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Promising Practices Project: Qualitative Findings

Authored by:

Erin Santana, PhD

Patricia Walsh, MAT

Ashley Gwathney, DSW, LCSW

Charles Payne, PhD

Kevin Majewski, PhD

Jhanae Wingfield, PhD

Jared M. Neyman

Peter Simpson, MA

Elizabeth Cooner, EdD

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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.

Introduction

This report captures the qualitative findings from the Promising Practices Project, based on extensive interviews with teachers, school leaders, and staff members across New Jersey. These findings explore the diverse and innovative approaches schools have adopted to accelerate student learning, highlighting a range of strategies that educators believe have made a significant impact. From unique practices in classroom instruction to broader efforts to shape school culture, this report offers a glimpse into how New Jersey schools have risen to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following Section 1, which outlines the study's methods and provides a general overview of the project, this report offers both thematic and practice-based analyses. Section 2 presents a survey of innovative and promising practices, highlighting ideas and strategies that, while not always labeled as "innovative" by the schools themselves, struck the research team as distinctive and worthy of wider attention. Section 3 examines the varied social, emotional, and academic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns on Promising Practices schools. Such impacts include both those felt acutely during the period of virtual instruction, as well as those that continue to shape schooling several years later.

Section 4 details the broader themes that educators view as central to their success, with a particular focus on the importance of positive school culture, social and emotional learning (SEL), tiered instructional supports, the use of data to inform instruction, and supports for historically underserved students, namely: students with disabilities (SWDs), multilingual learners (MLs), economically disadvantaged students (ECDs), Black students, and Hispanic students. While Promising Practices schools took a range of approaches to furthering academic achievement, most emphasized some combination of school culture, SEL, tiered supports, use of data, and equity/inclusion as central to their successes.

Section 5 presents case studies that draw attention to high-leverage strategies that educators identified as impactful and potentially replicable across similarly situated schools in the state. Such strategies are shared thematically to highlight promising practices in family and community engagement, arts integration, developing student work habits, scheduling flex periods, and promoting postsecondary achievement. Finally, Section 5 concludes with four single-school case studies that illuminate exemplary practices in a range of grade levels, demographics, and subject matters. Any number of schools across the state could have merited such a focus; these are simply illustrative of the tip of the iceberg of educational creativity and excellence across the state of New Jersey.

Section 1: General Overview

What is the Promising Practices Project?

The Promising Practices Project was launched to identify and document effective practices for learning acceleration in K–12 schools, particularly those that emerged in response to the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This period served as a crucible of innovation in education, prompting schools to develop strategies that could drive student success even in the face of adversity. The study did not focus on the nuanced details regarding how one educates during pandemic lockdowns; instead the research explored how such stresses may have catalyzed schools to develop practices that have had an ongoing positive impact on teaching and learning. The research team identified positive outlier schools—those that exceeded predicted academic growth. This research investigates both the qualitative and quantitative factors associated with their success, including interviews with teachers and administrators about the most innovative and replicable practices they believe impacted student learning. Findings will be disseminated in several formats including this report.

Motivation

The Promising Practices Project was initiated following an observation by the NJDOE that approximately 15% of the state's public schools managed to increase their proficiency rates in math and/or English language arts (ELA) on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) from the 2018–19 academic year (pre-pandemic) to the 2021–22 academic year (post-pandemic). Motivated by this finding, the NJDOE commissioned the New Jersey State Policy Lab at Rutgers–New Brunswick to explore the phenomenon. In partnership with the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers–Newark, the research team designed a comprehensive mixed methods approach to identify and analyze positive outlier schools—those that performed better than expected during this challenging period.

Research Methods

Quantitative Analysis: The first phase of the Promising Practices Project identified positive outlier schools using Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) for elementary and middle schools and Value-Added Models (VAM) for middle and high schools. These analyses aimed to identify schools that demonstrated exceptional performance in student learning outcomes, particularly for underserved student groups. The models compared actual to predicted student performance on the NJSLA in math and ELA, accounting for socioeconomic and

demographic factors. Data for the analysis were derived from multiple sources, including NJDOE School Performance Reports, NJDOE student-level demographic and testing data, and school district-level socioeconomic data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The HLM analysis used 2021–22 school- and district-level data to predict schools' average ELA and math scores, both schoolwide and for five student subgroups (Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners). The VAM analysis estimated each school's unique contribution to student growth in math and ELA between 2018–19 and 2021–22, controlling for prior student performance, demographics, and socioeconomic status. Schools were considered positive outliers if their actual scores were higher than the model's predicted scores, with differences (called "residuals") contributing to their identification. Schools where the actual performance was better than predicted generated positive residuals—those exceeding expectations for student learning outcomes in math and ELA schoolwide and/or for each of the five key student groups of interest.

The sampling process primarily targeted schools in the ninth and 10th deciles (the top 10%-20% of performers) to focus on those with the highest positive residuals. In total, 712 schools were classified as positive outliers. With overlap in middle school grades across both models, 348 schools were identified in the HLM model and 391 schools in the VAM model. The schools with the highest residuals reflected better than expected student learning outcomes, when compared to statistical estimates for student learning outcomes.

To ensure diverse and representative qualitative research, 78 schools were blindly selected without school names identified from this group 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). In some cases, the selections exceeded the top two deciles to include schools in all New Jersey counties, and to promote a broad cross-section of schools serving different communities. Of the 78 schools selected in this stratified sampling process, 52 schools consented to participate at both the district and school levels, and welcomed teams of interviewers to conduct group interviews of their staff. At least 95% of sampled elementary schools, 80% of middle schools, and 60% of high schools increased mean scale scores for ELA or math between 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) and 2021–22 (post-pandemic).

Based upon measurable data, the Promising Practices sample schools are relatively similar to the universe of schools across the state. As of 2021–22, they served more economically disadvantaged children (38.0% at Promising Practices schools vs. 31.3% statewide), somewhat more Hispanic students, (34.3% vs. 29.9%), and slightly fewer Black students (11.3% vs. 12.9%). Per pupil expenditures are close, at $13,311 for the sample schools as compared with $13,872 across the state. Patterns of chronic absenteeism among Promising Practice schools track state patterns very closely (16.4% for the Promising Practices schools against 16.8% for the state). By this study's estimates (discussed in section 4.5), their test scores are almost half a standard deviation higher than the state average and slightly higher than for historically underserved groups.

Despite the blind selection process, strong performance at these schools has been recognized before. Based upon a non-exhaustive list, five of the Promising Practices schools have been recognized as **National Blue Ribbon Schools** based on overall academic excellence or progress in closing achievement gaps (**Rosa International Middle School**, **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, **Radix Elementary**, **School 28**, **Princeton Charter School**). Three made the 2022–23 **College Board AP School Honor Roll** for their commitment to increasing "college-going culture" and access to college credit through extensive Advanced Placement (AP) offerings and pass rates (**College Achieve Central Charter School**, **Passaic Preparatory Academy**, **University High School**; see awards list here). **School 28** in Paterson Public School District placed first on the 2024 U.S. News and World Report's ranking of New Jersey elementary and middle schools based upon proficiency rates in state math and language arts assessments. **School 28** was also recognized alongside **Reeds Road Elementary School** and **Sara M. Gilmore Academy** as a National ESEA Distinguished School for high academic achievement in the context of a 35% or higher poverty rate. **Robert Morris School** was recognized as a 2024 Steven Covey's 7 Habits of Healthy Kids Lighthouse School, and Character.org designated **Rieck Elementary School** a 2024 State School of Character (see section 4.2 on Social-Emotional Learning).

Some educators may feel that selective schools and those serving highly privileged student bodies should not be in the same conversations as schools facing an array of challenges those schools do not confront, since the playing fields are not level. Nonetheless, the research team would urge readers to suspend judgement. As much as possible, the research team is trying to compare schools to other schools like them (i.e., Promising Practices schools were chosen because they are doing better than schools with similar demographic composition). Moreover, some ideas that are most easily developed in one context may travel well to other schools, such as the intense co-teaching in the College Achieve charter network or the dual diploma program at Newark's magnet University High School, where students complete a high school diploma and an associate's degree at the same time. Other schools might contemplate similar offerings.

Qualitative Data Collection: The qualitative research phase was designed to gain a deeper understanding of practices and strategies employed by schools demonstrating better-than-expected performance. Following the identification of 78 schools based on the first phase of quantitative analysis, the research team secured permission from district superintendents to conduct research in their district. Once approved at the district level, principals were engaged, first for permission, then to confirm an interview date and participants. 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.

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. The research team prompted school principals with suggested criteria for selecting participants: "*... you and two to four other key members of your staff (e.g., assistant principals, deans, teachers, directors of curriculum, school support staff, etc.) who are best positioned to speak to your school's promising practices.*"

Principals had the autonomy to select participants for the group interviews. This selection process primarily represents convenience sampling, relying on employees who were available and willing to participate. During the interview consent process, participants were given the opportunity to elect to be named for the purposes of publication or to remain confidential. For those who requested anonymity, quotations in this report are generally identified with the individual's role. Given the small number of administrators in each building—rendering their identity an easy internet search away—administrators who requested anonymity are simply identified as "administrator."

As part of the preparation for the school interviews, the team developed quantitative and qualitative profiles for each sampled school. The quantitative profiles were drawn from NJ School Performance Reports, including key metrics such as student demographics, performance data, and residuals. Qualitatively, the research team gathered information from school websites about school culture, academics, and other programs. These profiles facilitated the tailoring of interview questions to each school's unique circumstances, allowing for more focused and insightful discussions. The development of school profiles was one of the initial steps in the mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to enhance the group interview findings and gain a deeper understanding of each school's performance and environment.

Two-person teams of interviewers conducted semi-structured qualitative group interviews with teachers, staff, and administrators between February and July 2024. These interviews explored what practices educators identified as the most innovative, replicable, and impactful; how they implemented such practices; and the conditions that supported these efforts. Interviews were typically 2 hours in length. They were not intended to provide deep knowledge of any one school, but to provide understanding of what school leaders across promising schools considered to be important practices. Due to the varying numbers of group interview participants (i.e., typically five, but ranging from one to 11 people) and expertise of the interviewed teams, interviews at each school differed in terms of the perspectives offered, emphases, and degree of detail. By including schools from diverse communities across the state with varying levels of need and achievement, this project attempted to capture some of the complexity of New Jersey's school landscape.

The presence of administrators in every interview—with teachers and support staff generally accompanying them (in all but nine cases)—certainly shaped the type of information that was shared. In short, one could say that the team received "authorized" accounts of each school, meaning those that met with the approval of those holding the most authority in each building (or district as the case may be). Even given the team's allowances for confidentiality (see above), educators were unlikely to openly disagree with their bosses (or each other) in front of outside interviewers on the record. Indeed, the overwhelming effect of these interviews was amicable and even jovial, especially once everyone had gotten comfortable with the process. Interviewers reported pervasive non-verbal expressions of warmth, camaraderie, and mutual respect among participants—lots of laughter and at times even tears, particularly when discussing the trials of the pandemic lockdowns.

Such emotive aspects of the interviews can be difficult to capture in the form of transcribed conversations; however, they are reflected most heavily in section 4.1 School Culture as a Pillar of Effectiveness, which includes extensive quotes testifying to the strong relationships among educators. That said, further research employing a wider range of interview subjects and settings would be necessary to elaborate on the complexities of school communities—the tensions and conflict as well as the support and camaraderie.

Qualitative Data Analysis: The research team collected and transcribed more than 100 hours of interview-based data. Using qualitative data analysis software, this data was analyzed beginning with accepted themes derived from previous research on school improvement, such as "social-emotional learning," "school culture," and "family engagement." These themes were then refined through multiple rounds of team discussion and data analysis to determine significant sub-themes and discrete "practices." Research team members shared these findings and developed collective understandings of how "innovative" or "impactful" any given practice might be, based on both the testimony of the interview participants as well as prior understandings based on education literature and practical experiences working in and around schools.

Thus, the findings shared below can be considered the result of a series of dialogues between researchers and Promising Practices educators—both the literal recorded dialogue between the interviewers and participants, as well as the subsequent dialogue between and among researchers and their interfacing with the transcripts throughout the data analysis process. Lastly, researchers tested interpretations by sharing with each school statements reflecting their school's practices prior to the report's publication. In many cases, participants requested more streamlined, grammatical, or otherwise precise articulations of their initial, more conversational, quotes. In others, they shared additional context to clarify the nature or extent of a given practice. In rarer cases, they requested certain information be removed entirely, either due to inaccuracy or changes in personnel. Given that the research team was not able to confirm interpretations with every single interview participant, the findings would likely benefit from additional dialogue with the educators.

A Note on Presentation: The Promising Practices Project is a mixed methods study that attempts to bring the insights of both quantitative and qualitative data to bear on the complexities of school improvement. Quantitative insights drove the selection of the qualitative sample and informed the questions asked of interview participants (see above). Additionally, this qualitative report is accompanied by a quantitative report that takes a far more macroscopic perspective on what factors can be understood to shape school improvement (see Quantitative Report). In this qualitative report, introductions to school practices often provide some background quantitative information on the school (e.g., something relatively distinctive about its outcomes with all or some subgroups of students). This is not an attempt to imply that a particular piece of quantitative information is causally related to the qualitative description of practice that follows.

Additionally, the style of presentation here is not linear. Some points will be made more than once and some quotes appear in more than one section. For example, a single quote could describe an innovative approach to data-driven instruction within a tiered support framework for students with disabilities. That quote or information might be repeated in sections on innovation, data use, tiered support systems, and students with disabilities. Schools are holistic, intertwined ecosystems that are difficult to dissect and fully capture on paper. Some readers may skip around to sections of particular interest rather than reading straight through. If important points are made in just one place, such readers may miss them. More thorough readers will see some intentionally repeated statements reflecting the interrelated nature of the themes.

Study Limitations

These research findings do not imply causality as that term is understood in the social sciences. The practices identified reflect what the interviewed educators believe account for their positive outcomes. This analysis also recognizes the non-discrete nature of educational practices, where multiple factors often overlap, contributing to the complexity of the learning environment. The Promising Practices Project does not endorse any commercial products or programs mentioned in this report; they are included because educators at the Promising Practices schools considered them to be important.

The sample includes several schools that are selective in one way or another. Incorporating them in the same pool with traditional schools may seem unwise, but the project's methodology attempts to compare schools that have similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The research team has endeavored to make apples-to-apples comparisons. Sometimes, selective schools may have the resources and flexibility to develop innovations from which others can learn. The research team is also aware that some of the schools in the sample have been at the center of controversies regarding pay scales or other allocations of resources. Those controversies are beyond this project's scope, which is concerned solely with issues of teaching, learning, and youth development. Notably, the sample was selected "*blindly*," based strictly upon quantitative outcomes, so no consideration was given to reputation or other preconceived notions about schools.

Section 2:

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."*

Section 3: 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.

Section 4:
What Matters Most? Through the Eyes of Educators

In contrast to Section 2's focus on discrete "*innovative*" practices, this section summarizes more broadly what school leaders consider the *most impactful* things going on in their schools. A point made perhaps most emphatically had to do with the salience of culture, broadly understood to include positive relationships, trust, staff willingness to "go the extra mile," high standards for everyone, and a high degree of collaboration. Specific practices and programs are seen as being enabled by supportive culture. Related to that is the heavy emphasis schools place on the social and emotional development of the whole child. Some schools are equally explicit about providing a supportive social and emotional climate for adults. Although the protocol did not inquire specifically about tiered systems of support, a strong theme emerged around the importance of tiered academic and social supports, supported by extensive and collaborative use of data. This was complemented by extended time for academic development or enrichment, often built into the schedule in a way that supported individualization.

- **4.1 School Culture as a Pillar of Effectiveness**
- **4.2 Social-Emotional Learning**
- **4.3 Tiered Instructional Supports**
- **4.4 Using Data to Inform Instruction**
- **4.5 Supporting Historically Underserved Student Populations**

4.1 School Culture as a Pillar of Effectiveness

Introduction

Educators at most Promising Practices schools emphasized the central role of relationships, expectations, beliefs, and a "*can-do*" atmosphere—school culture—in undergirding their ability to generate positive student outcomes. When asked what makes their school so impactful, an administrator at **School 28** summarized many of the elements that peers across the state highlighted: "*We can bottle it up; teacher buy-in, trust, flexibility, creativity, teacher voice, teacher leaders, sharing best practices, relationships, high expectations, transparency ... I would say just being human first, treating people for who they are.*"

In many cases, educators utilized the word "*culture*" explicitly to describe the ways that staff, students, and their families interact at the schoolwide classroom, and sometimes district levels. Angelica Ewaska, fourth through eighth grade supervisor of instruction at **College Achieve Central Charter School**, spoke highly of their "*culture of support and aid.*" When discussing their impactful "*parent involvement activities,*" **Marie Durand Elementary School** staff described their goal as, "*creating this family culture where the parents feel comfortable coming*

here, they want their kids to be here." Kelly Sogluizzo, a fifth-grade teacher at **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**, emphasized the importance of the beginning of the school year, "*when you're setting your classroom expectations and you're creating that positive culture in your classroom … that comfortable environment where [the students] are not feeling nervous, sad, or embarrassed while taking risks.*" Wendy O'Neal, principal of **Ocean City High School**, shared that the final question she asks in every job interview is, "*How are you going to improve the culture and the standard of excellence we have at OCHS?*"

Such evocations of the concept of "*school culture*" gesture at several intertwined characteristics that many Promising Practices schools pointed to as particularly impactful, namely:

1. A **familial environment** rooted in **caring relationships** among staff, students, and their families.

2. Extensive, respectful **collaboration** among administrators and teachers facilitated by developing and empowering **teacher leaders**.

3. **Consistently high expectations** of everyone in the school community supported by a culture of **learning, growth**, and the safety to **take risks and make mistakes**.

To reflect the premise offered above that impactful school culture is often rooted in "*just being human first,*" the elaboration (below) on these themes heavily centers the voices of educators. The repetition of similar sentiments and even emotions in their words testifies to the important role the relational and intellectual life of a school can play in realizing the "*promise*" of any of the practices detailed further in the remainder of this report.

Caring Relationships and the School as Family

> **Building relationships. Probably the most paramount aspect of any of this is building relationships.**
> *– Administrator, Ocean City High School*

According to many Promising Practices educators, people and the relationships between them are the central factor making the implementation of any successful educational programs possible. Kevin Lightcap, principal of **Reeds Road Elementary School**, encapsulated this belief when reflecting, "*If you're looking for a program or a book to read or whatever to make things work … we have stuff we've done that works for us. But without people like this, it doesn't.*" Alyce Anderson, director of curriculum and instruction at **Brick Memorial High School**, echoed this sentiment: "*The best thing about working at Brick is the people.*" A fourth-grade teacher at **Good Intent Elementary School** elaborated on how strong relationships between people result in a familial culture that positively impacts students' connection to school:

The kids see us all talk together and they know we have their backs as teachers, and as teachers, we have each other's backs. They see the family that has been built here at Good Intent, and they love that. They want to come to school, and they see that. And I think they want to be a part of it too. And we welcome them in. It's just like a big family that runs through this building.

Several educators suggested that the centrality of relationships to successful schooling is often underappreciated. Michael Coyle, principal of **Rieck Avenue Elementary School** (a 2022 Honorable Mention for a National School of Character), similarly argued that "*Not too many people like to get into the heart and feeling aspects of education, but it's vital. It's so important. And in the data-driven era that we're in, none of that's wrong. But I think sometimes we forget about the heart of a school and the heart of what education should be.*"

A number of different relational axes emerged as relevant to the success of Promising Practices schools: **educator-student, school-family, teacher-administrator, and teacher-teacher.** One of the most prominent qualities educators pointed to as of paramount importance to their relationships with students was care, and even love. They often connected these qualities to the development among students of feelings of happiness, safety, comfort, and belonging at school. Educators described a number of both formal and informal ways they work to institutionalize a culture built on caring relationships, such as greeting all students warmly as they enter school each morning, conducting structured "*Morning Meetings*," and individualizing instruction to each students' needs. (See sections on Innovative and Promising Practices, Social-Emotional Learning, and Tiered Instruction for a more in-depth examination of such practices.)

I do think the kids ... feel cared for and when you feel cared for, you're willing to work really hard for your teacher and for yourself. – Lisa Groiss, fourth-grade teacher, **H & M Potter School**

I just think there's a genuine care for kids, and I think that at the end of the day, you have to expect that as a leader, and the buildings need to have that in order for your kids to be successful. – Laura Gore, principal, **Radix Elementary School**

I am a big proponent of forming relationships with the kids. Positive relationships no matter what. I really think that trust, that buy-in factor with the students and the families is huge. We're with these kids for 10 months and I know especially with the younger ones, it's very, very important ... [to form] those relationships ... it's very, very impactful. – Third-grade teacher, **Good Intent Elementary School**

What I focus on here is kids being happy, kids reading, kids feeling loved. I don't want to say I don't care about the test scores ... But you know what? I think if we worry about all of those other things, it turns out the test scores turn out okay. – Katherine Egan, principal, **Middle Road School**

I think it just speaks volumes in terms of the culture in the building and the relationship with the students ... they know if they don't do well, their teachers are still going to love them and care about them and teach them. I know we keep going back to relationships, and it's very hard to find the "it factor" to replicate. But when you have very caring and compassionate staff and that's all the way through, kids feel safe to come to school, they feel safe to ask questions, they feel safe to say, "I don't know how to do this" and seek help. – Administrator, **Cedar Creek Elementary School**

My personal philosophy as far as education is that, yeah, I can teach you if you're in the classroom miserable, but you are going to be a lot more effective as a learner if you're comfortable and having fun doing it. If you have a smile on your face while you're learning, it's going to mean a lot more. It's going to sink in a lot more than if you came to school tired, hungry, and grumpy. From the second they get out of the car in the morning, they're greeted usually with smiles. "Hey, how's your morning going? Did you have breakfast? What are you doing this weekend?" I feel like we really do try hard to make them feel comfortable, make them feel safe. And then [teachers] layer on the fun. – Administrator, **Hamburg Middle School**

We have a counselor at the car line and we have our social worker at the bus lane. So that helps as well. Oftentimes, one of them will be walking in with a student who is having a hard time even getting out of the car or is crying. And usually by the time they get back to their office and grab their breakfast and just take some time just to calm down and just feel love and calm, it usually works itself out and they're back to class." – Brittney Tomlin, assistant principal, **Marie Durand Elementary School**

One of the things we say to students when they enter our building each and every day is we have a responsibility to make sure you feel safe and to make sure that you're okay. Our principal is very intentional with making sure that is shown amongst the administrative team, amongst the support staff, as well as amongst the teachers, that we show the scholars that we care about them. When they come in the building, our top priority is not to educate them, but to make sure that they feel well. Our principal is very intentional that each and every morning she's at the front door and she greets [the students] too, "How are you today?"
– Lawren Bridgeforth-Monroe, social worker, **University High School**

When we were coming out of COVID, I told our staff, "Take care of these kids, make them want to be here, be the reason they want to be here." We didn't talk about content, we didn't talk about tests. We said, "Make them want to be here. Everything else will take care of itself. Create an atmosphere where they want to come to the building." And our kids do. In the morning, there's anywhere from

three to 10 people greeting kids at the door. I mean literally because it's become a hangout, right? ... We have 530 kids in our building right now, easily 250 kids a day in the auditorium [before school] ... They want to interact with each other. They want to interact with the adults. We have a building [full of] adults that care about kids. – Robert Lake, principal, **North Plainfield Middle School**

I do a lot with morning meetings. So we say "good morning" to one another. Each morning, we might share, we might do a specific activity or a game just so we get to know each other and have that sense of family, as corny as that might sound. But we truly are because we spend these 10 months together and we do get to know one another and it's important and we truly care. And I feel the same among all my students too. Just their genuine care for one another. – Fourth-grade teacher, **Mount Tabor Elementary School**

It's extremely important that I tailor my instruction to what my students need. I want to ensure that they have opportunities to be successful. We can do this by being flexible and tailoring lessons to increase interest, engagement, and success. During our Professional Learning Committee meetings, we look for trends. We ask, "How can we address this?" We work as a team to ensure every student's success. This includes meeting with parents as well as our colleagues. Perhaps a student is struggling with math, but loves basketball. I'll meet with the gym teacher and share this student's interests. I'll ask for him to build on this student's talents/interests and make them feel confident. One of my roles is to ensure our students feel like our school is a comfortable place for them to strive. When they struggle in one area, we take the time to highlight their strengths. We always say that our building takes an all-hands-on-deck approach. We want our students to know that we are here for them and they belong here. We want them to recognize they are doing great things here. – Third-grade math and science teacher, **School 28**

In addition to creating a sense of family *within* the school, many educators discussed the importance of building familial relationships with the families of their students. Whether through regular communications home, events that bring parents into the school, or collaboration with groups like PTAs/PTOs, educators pointed to the **school-parent/family relationship** as another key component of effective school culture (see section on Engaging Families and Community for more details on these sorts of practices):

Most of our parental involvement activities ... are more about creating this family culture where the parents feel comfortable coming here, they want their kids to be here. – Administrator, **Marie Durand Elementary School**

If the school and the families can work in tandem, then we should have ultimate outcomes pedagogically for our students. – Administrator, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation**

> **We really try to create a culture [of parent participation] in the district ... Whether it's something at the school or in our district, we try to create that culture of welcoming parents back and educating them and helping them.** – Gregory Lasher, superintendent (Lower Cape May Regional School District) **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**

> **There's a lot of arguments with parents as well, but just like a family, we're a pre-K to Grade 8 school, and our families are family to us—we see their kids grow up. I can't even believe sometimes when I see my kids when they're in high school and they come and revisit me and I'm like, oh my God, I'm getting old. It's a blessing to have a school that is like a family. And I think that's what got us through the COVID so well.** – Madeline Santiago, guidance counselor, **Robert Morris School**

Educators frequently spoke to the foundational role of the teacher-administrator relationship in establishing the preconditions for strong relationships with students and families. They noted that an environment in which teachers feel cared for and supported furthers their ability to care for and support their students. Several educators remarked explicitly about the "*trickle-down effect*" of relationships between administrators to teachers to students; in at least one case, a principal drew this line all the way up to relationships with central administration.

> **Having [school administration] have so much care for the teachers, asking us what we need when we need it, and if there's anything that they can do to help us. Really, we want to empower the children, but now we also feel empowered to be able to do that as well. I think that's very helpful and seeing that throughout all of administration as well.** – Second-grade teacher, **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**

> **I think having collaboration [and] relationships with our teachers, listening to what their needs are, what their wants are, being able to meet them where they are so they can better serve our students—I think that's something that we've always done. I just think that we've built stronger relationships during COVID and they've kind of 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. We need another program. We need more technology." Being able to be open with us and just being flexible as a school, I think that continues to make the school better.** – Josephine El-Reheb, assistant principal, **Robert Morris School**

> **We are comfortable enough to bust on each other. We're comfortable enough to say, "I'm having a really bad day today," or whatever it is. And we know that we're not going to be penalized for it. The [administrators] are going to have our back. They're going to say, "All right, take 5 minutes. Go take a breather ... We'll get**

coverage for you, whatever it is." And we don't have to be scared to go to them. I don't think that's the same in other buildings. – Danielle Williams, special education teacher, **Rieck Avenue Elementary School**

The practice that [the principal] brought [is] just showing the level of care about the scholars, and not just the scholars, but also the staff. She's very intentional with letting the staff know, "I care about you [and] I'm here for you," to the point [where] if we have ... a staff development day [or] staff appreciation day, she'll take the time and she will serve the staff [alongside] the administrative team. When it's time for them to eat during breaks and things, they will be intentional. "You need help?" "No, we got it." They will serve the staff because they want them to know, "I appreciate you. I value you." Making sure the staff have the gifts and various things of that nature. Keeping the staff's morale up, in all honesty, allows them to practice really the same things that [the] principal expects. The same way she's at the door every morning, they're at the door of their classrooms every day as scholars are entering the room to notice and to make eye contact. – Lawren Bridgeforth-Monroe, social worker, **University High School**

Every year when the district puts out its culture climate survey, there are specific questions in there that reflect building leadership. We look at that every year, and we monitor how we're doing and how the staff feels about the culture of the school, including how they feel valued as educators. Anything from how does the schedule work? Do you feel supported? For example: if your child is sick and you have to make a decision about leaving early because your child needs you ... Do you feel comfortable in that situation? I think just having a healthy culture and climate of your building from not only a student perspective but also from a staff perspective is important. It's really hard, or it makes it a lot harder, for teachers to be there 100% for kids if they feel like the system isn't there 100% for them in their workplace. It is not perfect, but I try to meet the needs of my staff so they can then be there for their kids. So that's something that's important to me. – Anthony DeMarco, principal, **Reading-Fleming Intermediate School**

My advice to any administrator would be [to] invest in the wellness of your staff. It's huge. Teaching is in a crisis right now. There's a shortage of teachers. Enrollment in colleges is down, as I'm sure you're aware. So the career teacher is becoming a dinosaur. Invest in the wellness of your staff; the fact that I know that [the principal's] door is open and that I can be a person, not [just] one of his staff members, is tremendous. The fact that we have the relationship among the staff is tremendous. We have a wellness committee, we do cheerleading things, [raffles,] and [have] that comraderie ... [A teacher] had said before, "Happy teacher, happy students." It shouldn't be overlooked. It's a really big deal. The wellness of the staff. – Eighth-grade math teacher, **North Plainfield Middle School**

We always feel supported and that transcends to the students. Even during those years virtual [learning], some of those things kind of trickled down. I know that when I felt seen and supported, I made sure that the students also felt seen and supported. And it wasn't just, we have to get this content out. It wasn't about that. It was about "How are you?" and **"What can we do to support you?"** And I think the students definitely feel that here. – Nicole Sequeira, technology coordinator, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation**

I've had three administrators in the building [over the course of] 21 years, and the description I could always use is [that] **they're family-oriented people.** You see that with the teaching staff. We're very family-oriented. Take care of each other. "You're down, we'll pick you up; when I'm down, I know you have my back" type of environment. – Fifth-grade teacher, **Good Intent Elementary School**

It really comes from that vision and **that trust and that relationship that the central administrative team has instilled in the administrators. The administrator [then] tries to instill in the teachers, [and] the teachers therefore try to instill in the students.** And it really is that trickle-down effect where sometimes it's clicking and everything is great. And then when you do get that bump in the road, how do we kind of alter the flow, if you will, to get back on track? – Edward Sarluca, principal, **Brick Memorial High School**

Lastly, teachers often reflected on the importance of the strong relationships they have with their fellow teachers. They spoke highly of **the value of feeling welcomed, supported, and united as a staff:**

There's a sense of welcoming and a **sense of belonging** that I felt immediately when I came over, you know, I'm the new kid on the block, but I never once felt that way. As a staff, everybody is incredibly accepting and welcoming and always ready to help and go out of their way to make sure staff and students have what they need. [As] my colleagues have said, we definitely are united. We might not always get along. We're human. That happens. But when push comes to shove, we're united. **We have each other's backs and that filters through to our children too.** – Fifth-grade teacher, **Rieck Avenue Elementary School**

Collaboration and Teacher Leadership

Educators at many Promising Practices schools argued that strong **teacher-administrator and teacher-teacher relationships** undergird the cultures of collaboration and shared leadership that are foundational to their successes. Carie Norcross-Murphy, principal of **North Warren Regional High School**, summarized this premise well:

Start with relationships. Start building trust between your teachers and your leaders, your teachers and your students, and approach it collaboratively. And as the leaders, don't be the first ones to speak all the time. Approach it from a problem-solving idea, generating ... conversations instead of just throwing out all the problems on the table. First talk about "What can we do better? What can we improve?" Instead of saying, "Our test scores are in the dumpster, we've got to do something about it." Talk about what ideas the teachers or the leaders have to build on improvement. I'm a firm believer that you've got to start with relationships and build those.

Two leaders at **Gateway Regional High School**—the principal and the director of curriculum and instruction—wrote their dissertations on "*distributive leadership*" and "*collaborative leadership*," respectively. They shared how this work manifests in their all-hands-on-deck approach to building administration:

We really work hard to cut down on the silos. People see [the principal] not just as a disciplinarian, but as an instructional leader, and he's willing to get in and do the mess of the curriculum and instruction. I'm the curriculum instruction person. I've broken up fights, I do lunch duty ... I call naughty children's parents. We're all here to do whatever needs to be done and to break down those silos, not just structurally, through shared decision making. But we're here to do the work every day. – Amy Lynn Mount, director of curriculum and instruction, **Gateway Regional High School**

Administrators at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** and **Reeds Road Elementary School** spoke similarly of the value of shared leadership:

The other thing too that can be replicated, and this is just from the building leader perspective, is distributive leadership. I don't have to do everything. There are very capable people that I have surrounded myself with that I can say, "Can you do this for me please?" Right. It's not about me. It's not about "I have to do this, I have to call the names," or "I have to be the one that shares this." It's like, maybe who needs to do that at that time? So it's really building capacity of teachers as well. – Administrator, **Cedar Creek Elementary School**

I think [the principal] is vulnerable with his staff, and he wants and encourages his staff to be vulnerable with him. And I just think that's an intangible leadership quality he probably wouldn't say about himself. That, I think, just does set [Reeds Road] apart [from other schools]. I mean, you hear the passion in his teachers [that] he really comes from that belief or that philosophy of, "I'm here to help you, so you show me what needs to happen next and I'm going to try to make it

work." And I do think all of our buildings do that, but we're attached to Reed's Road, so we get to see it in action often. **And he believes in his people. His people believe in him. There really truly is a shared sense of leadership. And I think that's why it works.** – Suzanne Guidry, director of curriculum and instruction, **Reeds Road Elementary School**

Both teachers and administrators emphasized the value of **embracing teacher input and feedback, and trusting teachers to guide implementation** based on their professional expertise:

I've seen a really positive impact, even just from last year to this year, in how effective our curriculum is because, **as teachers, we're heard and what we observe is taken for what it is, which is our professional opinion, which is respected.** – Amanda Ressler, ELA teacher, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation**

What I feel has had the most impact—and I tell this to everyone all the time when I say that I love where I work—is that **when I suggest an idea or some new program or something, [the administrators] are open to listening to my ideas, to purchasing a program, to getting something for the school that I think is important.** I think that the open door policy, allowing us to collaborate and share ideas, and doing their best to get the resources we need, even if it's different from what the rest of the district is doing, is what makes us successful. – Jennifer Powers, reading specialist, **Woodrow Wilson School #5**

I think **the advice that I would give another district is to really listen to the teachers and what they see in the classroom. ...** Administrators attend lots of meetings through the state, through the county, and they say, "This is what we need to see in schools, and this is what you need to go and give back to your teachers, and this is what we want to see in your classrooms." But I think every classroom and every school is very unique in its students, its community, its teachers, their families. And my advice would be to really allow the teachers to speak on their experiences and what they're seeing in the classrooms with the students and with the families, and adjust. – Josephine El-Reheb, assistant principal, **Robert Morris School**

I guess just **trusting in good educators to do their thing and giving them the autonomy to make decisions on their own in the classroom** because they know the kids better than I do. We can read all the academic data we want, but it's not specific to Hamburg School and our children. We know our population, we know our kids. Sometimes what's going to work for our children may be contrary to what is best practice in other buildings and other schools and academic research. I think it is trusting, your educators to do the right thing. – Administrator, **Hamburg School**

Many educators additionally noted that strong teacher-administrator and teacher-teacher relationships were useful in **developing teacher buy-in** for the implementation of new practices. An administrator at **Birches Elementary School** explained how valuable teacher leaders are in moving the staff in a certain direction:

> **The way that these women lead and their talent, their expertise, it is just done. You ask, it's just done. The faculty respect them, look up to them, listen to them ... They've got the relationship with each other, they have kids at the forefront. They've got the expertise and they've got the backing of their colleagues, and that makes it work.**

Administrators at **North Warren Regional High School** spoke of how they utilize teacher-teacher peer relationships to further the implementation of more data-informed instruction. Superintendent Jeanene Dutt noted, "*You will always have one or two staff members in a department that like the data or what it's showing that you can lean on as a liaison.*" Principal Norcross-Murphy agreed, "*I just always think it's best when it comes from your peers.*" Christy Buck, technology teacher and Title I culture coordinator at **Reeds Road Elementary School**, reflected on how familial relationships among teachers facilitated the implementation of a rewards-based Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program (see also section on Social-Emotional Learning):

> **I think that, because Reeds Road has a family-oriented philosophy, it helped to create a supportive environment where teachers and students were able to "buy-in" and tell others about their success. Having the right people who are enthusiastic and willing to try the new PBIS program [called BARK] is key. For example, I heard people say things like, "BARK is working in Alicia Bakely's class and she is having success with students that were so challenging before." Even if a teacher was a little bit more reluctant in using the program, now they're willing to give it a try because they are seeing it work [among their peers] with success.**

Regarding leading staff towards having difficult conversations about race, Principal Michael McGhee of **Oakcrest High School** reflected:

> **My biggest thing in education over the years is you're as good as the relationships you have with your departmental members. ... I also believe you have to have teacher leadership, because if I sit there and [just] say, "We're doing this," [teachers may reject it] but you can say, "Hey Nicole, I'm going to talk to you. This is the direction I want to go on. Do you want to run this with me here in the building? And when we do, I want you to stand up in front of the faculty and engage your peers in these conversations." And that goes a heck of a long way, I think, by involving [teachers] in the decision-making process. ... It shows that they're on board and they're helping lead, and it's not a top-down decision making. I think the relationship piece at the top of the culture [allows you] to have these type of conversations [about race] along the way.**

A social worker at **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation** shared a similar sentiment regarding implementing restorative justice practices:

> **The behind-the-scenes kind of thing where a staff member could be pushing back and might come off as difficult because they're so set in their ways, and they want to stay that way. And then you just go to the person who has the best relationship with that person and you say to them, "Hey, we want to try to get such and such on board, go talk to your girl or your boy or whatever," because that's the back-end story of our community here at Orange Prep. It's not punitive or anything like that. We're all on the same level, but we have relationships with each other.**

Lisa Butynes, curriculum supervisor at **Robert Morris School**, reflected that developing a culture of teacher-administrator collaboration can make it easier for administrators to occasionally pull rank to override teachers' objections to a course of action:

> **I think, again, going back to relationships and creating an environment where teachers feel like they can say, "Well, I'm trying this [and] it's not working so well. What else can we do?," and kind of coming up with solutions together in some cases. And I think when you do that for most of the time ... you build that kind of emotional bank account, so to speak, so that when the time comes where it has to be said ... "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but this is what we need to do because it's for the continuity of our program and our instruction," ... it's accepted in a better way.**

Educators at Promising Practices schools offered a number of practices that helped them develop, deepen, or sustain cultures of collaboration and shared leadership: **teachers informally or formally sharing materials with one another, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), co-teaching, and involving teachers in curriculum development.** A kindergarten teacher at **Robert Mascenik School** shared how a collaborative—as opposed to competitive—culture manifested in teachers openly sharing materials with one another:

> **So many times you see grade partners in competition because they want to be the best one and they want to be the one that's most requested. We need to lift each other up because it's all the same with these kids. We all have the same goal in mind. ... Rather than saying, "I'm not sharing that [with my colleague]," saying, "Listen, this practice works the best. I'm not going to keep it to myself because I want to have the highest reading scores. I want to help you because we want the school to be the best."** – Elizabeth Troyano, kindergarten teacher, **Robert Mascenik Elementary School**

Samantha Regina, a sixth-grade ELA teacher at **Walter Hill School**, explained how their school combines sharing materials through an online drive with granting teachers the autonomy to "*pick and choose*" what they find useful:

> **We've had an influx of new teachers and we'll present what we have, but we never are like, "You have to teach it like this. You have to conform to our style." We never do that. We present ... the material and what we have, but [the teachers] have made it [their] own. You're able to kind of put your own spin on it. ... Everybody has their own perspective that they share and that they use. And I think that really works. Instead of saying, "You have to teach like this and you have to teach this material, we have to be on the same page every day." It's not like that. ... We share everything, and we have a shared [Google] Drive. But you're able to take those materials, kind of pick and choose what you want to use, and make it your own.**

Educators at **School 28** similarly reflected on how they have worked against teachers' often proprietary approach to their own materials by regularly utilizing a shared Google Drive in combination with weekly PLCs:

> **I've been in some buildings where staff members feel like their work was their intellectual property alone, and should not be shared with anyone. They had to put the time into it; therefore you should, too. I don't get that feeling here at all. If one of my colleagues came up with an activity, they would generally say, "Hey, I'm happy to share this doc with you." Or, if I have a way to help meet a collective goal, I would say, "Hey, I came up with a way to organize for STEM Expo. Here, I wrote up the rubric." We are pretty open to sharing anything with one another, but that has not always been my experience at other schools I've taught in.** – Fifth-grade math and science teacher, **School 28**

> **Anything we discuss in the PLC, we have a shared [Google] Drive where teachers can add the files and links discussed at the meeting to it. Whatever topic we are discussing or exploring, like best practices, we'll share what we used in the classroom and discuss what worked and what didn't work, and we share what we used on the drive so the whole team can use it. Every PLC starts out with teachers sharing something great that happened from the last time we met; it starts the meeting on a positive note.** – Kindergarten teacher, **School 28**

Educators at many Promising Practices schools emphasized the role of **common planning time, often through PLCs,** in structuring teacher collaboration. The form of these PLCs varied in composition and timing. Both vertical articulation (between teachers of different grades) and horizontal articulation (across teachers from the same grade) were common. **North Plainfield Middle School** shared their longstanding "*teaming*" model, wherein "*children are organized into teams where they all have the same language, arts, math, social studies, reading and science teacher.*" This cross-curricular team meets one to three times per week to plan, reflect on student progress, and deepen their collaborative relationships:

> **I think one of the biggest assets of our middle school is the teaming aspect that we have, because it lends itself to those relationship-building opportunities and those cross-curricular conversations, as well as being in tune with the social-**

emotional wellness of each other and the children. It's a terrific opportunity and we've been implementing that for [the] 22 years that I've been here. It's a real asset in our district and I think it ... contributes to an aspect of our success, certainly ... We're touching base with, "What are you doing? What am I doing? How does that relate?" That common planning, being in tune with, "Johnny, how's he doing academically, socially, emotionally? Do you see him squinting? Should we get him looked at for glasses?" All of those things. It lends an opportunity for us to build a relationship to co-plan, to know each other better, and to be really on target with those kids. – Eighth-grade math teacher, **North Plainfield Middle School**

Whitman Elementary School offered an example of how they "*gave teachers the freedom to develop PLCs that were meaningful to them.*" A group of first- through fifth-grade teachers joined with a reading specialist and librarian to explore students' experiences of reading across grade levels:

We did a questionnaire to ask the students about [the] kind of books they like to read, kind of getting [at] what motivates them. ... We're looking at it across the board from all the different grades. How can we connect what's happening in first grade to second grade to third, all the way up to fifth grade? What part are we lacking? So then we started looking at it. This year, we think vocabulary is a big piece that we're missing. That's something fifth grade noticed, that they really struggle with. – Jen Campbell, Third-grade ELA teacher, **Whitman Elementary School**

Gateway Regional High School provides both a stipend and training for teachers who lead PLCs and other committees:

Just the idea that [the district is] saying, "Because you're going to take this on, we value your skills, here is a stipend." It just means a lot. It says that you understand that we have something to contribute and it's worth something. – Elizabeth A. Desmond, English teacher, **Gateway Regional HS**

The timing of PLCs across Promising Practices schools varied. Some groups met weekly, some biweekly, and some even daily. Educators frequently remarked on the importance of constructing schedules that prioritize and protect this time. **Passaic Preparatory Academy** has a "*master schedule*" that includes daily departmental common planning time:

Every department has a PLC period in the day, so they each get one period a day that they come together as a department. ... [The administrators] don't dictate every single day. They don't get an agenda every single day what they need to do. We did two book studies over the course of this year and we put that into their work, and they go through the book and they read chapters and they respond to questioning. They get time in that period to work with the district supervisors on their curriculum, or they get time to just come together as a department and talk about lessons and kind of do their own organic group time. – Stacey Bruce, principal, **Passaic Preparatory Academy**

Similarly, John Mellody, principal of **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy School No. 20**, shared how both common planning and professional development (PD) are "*embedded into the weekly schedule*" in a way that he feels has positively impacted their ELA scores.

> **I really appreciated the district's focus and attention to detail for grade level meetings last year, with the implementation of so much new curriculum. I think that attention to detail, and even though we all groaned or made fun of the fidelity to the curriculum, was the right focus and it had the desired impact. Our ELA scores skyrocketed last year in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade because of that. And so that PD is embedded into the weekly schedule. Part of my scheduling focus is to give grade level teachers time to meet together, and content area teachers time to meet together. That's kind of "sanc." I try not to take that away. In fact, I try to give more prep time to teachers than the district's minimum.**

At least three Promising Practices schools—**Hamburg School**, **Gateway Regional High School**, and **Oakcrest High School**—facilitate extensive teacher collaboration through co-teaching models, beyond those typically used to meet special education accommodations. **Hamburg** assigns two math teachers to each fifth- to eighth-grade class. **Oakcrest** assigns two math teachers and two ELA teachers to each ninth grade class. And **Gateway** "*structure[s] schedules and pair[s] teachers up for co-teaching to the greatest extent possible.*" Both **Hamburg** and **Oakcrest** began these co-teaching models in direct response to meeting the instructional challenges of the pandemic; however, they have continued the practice since. Educators at these schools emphasize how co-teachers are empowered to collaboratively make decisions among themselves regarding how to best meet the varied needs of the students in their classes. An administrator at **Hamburg** emphasized, "*we really tried to give the staff members the autonomy to make those decisions [regarding differentiated instruction] on their own.*" Joseph Costal, **Oakcrest's** supervisor of English and social studies, noted:

> **The real innovation came in empowering [the co-teachers] to be really flexible, to not just use the ICR [In-Class Resource] model of one lead/one assist. We literally taught PD about all the other ways you can go. But even the PD we taught, which was just textbook co-teaching models, really, they innovated it on their own. And they will separate students based on an assessment score, who missed certain dates, things we probably wouldn't even dream up. They moved the kids around based on that. We're lucky to have room where you can physically go across the hall to another classroom and take a group of students to do X as opposed to Y. Bring them back together at the end. So we really encourage them to use it to fit the needs of the students specifically. And I've let them have leeway with what that looks like.**

Michael D'Alessandro, a math teacher from **Gateway Regional**, reflected:

> The **relationships** **[I]** have with my **co-teachers, with my department, the freedom that we get, the feedback that they ask from us, and [how] they actually respond to the feedback that we give**—I think **that positive vibe feeds off onto the students** and ... I know the students enjoy the co-teaching partnerships I've had over the past 4 or 5 years. Again, it's just a positive vibe. It's a family atmosphere. Some of these teachers I've actually had when I went [to school] here and [now I'm co-teaching] with them, so it is special. But the students see the relationship and the work ethic that we have, and we get that response from the students—very positive.

Several schools noted the positive impact of having **teachers participate in district- and county-level curriculum development.** Lisa Butynes, curriculum supervisor at **Robert Morris School**, elaborated on this practice, which was also found in **H & M Potter School**, **Harrison Elementary School**, and **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School**:

> **I have had teams of teachers work alongside me in writing and revising curriculum.** It really immerses them in it. And I think it gives them a different perspective of, "What are these standards? Where does it fit within the programs that I'm doing?"... So that is one of the things that I've been doing for a long time, and I think it has a huge impact on our teachers' efficacy. ... Another thing that I've been doing, and it's been almost a self-preservation kind of thing, is having teachers who have particular interests or certifications attend some of the county curriculum meetings. I manage all curriculum, Pre-K, all content area, so I can't possibly attend everything. I have a list of teachers who attend these round table meetings monthly with the county and they keep the notes. We come back, we know we sit down for 10 or 15 minutes, go through what happened, and they're happy doing it. And it gives them, again, from a small school, a bigger perspective of what's going on out there. And I think they appreciate it.

Consistency, High Expectations, and Growth-Mindset

> *Within the grade level, within prep time, within planning time, within programs. It's all about consistency.*
> *– Thomas Ettari, third-grade basic skills interventionist, H & M Potter School*

Promising Practices educators affirmed the importance of establishing consistent, schoolwide, and sometimes districtwide expectations and norms. They frequently used the language of "*core beliefs*," "*core values*," "*vision*," or "*mission*" to describe the shared premises that underlay their work:

When you think about replication ... **it all ties down to vision, and the vision from leadership at the building level. Of course, I need to be in alignment with the curriculum. I need to be in alignment with things that are beyond my building.** Now, it's nice because I'm the only grade 5-6 building in the district. I'm not one of our four elementary schools; I don't have to worry about being consistent with other buildings. There's a little freedom there, but at the same time, there is a lane I need to stay in. Everything that the group has been talking about are all things that have been clearly articulated as vision and beliefs of the school. It begins with new teacher orientations, regardless of a teacher's experience level, when they join the district, they receive an orientation at the district and building level where teachers learn about the values of the district.
– Anthony DeMarco, principal, **Reading Fleming Intermediate School**

When I became principal of the school, **I always held a very strong philosophy of education, that especially at the primary levels, is not just academics; it has to be the whole child.** That includes character education, trauma-informed instruction, and what is now coined as social-emotional learning. But even pre-pandemic, I think one of the things [that] works and what is innovative is that we've been doing a lot [of character education, trauma-informed instruction, and social-emotional learning] for a long time. When the pandemic hit, these were already foundations of Hoover School. At Hoover, Scholars T.H.I.N.K. **T.H.I.N.K. are our values as a learning community. T.H.I.N.K. stands for tenacity, high expectations, integrity, nobility, and kindness.** What we do with that here is—and we've done since I've been principal—is those are our founding five values we encourage within our students. – William Fleming, principal, **Hoover Elementary School**

I think our teachers in this school realize the importance of our vision and mission, and incorporate them in all aspects of their instruction. And if there's something that they want to veer off of, we have a dialogue about it. If this is maybe a curriculum adjustment that needs to be made, we talk about it together and we collaborate through the process. But again, that goes back to the trust and the collaboration. – Jack Lipari, principal, **Roosevelt Elementary School**

What are we doing that our test scores are so high? I think first, primarily, number one is the mission of the school. **The mission of our school is to do well on those tests. So you are here because you care about those tests.** That gives us a baseline kid [and] that gives us a baseline family. ... That's why ... I don't have to worry about talking [a student] into doing well on this test. You're here because you want to do well and you're receptive to me teaching that. – Erinn Auletta, English teacher, **Princeton Charter School**

Educators particularly emphasized that beliefs *about students*—namely, **consistently high expectations of all students**—were central to their successes:

> **I think expectations and belief[s] [go] a long way. Because when people know that—when children know, but even adults—when you know that somebody believes in you or believes you can do something, it really... hits you inside. It strikes a chord. It's part of what our responsibility is. It's not just graduating [students] with great grades; it's graduating them confident with strong work ethics. I think keeping those expectations high and communicating them to the students, and making sure they know that you believe in them when you're building any program—that should be part of [the] foundation.** – Stacey Bruce, principal, **Passaic Preparatory Academy**

> **No matter where you are ... how can you level up? How can you get to the next level? And so often, to me, that comes with a mindset shift for our students. We start feeding in them, whether it is the morning messages ... you start hearing stuff regularly, you start believing it. Believe it or not, we start feeding into them this positive perception of themselves, of who they are, of what they're capable of in spite of challenges, their ability to persevere. And that is a constant driving conversation.** – Administrator, **University High School**

> **Basically, we tell the children that they can be whatever they want to be. They can definitely do [it] as long as they put their minds to it. We believe in all of them. And there is no classification. I think there is no, "Oh, you can only do this. You can only do that." No, we instill the belief that we believe in you. If you put your mind to it, you can be whatever you want to [be]. It's the attitude, it's the love, it's the care. And we treat every child the same.** – Principal, **Charles J. Riley School No. 9**

> **When students are new to our school, they quickly see what we value and the expectations. ... With new students, they come from a different cultural norm, a different school that had a different norm, and they come here and then they realize real quickly, that's not how we work here.** – Susana Rojas, elementary supervisor, **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**

Many schools highlighted **PD, common assessments, data-informed instruction, and flexible grouping** as important practices that institutionalize consistently high expectations while developing teacher excellence and leadership. An ELA coach at **Lincoln Elementary School** reflected on the importance of "*focusing professional development and coaching related to the district goals in a very concrete way.*" She continued:

> **If the goal is reading levels, then that's where the focus is: looking at the student results as they happen, trying to provide support where we see that kids need**

additional support, and supporting teachers through conversations about how kids are progressing.

When reflecting on the implementation of a phonics curriculum, Fundations, Principal Gore of **Radix Elementary School** argued that a combination of extensive PD and the development of an in-house teacher trainer were beneficial:

> **Some people loved it, some people were not on board at all, and it took a lot of time to get people to kind of move the needle and come to that understanding of its place in the curriculum. But it did take** a lot of professional development. We had a lot of time in the classroom because it's not something you can just do a PD day on and then just say, okay, here's the manual, have at it. **You need to see strategies. We've created Fundations facilitators within the time period, which means they had a little bit of additional training. We did some lesson studies and collaborated after the lessons. I have a teacher here in my building who has gone on to receive certification to actually train for Fundations. She's also Wilson certified so she has a skillset to support novice teachers with this specific pedagogical approach.**

Principal DeMarco of **Reading-Fleming Intermediate School** described their approach to incorporating new teachers into their building as both formal orientation-style PD as well as informal acculturation with their peers:

> We spend the whole day talking about and doing different activities, sharing who we are as a school, and what we value in learning. ... **They get trained up not only formally through meeting with the administrative team, but then also when they join their team and their colleagues. What is important is that ... what students are expected to do, teachers do as well. And what's expected of teachers is reflected in leadership, and there's that consistency.**

North Plainfield Middle School established a dedicated "*Consistency Committee*" (see also Innovations section) that is responsible for norming the language around schoolwide expectations, establishing clear grading policies, and creating classroom lessons for the opening days of school. According to Erika Gambuti, a seventh- and eighth-grade ML teacher:

> **I think something that is really innovative that could be replicated in other districts is something that we came up with after the pandemic. A bunch of teachers worked in different groups to create common messaging for our school. And it's how we open the school year.** Every year, the first 3 days of school, every single classroom, every student is learning the same lesson and is going over the same materials **so that we all have a great foundation for what education in seventh and eighth grade is going to look like. That's continued throughout the year when we have our team days—seventh grade does a whole theme and eighth**

grade does a whole theme—and every student in every classroom is learning the same lesson. As far as inclusivity, with that piece, everything is translated in our dominant language, which is Spanish, so that even in our bilingual classrooms, they're having the exact same lesson but in their first language.

Teachers initiated this committee, which collects feedback from the staff about these procedures to foster a collective investment in the school's culture.

Common assessments—within grades, schools, and occasionally entire districts—were also mentioned as a practice that assists with institutionalizing consistency of instruction. Some educators created their own standards-based assessments; some utilized pre-existing assessment tools such as DIBELS or i-Ready (see sections on Data-informed instruction and Tiered instruction for more on these practices).

[My colleague] and I will give the same third-grade assessment, and if we notice that all or most of the students got number two wrong, for example, we will then discuss whether the question may be flawed or is not well written, or maybe something we did is wrong and we need to fix how we are doing it. It's a constant "in the moment" process of reflection and improvement. We don't wait until the next year to figure out what to do. – Marybelle Espin, third-grade teacher, **Harrison Elementary School**

What I think was key, and some teachers may not like this, [is that] the teachers know the standards. When you hear about, "I don't want to teach to the test," you don't have to teach to the test, but if you know the skills that live in the standard, not everybody can do that. The one ask that I brought to the team was around using standardized assessments to match what they were teaching. If [a teacher] recognized, "Hey, my students don't have a good grasp of 9.3, we never touched 9.5," she trusted me enough to say they're going to take a cold assessment. – Shavon Chambers, vice principal, **University High School**

We talked about streamlining our RTI [Response to Intervention] process to maximize the amount of usage for our interventionists. That is really where the conversation ... came to universal assessments across grade bands and looking at tangible data. ... That's one thing that we really found to be something we can control at the school level and say, "Hey, we're going to give this assessment in both kindergarten classes for math. We're going to generate a cut score, and we'll look at where we think those kids who fall below can make the referral for RTIs." – Jesse Herbert, principal, **Navesink Elementary School**

[The district prioritized] having consistent year-over-year data—three data points a year under our control, with our ability to analyze. When everything went

sideways with the state, we had NJSLA changes. Pandemic happens, [but it] doesn't matter because **we have our consistent set of data points with our own diagnostic.** I think, historically, we relied a lot on NJSLA data to make decisions. ... But then you're at the mercy of the state and any changes that happen there. The fact that we had started that diagnostic was, from my standpoint, [an] ability from year-over-year to go, "Hey, how are we doing this year? Where are the trends? What do we need to address?" For instance, this year we saw Grade 4, like, "Hey, Grade 4 is still struggling. We need to focus on that grade level." So that lets us do that without any lag. We're not waiting for data from May to hit us at the end of August. We're getting our data linked the same week.** – Brian Heineman, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, **Cranford Public School District**

There are teachers and district coordinators that serve on a district-wide PLC. They create these district assessments ... in alignment with the scope and sequence of the curriculum for that grade level in ELA, for math, for science, and for social studies as well. We're also looking at that data, too, in tandem with the common formative assessments, which is geared toward that individual learning that's happening on their pacing.** – Mary Kent, literacy coach, **Chelsea Heights School**

Some form of common assessments was one component of many schools' emphasis on **extensive use of data to establish and maintain consistently high expectations for teaching and learning** (see section on Using Data to Inform Instruction). However, several schools were clear that data was not an end in and of itself that should be allowed to overwhelm their broader student-centered mission/vision/values/beliefs:

I know the common ... catchphrase in education is "data-driven instruction," but we are very purposeful in saying "informed" instruction because ... children drive instruction based on where they are and what they need. We use systems for looking at and utilizing formative assessment data, which informs us as the educators as to where we need to target differentiated instruction. But we also have to take into account what is going on in a child's life. For example, if so-and-so's mother is sick, has COVID, and the teacher is trying right now desperately to get the student to sit down and read, it won't happen. That's not what the student is thinking about. The driver of instruction that day may be the child and what the child needs. ... We don't say data-driven instruction. Instead, we are data-informed, child-driven. – William Fleming, principal, **Hoover Elementary School**

Some scholars need a little bit more love than others. I've been at other schools. This is the first school where it is truly student-centered. Usually, it is academics or data-driven. However, in order to get the data, you have to meet the basic needs of

> **the students. And I think that's what the other schools are missing.** **Once you get the trust of the students and you respond to their needs, the data will come.**
> – Doretta Sockwell, ninth-grade English teacher, **University High School**

Principal James Knox of **Chelsea Heights School** explained how they try to balance rigorous data-informed instruction with the more humanistic, relational aspects of learning:

> **There's two things that we do. We do, of course, quantitative [analysis] because we're trying to measure what we are doing with respect to instruction and just seeing the impact of our practices. But of the other part of that [is] we're trying to make children feel good about learning, feel confident about learning, [and] want to come to school.**

Ocean City School District appeared to be unique in our sample in their efforts to **utilize data to institutionalize high expectations and incentivize collaboration through collective teacher evaluation practices.** According to an administrator, they significantly increased the percentage of teacher evaluations driven by student achievement data: "*So it's 50% teacher practice, 50% student achievement across the board. Every other district's more of an 85-15 split.*" And **Ocean City** teachers are held accountable for their entire department's outcomes, as well as the ELA and math scores for all "at-risk" students, regardless of the subject they teach. The administrator explained:

> **It's a shared SGO [Student Growth Objective].** **I'm not just receiving the scores for my students' QBA [Quarterly Benchmark Assessment]; it is a departmental QBA to push the PLC sharing.** **I could go into my room, and I can kill my Spanish 3 QBA as a teacher, ... but if I'm not working with the other teachers teaching Spanish 3 and we're not doing the same things, [but] we're giving the same test, our results become that.** **It's not just my 40 kids, it's 120 kids whether I see them or not. Then, as part of the evaluation process as well, all teachers [in] Pre-K to Grade 12 get an achievement gap. We look at the standardized test scores for that building for our at-risk populations, our special education populations, our ML populations, our socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, and everyone gets that count as a score, because even if you're not an ELA or a math teacher, you are teaching skills that are benefiting those [areas] as students are trying to demonstrate their efficiency on an assessment.**

Other schools (and districts) utilized less formal means of **promoting high expectations by holding teachers and students accountable to data-based outcomes.** **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary** follows a districtwide practice of **posting monthly assessment data publicly on bulletin boards** inside or outside of the classroom. **Mount Tabor Elementary School** similarly participates in a **districtwide shared Google spreadsheet comparing all elementary students' literacy data.** **Marie Durand Elementary** internally compares each teacher's performance to peers in the same grade and across the district. Brittney Tomlin, Durand's vice principal, argued

that this culture of shared data analysis ultimately directed teachers back to the importance of relationships and collaboration:

> **It really did create some great conversations with teachers ... A teacher [may say], "My job is to teach not form relationships." When the three other people at their level, their students are all doing well on this particular assessment, it requires a conversation. Even if that is their philosophy, they want to at least be up there with their colleagues.**

Good Intent Elementary School shares data with students themselves to internalize their high expectations. An administrator shared:

> **From a data perspective, I give, not the babies, but our testing grades (third, fourth, and fifth) [data] in their grade level orientation. I go over the data with the kids to show them purposely where we stand in math and ELA in the district, in the county, and in the state as far as the average ... and not bragging, but our kids do well and I want them to see it and know it and know that we expect them to maintain that, right? Every year I show them [how we perform] regarding the test [as compared to] the district, the county, and the state average. Hopefully they take pride in that and say, "Yes, we're Good Intent. We're the best." Which is what we want our kids to say: "We're the best."**

A fellow administrator was careful to note that **developing "*an environment*" wherein "*people are comfortable [comparing data] .... doesn't happen overnight.*"** Vice Principal Tomlin estimated that it took their school 7 years to build this level of comfort. Jeanene Dutt, superintendent of **North Warren Regional School District**, similarly reflected that it took them 7 years to institutionalize a culture of data-driven instruction:

> **One of my suggestions to anyone who's going to read this report [is] "Yes, data-driven instruction is best practice." But if you have reticent people and people who are afraid of it, it's not going to happen in 1 year. It's taken us seven to get where we're at, to make data a daily conversation with staff members. My recommendation is start slow. Pick [a] content area. You need a good leader that's well versed in curriculum instruction standards and testing. You start with conversations, and you put it back to the teachers to say, "Where do you think we could look at this differently?," and let them come to the conclusion that we need to make some changes. That's been effective here.**

Educators also work to institutionalize consistently high expectations for students through **fluid grouping and differentiation, co-teaching, and seamless push-in and pull-out tiered supports** (see later sections on Tiered Instruction and Data-Driven Instruction). Principal Aponte of **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School** shared a sentiment frequently expressed regarding co-teaching for

students with IEPs: "*It's not, 'That's his teacher, that's my teacher.' No, they're the teacher of the whole classroom.*" Similarly, regarding teaching MLs, Kuntal Desai from **Oak Tree Road Elementary School** shared, "*the multilingual teachers go into the general education classrooms and they're not a para, they're not support, they're not pulling kids to the back of the table. … They're working side-by-side, planning the lessons with the classroom teacher, doing parallel teaching, taking turns leading, teaching the whole group, splitting small groups.*" Shannon Bucko, a seventh grade ELA teacher at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, reflected that she differentiates her instruction to ensure that all students can complete the same assignments:

> **That idea of differentiating work—my kids get the same assignments even in the in-class support class, [but] the support is different. The expectation for the end result may change depending on your level, but there's no child that enters my classroom who is not expected to write that essay, [to whom it] is not made clear … that they are capable of doing that.** … **I'll work one-on-one with you. There's no excuse to not be successful.**

Lisa Eckstrom, the assistant head of school for Grades 5–8 at **Princeton Charter School**, described their approach to differentiation while maintaining high expectations as, *"Seeing how high a level you can achieve and adjusting downward from that. But not just saying, 'No, you're going to go into a basic skills class and that's that.' And I think a lot of times kids surprise us."*

A majority of Promising Practices schools (at least 30) pointed to **a culture rooted in "growth-mindset"**—characterized by constant reflection, learning, and risk-taking—as essential to their ability to maintain high expectations for students and staff. Otherwise stated, a reading specialist at **Birches Elementary School** shared that it was important to have an ethos of "*progress, not perfection.*" An administrator at **School 28** called this mindset "*learning mode*":

> **But we always have to improve, right? Every year we have a goal, our personal goal is, "What is it that we're going to do differently next year?" The goal is to leave places better than you found them. I'm not saying any of us are leaving, but leaving that year better than you found it. Moving on to the next, … I ask myself those two questions every day when I get in my car: "What could I have changed? What am I proud of?" I think what keeps us going is the fact that we're always in learning mode.**

> **We don't think that any of these things is a finished product. We are constantly going back to the drawing board and thinking about how we are going to actually get it to where it needs to be to meet the needs of our population. I think that's a really important piece because sometimes when you hear [about our successes], it's like, 'Oh, well, we're doing better than we thought.' [We're] probably our toughest critics. I think that's a perspective that needs to be included. It informs why we constantly come back to this work with that intentionality.** – Amir Billups, social studies and career and technical education chair, **University High School**

We're not afraid to try something at least once or twice. You can't just try it once, because you're really not sure what you're doing. But we are not afraid. It might've worked in [one teacher's] class and did not work in mine. We're not afraid to say, "Hey, I have no idea what I'm doing. What did you do?" Nobody looks down on you. – fourth-grade teacher, **Harrison Elementary School**

We've always been trusted as teachers that if we are hearing new things happening in the teaching world, the tech world, we are given the freedom as educators ... to take the risks in the classroom to try those new things out without fear of it failing and then being reprimanded for it. – Kelly Comerford, fourth-grade teacher, **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School**

This is hard work. People think because [you're] in a good school it's easy. You have the smarter kids or your scores are better. It's not easy. ... This is always going back to the drawing board and looking at what's not working for us and what can we do to change it. ... We have problems ... but it's, what are we doing to combat those problems? – Administrator, **Charles J. Riley, School 9**

Educators explained that **not only administrators and teachers, but also their students, were in constant *"learning mode."*** They discussed how they guide students to learn from their mistakes, to reflect on their own learning, and even to transform the notion of making mistakes into more affirmatively taking risks:

There's a huge focus on responsibility, improving your choices, making better choices, learning from your mistakes. ... Students know that we all want them to learn from their mistakes. – Brittney Tomlin, vice principal, **Marie Durand Elementary School**

Our goal here is to not necessarily push these kids out, but to get these kids to graduate and to give them the opportunity to figure out a way. Mistakes are going to happen, but let's try not to make the same mistake over again. Let's learn from it, and here's an opportunity and a platform for you to be able to do that. It's not just coming from your classroom teacher; it's coming from an interventionist, or it's coming from the 'Block Five' program for freshmen. ... I feel like there's an opportunity for every type of situation, whether it be an absentee situation, whether it be a failing situation, whether it be an, "I don't like coming to school" situation. There's some type of platform for them to figure out a way to succeed. I think that helps add to the stats, if you will. But more importantly than that, it adds to that whole collective mindset of what we're trying to do here. – Edward Sarluca, principal, **Brick Memorial High School**

One of the things that we've done here is we designed a system such that when the children are answering the questions, if they get them incorrect, it's just not like, "Oh, I got it wrong and I'm moving on." The students have to reflect upon what they did and the mistakes they made. Then [the response is] twofold. ... If [the teacher] sees there's a group of students that are struggling with a type of question or type of response, she can pull a small group and coach in, and support them. If it's an individual student, she can meet with them. But the idea is the onus isn't just on the teacher to try and help the child with that. The children are reflecting and see the areas in which they know they're struggling. – Elementary supervisor, **Whitman Elementary School**

We have scales that the students reflect on each and every day. They do that in science and ELA. If they're responding [in science class], they have to use the scientific vocabulary because it's the language that scientists use around the world. That's something that I express a lot—that each subject has its own particular language. In order to answer those questions, you have to use that language. It's just rooted in everything as far as student responses, even giving feedback. I'm using the academic language, pushing students to change their responses, [and reenforcing] the high expectations that we keep asking for. It's just that constant communication with students so they always know where they are. They have constant self-reflection on their learning continuum. – Katie Richer, ELA/science teacher, **Walter Hill School**

When you talk about relationships and how your classroom is a community, we talk about mistakes, but ... I love saying, "You take a risk. Because if you take a risk, you are not always going to be right." And a risk is a different word for the kids, because they think of it as a mistake. But if you say, "Oh, I'm taking a risk, I'm just putting it out there," it's not like, "Oh no, I made a mistake." And then I always say, "I'm taking a risk, I think. But let's see." You don't even hear the word mistake, so it kind of changes their thinking a little bit. Now they're like, "I'm taking a risk." You can kind of almost hear it in their voice and we're like, "Alright, cool. What do we think about that? Let's talk, let's maybe debate a little bit." It kind of changes their mindset to that growth-mindset where they're like, "Alright, I don't have it yet." Even our younger learners might not even think about it as a mistake. They're like, "Oh, I took a risk. Let me try something else." – second-grade teacher, **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**

Both **Brick Memorial High School** and **Reading-Fleming Intermediate School** implemented standards-based grading, as opposed to more abstract letter grades, as a means of encouraging students and teachers to focus on learning. Alyce Anderson, **Brick's** director of curriculum and instruction, explained that they called these "*learner-centered grading practices,*" and Christopher Thompson, their math supervisor, expounded:

Our core grading beliefs were [that] grades should be referenced to curriculum standards. Grading is based on achievement and learning progress. **That grading system is not used as a form of punishment, control, or compliance. A grading system measures, reports, and documents academic progress and achievement separately from work habits, character traits, and behaviors. Information about grading should be clearly communicated, and grades are reflective of mastery of content. Then we had growth-mindset grading practices, the elimination of zeros and extra credit.**

Both schools experienced push-back from teachers and parents. **Reading-Fleming** is abandoning the practice due to "*political factors,*" but Principal DeMarco reflected that, regardless of their grading policies, they would maintain an "*attitude*" to teaching and leadership that empowers teachers to center learning above all:

We've spent a lot of time in the last few years on mastery-based learning. ... We've developed standards-based report cards, standards-based grading, and we're not doing that next year. We're going back to traditional grading because of political factors. People want to see letter grades. But what we believe in, regardless of what a report card looks like, is that a kid clearly does not perform well—it's not expected they get a 100%—we're not going to let that kid flounder and just push ahead. The teachers are very intentional in that. They've been encouraged and given that freedom, that it's not about a pacing chart, it's not about pushing through a curriculum. It's about teaching students. And you hear that with some of the attitudes and getting to know kids and who they are as learners. Those are all things that through leadership [are] encouraged at the building level. I think that's replicable. **These attitudes and these practices are replicable, but I think the message needs to be received. Teachers need to be empowered to do these things.**

Many principals and other administrators emphasized their responsibility for establishing and upholding all of the expectations they hold for their teachers and students. When asked what advice they would give other schools attempting to replicate their successes, an administrator at **Cedar Creek Elementary** offered, *"administrators have to model everything that we're sharing with you ... When teachers see us modeling, they model for their students, and it works. The other way too is, I'm learning from this staff every day, so they're modeling for me."* **H & M Potter School** Principal Andrea Cimino quoted educational leadership scholar Todd Whitaker: *"If the principal sneezes, the whole building catches the cold."*

Lastly, several principals reflected on the importance of **hiring staff that fit the culture of the building** in order to ensure consistent expectations—as well as the reality that those who don't meet expectations often leave:

I don't hire, the team hires: "*Can you work with this person? Can that person come in and keep that Barlow way?*" **Again, I could be out; I could be in. But that culture remains, and that person remains.** – Wilson Aponte, principal, **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School**

We also look at them and say, "*Would we trust this person with our own children?*" **I think there's that balance of, you can hire somebody who's great content-wise, but are they a fit for our unique environment?** – Wendy O'Neal, principal, **Ocean City High School**

When you have established yourself as a caring administrator and you have put yourself in a position where there's been multiple opportunities to meet with the individual and multiple opportunities to support the individual where they are, one of two things happen. Either the individual comes to a realization that I'm not going to be able to meet the bar for that expectation, so let me move on. When I became principal, that's what happened. There were quite a few that first year that moved on. – Carrie Halstead, principal, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation**

A principal and teacher at **Oak Tree Road Elementary School** shared how administrators set expectations early in the hiring and recruitment process:

I had a teacher transfer over from another school. ... She shared that the multilingual students sit in the back and do coloring sheets. I said, "We don't do that here. We co-teach here. We co-plan here. You'll learn the language arts curriculum." [The teacher responded], "I don't know anything about the newer language arts curriculum." "Well, we're going to get you the materials and you're going to learn it because this is what we do at Oak." ... She quit the next day. – Jill Osborne, principal, **Oak Tree Road Elementary School**

[Principal] Osborne has set the tone and it trickles. We just put so much emphasis on helping our multilingual learners. ... They're equal and everybody knows it and everybody is a part of it. And I've worked at other schools. I came from a school [where] it was one half hour of pullout instruction for multilingual learners, so I got my degree. First phone call I had with Osborne when I was interviewing, she's like, "We don't do that here ... this is what we're going to do." And I was ... open to it. That's when I came over and I started working with [my colleague] and it was just like, "Wow, I get it now. This is what works. And all those other schools are still doing it that other way." – Shannon Isola, multilingual learner teacher, **Oak Tree Road Elementary School**

Conclusion

When the Promising Practices Project set out to find "impactful, innovative, and replicable" practices across the state of New Jersey, educators from a range of schools—of different grade levels, geographies, and demographics—spoke with remarkable consensus that the **most impactful aspect of their work was the culture that underlies any and all practices.** Principal Carriero of **Charles J. Riley School 9** was one of many educators who articulated how the factors explored above—caring relationships, collaboration, and consistent expectations—are arguably all interrelated:

> **The first practice that we need to have in place is a safe, secure, healthy, and nurturing environment. It has to be highly organized and your administrative team has to be on the same page and have the same vision of what the outcome ... is going to look like. We communicate with each other. Decisions are all based on all of our thoughts together. We have an open-door policy with staff, because thestaff does bring in wonderful examples of instruction that we'd like to share with other staff members. We do have an open-door policy. We [have an] open communication policy with all school stakeholders. In order for you to have a successful school, you have to have an environment that is inviting and looking for people's voices.**

Promising Practices schools offered a litany of "*practices*" that build such an "*environment*" or culture: Culture is built by situating administrators at the school and district level who lead with care, collaboration, and consistency; by hiring staff who embrace and elaborate on these expectations; by centering students' individual socio-emotional and academic needs; by partnering with families; by creating formal and informal methods of common planning, sharing of resources, and professional development; by using data and common assessments to hold staff and students accountable to high standards; and by treating all students and staff as capable, competent, lifelong learners. The other sections of this report offer more detail regarding how Promising Practices schools endeavor to concretely implement such culture-building practices.

And yet, educators also spoke to **how challenging it can be to build and change school culture.** Of course, individual principals—let alone teachers—can only control so much when it comes to shaping relationships with upper administrators as well as securing the resources necessary to hire and support teachers that are a "good fit" and to meet all students' individual needs. Some Promising Practices principals shared that they inherited strong cultures and work to maintain them, such as Principal Lightcap of **Reeds Road Elementary School** who conceded, "*when you're talking about the culture, I don't know how to change it. I've never had to change it. All I've had to do is not mess it up.*" Others reflected on how they have changed culture over time, such as Principal DeMarco of **Reading-Fleming Intermediate School**, who shared,

> **These attitudes and these practices are replicable, but I think the message needs to come [from leadership]. Teachers need to be empowered to do these things ... It's nice to see it kind of just grow to where it becomes commonplace, and the words and phrases and attitudes and practices just happen organically.**

If schools' effectiveness is significantly shaped by the relationships, beliefs, and expectations among the people therein, it follows that many Promising Practices schools expressed concerns about challenges related to teacher recruitment and retention. They shared that broader trends regarding increasing workload and decreasing relative compensation have been aggravated by the stresses of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has increasingly vitriolic conflict over the politics of school curricula. Superintendent Dutt of **North Warren Regional School District** listed a number of "*external influences*" that in her view are rendering teaching increasingly difficult, including "*the lowest graduating rate of college teachers coming into the profession.*" Teachers who work late on nights and weekends to support students and their families, and who take on leadership roles, are not always compensated for this additional labor.

It is becoming harder to find the substitutes needed to cover classes during professional development opportunities. Emergency funding during the peak pandemic (ESSER funds) facilitated the hiring of valuable support staff in the form of coaches and interventionists, but budget cuts have either already forced—or threaten to force—significant teacher layoffs that may impact school culture and the resultant instructional capacity. Administrators at **Cranford Public School District**, reflected on the compounding impacts of these many factors:

> **It's gotten nasty with the national politics coming down into the schools and interfering with the work that people are trying to do, because now you're diverting attention to address potential misinformation. Not to mention the fact that a lot of educators out there are getting dragged through the mud with that narrative. And I mean, we've got heroes here every single day that are working incredibly hard and not getting that respect.** – Scott Rubin, superindendent

> **It is important to find ways to honor teachers and the teaching profession in general. Unfortunately, society does seem to undervalue teaching these days. I do think that translates to substitute shortages and staff shortages in general. ... Pragmatically, if we don't have enough substitute teachers, then it is difficult to release teachers to attend professional development as much as we would like. That professional development is tied directly, I believe, to classroom instruction and student achievement.** – Administrator

Many educators echoed the words of an administrator at **Marie Durand Elementary School** who lamented, "*something's got to change, or else people are going to be not entering the profession or leaving en mass.*"

Changing communities as complex as schools, whether imposed from above, demanded from below, or driven internally or externally, is no minor undertaking. Promising Practices educators—both administrators and teachers—expressed this humbling reality. From the administrative perspective, Principal Robert Lake of **North Plainfield Middle School** reflected on the difficulties of changing teacher behaviors and practices: "*All teachers [are] creatures of habit.*

If I have done something one way for X amount of time, that's how I'm going to do things. Change is hard. Change is really, really difficult. It is essential to acknowledge that and ensure people are heard and supported."

From the teacher perspective, Leigh Anne Gaffney, a third-grade teacher at **Central Elementary School**, reflected on the difficulties of adjusting to changes coming from above: "*Every year there's a change, another change. Change is good, but change is also hard when every year you're coming up on it.*" Once established, a strong school culture such as many of those described above can make it more possible for schools (and districts) to guide and manage change. But establishing the foundations of school culture—relationships, beliefs, and expectations—is a tremendous challenge in and of itself.

4.2 Social-Emotional Learning

Introduction

In the previous section, many school leaders stressed the importance of creating social and emotional climates that were positive and supportive as foundational to their success. Over the past decade, the number of students experiencing social, emotional, and behavioral crises has steadily increased, prompting local school districts, educational researchers, and policymakers to explore preventive measures to improve student outcomes (United States Department of Education, 2021). Adding to alarm, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened pressing concerns and, in many cases, propelled schools to explore, implement, and sustain evidence-based practices to address students' escalating needs. In response, many schools turned to social and emotional learning (SEL) as a best-practices approach.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—a leading multidisciplinary network of scholars, educators, specialists, and child advocates—SEL is an ongoing process in which adults and children acquire and apply skills that help them understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, build empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL is composed of five competencies— self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—that stress the importance of building healthy relationships with students by exploring and affirming the intersections of identity, lived experiences, and perceptions of others. Ultimately, SEL aims to advance educational equity by building school-family-community partnerships that create learning experiences centered on trust, collaboration, and meaningful curriculum and instruction.

SEL First

Of this project's 52 selected Promising Practices schools, 49 (94.23%) highlighted the importance and even the priority of SEL, and saw this framework as being crucial to their successes. An administrator at **School 28** exemplified this notion of "SEL first:"

> **We pride [ourselves] in the social-emotional [learning]. … We've been doing this for a very long time. I think that ties into the academic success because we do not only look at the child's academic [learning], but we also look at the child's social-emotional learning as well. While we want to academically advance students, we're more concerned about the social-emotional wellbeing of the child because we'd rather have a happy child that wants to be here than a child that's just going through the motions because the parents are putting pressure or because we're putting pressure.**

This "*SEL first*" approach was seen across grade levels. Principal Domenico Carriero of **Charles J. Riley, School 9,** which serves Grades K through 8, described their focus on the "*whole child*" as oriented towards positive outcomes in the postsecondary realm and beyond, in careers and as citizens:

> **We do meet the social-emotional learning aspects of the whole child. We're not just looking at the educational role; we're looking at the whole child just to make sure that they receive all of the necessities that they need in order to progress and to achieve. Because what we're trying to do is make great citizens out of these children. Once they do go to high school, they're able to bring that there, and then eventually college, and then we'd like them to return back here as doctors, lawyers, teachers, to show their community, this is where I came from.**

Lawren Bridgeforth-Monroe, a social worker at **University High School**, shared how they have sharp focus on students' holistic wellbeing:

> **We have to make sure that [the students are] doing well emotionally, mentally, [and] physically, in order for us to then educate them. It's very challenging to tell a youngster, "Take a test" or "learn this lesson," but they may not have had anything to eat that particular morning, or they're stressed. We let them know that we care about them beyond academics. We care about how you feel emotionally. We care about how you are mentally. We care about if you have a family loss, if a family member has passed—a parent, a grandparent. We've shown up at funerals, at wakes. We've gone into homes to check on them. And if you just make it in the building, we will assist you. If you don't make into the building, we're coming to look for you to find you.**

Educators at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** and **Brick Memorial High School** echoed this prioritization of SEL, and tied their work directly to the CASEL framework:

> **You look at the core competencies outlined on the CASEL website. That's it; that's the goal. That should drive the instruction. The core competencies of responsible decision-making, self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-assessment. That should drive our learning. ... What do we want out of our kids as good human beings? What do we want them to do when they finish school? ... [We want them to be able to] communicate with people, reflect, grow, and make responsible decisions. If that gets tied into all of our learning and standards, and it's woven in, at the end of the day, we can say, "I think we got it." And I think we got it right.** – Administrator, **Cedar Creek Elementary School**

> **We use the CASEL framework as a foundation for our SEL efforts. I think educating teachers on the framework, [and] connecting it to standards, self-efficacy, and confidence was really important. Redefining it for teachers and using the CASEL framework validated our approach to interacting with kids.** – Alyce Anderson, director of curriculum and instruction, **Brick Memorial High School**

The emphasis these schools place on SEL and developing the whole child is well-supported by rigorous recent research. One study from the UChicago Consortium on School Research concluded:

> *At their core, our findings show that learning is about much more than content. Students benefit when they are in schools that challenge them to work hard, productively foster engagement and study skills, and cultivate supportive connections with their peers and teachers. This research doesn't just show that these things have positive benefits—it shows that, actually, they're the most important things schools can do (Jackson et al., 2021).*

Educators also pointed to the social and emotional well-being of *staff* as integral to supporting the whole child (see section on School Culture for more on staff well-being). A teacher at **North Plainfield Middle School** highlighted their school's focus on staff well-being through their school wellness committee, and having periods of unstructured time during in-service days:

> **My advice to any administrator would be invest in the wellness of your staff. ... The fact that we have the relationship among the staff is tremendous. We have a wellness committee, we do cheerleading things, and [raffles]; and that comraderie, that climate among the staff [exists] because [of] the trickle down [effect]. ... Happy teacher, happy students. It shouldn't be overlooked. It's a really big deal.**
> – Eighth-grade math teacher, **North Plainfield Middle School**

> **I don't say kids first. I say staff first. The reason I say staff first is because they [talk to] the kids every day. I can't interact with every child every day, but they can. ...**

By putting them first, making sure they are comfortable with what we're doing, why we're doing it, how we're doing it, that translates to the kids, then I am taking care of the kids. ... It's about people and taking care of people. And that's what we do. – Robert Lake, principal, **North Plainfield Middle School**

Of the 49 schools that identified SEL as a contributing factor to improving their schools' outcomes, 25 schools (51%) emphasized its role in addressing the holistic needs of students and staff in relationship to the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic; 16 of these, including **Birches**, **Rieck Avenue**, **Hoover Elementary School**, **Robert Morris**, **Charles J. Riley**, **School 28**, and **University High School,** attributed their relative success during the pandemic to their strong focus on SEL before the pandemic. For example, a staff member at **Hoover Elementary School** shared, "*But even pre-pandemic, I think one of the things when we were talking about what works and what was innovative is that we've been doing a lot [of SEL] for a long time. When the pandemic hit, we were ready.*"

Other schools, such as **Middle Road Elementary School**, discussed how they expanded their SEL practices in response to the pandemic by prioritizing the development of healthy connections between students and staff (for more on SEL during and after the pandemic, see Pandemic Impacts section):

> **The biggest thing that we did was really heavily push social-emotional learning; that has stayed [beyond the pandemic]. We do recognize how important it is, and we have continued that process, and I would say probably in some ways even increased it. That was probably the biggest thing that we put in and that stayed. After COVID, I think there was definitely a switch [to the] more social-emotional side [of learning] and I feel like when the students connect more to the teacher as a person and not just an authority figure in the room, you get a lot more feedback and ... they're willing to work with you and work for you rather than [feeling like] it's just someone telling you what to do upfront.** – Katherine Egan, principal

District Support for SEL

Another finding revealed that, out of the 49 schools, 15 schools reported having district support for SEL initiatives; common practices noted included support for mental health and wellness scheduling, trauma-informed practices, and district wellness goals. For example, teachers at **Packanack Elementary School** shared:

> **The message had been clear I think during the pandemic and since. ... not that academics were less important, but the person was most important and that was from top down, from superintendent to principals to everyone. In a data-driven world with test scores and things of that nature, the message was, let's say that we**

don't know what type of situation [students are] dealing with right now. It's okay to put whatever you're working on aside and have a conversation or ... a connection to draw them back in. I would say that message has continued. I think last year some of our district goals were mental health-related wellness. – Matt Grossman, fourth-grade teacher

As part of that district initiative, they brought in wellness weekends. Four weekends a year, no homework, no tests, no projects. It's just a stop. – Jamie Meigh, first-grade teacher

Amy Mount, director of curriculum and instruction at **Gateway Regional High School,** attributed their post-pandemic implementation of an advisory period to the shared trust between their district's superintendent and teachers:

We spend a lot of time talking about what do the teachers need in order to be able to serve the kids. I think there was a general trust factor between our superintendent, union leadership, administration, the teachers, the whole. We have a relationship with our administration. They're visible, they're in the building, they're out in the hall. I think there's a comfort there when we all talk and discuss. We try and get toward this unified goal.

Highlighting a sharp focus on starting with SEL first and supporting the whole child pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic lockdowns, Scott Rubin, superintendent of **Cranford Public School District (Orange Avenue School),** shared:

That social-emotional piece, not just during the pandemic, is big for us, the idea of the whole child. We talk a lot about data, but we're also fond of saying, "Hey, data is not everything, but it's also not nothing." We try to use it appropriately when we're trying to identify what's happening. We did ... a higher level of care during that time because if a kid is not feeling comfortable, valued, respected, and safe, I don't know how you think you're going to get very far with the academics. I just don't want that to get lost because people, no matter what they're implementing, can't lose sight of the fact that it's still a child there.

Principal Michael McGhee of **Oakcrest High School** emphasized their district's pre-pandemic and post-lockdown focus on mental wellness:

From a mental health standpoint, coming out of COVID this district ... we've made a strong push from a mental health standpoint. I give a lot of credit to our superintendent now, who was principal back then, he really took an initiative.

John Bennetti, the assistant superintendent of **Union City School District (Sara M. Gilmore Academy),** shared how their district as a whole functions "*like a family*:"

We talk about the secret sauce. ... We all live and breathe by kids come first, right? In every decision we make in the district, at any level, it's about kids and relationships. A lot of the work I do, as I mentioned, is working with administrative teams. That could be scary for those teams to have central office come in and sit at the table. But we have developed through the years, these non-threatening partnerships. It's not uncommon for me to go into a school that might be experiencing some challenges, take some supervisors with me, and say we're going to help you through this. We go in and out of classrooms, we work with you [principals] to unearth the challenge. To provide some support and help figure it out and to sustain that success once we're no longer with you there. We are grounded in those strong partnerships. Even though we are at senior level, it's not uncommon for us to get down and dirty and get deep into classrooms and just partner up with staff in very non-threatening ways. We are like a family. Relationships are critical.

Data-driven SEL Implementation

While many schools emphasized an enhanced focus on SEL before, during, and after lockdowns, a few exemplary schools highlighted the importance of data-driven decision-making and implementations. Some schools emphasized the use of internal and external survey data collected from students, staff, and parents, and attributed their positive outcomes to this practice. Two schools (Hoover Elementary School and Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy) noted the use of the educational platform Panorama, a digital data platform that employs a wide range of social-emotional assessments and vignettes, including assessments on students' feelings of belonging at school.

Comparatively, six schools (Robert Mascenik School, College Achieve Central Charter School, Robert Morris School, University High School, Brick Memorial High School, and Gateway Regional High School) shared how they use internally constructed surveys and discipline referrals to guide action-planning and implementation of SEL supports and interventions. For example, interviewees at Whitman Elementary School relayed, "*Under our data meeting, we also look through the lens of SEL and the behavioral support students need as well. We do have those conversations as a community. ... It's been very successful, I think. I feel our teachers feel the same way.*" Emphasizing the practice of data-driven decision-making, Madeline Santiago, the guidance counselor at Robert Morris School, shared:

I collect data in all my counseling sessions on what the need is. Last year was behavior. And that's why we implemented much more of the restorative circles to help out and social-emotional learning. ... When I first started here, only 40% of [the students were] Hispanic; now they're 60–65%. ... I saw the need of social-

emotional learning in our Hispanic community, newly arrived, and even those who come from other districts. So, I run SEL friendship groups.

Jennifer Lane, secondary science supervisor at Brick Memorial High School, also highlighted how they used and continue to use surveys to guide SEL decision-making, dissemination of findings, and implementation of supports:

Building principals created their surveys. We had parents' surveys, and the building principals really turnkeyed what we learned from the surveys they created and frequently shared them with the staff. ... I think a lot of the information gathered from those surveys fueled participation in Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and SEL check-ins. That data, every school had an SEL committee that was designed to [focus] on the grit, growth mindset, and self-efficacy with those surveys. [Those] climate surveys have continued.

SEL and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

While there are many ways to implement SEL practices in K–12 schools, out of the 49 schools that highlighted SEL as pivotal to their successes, 32 (65%) identified PBIS (positive behavioral interventions and supports) or practices closely aligned with PBIS as key features of their SEL programming and initiatives. In sharing their thoughts on the interconnectedness of SEL and PBIS, Dawn Dolinsky, an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Richard M. Teitelman Middle School, shared:

I think that if you're going to be honest about this, I don't think there's one of us in the room who's going to think back to our middle school days and fondly remember the lesson that we had on whatever. What you remember are those fun times, those memories, those connections. Somewhere along the way we lost that concept that school is meant to also be fun and build those memories and build those connections, those friendships, those moments that you do remember. I think PBIS does that. It holds you accountable. You have to do the academics; you have to do the behavioral aspect as well. It doesn't take away from that, but they're kids and they have to have some fun to be motivated. If it's not, their motivation goes away.

Prior Research on Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

PBIS is an evidenced-based framework that aims to enhance learning environments by supporting students' behavioral, social, and emotional well-being and is one of the most widely adopted support systems in K–12 schools, with over 29,000 schools implementing this approach

nationwide, benefiting over 16.3 million students (McIntosh, 2021, p.2). Yet, contrary to popular belief, PBIS is not a scripted curriculum, manualized program, or single-day professional development training. Instead, it is a continuum of evidence-based practices that aim to foster a commitment to supporting students, teachers, and families emotionally, socially, and academically.

According to the Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, PBIS is a three-tier evidence-based framework designed to strengthen school ecosystems, student achievement, classroom instruction, and teacher efficacy (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, 2023, p.10). Comprehensively, PBIS uses universal practices, targeted supports, and intensive interventions to ensure that all students receive the appropriate level of support based on individual needs. To achieve desired outcomes, PBIS centers on five key elements of (1) equity, (2) systems, (3) practices, (4) data, and (5) outcomes.

The Five Foundational Elements of PBIS	
Equity centers on…	Reducing disparities by collecting, analyzing, and disaggregating data. Disseminating data findings to relevant stakeholders. Using self-awareness, culturally responsive interventions, and evaluation.
Systems centers on…	Selecting, developing, and implementing practices. Training and coaching teachers on innovative approaches. Data-driven decision-making to sustain or modify practices.
Data centers on…	Collecting and analyzing student outcomes and practices. Identifying gaps, challenges, and goals with precision. Assessing for fidelity, sustainability, and allocation of resources.
Practices centers on…	Implementation of schoolwide supports and approaches. Targeted strategies to address goals for school and students. Implementation of practices in intended manner.
Outcomes centers on…	Explicitly monitoring fidelity in implementation. Modifying policies, systems, and practices to evolving needs. Accountability, establishing goals, and assessing findings.

Modified from Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2024). What is PBIS? https://www.pbis.org/pbis/what-is-pbis

While there is no single approach to implementing PBIS, researchers highlight active involvement of school leaders, PBIS teams, and parents as critical components for effective implementation. For example, in using the PBIS framework, school administrators are responsible for spearheading the implementation of practices and policies that prevent, address, and reward students' behavior. In collaboration with teachers, parents, and the larger school community, **school leaders co-create shared values, goals, and schoolwide norms that support positive and healthy relationships.** This is commonly done through the identification, selection, and recognition of character traits that school leaders, teachers, and students desire to represent their school (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports 2023, p. 52).

Accountability is also noted as a critical measure to sustaining PBIS implementation, identity-affirming practices, reductions in disciplinary practices, and feelings of belonging for students

and staff. Thus, PBIS aims to shift educational paradigms from reactive remediation to **proactive prevention and intervention that support students at varying tiers and levels of support** (Preston et al., 2016, p.175). Through this practice, stakeholders are empowered to co-create character traits and learning environments that foster a positive school culture, reduce discipline disparities, and improve teaching capacity.

In short, a PBIS functions as a system of behavioral supports to proactively address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students by establishing and setting universal expectations, engaging in equitable decision-making, and implementing positive reinforcements. The three tiers of PBIS define, teach, and reinforce healthy behaviors and school environments to provide intervention at varying levels of intensity.

The Three Tiers of PBIS	
Tier 1 aims to…	Meet the needs of 80% of students. Provide all students with access to universal supports. Function across all settings classroom and non-classroom.
Tier 2 aims to…	Meet the needs of 20% of students. Provide small group intervention to students. Individualize and increase access to instructional supports.
Tier 3 aims to…	Meet the needs of 1–5% of students. Provide intensive and individualized support for the most vulnerable. Identify gaps, challenges, and goals with precision.

Modified from Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2024). What is PBIS? https://www.pbis.org/pbis/what-is-pbis

Grounded in proactive strategies, Tier 1 centers on defining and establishing schoolwide expectations that serve as the foundational pillars to building a healthy school environment. Tier 1 interventions are robust, differentiated, and aim to support 80% or more of students, and are applied universally to all students in classroom and non-classroom settings. This tier emphasizes proactive prevention through the explicit teaching of schoolwide expectations, and includes positive reinforcement, rewards and recognition, and the cultivation of positive interpersonal skills.

Another key feature of Tier 1 is developing partnerships with students, families, and the broader school community. Universal screening and progress monitoring are other key features supporting students' success at Tier 1, and are closely tied to data-informed decision-making—a critical step to determining the need for Tier 2 interventions (Horner, et al., 2017, p.26).

Building on Tier 1, Tier 2 interventions align with schoolwide expectations and provide additional support and intervention to students who are at risk for increasing behavioral issues, generally through small group sessions on social skills, emotional regulation, and academic support. Similar to Tier 1, Tier 2 interventions are implemented in the classroom and beyond, and are designed to

serve about 10–15% of students and are selected based on student need. Tier 2 supports are done in conjunction with Tier 1 and are implemented by various staff including teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators. Aimed to improve early identification and intervention, Tier 2 interventions are individualized and increase students' access to instructional supports as well as opportunities for praise, recognition, and positive reinforcement.

Lastly, Tier 3 provides intensive and individualized interventions to the most vulnerable students. It aims to support approximately 1–5% of students whose needs are not met through Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions. These interventions are individualized and intensive, and begin with strong Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports. Different from Tier 1 and Tier 2, Tier 3 supports center on developing behavior intervention plans that are individualized, comprehensive, student-centered, and address persistent and severe behavioral concerns. Functional behavioral assessments (FBA) are a core focus of Tier 3.

In some cases, Tier 3 teams are composed of a school administrator, behavioral specialist, and other school personnel who assist in understanding the root causes of behaviors to identify appropriate interventions that are most useful to the student. Tier 3 data collection is rigorous and includes feedback from various sources including parents, extended caregivers, teachers, and other school personnel, who are included in devising comprehensive plans. Tier 3 interventions can include modifications to instructional assignments, structured classroom breaks, behavioral contracts, teaching of replacement behaviors, and parent training on preventive and proactive strategies. Overall, the use of universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-driven decision-making guides PBIS teams in identifying students who require Tier 3 interventions.

Research demonstrates a strong correlation between high fidelity in PBIS implementation and student well-being, academic performance, and teacher efficacy. For example, a 2018 study by George et al. revealed PBIS coordinators, teacher training, and district support as key variables in successful PBIS implementation. This study suggests that schools with high fidelity build capacity for teaching, reinforcing, and monitoring interventions. Findings also showed that the length of implementation was key to creating supportive learning environments and fostering student success. Highlighting the importance of sustained implementation, these researchers warn that early abandonment of PBIS yields little results and suggest that sustained implementation plays a significant role in producing positive outcomes.

A longitudinal study conducted by Kitterman et al. (2019) investigated the impacts of PBIS implementation over a 5-year period in 552 school districts across 25 states, and revealed that **schools with high fidelity over a 3-year period experienced steady reductions in disciplinary referrals and school suspensions, and improvements in math.** Compared to results at schools during the first 2 years of implementation, schools with 3 years of implementation yielded more positive outcomes.

Similarly, a mixed methods study by Kim et al. (2018, p.364) examined the impacts of PBIS implementation over a 3-year period in 477 schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities, and found that schools with sustained PBIS over 3 years increased student and staff belonging, attendance, and saw reductions in exclusionary discipline. Studies by Childs et al. (2016, p.94), Freeman et al. (2016, p. 47), and Simonsen et al. (2012, p.10) analyzed the relationship between fidelity in implementation and student outcomes in high schools, and found significantly lower discipline referrals over a 2-year period of implementation in high fidelity schools. These studies also found that high turnover in leadership, teacher burnout, lack of resources, and insufficient capacity for sustainability were contributing factors to early abandonment of PBIS.

Despite its benefits, PBIS implementation is not without challenges. One common concern is the fidelity of implementation, as schools may struggle to fully adhere to PBIS practices due to resource constraints or competing priorities. Additionally, critics of PBIS have raised questions about the cultural responsiveness of PBIS interventions, highlighting the need for greater attention to equity and inclusion. For example, a 2018 study by Nese et al. examined 708 schools within five states and found that, when compared to middle and high schools, elementary schools were more likely to reach adequate fidelity in the adoption of PBIS, length of implementation, and sustainability of practices. Similar to Childs et al. (2016), Freeman et al. (2016, p.47) and Simonsen et al. (2012) found that non-Title I schools and suburban schools were likely to reach high fidelity before Title I schools and schools located in urban areas. These findings highlight concerns in implementation and outcomes for under-resourced schools and the students attending them.

Secondly, the lack of trauma-informed practices within the PBIS model is also a concern highlighted throughout the research, noting the growing number of children experiencing one or more traumatic childhood events. A 2020 study conducted by Plumb et al. (2020, p.45) notes that PBIS lays a strong foundation for scaffolding preventive behavioral and social-emotional practices, but misses the mark in addressing the root causes of behavior and trauma. Similar to Ebner et al. (2020), this study suggests that PBIS alone does not address the complexities of the whole child and asserts trauma-informed training is essential to addressing the gaps in PBIS implementation outcomes.

Additionally, Eiraldi et al. (2019, p.11) examined PBIS implementation in conjunction with mental health supports within two urban K–8 schools, and found that school personnel struggled to identify non-externalized behaviors or "red flags" for students experiencing behavioral and mental concerns of social isolation, depression, and anxiety, but were more effective at observing externalized behaviors of verbal outbursts and physical aggression. Moreover, this study highlighted that school counselors within this study lacked the capacity to deliver Tier 2 interventions, program content, and coordination of scheduling without direct support, and suggests that additional training could minimize disruptions. These studies assert that gaps in mental health supports, professional development training, and awareness of red flags adversely impact PBIS implementation.

Promising Practices Project Findings Regarding PBIS

Findings from Promising Practices schools reinforce prior research on PBIS. Aligning with prior studies, this study's findings suggested positive outcomes related to the length of implementation of positive behavior supports. Common Tier 1 approaches included developing early connections with students, implementing pre-existing character-education programs, using rewards and recognition, intentional scheduling to create time for SEL, and structuring mental breaks into the school day. Some schools directly referenced such schoolwide practices as part of a comprehensive PBIS approach, while others did not make this explicit connection. Tier 2 approaches included group counseling and wellness activities, while Tier 3 consisted of individual counseling and goal-setting.

The First Days of School

Interviewees highlighted the Tier 1 practice of building early relationships with students, parents, and the surrounding community as a key factor to their positive outcomes. A few exemplary schools (**Hoover Elementary School**, **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School**, **Community Middle School**, **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**, and **North Warren Regional High School**) emphasized a standard beginning-of-year practice of "getting-to-know-you activities." Lisa Taylor, seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teacher at **Passaic Preparatory Academy**, shared how her beginning-of-year activities are integrated into the school curriculum and used by all teachers:

> **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? And what do you think our class rules should be? Or expectations?" I think we just have our students participate a lot in what our environment should be like. I think it just creates a positive culture for the classroom as well as the school. Just involving them a lot in their own learning. That's across the board. Every teacher spends the first 4 days [doing this]. It's in our curriculum. ... **We work hard to create a safe space, an inclusive space where all of our students feel safe. We encourage our students; we always continue to [have] high expectations for them. We hold them accountable, but we're also very flexible and understanding.** I think that goes a long way with them.

At **Community Middle School**, language arts teacher Kaitlyn Diaz shared how she and her colleagues dedicate half-days to relationship-building at the beginning of the school year, through activities such as a classroom scavenger hunt. These activities build early bonds as students learn about others' backgrounds.

> **In the beginning of the year, we have a couple half-days; we don't do anything but get to know our kids.** I have a scavenger hunt around the room and they get to know about me, and then the next day it's the flip. It could be something as simple

as, "Oh, you like purple, so do I," and then we can kind of stem from that. Maybe if I know they like purple and it's their birthday, I'll give them a purple bookmark and just try to do little things to say, "I remember that, I'm here, I care about you." But the first couple of days of school, we just get to know our kids. We don't touch content. I'm not going over my syllabus just yet. I'm not doing anything but "What can I do to help you succeed? What do I need to know about you? You're going to be with me all year, so let's see what we can do. Let's see what we can learn.'"

Brenda Roth, instructional coach at **Hoover Elementary School**, shared how they **establish classroom communities** on the first day of school and help students to **develop classroom norms and expectations**:

> Day one, we come in and we are establishing our communities. And [the principal] gives us that time. It's not just, "Oh, well, we have to be done with this chapter," or "We have to do this, and we have to finish this by this time." No, we're going to take the time. We're going to establish our community; we're going to establish our rules. The kids are going to come up with those, of what they expect from the classroom and what they expect from each other.

At **North Warren Regional High School**, Principal Norcross-Murphy shared beginning-of-year practices of having students work together to identify healthy interpersonal interactions that center on respect:

> At the beginning of the year, all of the students collaboratively create a list of things [to answer the question], "How do you want to be treated?" Right? The number one word that comes up over and over and over again is respect. I want you to respect me, but what does that mean? How am I respecting you? What do I do to show you respect? The students spend time with each teacher in each one of their classes identifying what respect looks like, both from the teacher's perspective and also from the student's perspective. What does it mean for me as a teacher to feel respected by you? And what does it mean for you as a student to feel respected, not only by me as the teacher, but also by your peers?

Describing their opening day practices of getting to know students, Dawn Dolinsky, an eighth-grade language arts teacher at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, shared how they established a 2-day series of events including a field day for students and staff:

> In the beginning of the year, we teach the kids the expectations because it's hard to hold you accountable if you don't know what the expectation is. Then we added a second kickoff day, which really was a team-building student child connective field day per se. I've never had a staff member look at me and say, "I'm not going to do that."

CASEL SELect Programs

Several schools (**Robert Morris School**, **Rosa International Middle School**, **Central Elementary School**, and **Mount Tabor Elementary School**) highlighted the integration of individualized approaches to implementing CASEL SELect programs. CASEL SELect programs are exemplary programs identified by CASEL as having evidence-based practices and positive outcomes in building strong SEL practices, teaching approaches, and organizational strategies. The five identified CASEL SELect programs were: Steven Covey's The Leader in Me, Responsive Classrooms, Yale University's RULER, National University's Sanford Harmony, and Second Step.

Steven Covey's The Leader in Me is an evidence-based SEL program used by K–5 schools to build leadership qualities within the student, and is identified as a best-practice program that supports educational equity by offering strategies for understanding and reducing bias in children and adults, customizing youth action projects, and creating learning environments that promote inclusion and belonging. Responsive Classrooms is an evidence-based SEL program that schools implement to build positive classroom communities of trust and clear expectations. Yale University's RULER is a program that aims to support SEL practices by assisting students in identifying, navigating, and managing emotions. National University's Sanford Harmony is a no-cost digital K–12 SEL curriculum that supports schools in implementing CASEL's five competencies of SEL through healthy relationship-building skills. Second Step is an evidence-based SEL curriculum used by K–5 schools to transform schooling practices and create learning environments that help students thrive. The Leader in Me and Second Step are also recognized as equity-based SEL programs that center on creating a sense of inclusion and belonging for students, and have been included in research studies in suburban and urban settings.

In sharing their implementation and individualization of The Leader in Me's 7 Habits of Happy Kids character education program, Lorise Goeke, principal and superintendent at **Robert Morris School**, shared:

> **It's embedded in everything we do because we try to teach the children life skills that these seven habits represent. Being able to prioritize, being able to put things aside so you can reach your goals, goal setting, action planning, being able to work together in groups which we call synergizing, being a good listener. Sharpening the saw: this is telling them you need to have a balance; you need to be able to relax and have some fun. I think it has really helped a lot of our students. It's that kind of thing that we do all over. Students do the announcements, students have jobs, and the jobs rotate. We have leaders of the week. We have assemblies [run by] students.**

At **Central School**, interviewees shared how they use Yale University's RULER curriculum to guide their development and implementation of classroom lessons, and shared how this approach is also integrated into their use of Responsive Classrooms, particularly during morning meetings. Of note, the RULER approach was piloted with teachers 1 year before introducing it to students. Principal Shannon Simkus shared:

We've been using Responsive Classroom for more than 13 years at Central School. We have now integrated Yale's RULER program, and these programs not only align but complement one another. Responsive Classroom helps to set expectations up front, and classroom community and trust. It helps to create a safe, inclusive environment. In addition, students have a very specific curriculum that is guided by the Yale RULER program, but really designed by the teachers here who know our students well and can plan and articulate for them horizontally and vertically across a [school] year and across grade levels. With this program, we find that kids feel more comfortable, understand the value of their emotions, and build skills of emotional intelligence that help them thrive and be the best version of themselves. Before we even implemented the program with children, the district actually did it with teachers and faculty for a year. Our faculty completed a charter and participated in mood meter activities, plotting how we feel to recognize and understand the value of our emotions. We had professional development and really experienced and embraced this as a faculty. I think that is unique. We had time to learn it ourselves and experience it before we were doing it with the students and building it into our classrooms.

As part of their implementation of National University's Sanford Harmony, interviewees at **Mount Tabor Elementary School** indicated that this program was beneficial in establishing morning meetings: "*We use a program, Sanford Harmony, which kind of tags into that morning meeting idea and buddying up with a partner to answer questions and just integrating that throughout the day. We also do SEL days throughout the year.*"

Capturing Kids Hearts was also noted as an implemented SEL program that focuses on building positive teacher-student relationships. While this program has not yet been recognized as an exemplary CASEL SELect program, its evidence-based curriculum strongly aligns with the five SEL competencies. At **North Warren Regional High School**, Principal Norcross-Murphy emphasized the transformative role of individualizing accelerating SEL practices and attributed their post-lockdown adoption of the SEL program to their students' positive learning outcomes:

[Capturing Kids Hearts] is really a focus on building relational capacity with students, that they will succeed if you have built a relationship with them, that they will work if you have built a relationship with them. Post-pandemic students have cell phones and have a lot of distractions. I think it's harder to build connections than it ever has been. We have more access to social networks than we ever have, and yet we're more isolated than we've ever been. We are working, and I will tell you that we are nowhere near there yet, but we are working to build relationships with students. Some of the ways that we do this is by requiring our teachers to meet students at the door when they enter the door every day, and to 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 the business and it's all content, you're not building that. They are identifying good work and affirming good work to the students.

Token-Based Economies

Token-based economies are a positive-reinforcement approach that aims to facilitate and encourage healthy behaviors in students in the classroom and beyond. More than a dozen schools highlighted token-based economies as a structural framework to prevent and improve student behaviors, and attributed these practices to their positive outcomes. Several noted the benefits of token economies for developing, implementing, and sustaining schoolwide character traits and expectations. For example, Principal Kevin Lightcap at **Reeds Road Elementary School** described their school's integration of Total Participation Techniques—a teaching technique that aims to support active learning, participation, and engagement—to their customized PBIS reward system of "Best effort, Always cooperating, Respect for all, and Kindness matters" (BARK):

> **The BARK program is schoolwide. Total Participation Techniques [are] schoolwide. But [teachers] also have their own things that they've taken the lead with in their classroom. The PBIS program is a rewards-based program. It kind of takes everything and streamlines it for the teacher in every classroom. They're using the same language. They're using tickets. Some of them do it a little bit differently, but rather than a teacher having to go out and buy prizes and tickets and set up, the school—the building—does it and there's a building-wide prize bin. We're asking them to use it as a tool to prevent discipline issues. And we're asking them to use it as a tool to reward positive behavior. There are two types of rewards. We looked at tangibles and experiences, so tangibles being Squishmallows, that kind of stuff. Then experiential being lunch with principal, pizza with your friends, ice cream, whatever it may be. The older kids ... like extra recess, hat day, that kind of stuff.**

Christy Buck, **Reeds** technology teacher and Title I culture coordinator, elaborated on how the BARK program builds school community by requiring teachers to **recognize each other's classes** rather than their own:

> **This month we're focusing on being respectful. And every time in the hallway, if I see a class that's doing well, the homeroom teacher can't give their homeroom a ticket for doing well in the hallway. Somebody else has to compliment them. I really think it was a shift in how even the adults were looking. So it gave us like, okay, I am now going to start to look for these kids and be mindful to say, "Hey, you're doing a great job."**

Principal Jack Lipari of **Roosevelt Elementary School** shared their implementation of a rewards-based economy called Bear Bucks:

> **Another piece is positive behavior supports in schools. Now that's a very, very in-depth program. There [are] certain aspects that we incorporate here, something simple, such as Bear Bucks. If you're caught being respectful, responsible, or kind, you get a Bear Buck. What's important is that there's buy-in from the staff here, so everyone is issuing those Bear Bucks to the students.**

Highlighting the power of both a formal token economy as well as more informal opportunities to build relationships with certain educators as impactful reward systems, an administrator at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** shared:

> **And we do something really cool we do these cards. They're called ROAR cards. Teachers get those and they give them out sparingly. So, it's got to be something really good. But the kid comes down and we celebrate them, and we call their parent with them. And they love it. Then the other [thing] we do is ROAR tickets. The kids will earn these orange tickets, they put them in a bin, and on Friday mornings we do a raffle. They get little knick-knack stuff, but we ask them what they want and some of them want breakfast, or they really want lunch with me. ... We have some kiddos who are male that maybe they struggle, they may need a positive male role model. So, we try to identify that. He'll invite the kids to come down and check with him. ... It just had a lot of impact.**

Student (and Staff) Recognition

Of the 49 schools that mentioned SEL, 22 schools (44.89%) highlighted the importance of recognizing and celebrating students and staff through practices such as student of the month awards, which extend their character education and rewards-based initiatives. For example, detailing their practices to build character education student recognition, Principal Lipari of **Roosevelt Elementary School** shared:

> **Schoolwide incentives have been helpful from either the classroom or the school. We have a student of the month assembly every month, and a recent addition was perfect attendance. So instead of just a student of the month, that's only one award. ... [Now] there's also a perfect attendance for the month award. So, each month, whoever had perfect attendance for the whole previous month gets a homework pass or something simple like that.**

Laura Gore, principal of **Radix Elementary School**, discussed her staff's implementation of Radix Rockstars and highlighted a sharp focus on inclusivity in their monthly student recognition ceremonies:

> We are doing something different this year—it's called Radix Rockstars. Every month, from kindergarten to fourth grade, a character trait is discussed in our school. Every teacher has to nominate someone from their class for demonstrating that character trait. It doesn't have to be in that month. It can be at some point throughout the year. But the most important part of the nomination is the teacher writing why they nominated the student. [Nominated students] get a little certificate to take home to their grownups, which also shares why they were nominated. Typically, student recognition ended up being the kid who got good grades. But that's not all we should be acknowledging. We are very inclusive and maintain an approach that our kids should be recognized for who they are and what important qualities they bring to our schoool community.

Similarly, interviewees at **Reading-Fleming Intermediate School** shared their approach to recognizing students in their grade level teams, especially those who "fly under the radar," through both awards and phone calls home. One teacher shared:

> The kids are given awards based on character education. The teachers get up, we give an award, usually there's a quick little narrative and story. It's some of the most powerful moments as a teacher to see kids sit and cheer on their classmates. This year we had quite a few students get emotional and cry. Sometimes it's those students who fly under the radar. They're not the most talkative, they're not the most involved, but we see that spark in them that they're doing incredible things without being noticed. It is important that kids are recognized, but there's no one way a team can do it. There are no rules for it. But through taking a whole-child approach, just recognizing kids for being who they are and for their achievements regardless of what that is. My vice principals [made] probably over 120, maybe 130 positive phone calls this year. That's something new we've started this year, making a phone call from an administrator saying, "Hey, I'm going to tell you basically how awesome your kid is, and this is why."

Ken Doolittle, principal of **Packanack Elementary**, discussed the school's Praiseworthy Penguin monthly character education assembly, which aims to recognize students who exhibit their schoolwide character traits:

> Each month, we highlight a character trait and then students are working to show that character trait in their everyday school life. Then teachers are looking for those character traits, and they fill out a nomination form that has the student's name and activities or the actions they did that exhibit that trait. Usually the last Friday of every month, we go into the gym and we lay down a beautiful red carpet and we have [our mascot] Paki the penguin in the front. The school counselor talks about the character trait, and then we'll read out what the individual does and say the child's name, and the child gets up and they walk down the red carpet.

Everyone ... hollers, and they get a picture. Then we talk about what the next month's character trait [is] so that we all have a goal and something that we're kind of working towards highlighting in our life.

Principal Norcross-Murphy of **North Warren Regional High Schools** described how their Patriot Awards recognize positive behaviors among both students and staff:

Our middle school teachers used to give Patriot Awards, and they would identify students on a marking period basis who identified some of the characteristics. ... We have now created that for seventh- to twelfth-grade students. February was positive attitude, March was ambition, April is trustworthiness, and May is going to be spirited. The students can nominate each other through a Google form. The teachers can also nominate. We choose two students in each grade and have the teachers vote on the top two students. They get selected, they get a certificate, they get recognized on our social media, and we're going to have a breakfast for all of them at the end of the school year. The students can also then give positive affirmations to their teachers. They do it on pen and paper, and we give those to the teachers to put them in their kits of positive notes. We put all of the teachers' [names] in an online spin wheel, and we choose one of them to be recognized for their positive contributions to our building. So that's to affirm the good things that are happening in our building all of the time.

Highlighting the importance of using **small tokens of appreciation**, an administrator at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** shared how they recently implemented a random selection drawing:

At the beginning of the year, [all of the staff members] get a squeezy squishy. It's like stress relief and something to keep for the year with a bingo number on it. On Fridays we call two bingo numbers, and they get a $5 gift card to Wawa. I think that piece of feeling valued, we model that to the staff and the staff in turn models that for kids. So, it's constantly, "What would I expect or what would I want as a teacher? What would I want as a kid? How can I support?"

Intentional Scheduling and Brain Breaks

A key finding revealed **intentionality in building and organizing school schedules around SEL activities and interventions.** This intentional scheduling of SEL occurred in the forms of WIN (*"What I Need"*) periods, advisory blocks, and flex lunches, with elementary schools more likely to report WIN periods as common practices, while advisory periods and flex lunch periods were described at the high school level. These flexible periods were noted as intentionally scheduled periods of time to tailor support to students' unique needs and provide students with social-emotional and academic support. Educators also noted how they use this time to bring in extracurricular clubs to increase student participation, engagement, and attendance during

the school day. Overall, schools emphasized how the intentional and structured integration of social-emotional learning into their schedule has increased opportunities for students and staff to access social-emotional supports, build connections, and increase school morale and feelings of belonging while minimizing disruptions to academic instruction. **(For more details on these practices, see Flex Periods case study in Section 5.)**

In addition to the incorporation of flexible periods into their schedules, several Promising Practices schools shared various versions of **"*brain breaks*"** they provide to students throughout the day. Brain breaks are an evidence-based practice supporting self-regulation, by allowing students to take rest periods for stress relief in between classroom lessons and activities, and can include movement, breathing exercises, and/or listening to music. For example, interviewees from **Brick Memorial High School** share how they have continued with their pandemic approach of allowing students breaks in between instruction **to decompress, engage socially with their peers**, and in some cases to engage in **physical movement**. Describing how this practice has had positive impacts post-lockdown, Christopher Thompson, secondary math supervisor, shared:

> **We recognized that we would only have the attention of these students for a very short time. The focal point of our lesson plan was a mini-lesson. Teachers gave a very short but rigorous lesson to the students and then give them a break. Teachers have recognized when given in small chunks, these lessons were benefitting the students. They didn't have that long of an attention span, so frequent breaks and things like that have helped. I think, before the pandemic, teachers were more likely to just give a zero when students didn't turn in work and leave it at that. They became a lot more understanding as virtual instruction gave them a window into their students' homes. It opened the eyes of a lot of the teachers to see what kind of situations [students] were dealing with at home.**

An administrator at **Community Middle School** described how they restructured their schedule post-lockdown to **provide mental breaks in between instructional time,** and shared how this practice assisted students and staff in adjusting to returning to school:

> **There was a lot of intention, even just how to structure a student's day, having a couple back-to-back core classes and then a break. We actually infused more specials classes, more elective classes, to have those little brain breaks in between as well. And for teachers, correct me if I'm wrong, we don't go more than 80 minutes without some sort of a break with teachers as well, so they can continually get refueled all day long. … We had the backing of our superintendent because of where he comes from. We needed to hire, and he and the school board stood behind us and said, yes, hire more staff to make all this happen. And it's been good. It's worked so far. At the end of the day, it's an investment in kids and their futures.**

As another example of increasing students' access to periods of breaks in between instruction, Lisa Eckstrom, assistant head of school for Grades 5–8 at **Princeton Charter School**, shared how they continued with their intentional pre-pandemic school schedule of offering **three recesses a day**:

> **I want to bring up recess too, because I think [that's] one of the things that we are really strong in. Most middle schools, you might have recess after lunch, and it often gets canceled because it was too cold, too hot, a little rainy, or it might rain. I 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. And 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. Middle schoolers are out there on the swings. And I just think it's a very important part of middle school life. I think students see it as something that's important because there are principals out there or there are teachers out there.**

Small Group Counseling and Wellness Activities

Tier 2 supports include targeted interventions of peer support groups, individual goal-setting, and regular progress monitoring. Findings among Promising Practices schools revealed common Tier 2 supports including **small group counseling, multi-disciplinary student support teams, and individualized student success plans.** School counselors, social workers, and school psychologists were also highlighted as an integral part to identifying, implementing, and carrying out Tier 2 interventions. Data-tracking and monitoring through Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) or Multi-Tiered Support Services (MTSS) was shared as a schoolwide approach to discuss, assess, and implement interventions for students in need of Tier 2 interventions (see section below on Tiered Supports). Allison McCartney, assistant principal at **Rosa International Middle School**, shared how they use a Tier 2 approach of student support team meetings to observe and identify students who may need additional interventions.

> **Our guidance counselors meet with the teams once a week. We call it our student support team meetings. We focus a lot on behaviors, who we're worried about mentally and social-emotionally. Guidance does a lot to try to support the teachers with those students depending on the need. I've had guidance counselors go in and observe classes to kind of find ways to support those students there. They try to recognize everything that the teachers are doing, and when they see all these things that the teachers are doing still might not be working for that child, that's where the guidance counselors kind of try to step in and see what else is going on.**

Joyce James, Grades 4–8 vice principal at **College Achieve Central Charter School**, shared how they create **subgroups of students** who receive 6 weeks of counseling with school-based counselors to assist them in learning **strategies to navigate testing anxiety or other social-emotional concerns**:

> **If we have scholars who have test anxiety or we have scholars who have trust issues, we've made subgroups that meet with the counselors for 6-week terms, 6-week blocks, and they get to talk through some strategies, some ways that they're going to overcome this.**

Principal Jesse Herbert at **Navesink Elementary School** shared:

> **Our social behavioral support specialist (SBSS) is new to us, came midyear last year. ... She was a school psychologist. ... She wanted to take on a role of more student-contact counseling. She does not only positive action lessons—where she pushes into the classroom regularly to do lessons about emotions, emotional regulation, social emotional wellbeing, character—But she also is very involved in counseling. We do countless lunch groups. We do social skills. We do games just to learn peer mediation.**

Noting the limitations of school-based supports, Tina Ritchie, director of student services at **North Warren Regional High School**, detailed how they do the best they can by providing intentional **wellness spaces and activities:**

> **Schools can't provide therapeutic services in the capacity of school counselors. So we don't do that. But what we do is we're offering activities so that kids can come sit with a school counselor. We do it every Wednesday throughout the year. We've been doing it. And they do different activities. For instance, we have seniors signing up to do macrame. They want to make plant holders, right? There are puzzle days. We provide snacks. It's really providing a safe space for kids with school counselors so that they just feel like there's a safe place. We are also doing it during lunches. We call that one Brain Quest. ... We offer opportunities for students to come in the summer. Our health and physical education teachers have done some wellness activities. We have a wellness space that we revamped with Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds. We are focusing on yoga and meditation in ways that we never have before. In addition to summer school opportunities where students can make up credit, there's also opportunities for them to do fun things in the summer they've never had before.**

Individual Counseling and Success Plans

Tier 3 provides intensive and individualized interventions that aim to meet the needs of vulnerable students whose needs were not met through Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions. Tier 3 interventions often include extensive information gathering of students' schooling and family histories, individual counseling, and functional behavioral assessments. Promising Practices schools described implementing such interventions through both formal and informal **individualized counseling and mentorship for students**, as well as through the **establishment of individual plans to further student achievement**.

Educators also observed in the **growing number of students experiencing mental health crises after the COVID-19 lockdowns,** which propelled schools and districts to implement internal and external mental health supports. In some cases, interviewees highlighted the importance of allocating resources to support the mental health needs of students, including hiring specialized staff and developing partnerships with mental health organizations and parents. Lauren Gunther, district director of student services for **Ocean City High School**, shared how they used a research-informed approach to create a mental health triage chart. This assists teachers in locating student supports and hired additional staff, including a licensed drug and alcohol counselor who also manages a caseload of students, to provide school-based mental health counseling to students:

> We wanted to really think about how we could implement school-based mental health around the pandemic. We researched different school districts and companies around the world and around the nation, and how the [post-COVID 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**.

Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy shared how they received a grant from their district's guidance department to provide students access to onsite therapeutic services with licensed professionals from M&S Psychotherapy and Counseling—a culturally competent and evidence-based mental health provider located in Passaic County (M&S Psychotherapy and Counselling LLC 2024). According to Assistant Principal Anissa Jones:

> We have M&S this year, so that was huge—a grant through the guidance department for an outside agency that actually is here, housed here every day, Monday through Friday, giving therapeutic sessions to students. Guidance counselors and schools-based social workers don't do therapy. That's not within our purview, but **this person provides therapeutic sessions. I hear the teachers saying it was huge, the impact it has had, and [students] having access to therapy right offhand, instead of having to go through the whole process** of going to the doctor, then having to get a referral, and going through insurance. They have access to it right here, right onsite. Sometimes it's bigger than a school counselor.

Educators also highlighted the positive outcomes of hiring additional counseling staff and developing partnerships with external counseling agencies like Learning Alliance, Tri-County Behavioral Care, Wafa House, and Middle Earth Mentoring. For example, **Community Middle School** hired additional counselors and developed a partnership with Middle Earth to provide

daily mentoring, and shared: "*We've added a counselor in the recent years. Everything stops with a student in crisis. ...We have Middle Earth come in and [they] do peer mentoring on a daily basis. They work well with us for our afterschool program.*" **Oakcrest High School** described their partnerships with AtlantiCare and Effective School Solutions, which provides comprehensive counseling to their students through their Teen Center and Guidance Department. Principal McGhee shared:

> **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 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. The Teen Center would help run it. They would go around and do that type of teaching in the classrooms with teachers. We also have Atlantic Care 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 2 counseling and Tier 3 counseling here for students outside of our guidance counseling.**

Principal Lipari of **Roosevelt Elementary** highlighted the Tier 3 practice of **functional behavioral assessments (FBAs)** as an approach to identifying individualized PBIS supports for students:

> **We have a behaviorist that's assigned to the elementary schools. She is a wonderful and supportive resource because she has great strategies and resources about identifying where the behavior could be coming from and certain questions to ask, or conversations you could have with parents. And she'll ask certain questions that I might not know to ask. She'll come up with a functional behavioral assessment. Or, it doesn't have to be a behavior plan. It could be something simple like a sticker chart or a visual aid. All of those things are helpful in helping the student to respond to their emotions.**

Arlene Ringwood, first-grade teacher at **Harrison Elementary School**, shared a more informal but still structured Tier 3 approach of providing **targeted mentorship to students** who may need a higher level of intervention, as well as meeting with parents as a multi-disciplinarily team to discuss **at-home interventions**:

> **There is an underlying mentorship that occurs here. It doesn't have to be a behavioral student. Sometimes, it is just a child that might need a little bit more attention. And [teachers] volunteer. Sheets go out by the counselor, and everyone signs up and a student is assigned to them. And we check in. It's something that I think helps. We come from a "we" approach. So, if a student is getting support or whatever it is, when we are approaching the parents, [it's] as "we." Collectively as specialists, as educators, we're coming with that information to the parent. And parents are never left wondering. This is what we are doing here; this is what we would like to try at home. And then let's meet back again and talk and see. We**

never just say, "Well, this is what's happening." We have to give them the tools because they may not have them.

Lawren Bridgeforth-Monroe, social worker at **University High School**, described using Tier 3 practices like individualized success plans to support students in working through challenging behaviors, situations, and/or emotions, and noted the schoolwide standard of taking a strength-based practice in meeting with their **At Promise Scholars**—small groups of students identified for individualized intervention:

> **We have certain scholars who have some challenges, and we call them our "At Promise Scholars." We meet with them on a weekly basis to assist them in any area that they may need assistance with, whether it be anger management, whether it be conflict resolution, whether it be decision making, whether it be empathy and various things of that nature, whether it be grief. And we work with them to make sure that they're at the level where they need to be. I think one of the ways that we are very impactful is that we'll do individualized plans with our scholars. … We identify our students, as opposed to saying that they have a behavioral issue, everything is strength-based around here. So, we don't call them behavioral plans, but we call them success plans because they're on the road to success.**

Trauma-informed Practices

While PBIS focuses on creating safe, predictable, and nurturing learning environments through character education and positive reinforcement, interviewees also noted the integration of **trauma-informed practices** into their SEL work. Combining PBIS and trauma-informed practices goes a step further, by establishing schoolwide practices that aim to acknowledge and **address the root causes of dysfunctional behavior** in the social-emotional and mental contexts of traumatic experiences. This evidence-based framework explicitly aims to mitigate the adverse impacts of traumatic experiences, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

ACEs are traumatic events that occur between the ages of 0–17 years and include physical abuse, emotional neglect, parental incarceration, exposure to violence, and having a parent with mental illness and/or substance use disorder. **More than half of schools mentioned trauma as a significant factor impacting students and staff wellness.** Interviewees shared that the implementation of trauma-informed practices have helped to improve social-emotional, behavioral, and academic student outcomes.

Therapy Dogs to Address Trauma

Among the schools that highlighted trauma-informed practices as a key approach to their outcomes, four exemplary schools (**Robert Morris School**, **Hoover Elementary School**, **Roosevelt Elementary School**, and **Navesink Elementary Schools**) highlighted the inclusion of **therapy**

dogs to support students and staff. Educators shared practices training their own full-time therapy dog or contracting with external partners, including Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs, an organization that specially trains dogs in specific tasks to improve the social, emotional, or physical needs of individuals in private homes, hospitals, and schools. They are also accredited by the American Kennel Club, a leading expert organization in dog health and training (American Kennel Club, 2024). Deborah D'Allessandro, reading specialist at **Robert Morris Middle School**, detailed how they have continued their long-term external partnership with this organization, and expressed how **this practice originally started out to support emerging readers but has expanded to support social-emotional needs**:

> **There's Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs. These are volunteers that are outside of our school. Lovely ladies who, many of them have been coming for 10–12 years. They've had many dogs over the years. They train them and they get certified, and they come here. It started out [with] our struggling students who are working so hard in the elementary grades to learn to read. They'd read to the dog and the dogs just love it.**

Showcasing the implementation of a full-time dog therapy at **Navesink Elementary School**, Principal Herbert shared:

> **Teaching empathy is something that's really unique. Our school-based support counselor has brought a unique aspect. We're going to have a therapy dog full-time next year. Bear is almost done [with training]. He is here often, and the kids go nuts for him. He's a full-blown staff member. The goal is always to meet the student where they are, deescalate the situation, and return to class for academics. In that, providing them with self-regulatory skills they can adhere to if they are feeling those emotions again. We've made a lot of success.**

In addition to therapy dogs, Principal Fleming of **Hoover Elementary** highlighted their pre-pandemic sensory paths, including Hoberman spheres—expandable balls that can be used to **assist in self-regulation through deeper breathing**—calming jars, and brain breaks to support trauma-informed practices:

> **The year [after COVID], we implemented a therapy dog in our school. ... I think post-pandemic, when you had so much anxiety and talking about trauma-informed instruction, people just need breaks. If kids need to get up and move, they can go to the sensory path. What the teachers did really well were brain breaks throughout instruction. We've worked a lot with, as I said, pre-pandemic with social-emotional learning. 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.**

Trauma-informed Professional Development

While all approaches to SEL require intentional PD, a few exemplary schools noted the role of ongoing and intentional PD to implement and integrate trauma-informed practices. Principal Peter Daly of **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School** highlighted their ACEs training as a key practice to improved students outcomes:

> **We had a cohort of staff go through resiliency training to try to recognize what kids are coming to school with. I think that's important. Knowing "What kind of luggage are they bringing in? What are they carrying?" We had turnkeys where staff led workshops with all the staff upon our reopening, with regard to talking about ACEs. But the idea is we want you to gain an understanding ... [that] those are the type of kids we're primarily bringing in here, middle class and low-economic status kids. When they come in here, they are carrying a lot of those ACEs. That's why it's linked to the PBIS initiative. That resiliency training focused on teachers, because you can't think that "I'm going to teach everybody the same [or] treat everybody exactly the same" because not everybody's coming in the same. So that understanding of our teachers helps those kids or any kid be successful, and it helps create that safe environment because they know they're not going into [a] somewhat harsh or sterile environment where their feelings and what they're bringing in isn't going to be respected.**

Discussing the role of ongoing and intentional PD in trauma-informed instruction, Principal Jeffrey Pierro of **Gateway Regional High School** shared how this schoolwide approach aims to address the social and emotional needs of students:

> **We've done a lot of training. We actually just had a professional development on dealing with trauma-informed practices, which now with the pandemic, every kid has gone through some degree of trauma with that. We put a lot of emphasis on emotional support ... as well as academic progress. I think that has helped us reach kids who would maybe be turned off to school or maybe not see themselves as being successful. Having that connection, having that adult they can go to in the building, has been helpful.**

Geri Perez, assistant superintendent of **Union City School District (Sara M. Gilmore Academy)** shared how they **used training in SEL competencies to address the impacts of pandemic-induced trauma for students and staff**:

> **We had high levels of stress and anxiety with not just the students, but our staff as well. We made a commitment to have ongoing training with the SEL competencies. We run that through our support service teams. Every school in the district has a support service task force made up of everybody from the social workers to administrators. But the whole admin team jumps in [and] gets involved with it,**

with the social worker, the school nurse, the dean of students, everybody that can kind of brainstorm a solution. ... We take that opportunity once a month at the district level to have professional development for the administrative designees. And they go back and they turnkey it to the school. Self-awareness, resilience, growth mindset, all of these things that were pivotal after a pandemic. Helping teachers understand that you need to embrace SEL in the classroom, not as a separate thing, but as an integrated part of how you teach and how you deliver the curriculum.

Regarding how they increased **trauma-informed supports for students**, educators at **Oakcrest High School** shared how they trained all staff on teen mental health first aid (tMHFA) and integrated that training to provide students with certification. tMHFA is an evidence-based training program developed by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing in partnership with Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation, and is designed to support teens in Grades 10–12 (or ages 15-18) in identifying, understanding, and responding to signs and symptoms of **mental health crises and substance use challenges** and crisis (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2024). In addition, it increases schools' capacity to effectively intervene, support, and respond to teens' mental health needs (NJ Department of Human Services, 2024). Joe Costal, supervisor of English and social studies explained:

> **[All teachers were] trained in teen mental health. It's state programming, teen mental health first. And all the juniors get it through the US II social studies course. They get the full state-approved curriculum. We deliver the full 6-week state curriculum to get certified. We have trained our faculty to be facilitators. They have to go to 4 days' worth of full-day training to get certified to then turnkey that with the students.**

Oakcrest High School also dedicated a year to engaging staff in discussing their own trauma in preparation for thoughtfully implementing trauma-informed practices with students. This "*year of empathy*" happened to coincide with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, preparing them well for the challenges to come. Coastal continued:

> **We literally said to ourselves, our faculty has trauma, too. We spent a whole year just encouraging our faculty to discuss 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. It was not always an easy discussion to have, but we stood strong on it. We would have PDs where we would say, "What does trauma look like?" We would have PD where we would say, "How can we help you be better employees? What are we not doing? Tell us what we're not doing to help you be better employees. What do you need from us? What are you not getting?" We came back, not the year [of] the pandemic, but the next year to build community.**

Restorative Practices

More than a dozen schools highlighted the use of restorative practices as an approach to creating positive learning environments, addressing student discipline, and meeting students' social-emotional and basic human needs. Restorative justice (RJ) is a non-exclusionary disciplinary approach that views student misbehavior through a holistic lens. This approach offers schools a humanistic approach to school discipline and often includes restorative circles as a method to repairing, understanding, and addressing the root causes of students' behaviors, including gaps in interventions and supports (Darling-Hammond, 2024). In sharing their approaches to restorative practices, Principal Herbert at **Navesink Elementary School** shared how they integrate RJ into their tiered system of discipline:

> **We'll do restorative conferences in regard to any type of disciplinary action. We do a tiered system for discipline. As small as we are, we have our fair share. But [the school counselor] is incredible at facilitating restorative conferences with students that are involved. She does anti-bullying and Harassment Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) related content as well. If a teacher notices there's a potential conflict in the class, they'll reach out. She'll come in; she'll do a generic lesson on it. She'll talk about skills necessary for self-advocacy, different skills necessary to report and/or understand.**

Highlighting the use of restorative practices to address student discipline, Principal LaRubbio at **Birches Elementary School** shared how their school uses internally developed restorative reflection sheets and shared an RJ group club:

> **I think that when we engage with our students, we're engaging them as human beings who have their own thoughts and ideas and reasonings for the actions that they do or that they did. We are able to talk through situations with them. In terms of restorative discipline, when I have to deal with discipline, it's not just like "You're in trouble; you're going home." We talk about things. ... I had [one student] come to three restorative practices in the morning to talk about what to do with those big emotions. He really enjoyed it so much so that he kept going, and [the school] allowed him to keep going, and it was more a positive for him. [The teachers] do reflective worksheets in there, but they talk through it. They play calm music. They're very likable human beings. Many of the kids have had them. When you have a lunch detention with me, I'm hoping I'm not likable and you don't want to do it again.**

Four exemplary schools (**Oakcrest High School**, **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy**, **Community Middle School**, and **Robert Morris School**) highlighted RJ as an approach to **addressing racial disparities in suspensions by increasing awareness of unconscious bias, equity, access, and justice**. **Oakcrest High School** is one noteworthy school that shared how their approaches to RJ shift away from exclusionary discipline and instead **underscore the importance**

of *"keeping students in school."* They described post-pandemic implementation of a 4-year plan that centers on intensive and ongoing PD, community outreach, and parental inclusion. Student and staff buy-in were emphasized as key components to the success of their restorative justice committee and Students Talking About Racism (S.T.A.R.) group. Distinctively, their STAR initiative aims to **increase identity-affirming practices for Black students** by seeking their input in **creating inclusive and safe learning environments**. They also shared how their inclusion of teachers in training, committee decision-making, and shifting from progressive discipline has contributed to their successes:

> **We have made tremendous strides to addressing [inequities in suspensions via] restorative justice; through training and professional development of our assistant principals and faculty. We've done a lot of work in gently presenting issues of equity, justice, and access to our staff in a way that didn't alienate them in any way. We also stopped with the progressive discipline. Students would miss a detention, then they would get two detentions, and that would turn into an in-school [suspension], and it would turn into an out-of-school [suspensions]. Our vice principals and principal have worked to decrease that. Those strides work hand-in-hand with failure rates, right? All those things are succeeding in is creating more behavioral issues and not rehabilitating anything. Because it's just the kids getting put out of school; they need to be in school.** – Joe Costal, supervisor of English and social studies

Staff at **Robert Morris School** described another combination of implementing SEL, trauma-informed practices, tiered behavioral supports, and RJ practices. They explained their participation in and successes with Kean University's Restorative Justice in Education Pilot Program by highlighting positive outcomes in Kean-led staff trainings on restorative practices, equity, and unconscious bias. In sharing their experiences, Madeline Santiago, guidance counselor at **Robert Morris**, noted:

> **We are involved in restorative practice circles. We have coaches that come into the classrooms to teach and help the teachers coach the students in circles to bring the culture, to have a close relationship with their teacher, and to bring down any type of codes of conduct and bullying. We were awarded a 3-year grant from Kean University to implement restorative practices. The first year was definitely ... bringing training to teachers to educate them on what restorative practices were and how that was different from discipline. I'm trying to educate the families, having parent meetings. Kean also provided lots of training, lots of equity training, bias training. That was really informative. With our third year, we implemented these restorative circles in the classroom. It was a really successful experience for us.**

Jennifer Larkin, assistant principal at **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy School No. 20,** described how they use RJ to **address racial disparities in discipline** through relationship-

building, "*head on*" discussions, accountability, and leveraging connections to build on staff strengths:

> **Restorative over punitive, definitely. It gets easier. The work is hard at first. We come here and we are exhausted, but it gets easier when you put the work in. It gets easier. When we first started, we were all given these two restorative practices books. One was about circles, and one was about just the practices in general. We've also had conflict resolutions with teachers. If an incident happens between teacher and student, if they feel comfortable … then it's private conversations of holding people accountable and saying, "I've noticed every year you're complaining, this year only about John. John is a young Black boy. Last year you complained about Paul. Paul was a young Black boy. [The] year before, you complained about Michael. Michael's a young Black boy. I'm seeing a pattern here. I don't know if you recognize it, but I do. And I think you need to be aware of that because I don't want to see that pattern next year." It's very direct. And those are private conversations that are not written up, are not formalized unless it happens again after that.**

While discussing how pre-pandemic implementation of restorative practices at **Community Middle School** catalyzed relationship-building with students to gain insight about their lived realities of race, an administrator shared:

> **I'm not saying restorative circle is complete and all in all, because there's certain parts you can use and certain parts you're not able to because you don't have the time or people and everything to get everything done. However, the one thing that I've learned is how you approach a situation. The one thing I've learned about kids in our population: they don't like to be wrong. They're afraid to make a mistake. They're afraid to open their voices up, they're afraid to talk. Part of that is they're told at a young age, especially being a White male, we're afraid of you. And they'll tell me that. And I'm like, "Okay, time out. Let's talk about it." We'll have a conversation about it. And as a teacher, it's very hard. You have to be open to [having] these conversations. You have to be open to having these really, really tough conversations for the kids to start trusting you … We start talking back and forth and it's one of those things, the connections made through these [restorative] circles.**

Conclusion

Lessons learned regarding the impacts of SEL across this sample highlight key approaches to addressing the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students and staff. The most salient overall finding was the priority that nearly all (49 of 52) Promising Practices schools place on SEL as integral to creating the conditions for academic achievement. In particular, the

pandemic was a crucible in which schools that were already prioritizing SEL benefitted from this emphasis, and schools that were not felt compelled to do so (see Pandemic Impacts section). Several schools pointed to district support for SEL as an important factor in their ability to prioritize this work. Additionally, many schools use data-driven decision-making, via internal and external assessments and surveys, to collect and analyze information regarding students' well-being, feelings of belonging, and interpersonal connections to peers and staff (see section on Using Data).

Many schools implement SEL through varying approaches towards tiered Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) systems. While some schools explicitly refer to their SEL work as "PBIS," others implement a range of approaches that align with the principles of PBIS without necessarily referring to them as such. Schoolwide SEL approaches that could be considered Tier 1 include the use of evidenced-based character education programs, token economies, student and staff recognition initiatives, and intentional scheduling to facilitate mental health breaks. A number of interviewees highlighted the implementation of schoolwide SEL and PBIS by building strong relationships between students and staff as well as etablishing shared goals, expectations, and a sense of classroom community. This finding aligns with this report's earlier observations of the importance of "school culture" in effective schools (see School Culture section). Regarding more targeted group (Tier 2) and individual (Tier 3) interventions, Promising Practices schools discussed small group counseling and wellness activities as well as hiring or contracting with specialized mental health professionals. The use of tiered SEL supports among many Promising Practices schools aligns with findings regarding the prominent use of tiered academic interventions as well (see later section on Tiered Instruction).

Several schools integrate a trauma-informed approach into their SEL practices via trauma-informed professional development as well as the use of therapy dogs. Many schools also utilize restorative practices to address student behavior and discipline. A few exemplary schools including **Oakcrest High School**, **Community Middle School**, **Brick Memorial High School**, **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy**, and **Robert Morris School** highlighted the importance of approaching students from an equity-based lens, and noted the use of trauma-informed instruction and restoratives practices as an approach to address racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. One noteworthy school, **Robert Morris School**, shared their participation in and successes with Kean University's Restorative Justice in Education Pilot Program, which provides schoolwide staff trainings on restorative practices, equity, and unconscious bias.

More research must be done to assess the ways in which school staffing, resource allocation, and testing pressures shape schools' ability to prioritize SEL. Nevertheless, these findings among Promising Practices schools—all of which were selected due to relative success on state tests—highlight the academic relevance of schools' emphasis on starting with the whole child and addressing the multi-faceted complexities of students of all ages from a data-driven, evidence-based, student-centered approach.

4.3 Tiered Instructional Interventions: "You Really Got to Try to Fail"

Introduction

The research team was surprised by the number of schools that attributed their academic success to tiered instruction. At least 40% of Promising Practices schools placed importance on tiered instruction, which was also described as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or New Jersey's Tiered System of Support (NJTSS). Rooted in the same Response to Intervention (RTI) model discussed above with regard to SEL, tiered systems can be used to make instruction more effective and improve the social and emotional climate. Evidence suggests the best pay-offs come when RTI is used to address both simultaneously (Hartsell & Hates, 2015).

As with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the most common versions of the idea see instructional supports in three tiers, with Tier 1 being universal instruction for all students, Tier 2 being targeted small group interventions for students, and Tier 3 being intensive interventions, ordinarily delivered individually and perhaps by specialists. NJDOE has been a major advocate of tiered systems of support—academic and behavioral—and their approach is explicit regarding the importance of leadership, positive school culture, and family and community engagement. This is presumably a reflection of the experience of the educators who developed New Jersey's approach (see sections on School Culture above and Engaging Families and Communities below).

https://nj.gov/education/njtss/overview/pres.pdf.
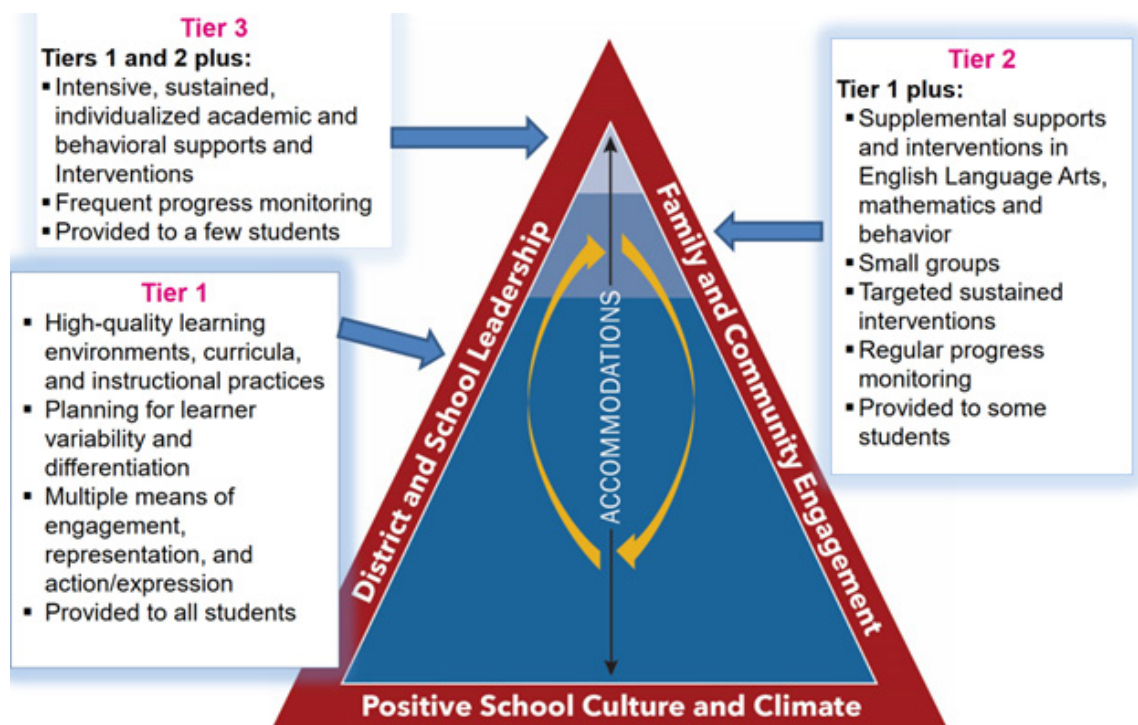
Resources for getting started with NJTSS can be found at https://nj.gov/education/njtss/started.pdf

NJDOE sees NJTSS as a "systematic, consistent approach to prevention, intervention, and enrichment," with "high expectations for all students, a continuum of supports to keep all students on the path to meeting those expectations," and a means to address variability among learners. The reference to high expectations is crucial because it underscores **the distinction between tiered instructional systems and traditional academic grouping or tracking which, as typically implemented, institutionalizes low expectations for many children** (Oakes, 2015; Gouldner, 1978; Wheelock, 1992), keeping children in the same track for all subject matter and holding them in the same track across their school careers resulting in a student's track becoming a permanent, stigmatizing label. In this scenario, lower track students would typically be assigned the poorest teachers and least imaginative curricula.

In contrast, tiered systems ideally call for frequent screening and regrouping of students, collaboration among educators, and frequent collaborative use of data, undergirded by high expectations at all levels. Indeed, there were many times when interview teams thought interviewees were deliberately distancing themselves from older tracking systems by emphasizing the flexibility of their grouping, the importance of high expectations at all levels, and their concern with avoiding any stigma for students. When these systems work as intended, so many resources can be strategically concentrated that, as one principal said, students almost would have to "*try to fail.*"

Interviewees noted a wide range of beneficial effects of tiered systems, including more learning, fewer referrals, better prepared teachers, and more collegial relationships:

> **As far as student discipline is concerned, [several educators] a number of years ago started a heavy focus on what ... is now the NJTSS process, which supports students who are struggling academically and/or behaviorally. As a result of focusing on that system through guidance, the number of students who are failing or struggling [in] classes has drastically decreased. ... The number of students that we send to summer school was close to 100 when we first started this process; it's now below 30 as of last year, so that was a huge success. The number of students that are transferring out of the building because of academic failure has also decreased, so the supports are working. Those types of systems are now part of the behavior of the building and help us to focus and keep a focus on learning.**
> – Jeanene Dutt, superintendent, **North Warren Regional School District**

Similarly, as their support structures have grown more robust, **H & M Potter School** has seen the number of students in the bottom performance levels decrease. One teacher said:

> **We, as a whole, work together and collaborate as well. [For example, we] make sure that the second-grade teacher knows when [students] leave first grade, I'm like, "Okay, these three friends, put a watch out, because I think they might need more than what they got right now. Based on their spring assessments, they might need a Tier 3 intervention." Or, "These friends, I think they might be okay. Let's see how they start off second grade." We talked throughout the grade levels as**

well. ... I feel like now **our population of basic skills has gotten smaller because of the consistency throughout the years.** Where now in third grade ... I used to have 25 to 26 kids in basic skills, now I'm at 13 or 14. So it's just because of the program success at a younger grade level, they're not really qualifying for basic skills now at an older grade level.

According to an administrator at **Hamburg School**, which already had strong performance in ELA, it was the way their kids reacted to the initial rollout of MTSS in math that led them to fully commit:

> Our ELA scores were already strong. ... Math jumped out and punched you in the face. So, we knew we had to do something, so we made that change midyear. It was like, "Hey, we're going to give this a shot for the rest of the school year with just seventh grade." I still remember [the staff members] were down in the cafeteria and we're like, "We'll see how it goes." And it was the kids that were actually telling the teachers ... "We love this." And we were like, "Okay." Now we're going to roll it up to eighth grade and then down to sixth and fifth. And **we've just continued each year to try to refine that model.**

Edward Sarluca, the principal at **Brick Memorial High School**, and his colleague Alyce Anderson, stressed that tiered supports systems could help students recover from stumbles:

> A lot of these programs were established before the pandemic. Whether they were necessarily amplified or certainly carried through the pandemic and post-pandemic, I mean, **you really got to try to fail around here these days.** You know what I mean? You have to try to fail. There are so many opportunities for kids to make up work and to bring up grades. ... I don't want to say erase absences, but have the opportunity whether they're at home or in school to get that instruction, you really have to try to fail. You know what I mean? – Edward Sarluca, principal

> It's a strong MTSS model, it really is. – Alyce Anderson, director of curriculum and instruction

> It's again, a **credit to the programs that are in place that**, look, our goal here is to not necessarily push these kids out, but to get these kids to graduate and to give them the opportunity to figure out [that] **mistakes are going to happen, but let's try not to make the same mistake over again. Let's learn from it**, and here's an opportunity and a platform for you to be able to do that. And it's not just coming from your classroom teacher, it's coming from an interventionist, or it's coming from the block five program for freshmen. ... I feel like there's an opportunity for every type of situation—whether it be an absentee situation, whether it be a failing situation, whether it be a, "I don't like coming to school" situation—there's some type of platform for them to figure out a way to succeed. I think that helps add to the stats, if you will. But more importantly than that, **it adds to that whole collective mindset of what we're trying to do here**. — Edward Sarluca, principal

Having **systematic ways to target resources** was especially important for many schools in the wake of the pandemic. An eighth-grade math teacher at **North Plainfield Middle School** shared:

> **Because math is a linear progression, falling into those holes during COVID has a tremendous impact later down the road. Thankfully, because of this work with NJTSS and identifying those weaknesses and implementing these programs, it gives us a fighting chance as teachers and as those children to make up that learning loss.**

Many schools indicated that they move kids in or out of groups frequently, even on almost a daily basis. Two teachers might confer in the hallway and decide a child is ready to be moved. The principal and reading specialist made a similar point about **Woodrow Wilson School #5**:

> **We're continually reassessing. ... Alright, this kid's made enough progress to go back into a regular Tier 2 class or regular with the teacher, and then we're going to bring another person that was too low to get into that class. –** Charles F. Bonanno, principal

> **The groups are flexible and, as we continually reassess, I might notice that this student is doing really well. They're on level or they're moving into Tier 2 or Tier 1. …Other kids are being reassessed. They might move into my group. So, it's kind of the fluidity of the group. The students are moving around. –** Jennifer Powers, reading specialist

One of the greatest objections to **traditional tracking is** that **lower track students seldom get a chance to learn with or from students in other tracks** (e.g., Gouldner, 1978). That's not the case where grouping is more flexible. As Jennifer Campbell, a third grade ELA teacher at **Whitman Elementary School,** shared:

> **That's something I think we do across the board, the flexible seat, flexible grouping in our co-room. ... Maybe on a Monday the higher kids are reading a 'Who was' or 'What was' book, and they're doing a research project on that since we're doing narrative writing. Someone picked 'Who was Princess Diana,' now she's writing a narrative pretending to be Princess Diana ... [and] then she's like, 'Oh, I want to make a Canva presentation,' which is kind of like a slideshow. Then it's turning into this whole thing now she wants to present and she's working on it at home and after school because she's just so motivated. ... Now, the other [level] kids seeing that were like, "What can I do? I want to do that too." Now we're kind of trying to move them up into the next group where we'll find a lower-level book that works for them [and] they can still get that nonfiction narrative.**

Flexible, small group instruction demands a lot of teachers. That is clear in how Campbell's colleague, Thomas Kilian, describes his math class at **Whitman Elementary**:

Other times we have done small group [instruction] where we just kind of rotate around. It all depends on the topic I think, and what the students need. There's going to be a group that doesn't need me and ... I might say, "Okay, well you can do this, this, and this, and if you get done, try this." And there could be another page in there where they can do something a little bit more on the challenging side. I'll identify problems on the board—must-dos and can-dos. The can-dos are usually the more challenging ones, but I want all the students to be able to do the must-dos. That's the basic concept that they're going to need to do their homework independently that night. If I know ... they can do the must-dos in those problem sets, they'll be pretty much okay with the homework. I won't get those phone calls saying little Johnny had no idea what to do. That's something that I'll concentrate on: Do they have what it takes to be able to work 5, 10 minutes independently at nighttime to finish that homework? Then some of the more advanced students ... might need help with the can-dos. Then ... I always make sure, even if there's not enough time, that we check those basic concept problems. ... That seems to help lower students.

At **Hoover Elementary School**, staff emphasized that **small group differentiation starts early**, even if it looks different from classroom to classroom.

When you get to third, fourth, fifth grade, kids have already [gotten] used to [working] in groups. ... I think everybody is really on board with that kind of differentiation. – William Fleming, principal

We're building on things. They do group work in kindergarten and in first grade; it's going to look different in fourth grade. But again, it's not something that's completely new, it's just we're building on it. – Deanna Breheney, third-grade teacher

Educators at **H & M Potter Elementary School** also emphasized the changing nature of grouping as children mature:

So, especially in the lower grades at the beginning, there's not as many activities they can do alone. Maybe when they get to third and fourth grade, they can do a little bit more. – teacher

From my perspective, when I go in and I see the best center work, that's it. They know the expectation. The teachers are reviewing the expectation before breaking out into their centers. They know what to do if they have a question so that they're not always going right to the teacher. – administrator

I think [since] they start doing this in kindergarten and first grade, that every year it just gets easier and the demand, so to speak, might increase every year because

they can handle a little bit more. By the time they get up to third and fourth grade, they know, "Okay, center time. I got this. I know what to do." – teacher

Students **being in interactive groups changes the way they learn from each other** as well as from the teacher. As described by Brenda Roth, instructional coach at **Hoover Elementary**:

> **They get how to use evidence to back themselves up. It's not just, "I'm throwing out an opinion." They really get practiced at saying, "Okay, well I can't just say that I agree. I have to say why I agree." So if we're talking about a novel, let's say in a group, then they have to go back into that novel and they have to find that page where that evidence is and express it to their group in a way that makes sense. And you can see it's very nice to watch, almost magical at times, when you see something click with a kid and in their conversations with each other where one says, "Yes, but I noticed such and such." And then all of a sudden that other kid says, "Oh yeah!" And that's amazing because that's them. And they've been taught how to have that group work through explicitly saying, "Okay, this is how we agree, and this is how we look for evidence."**

But that is **not to say small group instruction is always high quality**. Leaders at **Marie Durand Elementary School** felt they were making progress pre-pandemic, got side-tracked, and have had to work back to doing their best work. One school leader said:

> **We pushed for small group instruction post-pandemic and the rooms where our students are the most successful are the rooms where that's happening effectively. Bad small group instruction ... is the same as whole group instruction, if not worse. Because if it's bad small group instruction, that means probably what everybody else is doing in the classroom is not meaningful.**

A number of schools cautioned against reducing tiered support systems to procedures and policies; instead, they are probably most powerful when understood as a culture-building/enhancing tool. At **Brick Memorial**, where they speak of being "student-centered, teacher-led," Alyce Anderson, director of curriculum and instruction, sees tiered supports as one component in building a culture centered on collective efficacy, one of the best predictors of powerful schooling:

> **I would say that my practice has been most significantly influenced by the work of education researchers like Michael Fullan and John Hattie. Fullan's concepts of "leading in a culture of change" and Hattie's "six enabling conditions for improving schools" have profoundly impacted my approach. These frameworks emphasize the importance of building collective efficacy through a shared belief among staff that they can positively impact student learning. Hattie's research**

stresses the importance of **creating a strong multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to address diverse student needs, responsive leadership that supports teachers and empowers them with decision-making authority through school committees, and goal consensus about non-negotiables and core beliefs that unite the school community. These interconnected elements provide a robust and well-defined framework for school improvement."**

One of the ways in which **tiered systems of support** can begin moving the culture is by **broadening the kinds of people involved in student well-being**. Principal Sarluca at **Brick Memorial** recognized that the new support systems validated things he had always been doing as a physical education teacher:

> **I kind of look at it a little bit from a different lens too. ... Having a phys ed background and an athletic background ... it almost validated the way we were interacting with kids. The mentality of a phys ed classroom is very, very different than the mentality or the visual of what an academic classroom looks like. But I think it validated some of the things that we were doing as phys ed teachers. ... It's not just about ... how many pushups or how fast you could run, but it's that interaction that you have [when] you're not sitting in a desk. ... You're outside or you're in a big area in a different type of environment and I can have a conversation with you that's important. ... Maybe my conversation first block as a phys ed teacher will positively impact the way that [students] act in [the] second or third block in the math or science classroom. I think that part of it was kind of cool once they understood, ... "It is something that I'm already doing and that I'm invested in." And then you could ... build upon it ... and make it a little bit more concrete from a mindset point of view.**

John Mellody, the principal at **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy**, is very intentional about **involving his whole staff in supporting students**:

> **The different groups of non-teaching staff would include security, custodians, cafeteria workers, student support services (which includes guidance liaison, [and] nursing staff) and then the main office staff. So, with each of those groups, it's both including them in the successes of the school as far as test scores, attainment, the trophies, [and] the medals that were awarded, and making a point to have meetings with them ... as reminders that we are here to serve students.**

Tiered instruction is predicated on teachers having access to and using timely, granular, aligned information on student progress. Given the number of students, subjects, and skills being taught, schools have to rely on data software for keeping up with and sorting through everything. The following section provides more detail about how data are used to support instruction; **part of the process of creating tiered support systems is learning to work effectively with data management**

systems. Some schools spoke of using different systems for different purposes, and others spoke of migrating from one data management package to another as their questions become more sophisticated, needs changed, or as they wanted to find a system that would allow them to put all the pertinent information about a child in one place—state tests, national tests, local assessments, teacher-made assessments, referral and other administrative data, exit tickets, and so on.

Promising Practices schools are using numerous commercial systems: LinkIt, Freckle, Renaissance, the related Star Math, Educlimber, Nearpod, Imagine Edgenuity, I-Ready, IXL, Padlet, and Pear Deck. Some of these offer extensive support services for both educators and students, ranging from real-time analytic tools to full K–12 curricula, tutoring for students, and professional development for teachers, including help with "gamification" of instruction. Robert Lake, principal of **North Plainfield Middle School** explained:

> **A big part of what we're doing now is using data from. ... NJSLA or LinkIt assessments, or in-house common assessments or i-Ready or IXL ... all the different forms of assessments and diagnostics to target the academic needs of our students. Whether targeting a strand or a skill, we're looking at individual needs or the big picture of students and saying, "As a school, where are our strengths? Where are our weaknesses as a grade level? Strengths and weaknesses as a particular demographic? Strengths and weaknesses in my classroom? ... What are the areas that I need to target?" This information informs our instruction. We know that everyone will benefit from the Tier 1 interventions, right? [Another teacher] mentioned NJTSS—using Tier 1 interventions schoolwide and being very specific with the types of interventions we use and how we implement them. We say, "In terms of reading and writing, here are three interventions you should use. Here are three Tier 1 interventions designed to impact math. Use those and keep it as consistent as possible across the board so the students are hearing the same messaging and language on some of those foundational skills that need improvement."**

> **As we develop those, then obviously we can continue to build. Taking the big data, working it down into the smallest data, and that's where providing time ... Professional learning committee time or PD day time for people to look at those numbers and look at those areas. And then we use data teams also through our NJTSS, and our data teams meet and really dive into it and see where those ... weaknesses are, and then say, "If that's a weakness, what are the strategies that address that weakness as a school? We only scored the 38th percentile here. Okay, that's something we have to address. How can we address it?" These three strategies will address that, everybody implementing that in your classroom.**

Some of the **North Warren High School** staff described parts of their data journey:

> **I was going to talk about the I&RS team because ... we are continually trying to improve our intervention services. And I think as good as we've done it so far, we're ... doing better than we have been in this school year ... because we have a team of professionals who meet every week on Thursday afternoons after school. We have math teachers, we have special ed teachers, we have English teachers, we have counselors, we have intervention teachers, and we all meet to make sure that we are not only providing the services that our students need now, but we're also planning for what comes next.** – Carie Norcross-Murphy, principal

> **Through Renaissance, we have started to investigate, and we are starting the process of onboarding with eduCLIMBER to make our data more streamlined. Right now, our team has a Google sheet that has five or six different spreadsheets linked to it. We are keeping track of all of those students who are struggling, and we have people who check in ... sometimes twice a week with those students. educCLIMBER, we hope, is going to streamline that process and provide our teachers with more information about how they can differentiate instruction and where they need to differentiate instruction. ... If I'm being critical of what we've done, I think that we oftentimes go through the month of September and into October, and we're just then identifying those students at that point. The hope and the goal for next year is that we've already identified those students. In the first week of school, we know who those students are that we need to be meeting with regularly. That's ... one of the most significant improvements that we've made this year in our intervention services.** – Carie Norcross-Murphy, principal

> **Everybody in math and English is giving STAR Assessments now, and we didn't do that pre-COVID. We are also participating in professional development that allows us to determine which of those reports best meet our needs and how we can meet the needs of the students. We're learning more and more, and we're participating in that professional development with that team more and more, and we're getting to know the program better and better, and I think that we will continue to make strides with that.** – Carie Norcross-Murphy, principal

> **We're trying to use Renaissance in our basic skills math class to differentiate our instructions, so that you can have the best eighth grader in basic skills math and he's really working on algebra one, maybe even geometry at that point. Then you have some kids in eighth grade who may be in fourth [or] fifth grade math level and they can get help where they're at. So that differentiation piece is where I think Renaissance is helping. ... I wouldn't say we're doing a great job yet, but that's kind of where we want to go with it.** – Jim Haupt, math supervisor

No matter how good data systems get, the magic isn't in the data. It's about the people and how they work together. Jeanene Dutt, superintendent of **North Warren Regional School District,** articulated this commonly held understanding (see section on School Culture):

> **The main piece that none of them mentioned so far is the extreme collaborative nature that this district has. When I talk about a true team here, it's the leadership team, the people that you're seeing. But there's also a group called the Professional Improvement Panel here of teachers, counselors, [and] social workers that meet regularly [and use] money to hire basically an interventionist or a data specialist to review the data. And our counseling department is highly, highly involved with seeing if the kids are improving. ... It's truly a huge team of people. You can throw Edgenuity out or Freckle and Renaissance, all the programs that we're using, and you're not going to see any results without the people that are keeping up on these kids, working with one another, having conversations about data.**

Lourdes Murphy, principal of **Orange Avenue School**, discussed the explicit opportunities for collaboration that staff at her school implemented within the NJTSS. The Collaborative Problem Solving Team (CPST), formerly known as the I&RS team at Orange Avenue, nurtures "*very consistent conversations and dialogue about data in a very stress-free environment.*" Supporting educators to become more comfortable discussing data appears to be an important feature of this work in many Promising Practices schools. Murphy explains:

> **Through NJTSS, we created a Collaborative Problem Solving Team (CPST). The CPST replaced the team ... formerly known as I&RS. The team came together to look at data to help make informed decisions on which students needed additional interventions. Based on the data and teacher input, the team placed the student on an intervention tier. The data helped drive the intervention plan, which determined the frequency of the intervention, the size of the classes, and specifically what skills would be targeted. I found that the biggest difference [between CPST and I&RS] is that CPST in my mind almost became a professional development kind of experience. Based on the expertise of the team members and the data-driven discussions taking place, teachers were learning as they participated in the meetings. ... They were having very consistent conversations and dialogue about data in a stress-free environment. Over time, these assessments like i-Ready were viewed as a net that's cast out to everyone. Once we saw who was caught up in this net, CPST planned a meeting to have discussions about what the teacher thinks versus what the data showed. Then, plans were created to provide a specific and targeted intervention for each student. In the beginning, it's uncomfortable to speak about the data, but because we had consistent meetings, it became the norm to have conversations in this manner. All of a sudden, everyone's**

paradigm shifted into, "Data is important, this is meaningful, let's make decisions rooted in this information." And I think that this big change came from the work of the team, the CPST.

Some schools joked about taking the three-tier model too literally. They have learned from experience that the three tiers don't work for all their students. Two Promising Practices schools, **Orange Avenue School** and **Caroline L. Reutter School**, created an additional tier. Staff at Orange Avenue School identified this practice as "*the most critical, replicable piece*" of their work.

At **Orange Avenue**, "*Tier 1B*" is designed to target students who score "*between the levels of a Tier 1 and a Tier 2.*" Rather than providing those students with pull-out intervention services, the interventionists/coaches provide teachers with resources to support those students in their classrooms.

The staff at **Caroline L. Reutter School** developed "*Tier 1.5*" to differentiate their "Tier 2 students who need intervention" from the students who are walking a fine line between Tier 2 and Tier 1. Tier 1.5 students are beyond the intervention model; however, they are on the very low end of Tier 1. These students are predicted to need extra instructional support. They may need differentiated instruction and/or small group instruction with grade level standards based on their mathematical historical data in order to remain secure and successful in a Tier 1 class. For many of the Tier 1.5 students, Tier 1 plans or domain goal plans are generated with a coach so that teachers can give targeted instruction based on the students' needs and areas of weaknesses.

This can be approached by identifying a weak or insecure concept(s), or it can be approached by targeting a weak domain(s). The type of plan will be determined by the teacher and coach based on classroom performance and diagnostic/assessment data. At one point, **Caroline L. Reutter** had enough Tier 1.5 students to create an in-class-support math section, which included a basic skills instruction teacher (see case study below). Staff at both schools spent a considerable amount of the interview discussing their additional tier within the MTSS.

> **The MTSS is broken up into three tiers. The bottom tier is for everybody. Students who are identified as needing some more specific intervention go into Tier 2. Then those students who did not, I guess, benefit from those [Tier 1 and Tier 2] supports, they would get more specific targeted supports. It's just kind of how we gauge our support and [determine] who we need to support more or who gets a broad spectrum of supports. ... Those that are needing the specific supports would probably be the students that would need maybe special education or related services. –** Lauren Reszka, school counselor, **Packanack Elementary School**

Presumably reflecting learning from the field, NJDOE now notes the possibility of modifying the three-tier structure in its training materials.

Conclusion

Principal Laura Gore of **Radix Elementary School** summarized well both the mechanics of tiered systems of support, as well as the underlying instructional and pedagogical changes that they are designed to make possible. She explained that Basic Skills Instruction (BSI),

> **...used to be, "Johnny's really struggling with X, Y, and Z in my class. Can you come help him a little bit, or can he work with you a little bit and spend a little bit of time getting his math facts more solid?"** It's all databased now. Our kids are universally screened three times a year for our RTI model. **It is heavily focused on ELA, then we progress monitor for growth ... once we've identified students in appropriate tiers.** When we progress monitor them, if they do not make growth in the assessment that we are progress monitoring, we might move the student to ... a different intervention or environment **in the sense that they're getting more intense support. ... If a child does not respond to the intervention, we consider a change. I think that model has really helped us be able to** identify our learners that do need to go to our child study team with a lot of data, not just a lot of feelings.

Gore's reference to decision-making based on more than "*a lot of feelings*" seems key to understanding the promise of these systems. Teachers in Title I schools can be overwhelmed by need, working in isolation and with limited support. They may not be able to bring their best thinking to bear on the problems of each child. At their best, tiered systems can provide those teachers with evidence and colleagues to help them make sense of the challenges and respond, while thinking about children in a holistic way. It is easy to see how this becomes a platform for building the kind of "*collective efficacy*" that **Brick Memorial**, among others, strives for.

Research on tiered systems very closely parallels what Promising Practices school leaders shared during their interviews. Research finds that well-implemented tiered systems can have positive results in science (Richards & Omdal, 2007), math (Powell & Fuchs, 2015), literacy (Schuele et al., 2008), and social justice (Avent, 2016). Effects may be strongest for previously low-performing students. The literature makes it clear that good results are not automatic. Richards and Omdal, for example, found evidence that tiered instruction could make a significant positive difference for lower-level learners in science, but also emphasized that it wasn't automatic; teachers need strong background knowledge of content and pedagogy, and changes need to be introduced systematically over time, another point cited in these interviews.

Implemented poorly, tiered instruction seems likely to become another version of the kinds of ability grouping that have been problematic in the past, underscoring the importance of positive school culture as a hedge against poor implementation (see section on School Culture). **Indeed, for many schools, tiered systems of instructional and behavioral support are the way strong culture gets operationalized.** Results can be especially robust when both instructional and behavioral supports are organized by RTI principles. Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support

Initiative, for example, showed 21% reductions in special education referrals, 26% reductions in special education classifications, 10% average reductions in the rate of major discipline referrals, 3% average reductions each year of students requiring intensive reading supports, and 7% more students meeting or exceeding standards on the state reading assessment. Results varied, of course, with the fidelity of implementation. Michigan leaders believe that as reading improves, misbehavior decreases, allowing teachers to better concentrate on teaching. Similarly, results from New Jersey districts point to fewer incidents of violence, vandalism, office conduct referrals, and referrals to special education.

Here, again, readers should be mindful of the limitations of this study's sample. In looking for successful schools, the sample did not include schools struggling with tiered supports. Not every school has the cultural and organizational preconditions to do this work well. Nonetheless, both the interviewees and previous research suggest the possibility of very strong and generative outcomes for those who can.

4.4 Using Data to Inform Instruction

Introduction

As noted, tiered support systems are fueled by extensive and collaborative use of data in many forms. Staff at roughly eight in 10 Promising Practices schools described the role of data in garnering positive student learning outcomes. Several educators made a fundamental distinction between simply collecting student performance data and applying insights from the data to instructional planning. Adam Geher, principal at **Lincoln Elementary School**, made this point clear: *"We all know we're supposed to give the assessments and collect the data. And with a lot of teachers, especially younger teachers, inexperienced teachers … it becomes data to share, but not data to use."*

A primary theme that emerged during conversations with school staff was the distinction between *"data to share"* (which educators often feel compelled collect for compliance purposes) and *"data to use"* (which educators collect to assess and improve the learning environment). Educators discussed data-informed decision-making across several domains including leadership, social-emotional supports, and school culture. Their references to data most often touched upon assessment and differentiated instruction, including tiered instruction. Several schools reported using technology to collect and analyze student achievement data throughout the school year.

Many educators noted the degree to which intentional data analysis has strengthened their academic intervention services through Response to Intervention (RTI), Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS), and a Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS) (see Tiered Instructional Interventions section). Small group instruction rooted in flexible grouping is a common foundation for academic intervention in several Promising Practices schools. These groupings are generally informed by routine analyses of the students' academic achievement and behavioral data. Educators and intervention specialists follow regimented progress monitoring schedules

to ensure this data is current. Collaboration is a central expectation for data analysis in many Promising Practices schools, as staff participate in department-level, grade-level, and individual meetings to translate their data insights into action items for the classroom.

Data-driven Small Group Instruction

A significant finding related to the use of data in Promising Practices schools is that educators are facilitating impactful, data-driven small group instruction. One of the first ideas that Deborah D'Allessandro, a reading specialist at **Robert Morris School**, shared is that she and her colleagues are "*excellent at looking at data and providing kids ... [with] small group instruction based on their needs.*" Many educators feel that flexible **small group instruction** provides an ideal scenario to deliver individualized interventions, conduct progress monitoring, and collect meaningful student-level data that informs instructional planning.

Educators at **Whitman Elementary School** strongly believe in the power of small group instruction. Dana Reilly, a basic skills reading teacher, shared that she thinks small group instruction is "*the best teaching*" strategy and "*most effective when done well because [teachers] are really able to give those kids the time*" and support they need to be successful. Her colleague in the math department, Thomas Kilian, discussed the importance of using data from STAR Assessments—screening and progress monitoring tools by Renaissance Learning—to determine student groups:

> **I think here we do a good job identifying what the students need through STAR testing and different things that we do. I think we have a set group of kids that we know need [support] on basic facts, and then there's a group in the middle that kind of are there, and then there's that high group. So I think we do a really good job touching on the needs of the students ... as hard as it is to have 20 kids in a class and teach them one at a time**.

Woodrow Wilson School #5 outperformed the state average in NJSLA-ELA scores by roughly five percentage points during the 2018–19 school year, with a proficiency rate of 63.0%. During the 2021–22 school year, 79.4% of students scored at or above proficient on the ELA portion of the NJSLA, outperforming the state average by more than 30 percentage points. When asked what practices might account for this impressive gain, Jennifer Powers, the reading specialist, shared, "*What really has made a big impact is our RTI and our grouping and the interventions that we have in place; that really helped us during the pandemic and going forward.*"

Several Promising Practices schools noted the significant positive impact that programs like RTI, I&RS, MTSS, and NJTSS have on student learning outcomes (See Tiered Instruction section). Most of these discussions led educators to emphasize the importance of data-driven small group instruction. Powers clearly made the point that **using data to drive instruction is the key determinant** of whether or not an intervention plan will be successful. She added:

> **In order [for the instruction] to be impactful, you have to have the data [and use] that data to then drive the instruction. I think that's what's made an impact and a difference on being successful and not being successful.**

During the summer before the pandemic, Jack LoBue, the school's math curriculum supervisor, and Principal Bonanno devised a plan to incorporate intervention periods within the daily schedule. A feature of determining what kind of small group instruction would feasibly occur during those intervention periods involved LoBue evaluating all of the assessments for the primary grades. According to Principal Bonnano, LoBue created all the "*baseline testing*" for the district during this time. The data from these assessments and concepts from Lucy Calkin's Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—which is "*basically like a running record or inventory of letters and sounds*"—informed the intervention planning. Said Bonanno:

> **We use high frequency words up until second grade, and then [in] third grade, the running record from Lucy Caulkins is what we used to make a lot of our decisions in terms of which students were going to get pulled out for additional supports.**

Woodrow Wilson students who were identified as needing additional ELA support worked with Powers 5 days per week. Powers serves "*about 10% of each grade level ... five to seven kids*" in a small group setting. Once students are enrolled in her class, Powers tests each of them to collect more specific data about each student's skills:

> **I'm trained in Wilson, so I'm using other more in-depth kinds of testing to see where [the students'] skills are. Because I'm a reading specialist, I know reading level is not what we're supposed to be solely using as a way to provide interventions. I'm doing more skill-based assessments, looking at the more in-depth letter sound, because our sound assessment is just basic consonant and vowel sound. It doesn't go beyond that. I'm doing more in-depth looking at, do they know their vowel patterns? Do they know glued sounds? Looking at more of that [data] to kind of drive my instruction, not just a reading level.**

Collecting data to determine students' reading levels is one of the first steps in arranging the proper interventions for struggling students at **Woodrow Wilson**. Both Powers and LoBue stressed the importance of listening to students read. In order to facilitate this practice during the pandemic, Woodrow Wilson staff used a software called Literably which provided "*a roundabout in terms of the [students'] reading levels.*" The Literably program records students reading aloud using their device's microphone, and provides data through "*intuitive reports that pinpoint intervention needs.*" LoBue acknowledged that there were "*some discrepancies with [Literably] to an extent,*" but a major benefit of using the program was "*the ability to listen to the students read.*" This software enabled Woodrow Wilson teachers to "*have a real conversation about strengths and weaknesses.*" LoBue feels the data that Literably provided to educators was "*a big piece of the puzzle*" during the pandemic.

Once Powers collects and analyzes all the individualized student-level data, she carries out her small group instruction with the Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention System (LLI). She supplements her instruction with research-based resources to support her students with specific skills, like decoding.

> **I add science-based things like the Secret Stories program, because that's based on brain research [and] how kids learn to remember these sounds to help with decoding. ... I'm using my own kind of interventions on top of what the school is providing. This is a program that I would purchase additionally to what I have.**

Principal Bonanno feels the combined efforts of the intervention period within the schedule, RTI program, and tiered small group instruction all play significant roles in improving students' reading levels. Specifically, data-driven small group instruction that occurs during the designated intervention period allows students to receive academic support that remediates skill gaps without causing them to miss grade-level instruction in their regular classes. Explained Bonanno:

> **We see tremendous ... growth with kids [in] levels of reading from being pulled out and having that individual attention. There [are] a lot of kids that miss things along the way and when they miss that [information], they're lost. ... So we focused on, alright, let's pull them out, let's catch them up, and then still teach them what they're supposed to be learning today, but fill in all those missing gaps. And I think that's a big part of it.**

Flexible Grouping Using Multiple Data Points

Along with ensuring that small group instruction is data-driven, another key component of this practice involved flexible grouping in several Promising Practices schools. Flexible grouping occurs when progress monitoring toward clearly defined intervention goals, and data-driven qualifications for such support, determine whether or not a student receives intervention instruction. Andrea Della Fave, vice principal at **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**, highlighted the **shift away from "*the old-fashioned concept*" of basic skills instruction and RTI placements being a "*forever*" label for students**. Now, the emphasis for intervention instruction lies with each child's "trajectory of learning."

> **The whole idea is that it's not the old-fashioned concept of basic skills where a child is labeled and they are basic skills forever. The idea of it is, even within the classroom, teachers are working within fluid, flexible groups, and a teacher is working with a group on this particular standard skill this week or this day. Once the child masters that skill, that group dissipates and then maybe they start working on something else. If a child does have to leave the room for an RTI**

intervention, they may not necessarily be in that RTI intervention forever. They may be coming back into the classroom. So it's not like 10 years ago or 20 years ago when you were a basic skills child, you were always a basic skills child. I think that has also changed the concept [that] there is a trajectory of learning, and every child knows where they are, and they move.

An educator at **H & M Potter School** echoed similar sentiments, noting that a key feature of the Basic skills intervention program at her school is that it is "*fluid*."

We meet on a regular basis to assess whatever data there is to assess, to make sure that we're making the right decisions for the children who are in the [basic skills intervention] program. And again ... it's not like you've got a life sentence. You're in, but you might not be in [forever]. It's a very fluid program that works to meet whatever needs the children have.

To ensure that flexible small group instruction is tailored to each student's needs, many Promising Practices schools, like **H & M Potter**, **use multiple data points to determine placements**, including formal assessments and anecdotal conversations with teachers:

We use multiple data points. So we use the norm test, we do the DIBELS, we use teacher recommendation, [and] report cards. ... So we use all of that information.

Several Promising Practices schools implement virtual programs to assist with data collection, organization, and analysis. At **Cedar Creek Elementary School**, an administrator shared that "*the teachers are using daily data to build their groups and adjust as needed.*" Specifically, staff administer the NWEA MAP Growth assessment to their students. However, since that test is only given three times per year, Cedar Creek educators use programs like LinkIt, SIPS, DRA, and IXL to collect **multiple data points about student learning for small group planning**. While teachers are well-positioned to analyze student-level data from multiple sources, they are ultimately empowered to exercise their professional discretion when arranging intervention placements:

We have a program called LinkIt that really helps us group our kids. ... I think when you're using the data, it's multi-layered. The teachers are using daily data to build their groups and adjust as needed. We can't just use NWEA because you only take it three times a year. For our earlier learners, [we use] the SIPS data for reading, for math. We have common assessments and use daily assessments, but also Words Their Way has assessments. Again, DRA we use to target. I feel like there's more data available for reading than math. Sometimes we also have IXL, which gives [the teachers] immediate feedback, and that's how they can group kids too. Giving the teachers different platforms, but trying not to overwhelm them, which they might be overwhelmed right now. I'm not going to lie, I am very honest about that because there's so many different things. But really giving the teachers the professional discretion to review the data in their classroom and make

the decisions not just based on NWEA, because if a kid has a bad day taking a test that shouldn't determine their small group or if they're a Tier 3 intervention.

Staff at **Roosevelt Elementary School** also use virtual programs to guide their data-driven small group instruction. The Renaissance STAR Assessments provide educators with "*baseline*" data in the beginning of the school year. Roosevelt students take that assessment three times over the course of the school year for progress monitoring. Barbara Collizza, a third-grade teacher, uses the STAR Assessments results to collaborate with the district's ELA consultant, specifically asking for resources to address the skills with which her students are struggling. Since Renaissance also "*helps tier the students based on their needs*," Collizza utilizes these insights, in conjunction with the program's recommended "*next steps*," to plan instruction for her students.

Superintendent D'Amico raised the same consideration as educators at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** about using trice-yearly assessments: While the STAR Assessments provide useful data, progress monitoring must occur "*a little more often than three times a year to make sure that [the students] are on track with their progress and the interventions [teachers] are using are working.*" Lynda Puso, a curriculum supervisor, pointed out that Renaissance has a program called Freckle embedded in the software, which "*continuously adapts for student practice in math or ELA activities.*" Roosevelt educators also use Nearpod to push out assignments and collect additional standards-based progress data for their students.

Overall, D'Amico feels Renaissance is a worthwhile program compared to previous assessment programs the district has implemented. Other screeners took "*three or four class periods*" to complete, while the adaptive STAR screener takes "*40 minutes*" to complete and provides a useful snapshot of each student's abilities. Ultimately, the time spent administering other screeners was "*very important instruction time that [D'Amico and his staff] didn't want to waste.*"

> **We used [Renaissance] in the past, years ago, and it was a great product. We stopped for a while, and we circled back to it because it provides a quick snapshot in the beginning of the year. We had another one previously, but what we were finding was to administer that screening took a lot of time. You were taking three or four class periods to administer a screener a couple times a year. That's very important instructional time that we didn't want to waste. The STAR screener you could take in about 40 minutes and it gives you a quick snapshot. It adjusts to the students' levels, so it's going to meet the students where they're at; as they're answering questions correctly, it gives them harder questions. As they answer questions incorrectly, it brings them down. They find the students' level and kind of give the teachers a snapshot of where that scene is.**

Likewise, Principal Fleming of **Hoover Elementary School** reflected on the evolution of tracking student achievement data over the course of his career. He feels "*fortunate*" to have access to virtual platforms like Renaissance Learning and i-Ready, recalling the early days of his career when he kept student records on a "*giant sheet*" of paper.

Regardless of the platform, it appears that educators at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** have consistently used multiple data points to understand students' achievement over the years.

> **One of the things that we implemented when we got here, I used to call [it] our achievement tracker, which back in the day was just the giant sheet. But that helped. What we would do is each teacher kept records over the year of all the formative assessments of their kids, and we use multiple data points. ... The analogy I always use with my teachers when I talk about data-informed instruction is: "You don't go to the doctor and the doctor says, 'What's going on?' 'I have a cough.' 'Oh, you have cancer.'" It is not like you just do one test. We can't just take NJSLA. ... We were fortunate here because the previous superintendent and the current superintendent are very big on data-informed instruction. And so, we used platforms like Renaissance Learning, we use STAR Assessments for formatives, and we use i-Ready now.**

Educators at **Navesink Elementary School** shared their experience advocating for stronger data-driven instruction by striving to collect more comprehensive information about student achievement. Deanna Gerrity, an ELA instructional coach, noted that the school had previously only administered i-Ready and DIBELS diagnostic assessments, and the educators were "*noticing those gaps*" in adequately assessing students' abilities. Missy Ford, an ELA teacher, clarified, "*We had these two assessments; it wasn't enough. It really didn't say where the whole child was. As teachers, we said, 'We have to dig deeper.'*"

Principal Jesse Herbert noted that the key to providing student-centered instruction is utilizing "*multiple measures.*"

> **[Identifying students' academic needs] fluctuates on that ability to provide more than two single data points. That's why we are not getting the blowback from these teachers. ... They're saying, "Hey, we're going to do these quick assessment snapshots because we need more." Because if you're taking just two data points, you're going to receive skewed data.**

The **Atlantic Highlands School District** introduced the Learning Academy as a solution to the "*skewed data*" issue. The Learning Academy presents a paid opportunity for "*the interventionists and classroom teachers [to] meet and target kids that have [learning] gaps for whatever reason.*" The team collaborates to "*form groups*" and "*develop a 6–8-week plan where [the students] come in twice a week in the morning or after school,*" Ford explained. "*We booster [the students] and try to fill in the gaps.*" Gerrity noted that "*these are typically not our tiered or IEP students. These are our middle-of-the-road students [for whom] we can fill in the gaps and really bump them up.*"

The program starts on January 1. Principal Jesse Herbert explained, "*We use it as kind of a small window between then and the start of NJSLA to focus in on those skills and students that may need a little bit of extra help.*" There are "*typically no more than six students*" per grade level in a Learning

Academy section. Maintaining low student enrollment in the program is possible, in part, because "*kids who are classified*" and "*kids who are receiving Tier 3 interventions*" are not invited to participate since "*they're already getting as intensive of an intervention as [the school] can [provide].*" Principal Herbert went on to explain, "*We focused on those bridge kids, those kids who are teetering on proficient versus falling just below that.*"

While the Learning Academy is a district-level initiative, "*it is not run the same way at every building.*" Specifically, Principal Herbert's method for analyzing the program and selecting students for the Learning Academy is "*unique*" to **Navesink**.

> **What became unique is, last year, I had no upper grade teachers want to do it. I asked [the district] if I could focus, which is my belief, on the primary grades, and they said, "We're budgeted for this money, and if that's what you want to do, you can absolutely do that." I ran multiple sections of kindergarten interventions for before and after school Learning Academy. This year, we were able to service kindergarten, first, and second [grades], and they get both math and language arts [support]. The learning design team [was comprised of] the ones who went through the data and selected who we were going to invite to those before and after school Learning Academies based on [the students'] fall benchmarks, their winter benchmarks, and the assessments that were done. Plus, we did take into consideration teacher recommendations.**

The Impact of NJSLA on Instruction and Staff Expectations

A specific element of promoting an intentional data culture at many Promising Practices schools involves bolstering data-informed academic programs. At **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School**, careful analysis of NJSLA-ELA data led to an overhaul of the staff's approach to writing instruction. Monica Hancock, the data coordinator, shared that "*in 2019, [the College Achieve Greater Asbury Park administrative team] began looking at [the] NJSLA writing data, specifically narrative, RST [Research Stimulation Task], and lit[erature] analysis to see how many students got a zero, which at that time in 2018 ... was something like 70% of tested-grade students.*" This granular analysis can feel "*tedious*" because there is no easy way to export NJSLA writing task scores for each student, but Hancock says it provides "*super valuable data*" to her team. Given that the writing section of the NJSLA-ELA is worth "*more than 50%*" of a student's total score, Hancock and her colleagues adopted an intervention strategy designed to improve student learning outcomes in this domain.

For the entire school year, **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park** students received daily instruction "*fully dedicated to those three types of writing [tasks]*" during their 44-minute intervention period. When the school first implemented this plan, the whole intervention period was dedicated to writing support. Now, in the 2024–25 school year, students receive 15 minutes of daily writing intervention and participate in a quarterly 2-week "*writing bootcamp for the [NJSLA] tasks.*"

"*We have not in any way abandoned the structure [for writing intervention],*" Hancock explained. "*We've just sort of consolidated it.*"

Educators at **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park** apply these data insights to their instructional planning, alongside "*a repository of resources*" with "*lessons [that] are laid out*" and "*almost even scripted.*" The lesson repository is maintained by administrators in the College Achieve Public Charter School network. The instructional pacing guide for each writing task includes 10 lessons from *The Literacy Cookbook: A Practical Guide to Effective Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Instruction* by Sarah Tantillo. The lesson repository specifically provides teachers with "*the [writing] prompts, the practice prompts, how to unpack [them], the [student] checklists [for successfully completing the task], and all of the lessons that they're supposed to hit for that [task].*"

According to Hancock, explicit expectations and repetition of skills support the success of this approach to writing instruction. When students are shown how to intentionally "*unpack the [writing] prompt,*" they are well-positioned to identify "*what type of essay they're expected to write*" and "*how to set up their scrap paper before they even go to read the text.*" In other words, students benefit from "*a lot of training of specific processes and routines that they practice over and over again.*" Students build on their foundational writing skills by applying these strategies to increasingly challenging texts throughout their educational careers at **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park**. Repetition comes into play once again, as "*the process of preparing notes, preparing scrap paper, unpacking the prompt, and extracting and annotating remains the same year over year.*"

Hancock shared that nearly 100% of recent **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park** 11th graders passed the ELA portion of the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA). She believes this success "*has to do with how strong [the students] have become in their writing.*" Likewise, from the 2018–19 school year to the 2021–22 school year, the school saw a 36.1% increase in ELA proficiency. Hancock asserted that this jump in scores "*directly correlated to the increase in writing scores*" predicated on careful analysis of NJSLA patterns.

Hancock, who started her career as a **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park** ELA teacher, has witnessed a significant improvement in the student body's overall writing confidence and stamina since adopting this intervention program.

> **You can see that [our students] are significantly more confident when they write. They have writing endurance that they never had before. I know [during] my first year as a seventh-grade ELA teacher here, it was a struggle to get them to write more than two sentences. Now I see them spending the entire 45 minutes using their scrap paper, setting it up exactly as we taught them, taking their notes, and writing full five paragraph essays. This [systematic approach to teaching writing] is hands down a best practice, I think, that really would benefit anyone.**

Similar to Navesink's Learning Academy, educators at **Woodrow Wilson School #5** implemented an after-school effort to target students who were "*borderline*" for passing the NJSLA. The math curriculum supervisor, Jack LoBue, explained that this intervention strategy was designed to

benefit students who, based on previous NJSLA scores, "*potentially could struggle [while taking the assessment and] need some testing support and some content support.*" While the program was not explicitly "*drill and practice on test prep,*" test-taking strategies were infused into the standards-based learning activities.

All of the instruction was provided to students in a small group setting. Cohorts of about seven students met with their teachers after school for an additional 45 minutes to an hour, two to three times per week. LoBue cautioned other schools against attempting to provide these interventions in large groups, as that approach might yield more of "*a ninth period of the [school] day*" rather than individualized, impactful instruction. This after-school program was a component of the school's Response to Intervention model, which several **Woodrow Wilson** educators believe is particularly impactful for their students. Nonetheless, LoBue feels this data-driven intervention program helped the staff "*maintain percentages of success of students succeeding or increasing on [the NJSLA].*"

Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy School No. 20 uses NJSLA data to drive instruction on a lesson-by-lesson basis. Principal John Mellody believes that "*coordinating all of the systems*" at play significantly contributes to his school's success. The administrator and school-level annual goals at Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy are informed by the school's data and "*translated into Student Growth Objectives (SGOs) and lesson plans.*" Principal Mellody and his staff achieve this by ensuring that all SGOs "*target students who did not pass the [previous year's] NJSLA.*" The school's required lesson plan template contains a box wherein educators must list the first names or initials of their SGO students and "*the specific intervention that targets the standard for that day.*" Principal Mellody explained that the information in this part of the lesson plan "*shouldn't be copy and paste;*" educators are expected to be thoughtful about identifying and implementing interventions for this student group.

Part of what makes this student-centered planning possible is the district's implementation of Carnegie Learning, an "*innovative curriculum*" by one teacher's measure. This "*blended curriculum*" promotes the use of "*traditional textbooks*" and "*technology assessments and practice*" to support student learning. Marina Vogiatzis, a sixth-grade math teacher, uses Carnegie Learning as "*the main learning tool*" in her classroom, but "*always ... make[s] decisions based on [her] students' needs and based on the data.*" Principal Mellody shared about this aspect of planning instruction by emphasizing "*the power of the teacher,*" even with access to "*scripted*" educational tools:

> **The planning is there, the scaffold is there because of the scripted lesson plan [in Carnegie Learning]. Now, you get to prepare that lesson plan for implementation. How are you taking what's there and applying it to your students? That's the power of the teacher. That's the power of the moment. And that needs to be leveraged.**

Educators at **North Plainfield Middle School** also emphasize data-driven planning to ensure their students receive consistent messaging about tested skills across all content areas. Administrators analyze their students' performance data from the NJSLA, LinkIt assessments, i-Ready, IXL, and

in-house common assessments to determine which skills are necessary to target through tier one interventions. Principal Robert Lake shared:

> **A big part of what we're doing now is using data from ... NJSLA or LinkIt assessments or in-house, common assessments or i-Ready or IXL ... all the different forms of assessments and diagnostics to target the academic needs of our students. Whether targeting a strand or a skill, we're looking at individual needs or the big picture of students and saying, "As a school, where are our strengths? Where are our weaknesses as a grade level? Strengths and weaknesses of a particular demographic? Strengths and weaknesses in my classroom? What are the areas that I need to target?" This information informs our instruction.**

North Plainfield Middle School administrators aim to mitigate the overwhelm that many educators experience when provided with dozens of Tier 1 interventions by presenting their staff with three ELA and three math interventions to implement across classrooms. Lake continued:

> **We know that everyone will benefit from the Tier 1 interventions, right? [A teacher] mentioned NJTSS. Using Tier 1 interventions schoolwide and being very specific with the types of interventions we use and how we implement them. Instead of saying to the school, "Here's 30,000 interventions you can use," we say, "In terms of reading and writing, here are three interventions you should use. Here are three Tier 1 interventions designed to impact math. Use those and keep it as consistent as possible across the board so the students are hearing the same messaging and language on some of those foundational skills that need improvement."**

Data Management Systems

Staff at several Promising Practices schools discussed data management systems that help educators apply data insights to instructional planning in meaningful ways. **Hoover Elementary School**, which belongs to the Bergenfield Public School District, recently adopted Panorama as part of a district initiative. This program stores a catalog of each student's data over the course of their schooling. Teachers can access each of their students' historical performance data at the beginning of the school year. Mercedes Perez, a fourth-grade teacher, explained that the program essentially provides "*a virtual portfolio of [each] child.*" She shared that Panorama has a particularly positive impact on the school's I&RS process, as the ability to analyze multiple data points over time provides rich insights into student learning.

> **The current assistant [superintendent] has really done a great job of formalizing a lot of best practices. We use a platform now called Panorama where it live rolls in all the data for you into one set, and it travels with the child. When I give you your class for the following year, you have an immediate kind of pre-eval of who**

> **you're getting. It's data from different sources ... it's great because it pulls the NJSLA data. It pulls the iReady data. Teachers are able to input the child's running records, they're able to input their math benchmarks, they're able to input I&RS and intervention teacher assessments, teacher-created assessments. It's almost like a virtual portfolio of a child. It's great. I'm not trying to plug programs, but I think it's a great platform and it's really helped us, especially in the I&RS process, really have a better picture of a child because we can see what's been going on for multiple years.**

i-Ready was among the most frequently mentioned online instruction and assessment platforms used in Promising Practices schools. Teonnah Hannibal, a resource center teacher at **Chelsea Heights School**, spoke about the impact of monthly meetings with an i-Ready consultant to "*review data*" and provide "*ideas and tips"* for maximizing the school's implementation of the program.

> **The district has an i-Ready representative that works with all of the schools. She comes here once a month to review our data with our school leadership team. She also meets with grade levels during their planning time to review data. And she just gives us ideas and tips and things that we may want to focus on. She really provides us with a lot of important information for us to take back and to use as a school as a whole.**

Educator Collaboration Around Data

Educators at several Promising Practices schools participate in conversations about student data at the school and district levels. Some staff have regular grade-level and content-area meetings to analyze their students' data and plan their instruction accordingly. Educators at **Frederic W. Cook Elementary School** discuss district benchmark assessment results by comparing the data to previous scores and "*making a game plan for the future*" in grade-level meetings, according to Michelle Small, an Interventionist at the school. Educators at **North Plainfield Middle School** also conduct discussions about data on a quarterly basis during their PLC time. Teachers meet by content area for an hour and 20 minutes to "*review data implementation of interventions for students.*" During this time, educators also discuss "*Tier 1 interventions ... across the board to support language arts and math.*"

Similarly, staff at **Central Elementary School** participate in "*data days*" during which grade-level colleagues collaborate across the district. All students in the district have a delayed opening to accommodate this 2-hour meeting. Gianna Ferguson, a fourth-grade special education teacher, shared that "*data days*" give teachers the chance to brainstorm and share resources.

> **Let's say a population scored lower in whatever standard. We sit down as a grade level and we think, "Well, what can we do? Have you used resources? What can we make?" And then it's really collaborating and sharing.**

Other schools refer to these opportunities to engage in collaborative data analysis as "*data team meetings.*" Staff at **Roosevelt Elementary School**, where students outperformed the state averages for ELA by 21.1 percentage points and for math by 10.8 percentage points in 2021–22, participate in a top-down approach to data analysis. The district data teams complete the initial evaluation of the assessment data. Then, those teams meet with the school administrators, who eventually disseminate the data insights to their building-based data teams.

Frank D'Amico, the superintendent of schools, shared that these meetings enable the district to "*stress*" the importance of "*looking at multiple data points.*" He went on to share the kinds of analyses that he and his staff undergo when reviewing the district's NJSLA state reports:

> **These evidence statements that we get from the state reports ... show you how your students did compared to the state on the different standards ... We dissect these and look closely at the standards [to see] where we performed. It might be higher than the state [average], but where did we perform? Where did my class perform lower, even though it was above the state average? There's different reasons that that may be, because some of those standards are a little bit more advanced for the grade level and ... maybe the students don't necessarily achieve at the same rate on those standards as they do on other standards. You don't want to focus too much effort on those standards. Looking at all those different points of data and then planning our instruction accordingly, I think, helps with keeping that forward progress.**

D'Amico went on to explain that individual groups of teachers in each school ultimately "*break down*" this data and take it "*to the next level*" for students.

> **Groups of teachers in the same grade level, having that common planning time to look at their instruction, look at the data together, and then the individual teacher looking at their individual students, where did their students perform and where are the supports needed?**

Tracy Sullivan, a fifth-grade teacher at **Roosevelt**, shared that data-driven instruction is a key feature of her classroom starting in the beginning of the school year. Identifying where supports are needed, as D'Amico pointed out, is a major outcome of Sullivan's data analyses.

> **In fifth grade, as far as testing goes, I use the data to drive my instruction. I have the capability to look at the fourth-grade state test scores. In the beginning of the year, I immediately look and see where the areas of support are really needed, and that's where I start. I also look at my data from fifth grade. Okay, what areas do I need to support for this year? I really use a lot of this data and the standards that need extra support to guide my instruction.**

Separate from designated PLC time for data analysis, **North Plainfield Middle School** utilizes data teams through their NJTSS to "*dive into where the weaknesses are*" and determine strategies that

can address the score deficits. Principal Robert Lake shared that this work supports his "*very, very targeted*" approach to supporting instruction, as those selected strategies are shared with his staff to be implemented in classrooms across the school.

> **Last year, there was a significant effort to address language arts. This year, we are trying to be better at supporting our math [instruction] as well. [It's] a little bit more challenging in most classrooms, but we are working on that and giving people the tools they need to be successful. Our data teams and interventionists work to craft instructional strategies for each content area. We do this instead of saying to the social studies teacher, "Hey, make sure you do something that relates to math in class." [We are] providing strategies, providing what those interventions look like in the classroom.**

The data team at **Birches Elementary School** meets three times per year. This group is instrumental in assessing whether a student should be referred to I&RS and the kinds of supports a student who does not qualify for I&RS might benefit from in their learning. An interventionist explained:

> **In the beginning of the year, we look at the data and we say, okay, maybe they don't need to be on I&RS, but let's keep a watch on these kids. Let's set a goal for them and then let's list some interventions that we can put in place to see if they'll reach that goal.**

This practice is "helpful" for **Birches** educators, as it provides a space for them to discuss how best to meet the needs of each individual student:

> **Again, is it a Band-Aid or is it a bullet hole? Is it a kid who's just kind of low or is it the lowest kid in the grade? So having those discussions and giving teachers leave time to have those discussions is super helpful.**

School Leaders and Experts Supporting Data Analysis

Several Promising Practices schools are led by administrators who regularly engage their staff in conversations about data. The principal of **Frederic W. Cook Elementary School**, Caryn Cooper, initiates "*data chats*" with educators three times per school year. During these meetings, teachers engage in "*formal conversation[s] about how students are growing*" by way of reviewing student-level assessment data and discussing targeted instructional strategies. The principal relies on these "*data chats*" in part to monitor and reinforce high-quality instruction for all students. During the end of pandemic-era instruction and through the return to in-person learning, instruction for "*bilingual students was a priority*" at **Frederic W. Cook Elementary School**. Indeed, Cooper committed to facilitating biweekly "*data chats*" with the teachers of bilingual students.

At **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy School No. 20**, Assistant Principal Annisa Jones prioritizes constructive data conversations with teachers during coaching cycles. She finds success approaching these meetings in the spirit of "*a true partnership*," where educators can expect to feel supported.

> **It's not an "I got you" approach; it's a true partnership. How can we improve the skills for these students? What type of strategies will we implement [and] utilize? A lot of times I ask, "What do you need from me? Is it more coaching? Is it, I need to reach out to a district coach so she can come in and model to you in the classroom this specific skill?" We're always pretty much communicating with our teachers, knowing where they're coming from. I hope that each teacher has realized that it's a true partnership across the board. It's teamwork. It's not, "I am your supervisor," even though I am, but this is truly a partnership. We are here, we are passionate about students.**

At **Whitman Elementary School**, administrators lead data meetings in a comparable way. Christine Gehringer, the elementary supervisor, explained that the district's approach to data meetings has "*evolved*" since they started the practice around 15 years ago. Previously, all staff participated in conversations about their students' achievement "*as a whole*" grade level. Now, each teacher attends their own data meeting with an administrator and an interventionist.

> **When we first started [data meetings], like 15 years ago, we brought the whole grade level in and we conversed and, I mean, it was as basic as [using] manila folders and stickies, and we were writing goals and we were just moving them around. We would take all the kids and we kind of across the board looked at where they were falling and looked at the group as a whole. Then it evolved into individual data meetings where the teacher comes with their data, and then we just have the people at the table to help support the teacher.**

These formal meetings occur three times per year; between meetings, "*the interventionist follows up with the teacher on the strategies and the goals that were set, and makes adjustments*" to the action plans. The meetings are conducted as a "conversation" about supporting identified students beyond Tier 1 supports.

> **It's a discussion [during which we are] supporting the teacher and identifying what the child might need that is different than Tier 1. It's really thinking about Tier 2 intervention strategies and, if needed, Tier 3. It's a step that we use. I would say that then if children go to the I&RS, that's a separate thing with different goals. And then eventually they may have to be evaluated for a child study team.**

Gehringer noted that this approach to data meetings allows teachers to identify and support not only their "*struggling students*," but also their "*accelerated students*."

> **The action plan's fluid; it is able to be adjusted as needed. And the whole premise behind it is to look at the students, and not just your low students. I know we've talked a lot about struggling students, but also to look at your accelerated students that need to be challenged, because sometimes we have children that are reading [at an] exceptionally high level or are just exceptionally great at math. We have a responsibility not only to show growth of children that are struggling, but also [with] children that are already achieving our goals, we want them to continue to grow.**

Finally, this approach to data meetings creates space for teachers to celebrate themselves and their students' successes, which according to Gehringer, "*rarely happens*" in education.

> **To me, [data meetings are] an amazing opportunity for teachers to pause and recognize the growth of their students, because so often teachers are diagnostic [and] prescriptive, like doctors; we need to just figure out what we can do to help you. When you go to a doctor's office, they pull in all the reports, and that's basically what teachers are doing. [Teachers] rarely take time to pause and celebrate the growth of their students.**

Principal Samantha Dulude feels these data meetings play an integral role in monitoring the school's tiered approach to academic intervention.

> **I do think data meetings have really helped us to hone in on what's happening in Tier 1 to support our students, which is a major conversation and it's continuous. [Our interventionists are] Tier 2, and then [we look] through the lens of what we need to go into that Tier 3 approach with the I&RS team. So I really think data meetings have done a great job for us to not lose students into the cracks.**

The assessment item analysis practice is a feature of a greater systematized approach to data analysis in the **Elizabeth Public School District**. Administrators and educators throughout the district utilize the Five Whys Protocol to "*determine the root cause*" of students' performance on assessments. Principal Melissa Kulick facilitates this protocol with her staff during biweekly PLCs and models the practice with the assistant superintendent and with the superintendent.

> **My vice principal and I sit with the grade levels. We don't just say, okay, goodbye [after presenting the data]. We sit here and we look at the data and we talk about ways that we can improve instruction. ... [We] pull out the Five Whys protocol, which is [used to determine] the root cause of why the students did not do [well]. That's where the strong instruction comes in and the strong discipline and the pedagogy for teaching and learning comes in. Then we talk about best practices. ... We model what is done with us at our PLCs with the assistant superintendent and with the superintendent. We had to do a Five Whys protocol. We had to present to the superintendent and the assistant superintendent with other principals at the table like, "This why we've scored so low in certain areas" ... We're consistent with it. We do it every two weeks at PLCs.**

Conclusion

Educators at Promising Practices schools regularly use data to inform instruction, especially in the context of delivering academic interventions. This instruction takes place in flexible small groups generally determined by multiple assessment outcomes that reflect each student's skill levels at a particular point in time. These data points are collected and analyzed on a regular basis through intentional progress monitoring. Educators then collaborate with their teaching colleagues, administrators, and/or district staff members trained in data analysis to apply those data insights to their instructional planning. Furthermore, some Promising Practices schools utilize granular analyses of their students' NJSLA outcomes to bolster instruction around specific skills in their math and ELA curricula.

Data-driven instruction equips many Promising Practices educators to maintain high academic standards for all of their students while providing the supports they need to succeed. Flexible grouping determined by skills-based performance data ensures that students are not permanently set on a particular track for learning for the duration of their education. Frequent, specific progress monitoring is a key feature of individualized intervention services in many Promising Practices schools, thus mitigating the practice of recommending students for academic support based on more subjective "feelings" (see Tiered Instruction section). Moreover, data management systems like LinkIt and Renaissance Learning bring a noteworthy level of sophistication to data collection and analysis at Promising Practices schools. Educators across the state of New Jersey can learn a great deal from the ways that staff optimize their data management systems and evaluate their students' learning outcomes to execute effective, data-driven instruction.

4.5 Supporting Historically Underserved Student Populations

Introduction

New Jersey's schools are typically at or near the top of national test score rankings. Nonetheless, schools have struggled to serve certain student populations at a high level, including Black students, Hispanic students, English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students who fall into more than one of those categories. This is not equally true of all schools, of course. Schools in the sample vary widely in terms of how subgroups of students perform. Some do well with all student subgroups; others, with certain groups. Indeed, in some schools, the kinds of achievement gaps that bedevil the state and nation do not exist. Promising Practices schools' historically underserved students performed better academically than students at similar schools across the state (on average, approximately one-half of a standard deviation better than expected). These schools appear to be doing something right for students overall, as well as for students that many schools find hard to reach.

Issues of race, ethnicity, language, and disability status are socially sensitive, and some of the interview teams sensed some hesitation when those issues were raised, especially around race.

Nonetheless, respondents shared promising ideas about how New Jersey's schools can work for everyone. No one offered a step-by-step road map, but these conversations and other data suggest that schools can be more effective by **creating climates of frank and open discussion, sharing affirmations aimed at specific groups, targeting resources and opportunities, institutionalizing higher expectations, and being sensitive to stigmatizing experiences**. Sometimes what was said at one school contradicted what was said at another, suggesting there are many ways to improve.

Some schools indicated that they operate without much consideration of the distinctions between student subgroups. Asked if their array of social-emotional learning practices had different effects by race, ethnicity, class, or language status, one principal said:

> **I don't even think that's a factor to be completely honest with you. We don't think about [that]; our school's predominantly Hispanic. We have a small population of African Americans. ... But I don't think we take that into account when we're planning. ... We're not planning it based on anything more than what's fun, that high school kids want to do.**

Asked to comment on their relatively strong performance among low-income students, leaders at another school couldn't think of anything going on that was targeted to that group:

> **We do a lot of data presentations… in fact, she just did a data presentation Monday night to the board. Yes, we look at those breakdowns [by group], but we don't sit around the table and say, "These are what our Black students are scoring? What are we going to do differently for them?" We look at it all as basic achievement, offering as much as we can for every student that's in there. So, no. ... We don't have something in particular that we're doing for them.**

A much larger number of schools, though, are emphatic about thinking about the needs of particular groups and lifting up, celebrating, and leveraging diversity in both curricular and cocurricular activities. Some of the most successful schools are quite vigorous about calling out social tensions and controversies, and tackling tough issues in classrooms and beyond. Regarding his school's diversity club, an administrator at **Whitman Elementary School**, explained:

> **The idea is acceptance of everybody. Tolerance of everybody's ideas and beliefs. People who were involved in the club, talk about their cultures, their religious beliefs, what is a primary practice in their house, something that they do, something that they celebrate, why they celebrate that. [They] talk about the tone of the celebration or what it is that they do, and then explain why it's important to them. Then they build conversations off [it], "I do something similar, but at my household we do something like this." They bring different foods from [different] cultures, and [they care about] what their friends do. The diversity club is a great opportunity for our kids who are moving into the area that are coming from different backgrounds. They have a place where they can meet and be with people who are similar to them, so that they can share similar experiences as well. Or,**

have a place [they can connect with] somebody who they're growing fond of or close to. They can say, "Hey, this is me. This is what I do. I want to learn what you do." It's an open environment that's conducive to conversation.

Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy has very strong residuals across subgroups. Assistant Principal Anissa Jones discussed tailoring the school's attendance practices to students' culture:

So a lot of times we tailor different strategies based on the cultural backgrounds. When we do have an event like a party, it's not going to be Space Jam, it may be salsa ... [or] mariachi. And so just tailoring it to the different demographics in our building ... making sure that I'm conscious of my audience. ... In the attendance review committee, [we consider] what [students] would like.

An administrator from **Mount Tabor Elementary School** also discussed practices designed to celebrate different cultures:

Something that we did that we're very proud of this year was "one school, many cultures." We had an international day, and every student received a passport book and every classroom transformed into a certain country. ...What was so wonderful about it is we had our parents do the presentations. ...Children from both high schools came in and did presentations. We had over 20 countries represented. ... They listened to the presentation and they had their passport stamped. The children absolutely loved it.

Their presentations were amazing ... and some of them were graduates of Mount Tabor. ... All that builds the community. The children were so proud. ... We've had over 50 parents come and do presentations for our classes.

Elizabeth Desmond, English teacher at **Gateway Regional High School,** emphasized the importance of flexibility in book selection:

We were talking about diverse populations and connecting with them. As an English teacher, the flexibility in curriculum has been invaluable in terms of book selections. ... I have never been told I cannot bring a book into a classroom, which is amazing to say. ... So right now, my 10th graders are all reading one of five books ... about police violence against young Black men ... about a girl who's being sold into prostitution in Nepal, about the value of life and the abortion question, and about a girl struggling in Harlem—a Dominican girl dealing with her oppressive religious family, disparity of income, and all these issues. The fact that I have 10th graders who do not like to read who are reading. That's just so important. ... How does that translate on the state test? They're not going to read something that

> **doesn't connect to them. ... And the administration has always been so supportive when I'm like, "Here's a book. It's a little crazy, but I think kids are going to like it." No one has ever said, "You can't teach that; you can't give that to students."**

Jamie Meigh, first-grade teacher at **Packanack Elementary**, explained a recent overhaul of school texts:

> **Two years ago, I sat on a committee that went through every text that we use in the district to examine them for [diverse representation]. There was every type of person represented, so every race, students in wheelchairs, all sorts of different things. Parents that have two moms and two dads and single parent families and biracial families. Then we made sure that, throughout their K–5 life here in school, they would see people like them in books. As part of that, also identifying negative stereotypes and removing those texts from the curriculum, so that we didn't sort of perpetuate any negative stereotypes, and replacing them with more meaningful, better [work].**

At **Community Middle**, Andrew Heiser, the social studies teacher, starts the year by honoring everyone's heritage:

> **One of the projects I start off [every year with is] a heritage project, [where] they tell me about themselves. ... Just teach me about your heritage. What do you learn from your parents or grandparents [about] that? And if you could trace it back further, let's trace it back further. And the kids are teaching me all about their family. I tell the kids I love to cook. ... Who's going to have the recipe that grandma has secretly, that I can make, that she doesn't know about? And they all start laughing like, grandma won't let me have it.**

Teachers at **Whitman Elementary** also build on the backgrounds of their students in combination with Wit and Wisdom, a K–8 ELA curriculum with emphasis on multicultural, multilingual themes and higher-order thinking:

> **I would say right now our third-grade unit is all about coming to America and immigration and talking about the students' culture[s]. We're trying to bring in that authenticity. We're starting an immigration project, where we have [students interview] family members. ... Then we kind of collect them all and we put them in our Schoology platform so the students can listen. I think it creates more of a community too, because they get to share their background, what kind of traditional food they eat or holidays that they celebrate. We have a parent coming in tomorrow to talk about Ramadan and Eid and explain how they celebrate that in their culture and it intersects with all the things that we're learning and wisdom. We kind of try to keep that more authentic, so it is in their writing. – Dana Reilly, reading teacher/basic skills**

So also with Wit and Wisdom, the things that we learn are real world issues. We learned about the Nez Perce War, whereas for a lot of people, they never hear about that. [The] kids think about the ideas of fairness and just really how the Nez [Perce War] wasn't a shining moment for the U.S. government. ... The texts that we read in Wit and Wisdom relate to either science or social studies, but they relate to real world issues and history that kids need to know. – Tia Cade, ELA teacher

One principal spoke for many of the Promising Practices schools when she said she wanted a curriculum built around mirrors and windows: mirrors that let kids see themselves in what they are studying and windows that help them see beyond their present worlds.

Making School Work for Everyone

Whether schools move beyond the "shining moments" and embrace real world issues as kids experience them appears to be significantly related to their success with students from historically marginalized groups. The only easy generalization to be made from our data is that schools seem to be getting to the same place by different pathways; however, some of them are particularly focused on shaping a school culture that encourages people to embrace tough, uncomfortable conversations.

Oakcrest High School prides itself on its diversity—40% economically disadvantaged, 22% Hispanic, 30% Black, almost 7% Asian, and 21% with disabilities. Schoolwide ELA performance as measured by residuals ranks in the top 10% of all middle and high schools in the state, and ELA performance is in the top 10% for for all vulnerable groups. Principal Michael McGhee thinks of diversity as one of their "biggest strengths":

> **We have students living in million dollar homes back along the Mullica River, [and] we [have] kids still living in chicken coops out there in Mullica, or Mizpah I should say. So we have everything in between. So if you love working with children, I mean, diversity is what we have here in our district, which I think is fantastic**

The school is not without its tensions, but it adheres to a policy of open discussion, some of it taking place in student clubs, including the Multicultural Interest Club and Students Talking About Racism (STAR).

> **We had a group of about 50 students come to me because of an issue that occurred outside of school…and it was a lot of our African American students [and] some Hispanics who said they don't feel sometimes as included in decision-making in our building. So at that particular time, they spoke up for themselves. God bless 'em, they did. And we had a very good meeting. I always like to say I worked it as a counselor in that I just had to sit there and listen, because they had to sit there**

and get the point across [and] they made a lot of valid points. ... [Ultimately,] I stopped defending and just listened. What came out of it was something called STAR: Students Talking About Racism. – Joseph Costal, supervisor of English, social studies, and multi-language learners

Indicative of the times, students were initially going to call their group Black Lives Matter.

And we said, you know what, that's a flashpoint language. It might be politicized. And it also might steer students away from it. So we call [it] Students Talking About Racism. Yeah, that's still pretty strong language. It is. I think that started a lot of conversations that were had out of these programs. – Michael McGhee, principal

Supporting that kind of space for students to own requires adults who are willing to push beyond their comfort zone:

Students were ready to have the conversation forever. It's the teachers who weren't ready to have the conversation. ... So I learned and I tried to grow and I tried to say to myself, okay, how do I access this? How do I access my own privilege in a lot of ways as a male, as White, you know what I mean? To get in there and say, this is entrenched in fear and it's a fear that we have to understand and it's okay to be afraid and it's okay to grow and learn. And the students had to learn to accept that in the staff. And it took a lot of time. Mr. McGhee has done a lot of work and been extremely open to his own vulnerabilities and being open to discussing. – Joseph Costal, supervisor of English, social studies, and multi-language learners

Openness to discussing topics that some schools might shy away from is now part of how **Oakcrest** operates. An educator said:

So there have been some very passionate, professional, adult conversations in some of these meetings we've had throughout our building over the last 2 years. A committee [of teachers is] being trained, through a grant through Penn State, right now on how to have tough conversations with your peers, with your students in your classes. It doesn't just have to be about diversity, but just tough conversations.

Rosa International Middle School in Cherry Hill is another school that has been successful with multiple groups:

NJSLA Residuals
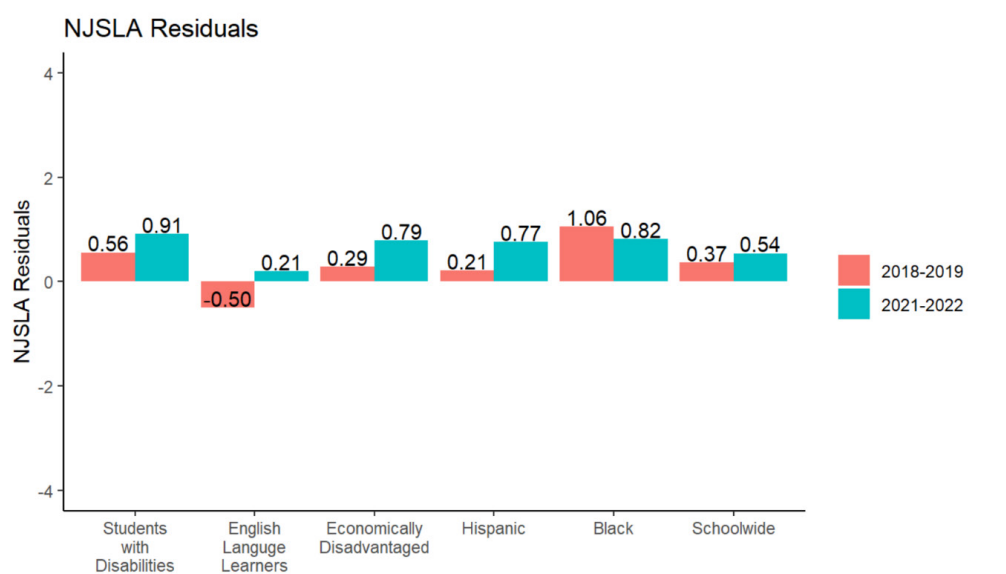
Data Source: Author's Calculation Based on NJDOE School Performance Reports and NCES Data

In 2021–22, with the exception of English learners, all other subgroups outperformed the schoolwide average, many by more than one-half of a standard deviation above mean performance. Of note are the much higher residuals for Black student ELA and math performance, and math performance among students with disabilities, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students.

Very much like Oakcrest, this is a school where racial and social issues are front and center in school dialogue and curriculum. Some of this emanates from the district. The principal noted explicitly the challenges of providing equitable outcomes for all students, but the Cherry Hill district has stayed the course. The district sponsors a committee on Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Character Education, which leads conversations on tough topics. During its first year, staff read *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* (Acho, 2020) and engaged in discussions about it across the district. Rosa has a long history of using National History Day (NHD) as a nationally recognized tool that creates space for students to explore uncomfortable social issues, involving students from across the social spectrum:

> **We're talking about innovation and impact as a potential promising practice for Rosa with some of our historically underserved students ... and [eighth-grade humanities teacher Christy Marrella's] work with NHD and civil rights and eighth-grade curriculum and [her] work in the state and then nationally. ... We have low socioeconomic status students, we have neurodiverse students, we have**

Black and brown students, we have Asian students. We have a number of different students that have come through in the 10 years that [she] and I have been working together for NHD to be able to make these gains. And then we see the gains spread in high school. – George Guy, principal

And beyond, because the first group of NHD [students] that I worked with are [now] in their thirties. It's definitely an experience that is diverse and [enables] students to kind of go out of the proverbial four classroom walls. ... It's such an important piece for our students because it's an empowerment piece for them. I see it as, by learning about it, it's empowering them to become the agents of change, right? They're going to vote in 4 years. ... This year, one of my goals was to have students work on "undertold" as NHD is referring to it ... "Undertold" is a word that they're using this year [to describe] forgotten, underrepresented stories. And I feel very passionate about my students looking into things that are outside the parameters of a textbook. So an example would be, we did a performance on the killing of Vincent Chin. So this is a big connection with Asian and American Pacific Islander [students] because his death actually kind of spawned this conversation. We also are doing a documentary on the Birmingham Children's March, but looking at it as a turning point and how Martin Luther King, Jr. kind of used how it was set up and its parameters to focus his march the same way. One of the young individuals in that group, his great uncle, helped King do the march. So it's just such a neat connection. We also have a documentary on Chiune Sugihara who is considered a righteous gentile. He saved Jews in Lithuania and the [students] uncovered that he also saved Jews in the Czech Republic. ... We have an exhibit on Mr. Hopper and the Underground Railroad from [nearby] Woodbury, New Jersey. ... [A project on] Bordertown School (segregated high school) ... which I think is one of my favorite projects we've ever worked on, [examined] how *Brown v. Board of Education* actually was a deterrent to the school. It had to close because of the separate but equal law. ... My club is set up so there are no parameters, as it's not a tagged class where a lot of people do NHD as gifted and talented; you just have to have a passion for history. That's it. Passion for history. ... So I believe in having groups so that they can learn those skills with the grouping. And then I really push them to kind of go past the textbook. ... I really love to have students who are on any spectrum of anything. This year we have neurodiverse students on the team who are going to nationals. — Christy Marrella, eighth-grade humanities teacher

The project won multiple prizes (again) in the national history competition this year. Research on ethnic studies courses is clear about their potential advantages for both minority and majority group students. Well-designed and executed culturally relevant curricula can improve student

GPA, attendance, and credits earned (Dee & Penner, 2017), along with engagement, attitude toward learning, and agency, and, for majority group students, improving their "democracy skills" (Sleeter, 2012). The specific emphasis that schools like **Oakcrest**, **Cook**, and **Rosa** put on "hard" conversations is very important. According to Sleeter's comprehensive literature review, representational courses—and co-curricular activities—bring more minority faces into the curriculum. But by avoiding uncomfortable issues, they have a weaker effect on student engagement and growth than those which draw students into the examination of potentially controversial and edgy issues, at least among older students.

A school where middle schoolers may be discussing white supremacy and racial privilege is going to have critics, which has certainly been the experience at **Rosa**, but the district's work around diversity, equity, and inclusion helped. When some parents expressed concerns about the choice of some material, it was the Parent Teacher Association president, who had been exposed to some of those trainings, who defended the school's commitment to inclusion and access. Principal Guy helped the critics see how the work connected to New Jersey's learning standards, and invited them to have as much dialogue as they wanted about it. He said: "*Let's have more dialogue about this. And usually, those voices will retreat because they don't want to have more dialogue. They don't want to come to the table. They don't want to discuss differences around that or where we can come together. I know those parents. I like those parents. They're good parents.*"

It is likely a mistake to think about affirming school cultures separately from the broader context in which they are occurring. Integral to the discussion with **Rosa** staff was their ability to raise issues that could not be raised elsewhere. They embraced high quality professional development and strong relationships with the community, colleagues, and students. They check in with students about how they are connecting to one another and administer a climate survey, which revealed that students' greatest concern was negative interpersonal relationships. Importantly, that took on different meanings:

> **[Among] sixth graders, their big perspective was that people were stealing hats and stealing things like kids used to do on the playground in elementary school and then running with them. And that was causing, "Oh, he threw my hat down the stairwell" and whatever. Whereas eighth graders were talking about significantly deeper [issues]: "I feel left out [since] I'm not sure where I am in my journey to discover my gender identity or my neurodiverse self. I'm not sure I fit in." It was eye-opening to do that.** – JudithAnn Albuquerque, seventh-grade math teacher

That led to further discussions with students, including soliciting their ideas about how to do better, and more support for teachers around how to respond:

> **The LMC [Labor Management Collaborative, see Innovative and Promising Practices section] gave us that opportunity to delve a little deeper. … "You said it was negative interpersonal reactions. What are negative interpersonal reactions?"**

> **We did have students … use Post-its to remain anonymous [and] identify things that they were most concerned about, [and] how they felt it impacted them. Students also expressed a desire for more structure, for making sure that students who acted up faced consequences.**

Discussions about hard topics are taking place, and schools are also signaling concern for the whole child (See sections on School Culture and Social-Emotional Learning). Indeed, sensitive issues are more easily and comprehensively explored in a context where people have established a degree of trust and caring for the whole person. For that reason, culturally affirming practices should not be taken out of context. **Rosa's** chronic absenteeism rate of 8.1% in 2011–22 is half the state average.

Sara M. Gilmore Academy does not have many Black students or multilingual learners (under 3% for both), yet all student groups have been outperforming expectations:
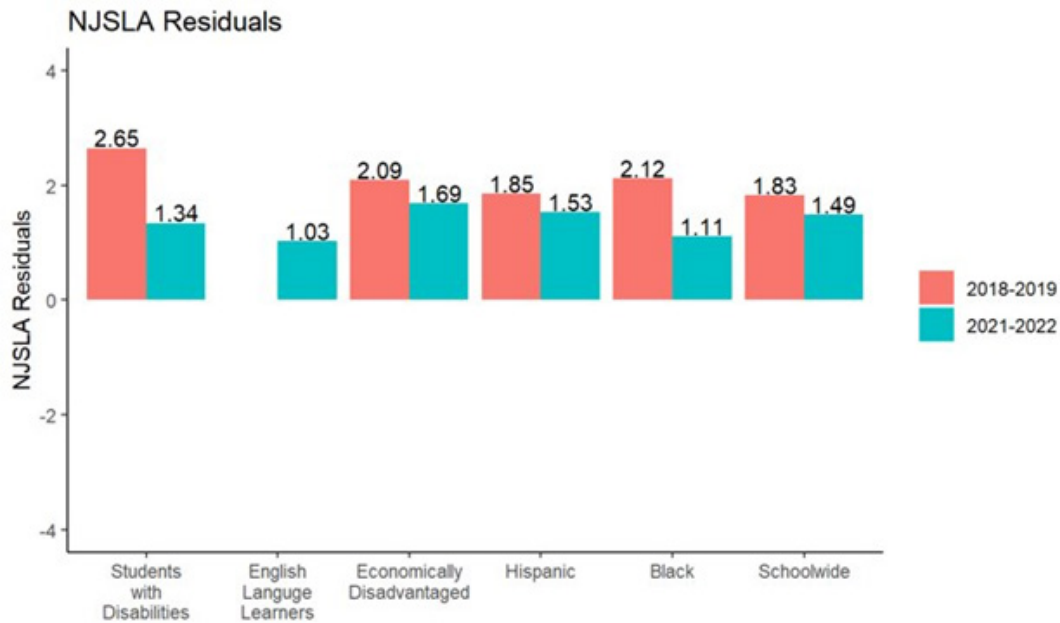
Data Source: Author's Calculation Based on NJDOE School Performance Reports and NCES Data.

This school places an emphasis on superior teaching and culturally relevant instruction as part of its "secret sauce." But, as noted in the case study below, it is also very conscious about relationship building. *Improbable Scholars*, David Kirp's book on Union City, Gilmore's district, **stresses the centrality of "abrazos," a culture of caring, that builds on the culture of their students** (Kirp, 2015).

More than nine in 10 students at Atlantic City's **Chelsea Heights School** are low-income students and more than half (56%) are multilingual learners. It has been identified nationally as a Model PLC School, a New Jersey Governor's School of Excellence, a New Jersey Benchmark School,

and a National New Jersey Title I Distinguished School. Its residuals place it in the top 10% of elementary and middle schools, with English language learners, low-income students, and Hispanic students, all performing better than comparable schools:
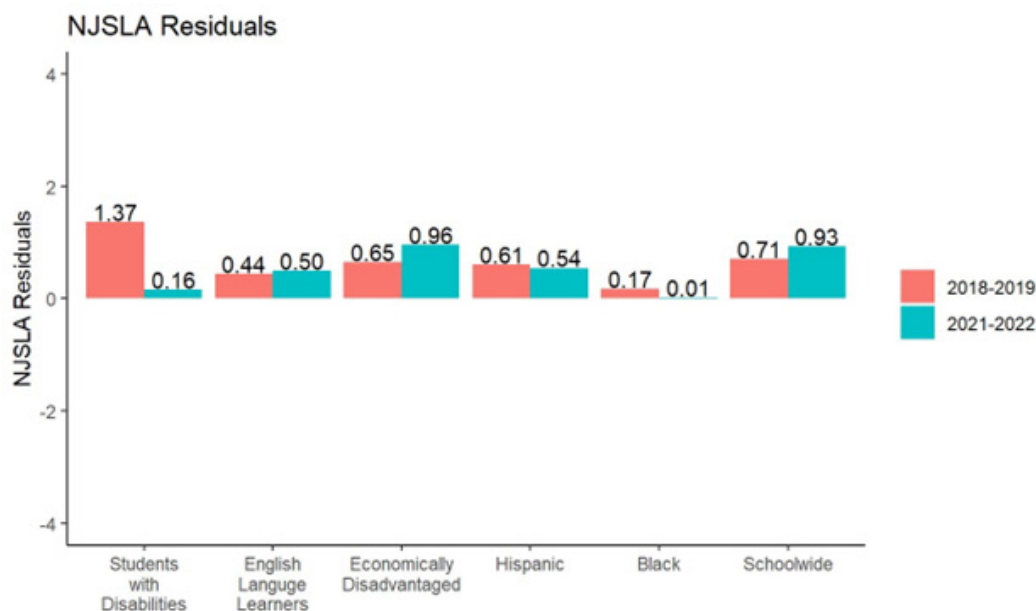
NJSLA Residuals

Data Source: Author's Calculation Based on NJDOE School Performance Reports and NCES Data.

The Black population here is very small but the apparent impact on students with disabilities and low-income status is quite high. The absenteeism rate is average, but the recognition of the quality of their PLCs suggests a high level of teacher collaboration. Additionally, their social-emotional learning (SEL) coordinator focuses on students, staff, and parents. When asked why **Reeds Road** had lower chronic absenteeism than state averages for multiple groups, Principal Kevin Lightcap pointed to relationships:

> **I think that goes back to the relationship thing. ... I used to have kids tell me they didn't want to be absent. They didn't know what they were going to miss, what funny thing I was going to do, what was going to happen in the classroom ... but also then the positive interaction with adults, with peers. There's a lot more stability here.**

Some schools showing breadth and depth of impact across historically underserved student groups are places where social differences are openly, even aggressively discussed. Some of them may also be places where social bonds are particularly strong. The most supportive kinds of environments may be places where both SEL and social/cultural affirmation are done at a high level, telling students it is safe to bring their whole selves to school. Anticipating the discussion

below about successful environments for students with disabilities, some of the most broadly successful environments are highly inclusive, both in the relationships that pull children in and in the atmospheres where issues that concern kids can be included in the issues of importance to the whole school.

The dominant mode of organizing instruction in Promising Practices schools entails tiered instruction, which is collaborative, data-based, and centered around flexible small groups. The thinking of the best teachers gets applied to the problems of the weakest students, and teaching decisions are more likely based on actual data rather than stereotypes about a child or the group to which the child belongs. These models create more opportunity for children to learn from one another in addition to learning from the teacher and from stronger curricula. As students are shuffled from group to group or teacher to teacher, no one group gets stigmatized as the "*dummy group*." If privatized teaching magnifies the effect of low expectations, collaborative teaching should minimize it. Whether or not eliminating achievement gaps is a conscious goal, well-implemented tiered instructional systems should mitigate some of the practices that lead to underperformance, including lack of access to the best teachers and materials, low-expectation environments, and stigmatizing labels. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that tiered instructional systems may produce the largest impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Institutionalizing Higher Expectations

Directly or indirectly, every section of this report has reflected the crucial importance of higher expectations for good practice. They play a particularly important role in the education of children from historically marginalized groups precisely because expectations have typically been lower for them, with cascading negative effects on teacher deployment and pedagogical practice. The problem of low expectations for such students is clearly among the central—some would say, is the central—challenge of bringing school improvement to scale (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016; Payne & Anderson, 2023; Paynek, 2008; Gershhohn & Holt, 2015; Gregory et al., 2012).

Even at the risk of redundancy, it makes sense in this section to underscore the importance of high expectations by looking at some of the ways schools signal confidence in the capacity of these students. Promising Practices schools are doing that work in many ways—ensuring access to rigorous coursework, building higher expectations into teacher evaluations, closely tracking the performance of students by group, organizing teacher teams that ensure historically underserved groups are exposed to higher standards, delivering instruction in ways that students will not find stigmatizing, even changing the way children are seated in classrooms.

At the high school level, many schools in New Jersey, including many in this sample, have been trying to broaden access to advanced or college-level courses, experiences which can have multiple long-term advantages for young people (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). By way of context, the city of Passaic has made access to advanced courses a point of emphasis (Roegman, 2020). The

system was 97.5% economically disadvantaged in 2022–23, with 35% English language learners, but it had a higher proportion of students taking at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course than the state average (41% vs. 35%). Across the state, 22% of Hispanic students are taking one or more such courses; in Passaic, it is almost twice that, at 42%. Statewide, Black students are taking such courses at a rate of 19%; in Passaic, that rate is 33%. The statewide average for English language learners is 9%; it's 28% in Passaic. Only for students with disabilities were the numbers close: 5.4% statewide and 4.6% for Passaic (NJDOE, 2023).

Indeed, with targeted efforts, an overwhelmingly low-income system has been able to catch up and surpass the state on an important measure of access (Roegman, 2020).

One of the strongest schools in this sample, in terms of breadth and depth of impact on historically underserved students, developed in the context of a sustained district-wide effort to push beyond typical expectations. In 2021–22, **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy** had positive NJSLA residuals: 0.64 of a standard deviation for English learners, 0.98 of a standard deviation for Black students, and 1.13 of a standard deviation for Hispanic students. This is a school where leadership is not afraid to challenge teachers, even on touchy subjects like unconscious bias. John Mellody, the principal, shared his approach:

> **I trust teachers. I trust their judgment. When teachers join the team, there's private conversation: "Welcome, here is my philosophy. Here's your role in this." I'm very forthright in saying, "You have 2 years. First year, you're learning class ... management and curriculum. Second year, hit the ground running. Let's see what you got as far as cultural competency." It's, again, it's observations. I rely on admin for their input. Then it's private conversations of holding people accountable and saying, "I've noticed every year you're complaining ... this year only about John. John is a young Black boy. Last year you complained about Paul. Paul was a young Black boy. Year before, you complained about Michael; Michael's a young Black boy. I'm seeing a pattern here. I don't know if you recognize it, but I do. And I think you need to be aware of that because I don't want to see that pattern next year." It's very direct. Those are private conversations that are not written up, are not formalized, unless it happens again after that.**

Implicit bias is an idea that would be difficult if not impossible to discuss in many schools. By putting it on the table, **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy** sends a strong message about the standards to which it holds teachers.

College Achieve schools send similarly strong messages about expectations to both teachers and students via their requirement that students enroll in three advanced placement courses over the course of their high school careers. The school is heavily invested in seeing that students are successful in these courses. For example, teachers serve as graders on the test for Educational Testing Services (ETS), which gives them an intimate knowledge of exam contents. The schools also encourage students to take courses like AP U.S History, which has a higher pass rate.

Chelsea Heights School uses NJSLA scores to determine classroom seating, placing a high-scoring child next to a low-scoring one. This is very different from the old patterns of segregating students by ability and is a clear signal that low-scoring children are expected to move up. Chelsea Heights also uses multiple consultants to support its data analysis.

An earlier section of this report noted **Ocean City High School**'s policy of making teacher impact on "at-risk" student populations—including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and low-income students—a factor in teacher evaluation (see section on School Culture). Its evaluation system weights student achievement more heavily than many other systems and holds individual teachers to account for their department's outcomes. This sends an unmistakable message that teachers are expected to support all students at a high level.

Although data can be used to reinforce low expectations, the data practices described earlier are clearly aimed at raising expectations and helping teachers act on them, sometimes through close tracking of subgroup performance as a part of organizing instruction. One administrator addresses strategies for minimizing achievement gaps:

> **To address potential achievement gaps, early on we closely monitored the progress of specific student subgroups, such as African American students and students with disabilities. We conducted monthly meetings to analyze data, particularly in ELA and math, and discuss strategies for improvement. These meetings included assigning responsibilities and planning follow-up actions. Furthermore, we observed classrooms to ensure learning targets were clearly displayed, students were actively engaged in meaningful tasks, and both students and teachers were monitoring progress. This framework guided our classroom observations and helped us stay focused on our overall goals while specifically tracking the progress of the identified subgroups.** — Alyce Anderson, director of curriculum and instruction

Dana Reilly, the reading and basic skills teacher at **Whitman Elementary School**, stressed that higher expectations are about so much more than just test scores:

> **I'm taking things that are very black and white, like a test, and then bringing the bigger picture to them. … It's not just about you passing this vocabulary test and learning these words. Let's really talk about what these words mean in the real world. "When are you going to use them? When can you add them to your writing? Yes, we want you to be successful on a standardized test, but what tools will make you a better learner in general, or how will you apply this better?" Even with the most struggling readers that I work with, I still am expecting that of them, not just to be so focused on passing a test question. We have to always be thinking broader, "How is this helping you become a better reader … a better writer in general? [I'm] always reminding them of what is authentic in itself. It's just not so black and white of scores and assessments, [but] "What is this making me better at?"**

One of the critiques of SEL has always been that worrying so much about kids' feelings would interfere with holding them to high academic standards. Educators at **Hoover Elementary**, which has the highest percentage of economically challenged children in their district, are aware of the problem and determined that it won't happen on their watch:

> **We've never empathized to the level of making it an excuse. We've always expected our students to achieve. And really, the mindset is key. I think, when I look at the people at this table and all of the teachers, no one has ever allowed there to be an excuse made based on somebody's socioeconomic status or [that] we have a very large immigrant population. ... [We believe] socioeconomic status or immigrant status or race or ethnicity ... are not limitations, but they're things to be celebrated. We highlight those [things] in our kids to make sure that they're achieving.**
> – William Fleming, principal

By **creating policies that provide access to rigorous courses, evaluate and challenge teachers, and encourage the use of data**, these schools are making higher expectations institutional priorities, not something driven by individual attitudes.

Including the Students with Disabilities

In 2021–22, students with disabilities constituted 18% of New Jersey's student body. They trail other students in virtually every measure of academic achievement. Educators in this study remembered when these students were kept out of sight, out of mind, when even some parents were ashamed to have their children labeled "slow," or when special education classes could be found in the school's basement right next to the boiler room. Educators at Promising Practices schools are clearly proud of how far their schools have come.

The most successful Promising Practices schools have moved to a point where those students are so mixed into the life of the school that no one knows who they are or which teachers are specifically assigned to them. These schools have brought higher expectations to bear on teachers and students, and integrated high quality resources (e.g., strong curriculum, strategic staffing and grouping, and co-teaching). These educators shared stories of "inclusion"—in every sense of that word.

Arlene Ringwood, a first-grade teacher at **Harrison Elementary School** (where students with disabilities performed better than expected on the NJSLA during 2018–19 and 2021–22), explained how she sets high expectations for students with disabilities:

> **Know[ing] [a student's] disability and know[ing] the strategies that work with that disability. ... You have to know your babies, and then you have [to have] the same expectations [as you do for the general education students]. You just modify how [the students with IEPs are] going to give that answer. So one might draw, one**

might write a sentence, one might write a paragraph. ... Some [students with IEPs] are way more capable of producing academic work than some of our gen ed kids, depending on what their disability is.

Melissa Nevarez, principal at **Harrison Elementary School**, echoed similar sentiments when she explained that her special education teachers do "*not dumb anything down*" for the students on their caseloads. Instead, those teachers hold their students to "*the same expectation*" with the "*same learning materials ... at a different pace.*" Educators at **Walter Hill Middle School** institute high expectations for students with IEPs by "*hold[ing] the kids very accountable*" for their learning. Jessie Clifford, a sixth-grade ELA teacher, explained that some students with IEPs and 504s expect their teachers to "*be easygoing.*" However, Clifford believes "*one of the things that enables [her teaching team] to be so successful*" is the fact that they "*don't just shrug things off*" when it comes to their students with IEPs:

Especially for special ed, I feel like sometimes they come in and they think—well expect—"They're going to be easygoing on us. We have IEPs, we have 504s." We modify things, we do allow extra time, but we don't just shrug things off, and we still hold them just as accountable as everybody else. I feel like they do well with that.

Another **Walter Hill** teacher added that special educators implement each student's IEP with fidelity, "*but also [provide] scaffolding throughout the year*" to encourage a sense of autonomy in the classroom. This educator believes that opportunities to "*ask for help more often on their own*" prepare their students with IEPs for success in a larger academic setting.

We are true to their IEPs, applying all the modifications and accommodations, but also [provide] scaffolding throughout the year so that [the students] are accountable. So this time of year, we want them to be more responsible and using their resources on their own and asking for help more often on their own. So giving them that responsibility to carry over into ... a much bigger school, a bigger classroom size.

Inclusion Model

For some time now, plans for better supporting special education students have centered on inclusion. Promising Practices schools see it as absolutely essential to their mission. Laura Gore, the principal at **Radix Elementary School**, shared that "*mesh[ing] both general education and special education students*" is "*a great support for [the] students because they're able to see growth; at times, they're able to rise to the occasion. The glass ceiling is essentially removed and learning from peer to peer, curricular interaction may be exactly what a student needs to be successful.*" Gregory Lasher, superintendent of the Lower Cape May Regional School District, commended his staff at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School** for their "*focus on inclusion.*" He explained, "*We work to push students*

into the most rigorous settings they can handle." Educators at **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School** and **Central School** specifically discussed efforts to expand inclusion programming across grade levels in their buildings. Angelica Velez, a kindergarten inclusion teacher, shared that the inclusion model "*helps*" her "*advocate*" for students in the classroom:

> **I started at Barlow 11 years ago, and when I first started, we didn't really have inclusion classrooms. It was more like ... the students had to get pulled out and go for some time to the resource room, and then come back. Once [Principal] Aponte got transferred here to Barlow, which was [a] great job by the district, he brought ... an inclusion classroom [to] every single grade level. So all of our monolingual classrooms are inclusion classrooms. We have a special education teacher in every single grade, plus our two language and/or learning disabilities classrooms. So I think that has helped a lot in making sure that we are able to advocate and help all of our students and [give] them a place ... to be able to thrive in the classroom instead of them being pulled out for additional support.**

Central School, where students with disabilities performed better than expected on the NJSLA in 2018–19 and 2021–22, implements a full inclusion program for special education. Principal Shannon Simkus noted that "*full inclusion is something [she and her staff have] worked really hard*" to achieve. When Principal Simkus first arrived at Central, she observed special education "*teachers pushing into fourth grade, third grade, first grade ... running from level to level, grade to grade, trying to plan. They didn't know the kids well.*" Having previously worked in a district that "*had full inclusion,*" Principal Simkus understood the substantial benefits that adopting a comprehensive inclusion model could bring to Central School:

> **We really tried to make that transition to full inclusion, or at least [make] sure that one teacher is assigned to a grade level. I think we fully got there just a few years ago, but that really has an impact ... on the learning environment for students because teachers can become experts in the curriculum.**

An educator at **Central School** agreed that her colleagues "*value and prioritize inclusion of the students.*" She believes a "*true inclusion*" model allows students with IEPs to learn alongside their general education peers as often as possible:

> **Our children [with IEPs] are with their peers in their neighborhood school. I know in my district where I live, children are shipped out and bussed out to other schools. So like, "That school is the LD [Learning Disability] school" or "That school is the ED [Emotional Disturbance] school," but [at Central School], it's all kinds of learners, [and] we have them in class. If they need a specialized program or ... support, then they can have a pullout reading group or math group. But then otherwise, they're with their peers; they go to specials with them, they're in clubs with them. And I think that that is true inclusion, and we do a good job of that.**

After more than a decade of advocacy in support of placing students in the least restrictive environment feasible for them, some degree of inclusion (or mainstreaming) is available to

most students with disabilities—but research on impact is mixed. One review reports "*ample*" correlational research, finding that students with disabilities have better results if they spend more time in general education classrooms; however, it is not clear how much of that benefit is a result of those classrooms, as opposed to selection effects, concluding that "*research has yielded only weak evidence that inclusion confers benefits on students with disabilities*" (Gilmour, 2018). There is some concern that, in the rush to get everybody into the general education experience, students with the greatest needs may get lost. If, as seems to be the case, schools with effective inclusion programs are those with unusually strong and positive cultures, it would not be surprising if they were able to implement a difficult project at a higher level than most places. The prevalence of tiered supports should mean that students with the greatest needs don't get lost. These schools may be demonstrating what "*true*" inclusion can look like.

Effective co-teaching is the heart of the inclusion model for special education in many Promising Practices schools. Several educators described the co-teaching relationships between general education and special education teachers at their schools as "*seamless.*" These co-teaching pairs develop strong relationships by sharing instructional responsibilities and engaging in thoughtful co-planning (including **Harrison Elementary School**, **Reeds Road Elementary School**, **North Plainfield Middle School**, **Walter Hill Middle School**, **Birches Elementary School**, **Cedar Creek Elementary School**, **Rosa International Middle School**, and **Central School**).

While such efforts might yield a harmonious work environment for staff, Promising Practices educators feel the true prize of effective co-teaching is a classroom culture wherein "*the kids feel comfortable [and] they don't feel embarrassed, but they're also held to higher standards.*" Jessie Clifford, a sixth-grade ELA in-class resource (ICR) teacher at **Walter Hill School,** described her inclusion classroom in a way that rings true for many Promising Practices educators across the sample: "*If you walk into our classroom, you will not be able to identify who the general ed teacher is and who the special ed teacher is.*" Some schools said even the students did not always know which teacher was which.

Principal Renie Egan of **Middle Road School** shared that educators at her school implement the "*team teaching approach*" to co-teaching, where both the general education and special education teachers deliver instruction to the whole class at the same time. Other co-teaching models, such as parallel teaching and alternative teaching, involve splitting the class to deliver separate lessons. Principal Egan asserted that, as a result of team teaching, the students see both teachers "*equally.*"

Several Promising Practices educators echoed similar sentiments regarding a **shared responsibility for all students in inclusion classrooms.** The team-teaching approach at **Middle Road School** lends itself to the notion of shared responsibility for all students, given that "*when [the special education teacher] is in the room, she's the teacher; it doesn't matter. She's not just working with her special ed kids.*" Alicia Bakely, a fourth-grade teacher at **Reeds Road Elementary School**,

indicated that effective co-teaching "*has to be where [the general education teacher and the special education teacher] share all of the kids.*" Bakely went on to explain that, while the special education teacher is ultimately responsible for "*writing the IEP ... discussing what is effective and what [instructional strategies] will work for that student*" is a shared task.

Co-teaching pairs at **North Plainfield Middle School** are well-positioned to communicate their expectations to students in the beginning of the school year. Jordan Gelber, a special education and social studies teacher, noted that **all of the educators in this school deliver "*the same program*" during the first 3 days of school** (see "Consistency Committee" in the Innovations section). This practice, Gelber explained, "*really helps show ... the relationship between the two teachers*" in co-taught classes:

> It's not, "Oh, that's the main teacher, that's the assistant." That's an idea that a lot of us try to make sure is not there. It's, "Here's a lesson that's provided; it's not mine, it's not my co-teacher's, it's from the school." [My co-teacher and I] work on it together. We deliver it together [during] those 3 days ... I'm on one side of the board, my co-teacher [is] on the other, and **we're delivering [the lessons] together so [the students] know that we are a package deal.**"

Gianna Ferguson, a fourth-grade special education teacher at **Central School**, also described the collaborative nature and sense of shared responsibility within her co-teaching relationships. She and her co-teaching partner have received positive parent feedback as a result of their efforts:

> Every single teacher that I've ever worked with here has made it feel like it's our classroom. It's never been, "Those are your students, these are mine." It has always been "our," it has always been "we" ... I work with all students, whether they have an IEP or not. **All of the expectations are the same, really, for all of the students.** It helps to really make special education students not feel like they're less than or below other students. I go to all of the conferences and meet with the parents, and I can't tell you how many parents asked us this year, "So why are there two teachers? This is incredible! Every classroom should have this!" And no one put two and two together [about] why [it's happening] in this room, which is ultimately what you want.

Skills-based Grouping for All in the Inclusion Setting

Another way that educators in Promising Practices schools elevate the shared responsibility of co-teaching is implementing skills-based small group instruction. Relying on data to form small groups allows educators to focus on "*who needs that [extra] support*" rather than "*just pulling the students [who] have IEPs.*" Many educators asserted that their **small group instruction often**

consists of cohorts of students with and without IEPs benefiting from the same support. Jordan Gelber, special education and social studies teacher at **North Plainfield Middle School,** shared insight about the way he and his co-teacher use data to organize their instructional "*stations*":

> **Just because a kid has an IEP doesn't mean they're going to be in the [group with the most support]. ... We look at data, but we also do an in-class diagnostic as well. [During the] first few weeks [of school]. ... we pull each kid aside [and] we do a reading diagnostic and ... a writing diagnostic, which is for our student growth objectives. But then we compare [those scores] across everyone in the class and we do a lot of station work and we call them their reading groups. [The students] don't know it's ability-based ... but in each class, the blue group is the low group and that's not, "Oh, these are the special ed kids." ... [It's] not just, okay, well if this is a special ed inclusion classroom, the special ed kids are going to be the low ones.**

Gelber went on to explain that consulting data from skills-based assessments allows him to "*pinpoint*" which students will likely benefit from additional scaffolding:

> **I think the inclusion classroom allows for more of [looking at students as a whole]. ... I can really pinpoint who really needs that support, not just because they're special ed. In my period four this year, I have four special ed students in that class, but the blue group only has one of them, because those kids—even though, yes, they have an IEP—[are] higher level than some of the other kids [without IEPs] based on reading fluency, written expression, different things like that.**

Arlene Ringwood, a first-grade teacher at **Harrison Elementary School**, shared that special education teachers and paraprofessionals who work in her classroom also pull small groups based on skill and ability levels rather than classification:

> **We have our special [education] teachers that push in the classrooms, that will take our lesson plans and modify them down to make their accommodations, as well as paras that push in to work with these students. They're also [fully] part of the class. They're always in the class. There is not, "You're over here in this little corner." No. Even if my special [education] teacher pulls some of her special babies, she's also going to pull two or three of my lower performing academic students [who do not have IEPs] in that group as well. It's now a group of six and they're working together on the same lesson. The students may be going over the lesson at a slower pace or they might have less problems, more visuals ... but the expectation is still the same.**

Alicia Bakely of **Reeds Road Elementary School** noted that providing skill-based extra support for all students, rather than "*just pulling the students [that] have IEPs,*" is a deviation from "*old school*" methodology. She believes this inclusionary approach ensures that students with IEPs "*feel less different [and less] stigmatized because they're part of a whole class.*"

Yes, [students with IEPs are] pulled to the back if they need extra help, but I also have other students [without IEPs] that are pulled. You're not just pulling ... the students [who] have IEPs. If I see two or three [general education] students that are struggling with long division, [my co-teacher will] pop them in [her small group] and she'll work with them as well. Old school it was like, "You and you, you're back to the back table," and it's like, especially [in] fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade, they start to know what's going on. Again, just bringing that sense that we're all in this together.

Strategic Scheduling

Several Promising Practices schools cited strategic scheduling as a key factor in the success of their special education programs. One approach shared by Robert Lake, principal of **North Plainfield Middle School**, involves aligning all of the special education teachers "*in their content areas.*" This strategy facilitates continuity in the professional relationships that special education teachers develop through co-teaching and co-planning with their content-specific colleagues:

> **We haven't reinvented the wheel by any means ... as far as programs go. We do our best to align our special education teachers in their specific content areas. I'll use [one special education teacher as] an example. He is also a certified social studies teacher. He does resource room social studies for Grade 7 and in-class support social studies for Grade 7, and that is it. He works with two social studies teachers, and it's been that way for 3 years now. That's a sample of what we do with our special education programming so that those teachers are working together, they're aligned in their planning, in their work, their delivery, and everything that they do. We don't just randomly pick and choose and throw people around. It is all very purposeful.**

The inclusion class schedule at **Navesink Elementary School** is designed so that in-class support teachers can "*loop*" with the students on their caseload from one grade to the next. Principal Jesse Herbert believes this approach helps special education teachers develop "*a good understanding of the kids that they're servicing*":

> **We have one in-class support section in every grade-level band. And something that I did uniquely was ... manipulate the schedule to make sure that those in-class support teachers loop with those kids throughout their continuum here. One thing I found frustrating when I came here was [that] I'd sit through these IEP meetings with the parents and the teachers, and I'd have two separate in-class support teachers, one for math, one for reading, and I'm like, we got to fix this. We want these teachers to really have a good understanding of the kids that they're servicing.**

The team structure at **Rosa International Middle School** is described as being "*really positive for middle school students*" with specific benefits for students with disabilities. Allison McCartney, the assistant principal, explained the team structure on a whole-school level:

> **The students are organized into teams of about 100 students, ideally... and [there are] four core teachers and a special education teacher on each team. Those teachers are really tasked with supporting their team of students, and it helps them focus in on those students and really build those relationships.**

JudithAnn Albuquerque, a seventh-grade math teacher and former special education teacher at **Navesink Elementary School**, continued on to describe how the team structure can foster a supportive learning environment for students with disabilities. "*In the best setting,*" students with IEPs in inclusion classes see "*the same special education teacher in all of the classes in which they receive support*":

> **In the best setting, our ICR students are all on the same team and have the same core group of teachers. When everything is able to be scheduled correctly, they're followed by the same special education teacher in the classes in which they receive support. It gives the ICR teacher the opportunity to see them in multiple classes at multiple times of the day and provide support in different academic areas. It gives students access to that one person who's with them, who knows all of the pieces of their day, when it works well and when our schedules align.**

Furthermore, the team structure lends itself to forging strong collegial relationships, especially when "*the same special ed teacher can stay with the same team for more than a year,*" which makes "*the co-teaching a little more seamless,*" according to Albuquerque.

> **It doesn't always happen. It's not a perfect world. I mean, nothing in education is perfect. We recognize that. But when we're able to keep our special education teacher on the same team, or at least at the same grade level, it lets them build up their repertoire and their expertise in that area. So that has been really valuable for our students.**

Promoting Equity through Access to Curriculum

Educators at **Walter Hill Middle School** and **Princeton Charter School** emphasized the importance of exposing students with IEPs to complex, grade-level texts. Lori Savas, a district ELA and social studies instructional coach who works at **Walter Hill Middle School**, explained that her special education teachers "*take the time to use [their] resources, modify where needed, [and] pull in where needed [so that] all of [the] students are being exposed to complex texts.*" According to the NJDOE's Vision for English Language Arts Education in New Jersey, "*throughout their kindergarten through Grade 12 experience, students will learn to persist in reading complex texts, establishing lifelong habits to read voluntarily for pleasure, for further education, for information on public policy, and for*

advancement in the workplace." As such, educators in some Promising Practices schools described efforts to ensure that students with IEPs are well-supported to achieve this vision. Jessie Clifford, a sixth-grade ELA teacher at **Walter Hill**, described the process that her colleague who teaches pull-out resource undergoes to help her students access complex texts:

> **She takes a lot of the things that we do in gen ed and modifies [them] for her students' needs. She might go [at a] slower pace, but they're all reading the same stories, the same novels, [they're doing the] same writing assignments, and she just modifies [them] usually for pacing and maybe the amount of material that she gives. But she does everything that we do [in the general education setting].**

Lisa Eckstrom, the assistant head of school for Grades 5–8 at **Princeton Charter School**, feels that engaging students in the ELA resource room with grade-level texts has social implications as well:

> **One of the things I like about our special ed is ... students don't read every whole class novel, but they read some of them. So [if] people are talking about *The Outsiders* at lunchtime, the kids in special ed are also talking about it. So I think that is sort of one of those things where we are pushing everybody up because we believe it's an important thing to be able to participate in those discussions. Even if you have significant learning disabilities, there are certain texts that you can be part of.**

Staff at **Rosa International Middle School** and **College Achieve Central Charter School** also discussed efforts to increase access to various curricula for students with IEPs. In 2016, educators at **Rosa** instituted a program to enroll qualifying students with disabilities in algebra, one of the district's high school math courses. Principal George Guy explained that "*traditionally,*" students with IEPs have not been able to take eighth-grade algebra because the class occurs at the same time as eighth-grade pre-algebra, which requires the support of a special education teacher.

In order to mitigate the need for another special education teacher in the eighth-grade algebra class, to support students with IEPs, the child study team "*takes co-teaching out of the IEP*" and, instead, increases professional support for the algebra teacher. This professional support is provided as a "*consultative model,*" in which the eighth-grade pre-algebra special education teacher meets with the algebra teacher once a week to add accommodations to "*any major formative assessments, summative assessments, [and] ... homework, if that's necessary.*" Principal Guy added that the teachers "*meet*" and "*talk everyday*" within the consultative model to ensure the students with IEPs are well-supported.

As noted above, all students at **College Achieve Central Charter School** take a minimum of three AP classes. That includes students with IEPs. College Achieve Central staff engage in strategic scheduling and provide a high level of support to students in order to achieve this goal (see the Robust Postsecondary Pathways Anchored by High Expectations section). During this discussion, Executive Director Corri Tate Ravare remarked:

Other schools say, "To be in an AP class, you have to have this GPA." To me, they're gatekeeping in a way. Whereas we are like, okay, set the high standard for all students and then create the environment where every single student can be successful.

Conclusion

The data in this study make it clear that the schools in the Promising Practices sample have a stronger positive impact on ELA and math scores of historically vulnerable student groups than is typical across the state. Within the Promising Practices sample, many schools are working hard to provide their students with mirrors that let them see themselves reflected in their studies, and windows that introduce them to worlds beyond their social experience. A subset of the schools having the strongest impact on multiple groups prioritizes strong cultural affirmation of traditional outgroups and on-going grappling with tough questions and social issues. It also seems likely that the schools with very strong social-emotional learning have positive impacts across groups.

It should be noted that the data do not provide insights into supports for the multiply marginalized—students who fit into more than one of the categories of interest in this study— an important issue that should be addressed in future discussions. The same can be said for understanding how effective supports vary for students with different kinds of disabilities.

Overall, the good news here is that some schools are finding ways to reverse longstanding and widespread patterns of underperformance among some of the state's most vulnerable children. The other side of that coin would be the concerns raised that few places have a handle on how to do the kinds of professional development required to support the most impactful practices. The kind of school culture that makes children feel a part of a welcoming whole can make some adults uncomfortable, or even attacked. If the state can find a way to resolve that fundamental tension, far more children and teachers could commit themselves more deeply to the educational process.

Section 5: Case Studies of High Leverage Strategies

This section combines the second section's focus on discrete practices with the third section's broader thematic approach. Each case study highlights various strategic approaches to important educational goals. Some were found at only one school, others at several, but all of them seem to offer approaches that study respondents considered impactful and potentially replicable.

5.1 Engaging Families and Communities

"No one functions in isolation; not the parents, [not the] staff, not the admin, not the kid. No one." – Erika Gambuti, teacher, North Plainfield Middle School

Staff at several Promising Practices schools expressed the notion that partnerships with caretakers and the broader community are vital to their work. No fewer than five of those discussions addressed the role of "trust" in schools' relationships with families (**Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School**, **Hamburg School**, **Middle Road School**, **Oak Tree Road Elementary School**, and **Navesink Elementary School**). Fostering a "*strong bond between the parents and teachers*," in the words of a teacher from **Princeton Charter School**, requires intentional effort and consistent home-school communication. Paramount to achieving this goal is a "*team-oriented approach, and it's not just the staff; it's also the parents and the community. But the focus has to be on the education and the wellbeing of the kids*," according to an administrator at Hamburg School.

Promising Practices schools implement a range of strategies to promote family and community engagement, from utilizing creative methods of communication to launching targeted programs. Some of these efforts are academic, while others are designed to provide a "safe" environment for families and community members to bond. Educators and administrators across the sample addressed

the idea of community engagement in several ways. While many staff members referred to the nexus of relationships within the school—administrators, staff, students, and families—as their 'community,' this section also outlines efforts to reach stakeholders who are not directly involved in the day-to-day of schooling, such as **Lincoln Elementary**'s fifth-grade students' yearly collaborations with food drives in their local town.

Family Literacy Night and Family Math Night

Educators at many Promising Practices schools expressed the value of engaging parents in English Language Arts (ELA) and math discussions. One of the methods by which schools are facilitating these conversations is by hosting Family Literacy Night and Family Math Night events. During these gatherings, families participate in academic activities that offer exposure to the curriculum while building community.

H & M Potter School hosts a Family Literacy Night three times per school year. Students who are enrolled in the basic skills instruction and multilingual learner (ML) programs are invited to attend. H & M Potter staff also host a quarterly Family Math Night that is organized by grade level. Any family can attend Family Math Night, as it is a district-level initiative offered in each of the schools. Thomas Ettari, third-grade basic skills interventionist, described a typical event:

> **We'll have maybe 80 kids with their families in here doing math activities, rotating around, teachers there to facilitate. We do have the ML teacher there ... administration's there as well. It's just something to bring the community together and that's a huge component of success, I feel, having the community involvement with the parents and/or grandparents [who] come in with their child and really see the school and see the activities and work together.**

Family Math Nights at **Robert Mascenik School** provide "*fun,*" hands-on experiences for attendees. Most of the games are created by educators, but some seventh- and eighth-grade teachers offer their students extra credit for designing the games. Vice Principal Gabriela Iannacone shared about the impact of this program:

> **We feed the community at night, we open our doors to the school, and the parents get to play with their children here. They learn the best ways ... using [the] mathematical strategies we teach them here, that they can support [students] at home as well.**

Family Literacy Night at **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School** involves a teacher-selected theme and craft each year. Educators are encouraged to work with their grade-level colleagues to plan engaging activities for families. Charlene Pappas, a second-grade teacher, shared that both the teachers and students get "*excited*" for Family Literacy Night:

> **This year we did a glow theme and it was so cool to see everyone's perspective. Second grade may have done a book and a craft under a black light, but then I know fourth grade got to do centers based on different parts of literacy and reading. ... It all just came together so nicely.**

During the 2023–24 school year, **Upper Greenwood Lake** families were invited to attend a district Family Math Night, during which the director of the district's new math curriculum taught families about the training and background that teachers would receive. One educator described:

> **All the elementary schools also came together in the beginning of the year. Family Math Night ... exposed parents who were willing to come to all the materials, like the hands-on manipulatives [and books that would be used in the new math curriculum] ... Then, from Conquer Math, the district brought in the speaker Nancy Schultz, and she kind of explained the training and background the teachers were getting. When the parents saw [their child's schoolwork] on their end, it wasn't so foreign and there was more of a connect and understanding. I think it needs to be a support between the school and community.**

According to Principal Jared Fowler, using Title 1 funds to implement these programs at **Upper Greenwood Lake** helps educators engage with economically disadvantaged families, in particular. He feels these events are "*very helpful*" and yield "*a pretty good turnout,*" noting that "*there's no stigma to [attending]*" despite the source of funding.

Latino Family Literacy Project

Staff at two Promising Practices schools discussed their implementation of the Latino Family Literacy Project, a program that serves the families of Spanish-speaking multilingual learners. The project was recognized by the White House in 2015 as a Bright Spot in Excellence for Hispanic Education for offering "*a culturally relevant and bilingual approach to parent involvement for English-language learners, and promotes early learning, English-language development, home family reading routines, and college awareness.*"

At **Reeds Road Elementary School**, Barbara Somers, the ML teacher, led the Latino Family Literacy Project on Thursday nights for 10 weeks. While the Latino Family Literacy curriculum provides learning activities to promote English language acquisition, Somers included some of her own ML games, like Old Maid, into the lesson plans, which made for a "*great time*":

> **Every week, [the families] had a vocabulary worksheet. They had a "seek and find" for vocabulary. They had, maybe, a verb worksheet. Every week, their books would have other worksheets that would go along with [the lesson] that they would take home. We built a binder. They built a binder. I built it in Spanish, and they built it in English. I promised I would do the Spanish side if they would do the English side. It was only fair.**

Somers explained that the meetings always started with a meal to promote a "*family*" atmosphere. The district provided childcare so the students could socialize with their peers while the parents engaged in the literacy-based learning activity with Somers and another Spanish-speaking teacher. Somers explained:

> **We ate first together. I always feel that having a meal together is a wonderful way to socialize. We'd have a meal together, [the] whole family, and then we'd let the children break off into an area [to] play games. We'd give them games to play or give them crafts to do ... with one another to build their little community, while the parents would come into another room with [me] and another [Spanish] speaking teacher. We had a bilingual program that allowed the parents [of bilingual elementary readers] to take books home once a week. And it brought such joy to my heart to watch these parents read. They would all raise their hand ... they would try so hard to read in English and to read in Spanish.**

Parents who participated in the Latino Family Literacy Project at **Reeds Road** told Somers that the program fostered "*great family bonding*" and "*conversation with other people and other families.*" One parent shared that he carries a Latino Family Literacy Project worksheet in his checkbook to "*know how to spell when [he] writes the numbers on [his] checks.*" Another parent said she studies her 'to be' verb worksheet "*every night.*" After recounting these stories, Somers described her involvement in the program as "*very rewarding.*"

Staff at **Robert Morris School** adopted the Latino Family Literacy Project to "*meet the needs*" of the school's growing Hispanic population. Josephine El-Reheb, assistant principal and ML supervisor, explained that the Latino Family Literacy Project is part of a larger effort to "*listen to parents during ML parent advisory committee meetings, and try to bring the communities together.*" The Project facilitates conversations with parents to "*help them understand some of the standards and themes and things that their students will be learning in school, and to teach them how to help their students.*"

Inviting Parents into the Classroom

A handful of Promising Practices schools make an effort to "*welcome*" caretakers into the classroom during the school day. Educators at **Lincoln Elementary School** shared that their Parents as Reading Partners program is particularly impactful for engaging families. A couple of times throughout the year, students spend the first 20 minutes of the school day reading or participating in a learning activity with their caretaker(s). According to Kaitlyn Sheehan, a kindergarten teacher, the sessions can take many forms:

> **This year, we had one session where the kids were playing math games. ... My kids were reading their "how-to" writing books to their families. We've also just done Parents Reading Partners, where [students] come in and they read the books**

in their book bag to their families. It's just a nice opportunity for the parents to see specific things that we're learning in the classroom ... and to take part in their child's learning.

The school experiences a "*really high turnout*" rate for this program. Not only do families benefit from seeing the classroom, but students also benefit from a confidence boost upon sharing their successes with their caretakers. Sheehan shared:

A big part of it too [is] just to boost the kids' confidence. [The students are] so excited when they get to show what they've been working on and what they've been learning and all of their successes ... with their families. Or sometimes it's parents, grandparents, aunt and uncle. You kind of get a little bit of everybody's family joining in. And we have a really high turnout rate. I think I had 20 out of 21 families come today. So the parents are excited about coming in and very eager to support their children.

Cara Bakos, an academic interventionist at **Lincoln Elementary School**, shared that this practice is "*accessible to everyone*" because parents "*really just have to interact with [their] child.*" Therefore, a family member does not need to feel comfortable speaking in front of the entire classroom in order to participate.

Asking parents to come into their children's classroom to be a guest reader, or to share their profession or expertise on a topic, is something many parents are excited to do; however, it does require a certain level of comfort speaking in front of a group. Inviting families into the classroom as reading partners or to play a math game makes coming into the classroom accessible to almost everyone. Whether you're not confident speaking in front of the group, or English is not your first language, there is a level of comfort in these activities. Parents can choose to just interact with their own child or with a small group. Whereas, if you're invited to be the birthday reader or the holiday reader, you're kind of on a stage. During Parents as Reading Partners, or Parents as Math Partners, you will see parents scattered throughout the classroom, some with their kids on their laps, just genuinely engaging in their children's learning. Everybody can feel welcome in that type of environment; no parent or guardian is put on the spot, and anything that they're willing to offer in that little 20 minutes of their child's school day is okay, acceptable, and appreciated. The smiles on the students' faces prove it.

Staff at **Lincoln** feel the key to replicating the Parents as Reading Partners program is early communication with families. Alyna Jacobs, the district director of elementary education, recommends communicating all of the dates far in advance, starting with a notice at Back to School Night. Sheehan reiterated this point:

We set all of our dates for the year in September and we send those dates out to families, and then we give them periodic reminders and we tell them, we know

everyone is working and has busy lives. If you can't make it to all of the sessions, that's okay. But it just gives them several opportunities to come in and support their children.

Supporting Parents with Homework

Staff at some Promising Practices schools shared methods for engaging families in their students' homework routines. A kindergarten teacher at **School 28** noted the "*greatest*" strategy for homing in on students' reading skills and number sense is to get parents "*involved*" and keep them "*informed*." This educator sends a weekly message to families that includes literacy and math topics like "*links to the stories [their students are] reading, the site words [they're learning], the letters [they're] focusing on, and the number topic [they're] doing.*" The messages often include YouTube videos of mini-lessons so that parents who "*struggle with the language*" are equipped to support their learners.

Staff at **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy** and **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School** also discussed efforts to prepare families for supporting their learners, particularly with math assignments. A technology teacher at **Passaic Gifted and Talented Academy** makes math tutorial videos for the students that she also shares with families to help them "*understand how to do the math homework with their children.*" Likewise, educators at **Upper Greenwood Lake** send students home with a "*helper page*" from their Eureka Math Squared curriculum for each homework assignment. This resource provides a brief summary of the homework topic "*so it's not as foreign of a concept*" to families while they support their students.

Tara Witt, an interventionist at **Middle Road School**, communicates with families "*every night*" through written notes on students' homework assignments. She gleans insights about assignments that "*gave [students] trouble*" from these regular communications:

> **I pull out a group of four kids at a time for reading, who need help. They have a homework sheet, and the parents have to write me a note every night about how they do [with the homework] Monday through Thursday. I have [students] read the same book at home [we're reading in class] to their parents. The parents have to write how they did, what maybe gave them trouble. So we are always communicating back and forth.**

Family Fun Events

Many Promising Practices schools organize events less focused on academics and more focused on creating safe environments for families and students to have fun and share meaningful connections. For example, **Frederic W. Cook Elementary School** hosts an event called Family Fun Day at the end of each school year. Students and families are invited to share a barbecue-style meal, participate in team-building activities, and compete in good-natured grade-level competitions.

Similarly, **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School** hosts an annual community-building event for families at the beginning of the school year. Each September, staff organize a movie night for families. While this is intended to be a fun event, Principal Wilson Aponte explained that Barlow staff use this opportunity to ensure families are connected for communication through platforms like ClassDojo and Genesis (see below for more on use of technology for parent communication). Angelica Velez, kindergarten teacher, explained:

> **At the beginning of the year, it's very tricky, but every September we host a movie night for the parents. We have all the parents come in and different teachers stay behind, and we kind of help the parents get set up with ClassDojo [and] help them get set up with their Genesis account, to make sure that they can apply for the lunches ... [and] know how to check their report cards. It's a night where we kind of just take the time, and most of the time it's on a one-on-one basis, where we're walking these parents through how to use the different technology and systems that we use in the school to be able to communicate with them.**

Angelica Velez, a kindergarten inclusion teacher, feels that this movie night event is vital for getting families connected to the school. Parent contact is a "*key*" part of her work throughout the academic year.

During the winter concert, staff at **Dewitt D. Barlow** organize an opportunity for family portraits. They install a seasonal backdrop and invite families to spend 20 minutes taking pictures with their phones. Principal Aponte shared that this event "*keeps parents involved and interested in showing up [at the school] again*":

> **During our winter concert this year, we had our winter pictures, which is something that our parents really enjoy, and we were doing that since before the pandemic. "[For] winter pictures, we offer backgrounds for the parents to come in and take Christmas pictures ... and then we have crafts. Sometimes we offer cookies, hot cocoa, we offer a movie, and with their own phone or cameras, they have 20 minutes to take as many pictures as they want with [the] background. And the parents love it. They come in in their matching PJs, they're all decked out. So that's always something that really keeps our parents involved and interested in showing up [at the school] again.**

One educator at **Marie Durand Elementary School** shared that "*parent involvement has been a huge focus of [theirs] for the past 5–10 years, and [their] parent involvement rates at events are second to none.*" Staff at this school host at least one parent involvement activity per month. An educator noted that the administration used to prioritize academic parent engagement events. However, they "*changed philosophies*" to better suit the goal of building trust with families:

> **We changed philosophies. We went from having academic nights to [making] it fun, because our primary goal is [that] we want our parents to send their kids to school and trust us when they're here and support us. When I first started here 20 years ago, we'd have homework night and academic night. They were well attended. Well, that philosophy sort of changed over the years about parental involvement. And so we changed gears. Most of our parental involvement activities, we might weave in a few things, but they are more about creating this family culture where the parents feel comfortable coming here, they want their kids to be here.**

Another staff member described these events as "*altruistically driven*" with an aim of offering "*experiences that might be difficult for [families] to get otherwise.*" Events that feature former basketball and football players turned motivational speakers "*always draw a crowd*" at **Marie Durand**:

> **Typically, those athletes ... have more of a story that our students could connect to. So perhaps they were bullied, or they didn't necessarily have a chance young in life, and then they had this person that influenced them. We really try hard to [feature] situations our students [and parents] can connect to.**

In addition to hosting motivational speakers, **Marie Durand** staff organize holiday programs in December, a Fall Festival, and a Spring Fling, meant to serve as fun seasonal events. An administrator underscored the fact that these events are "*completely manned by staff,*" which enhances the impact that these events have on the greater community:

> **Our staff works the entire event. ... The Fall Festival probably brings in 600–700 people every time we have it. It's completely manned by staff. ... I know that's hard to quantify in a study like this, but that's sort of how we got to where we [are] ... The entire staff, the parent population, the students, that's something that allows us to focus in on attendance.**

Use of Technology

Promising Practices schools regularly use technology to reach families and facilitate community engagement. As previously mentioned, **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School** uses events like its yearly movie night to educate parents on the types of programs and apps teachers utilize. Angelica Velez, kindergarten inclusion teacher, shared:

> **At the beginning of the year ... we host a movie night for the parents where we have all the parents come in and different teachers stay behind, and we kind of help the parents get set up with ClassDojo [and] help them get set up with their Genesis account, to make sure that they can apply for the lunch, [and] that they know how to check their report cards.**

ClassDojo is a smartphone application that allows educators to communicate with parents through text-message-like alerts, photos, and a shared calendar. Velez is an advocate for using ClassDojo to effectively communicate with parents. She explained that the application's embedded translation feature—which is capable of producing more than 35 languages—is particularly helpful for families.

> **ClassDojo is amazing. I love it because [the application] makes it extremely easy for [teachers] to be able to communicate with the parents. ClassDojo has the translation aspect too, where even if I'm writing the message for the whole class in English, my Spanish-speaking parents are able just to translate it into Spanish. It allows [teachers] to communicate with the whole school. In my class, I know I have 100% of my parents signed up on Class Dojo. I am constantly communicating with them through ClassDojo. ... A lot of the times, the [school] flyers we post on ClassDojo, either on the specific classrooms or in the school's ClassDojo page. [ClassDojo] gives us easier access to be able to send mass information out to the parents. It makes it very easy to talk to them on a daily basis because, at least for me, it goes straight to my phone and I get messages from 6 a.m. saying, "This kid is not showing up," to 8 p.m. [saying], "Did you send any homework?" It's constant communication with them.**

When asked about the feedback Velez received from parents about ClassDojo, she replied, "*It has been all positive.*" Other Promising Practices schools mentioned using ClassDojo to communicate with parents, some of which include **Marie Durand Elementary School**, **Middle Road Elementary**, **Passaic Gifted and Talented Middle School**, and **Robert Mascenik Elementary School**. Programs and applications such as Remind, Google Classroom, and Clever were cited as serving similar purposes in various schools across the sample (see appendix for a list of programs).

In addition to these programs, **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School** uses a program called Learning Alliances to offer caretakers on-demand virtual presentations about relevant topics, like cyberbullying, led by experts who speak various languages. Most **Dewitt D. Barlow** families access the presentations in either English or Spanish. Learning Alliances is impactful for parents and guardians because the topics are meaningful, and the presenters are experts in their field(s).

Parent Involvement and Communication Beyond Technology

Beyond the use of technology to communicate with parents, many Promising Practices schools utilize other tools such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), committees, home surveys, and analog communication.

One way in which schools are keeping parents and communities looped into their activities and student progress is through a strong PTA. Schools like **H & M Potter School** celebrate Student of the Month at PTA meetings, which encourages parents to attend—they see their children celebrated firsthand instead of those celebrations occurring exclusively during school hours. These meetings are further incentivized by rewarding the individual class that has the most attending parents. This establishes a goal-driven desire for students to empower the PTA through encouraging their parents' attendance.

Rosa International Middle School utilizes the Labor Management Collaborative (LMC) in conjunction with Rutgers University to hire a wide array of educational stakeholders, such as educational representatives of educational assistants and teachers, to "*create a culture and climate that can support access in ... areas of historically underserved students.*" Rosa created a survey that was distributed to not only students but also to parents and staff, to help develop ideas about how these stakeholders work together to create the culture present within their school. Ultimately, **Rosa International** utilizes family and community input to create the very culture present in their school.

Central School considers parent input when placing students in classes for the following year. Teachers send letters several months prior to the end of the school year—near the end of March— asking parents to describe their children; as learners, people, and a collection of other ways that may inform the teachers' and administrators' decisions in placing their students. Parent responses are then incorporated into the placement process for students in the following school year. While it isn't required for parents to submit responses to these letters, they are encouraged to, as it results in parents ultimately having a hand in their students' education, Principal Shannon Simkus explained:

> **We have all of this knowledge about kids, but who knows a kid better than their parents and caregivers? I think every parent in this room would say that they know their kid best, but we also know them best as learners in classrooms. So, when you look at those two lenses and look at them very holistically, I think you can place students in classes where they will thrive.**

Teachers consider parents' responses, along with the social-emotional learning of a student and their academics, in this "arduous process" of placing students.

Similarly, **Ocean City High School** uses both letters and parent organizations to include parents in their children's education. Ocean City High still sends out more traditional analog letters and newsletters to parents for regular communication, which they have found to be successful.

Principal Wendy O'Neal described how she also offers a voice to parents in the form of the principal-parent advisory committee:

> **I have a monthly principal-parent advisory committee meeting, and I invite every parent every month. There are some standing individuals who will want to be super involved, and we have those subcommittee meetings every month. In the same way we give students a voice, there's a realm for parent voice as well.**

Roosevelt School in the Lodi Public School District reported a schoolwide chronic absenteeism rate of 15.2%, more than two points below the statewide average for grades Pre-K–Grade 5 at 17.8%, during the 2021–22 school year. **During the 2022–23 school year, the schoolwide chronic absenteeism rate was reduced to 11%. During the 2023–24 school year, the rate dropped to just over 5%.** Superintendent Frank D'Amico and Principal Jack Lipari cited the recent adoption of a "*tiered system of support for attendance … available on the state Department of Education website.*" D'Amico explained that the district had been "*doing a lot [of these practices] informally*" prior to adopting this approach, "*but [he and his staff] wanted to make the process consistent across the district.*"

This NJDOE guidance on attendance comes from the Office of Student Support Services. The webpage, titled Conditions for Learning: Promoting Regular School Attendance and Addressing Chronic Absenteeism, provides educators with resources like a "*data-based decision making for addressing chronic absenteeism*" guide, a beginning-of-the-school-year letter template, and "*Attendance Awareness*" flyers for families and caregivers. A team of Lodi district colleagues— including D'Amico, administrators from the middle and high schools, and Principal Lipari— devised a plan to clarify the district's attendance expectations and goals based on the NJDOE recommendations.

Lipari noted that staff at **Roosevelt School** customize the "*opening attendance letter*" template to educate families about the potential impacts of chronic absenteeism on their children's education. The letter also includes a "*schoolwide tip sheet*" for supporting regular student attendance:

> **An opening attendance letter … goes out to all the parents about chronic absenteeism, with some bullet points and stats. [For example,] children chronically absent in kindergarten are much less likely to read at grade level. There's a lot of hyperlinks [included to] educate and engage students about the impact of attendance. School-wide tip sheets [provide advice like] … [getting] the child's backpack and clothes ready the night before … so we're not scrambling out the door. And then it goes into some deeper strategies.**

This letter helps facilitate what Lipari believes to be "*the most important thing with regards to attendance,*" which is **communicating clear expectations to both families and staff**. More specifically, families must understand their responsibility to properly report their students' absences, and staff must follow the protocol to ensure that each student absence is thoroughly documented. This way, if a pattern of unverified absences occurs in any case, families and staff members are equipped to address it.

Community Involvement and Fundraising

Staff at **Navesink Elementary School** facilitate partnerships with community organizations to fundraise and foster a deeper home-school connection with families. Administrators allow parents to host Cub Scout and Girl Scout events in their classrooms, and offer their library as a space to host plays and raffles. Principal Jess Herbert explained:

> **We have a huge Cub Scout and Girl Scout component too, which is really nice. They meet here every Tuesday night within the building. They're run by parents, which is great. They do camping trips together ... It all revolves back to people coming to this area to live, to be part of a small community. And that's what they're getting in the sense they are part of the greater Middletown as a whole, but they identify as Navensinkers. They are Navensinkers. I think that's what they take pride in more than anything else. If you gave them the opportunity to say, "Oh, you guys [are] part of Middletown?" [They'd say] "No, our kids go to Navesink."**

Navesink Elementary School staff also nurture collaborative partnerships with community organizations such as the fire and police departments, food banks, and county libraries, to host events for families: "T*hey do a parents' night out, they do a trivia night, which again was hosted over at the library, which was great. And then ... last year they did a danceathon. It wasn't super successful. This year they're going to try a color run, which will be our first time doing that.*" These activities serve as a constructive way, beyond academics, to get parents and students into the school building. Navesink educators highlight how these connections to the physical school environment encourage parents to feel comfortable volunteering for school-related events.

Educators at **Lincoln Elementary School** support their students in intentional community engagement on an annual basis. For example, fifth-grade students regularly participate in activities that "*instill a sense of community service*" among the group. Principal Adam Geher described how those students typically work together to organize and coordinate item collection for a local food drive:

> **Our fifth graders have a tradition of doing a few projects a year. So, we collect food. A lot of schools do food drives, which is great. What separates us a little bit [is that] our fifth graders are in charge of organizing it. They decorate the boxes; they write anonymous letters to families. They pack the food and load it onto a truck, which is then delivered to the local food pantry. The pantry distributes the food to families in the community for their Thanksgiving meals. They work with veterans in town and family members. Once a year, we invite veterans to our school and we put on a whole big production for them. The whole school and all the parents are invited. It's a really nice event.**

5.2 Arts Integration Across the Curriculum

Several Promising Practices schools prioritize incorporating the arts into their visions of teaching and learning. These schools demonstrate varying approaches to integrating the arts into academic curricula; one school, in particular, offers arts instruction as a "*break*" from academics.

Rieck Avenue Elementary School institutes a schoolwide program rooted in project-based learning to integrate art with academics. This program is fused with the school's ELA curriculum to include large art projects in the units of study. For example, when **Rieck Avenue** fourth graders read a book about children getting lost in a rainforest, their wing of the school building is transformed into a rainforest through arts and crafts. Furthermore, the science department aligns its curriculum with the ELA department by teaching those students about a rainforest's ecosystem. The rest of the school participates in the program by creating "*passports*" that enable them to "*travel*" to the fourth-grade wing to enjoy the artwork and artifacts. District-level administrators often stop by **Rieck Avenue** to admire the work of staff and students in these culminating displays of art and academics.

The art teacher at **Harrison Elementary School** collaborates with math and ELA teachers to create art projects and teaching aids. For example, the art teacher directs an annual musical parody by changing the lyrics of a popular song to motivate students for state testing. Arlene Ringwood, a first grade teacher, shared that the art teacher can be "*commissioned*" to create art projects for teachers' classrooms:

> **Our art teacher has just put out there that if [you] want something for your classroom [you can have it]. ... We commissioned her to create a photo [board] ... where you put your head in a little pumpkin. ... If you need something made for your classroom or if you're doing a project or you want a banner, she'll do that for you too.**

Sara M. Gilmore Academy integrates the arts into teaching and learning by implementing features of Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Students enrolled at Sara Gilmore choose their classes, many of which include a level of arts integration in line with the Multiple Intelligence Arts Domains (MIADs). According to Assistant Superintendent Geri Perez:

> **[The MIADs program offers] classes that are structured by the staff. The staff takes their interest, their passion, and they develop coursework ... aligned to the [New Jersey Student Learning] Standards ... but they're completely different from what goes on in the rest of the day. ... These are more arts-focused classes [that incorporate] partnerships with professional agencies.**

In contrast to these various models for arts integration, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation** relies on its extensive before- and after-school arts programs to afford students a "*mental break*" from academics. Staff at Orange Preparatory Academy see strong participation in their visual and performing arts programs. Visual Arts Teacher Laura Politi shared:

> **I think the biggest impact I have on the children [is that] the relationships are different in the arts than the academic classes. [They have] the freedom to express themselves ... they can be themselves and take a break from academics. Our VPA (visual and performing arts) team really tries to make the lessons relatable to the students across our whole department. And I think it's a fun experience for them to come to us.**

The school also offers popular fine and performing arts after-school clubs, some of which involve regular trips to theaters in New York and New Jersey. **Orange Preparatory Academy** educators believe the school's culture of trust and acceptance encourages its students to take a deep interest in the arts. In other words, the students feel comfortable being themselves at school, which reflects in their art and their creative processes. These arts-focused opportunities ultimately grant students the freedom to attend their classes prepared to learn with less stress and a more open mind.

5.3 Developing Student Work Habits and Leadership

Several Promising Practices schools stressed the importance of **nurturing students' autonomy by systematically developing their abilities to actively participate in and assess their own learning.** Some schools accomplish this through the explicit modeling of language to foster a growth mindset and critical self-efficacy. Others engage students in exercises to analyze their own diagnostic data and develop personalized learning goals. Several Promising Practices schools implement off-the-shelf programs designed to further student leadership and executive functioning, while others have developed their own practices.

Central School utilizes pre-existing programs to further their students' abilities to set and achieve their own academic goals. The school promotes the student development of executive functioning skills by implementing a program called SMARTS, which stands for Strategies, Motivation, Awareness, Resilience, Talents, and Success. The Research Institute for Learning and Development, "a 501(c)3 non-profit organization committed to changing the lives of children, adolescents, and young adults with learning differences and executive function challenges," created this program in 2007 and has vastly expanded its reach throughout the 2010s and in response to the challenges of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the SMARTS website, this program provides educators with instructional videos, PowerPoint presentations, and handouts that teach students how to understand their strengths and challenges using executive functioning strategies such as goal setting, cognitive flexibility, memorization, organizing and prioritizing, and self-checking and monitoring. **Central School**'s principal introduced this program to the school, and it is utilized throughout the district.

The superintendent of the **Elizabeth Public School District** has assisted with the implementation of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program and the mayor of the city has attended presentations made by the AVID team. AVID is a college readiness program designed

to strengthen student performance and create a culture of positive work habits and cooperation. According to AVID, enrollment criteria are dependent on a district's own expectations, but it is usually based on attendance, satisfactory standardized test scores, and satisfactory GPA. The AVID program has inspired students to create math games and other fun educational aids for their fellow students as a form of extra credit. The school also has AVID student tutors who support their peers in after-school and weekend programs.

Harrison Elementary School develops student work habits through a schoolwide initiative to encourage positive choices within the classroom. Teachers in each grade level display posters that remind students to make good decisions. First-grade teacher Arlene Ringwood offered an example:

> **I have [a poster] that states, "I will not interfere with someone else's learning." And we use that, so, if someone starts making a noise or tapping a pencil, the child will turn and say, "You're interfering with my learning." ... And then they go back to their [own] thing. So, they're actually using the vocabulary that we're giving them.**

Other prompts include, "*I will help someone when I can*" and "*I celebrate mistakes.*" Harrison educators explained that the "*I statement*" format helps students understand that they have agency over their own learning. Educators believe this practice ultimately motivates students to seek help when needed and offer help to others when possible.

Richard M. Teitelman Middle School takes a similarly systematic approach to developing critical thinking skills among students. In math, this may look like providing a "*seven-step word problem checklist*" to help students develop routines around mathematical thinking. If students finish their work early, the math teacher directs students to continue learning on IXL, an interactive online platform. Students complete the diagnostic assessment and refer back to their results to gain awareness of their skill-based strengths and gaps. The teacher believes this practice boosts students' confidence and encourages the development of strong work habits.

Walter Hill Middle School also emphasizes building independence in students by modeling the skills needed to manage one's own learning. At the beginning of the year, teachers focus on developing their students' organizational skills to instill work habits that focus on taking responsibility for their learning. **Walter Hill** educators implement instructional modeling practices that are more prevalent in younger grades, but can be impactful for middle school students as well, according to Emily Gretz, a sixth-grade ELA teacher:

> **I think one of the biggest things coming from kindergarten, there's so much modeling that happens. I think that's something that I really brought into sixth grade as well, just modeling how to level up their writing. There [are] days where we will [write] a piece together as a class and just really break it down and show how we can [improve], whether it's word choice or sentence structure or just expanding our explanations. When you're striving to make learners become**

more independent, I think that modeling piece and that small group piece can sometimes fade away—but keeping [those practices] at this grade level, I think, is really important to continuing their growth.

Gretz also provides students with reference or cheat sheets, which have examples of better transition words and other resources students can use to "*level up*" their writing skills. Students get into the habit of utilizing these resources because the teacher has modeled how to properly look at their own work and look for ways to improve it.

Robert Morris School emphasizes student leadership through its own home-grown student (and teacher) recognition program. Teachers and administrators assign students positions or "*jobs*" that are rotated weekly. These positions cover specific responsibilities in the classroom and school community, such as delivering the morning announcements. Other designations like "*Leaders of the Week*" and "*Leaders of the Month*" are voted on by the teachers. Teachers recognize the "*Leaders of the Week*" with a picture posted on the door of their classroom and a certificate. Students can also be recognized by the principal for exceptional work in their leadership jobs through the "*Principal's Leader of the Month.*" Morris educators believe that these recognitions help students develop a sense of responsibility. Students are also provided with "*Leadership Binders*" in which they set and track their progress in academic and other goals. As one example, a student was able to set a goal to declassify herself from eligibility for special education services before she moved on to high school, which she eventually succeeded in doing.

5.4 Flexible Periods for Individualized Supports and Enrichment

In 2023, the NJDOE recommended that schools plan to accommodate a flexible period for intervention, acceleration, and enrichment instruction. The NJDOE's Maximizing Schedules to Support Learning Acceleration guidance provides local education agencies with sample schedules and research-based strategies for adopting a flexible period. The Promising Practices Project research team learned that flexible periods have been part of the lexicon in some New Jersey public schools since before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, William Fleming, the principal at **Hoover Elementary Schoo**l, told the team that the concept of a flexible period is often reduced to "*a really big catchphrase.*" In other words, **simply carving out time in the schedule does not constitute a best practice; thoughtful and sometimes creative implementation is key.** The research team visited several schools, including **Hoover Elementary School**, where a flexible period serves as an integral strategy for promoting student achievement.

A flexible period can take many forms depending on the grade level. Several Promising Practices schools **utilize their flexible periods to tailor instruction to students' unique needs, generally by providing students with Response to Intervention (RTI) support.** Some schools additionally offer extracurricular clubs and activities during their flexible periods. In all cases, these **flexible periods are designed to provide each student with the individualized support and enrichment they need to be successful** while minimizing disruption to regularly scheduled classroom learning.

Elementary School

A popular name for these flexible periods at the elementary school level is "*Whatever I Need,*" abbreviated as WIN. At **Hoover Elementary School**, students engage in a 40-minute WIN period every day. WIN time is staggered for each grade level, so staff who serve the whole school, like the reading specialist, can provide pull-out support to students at each grade level. Students with IEPs work with a special education teacher during the WIN period. Fleming believes this scheduling structure plays a big role in the success of WIN periods at his school. By scheduling all of the specialists to serve one grade level at a time, "*a grade level of 40 kids with two teachers [becomes] 40 kids with six or seven teachers.*"

Students who do not receive pull-out support still engage in rigorous skills practice during WIN time at **Hoover Elementary School**. Since the general education teachers have fewer students in their rooms after pull-out instruction begins, those educators can deliver individualized, data-driven small group instruction to the remaining students. In fact, Fleming has specific expectations for the cycle of instruction in these small groups during WIN periods:

> **Day one [of a WIN period cycle] is the introduction of the concept, because it's only 40 minutes. Then day two is the reinforcement, [and] days three and four are the practice of [the skill]. Day five is the formative assessment of [the skill]. ... On day six, the teachers meet and collaborate and look at their data, and then they reassess and redo their groups. And then the 6-day cycle starts again.**

Fleming believes that WIN time played a role in the school's NJSLA score growth, when comparing his students' results from before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the WIN period was adopted at **Hoover Elementary School** before the pandemic, Fleming and his staff continued to improve the program's implementation during post-pandemic instruction. Fleming reported that the teachers at his school make "*magic*" with the resources he provides for WIN time. Nonetheless, careful staff scheduling is also a vital component of executing this practice at a high level:

> **[WIN time] was something that we started pre-pandemic, but really kind of finessed as we got better post-pandemic. But again, I view teachers as instructional leaders. ... You just have to build the platforms for them to be able to do it. And then once you do that and provide the resources, they're going to turn it into magic and come up with even better things. ... It's important to know how much planning it takes because the coordination of all those schedules and getting the people in place is really important. And then teachers make the magic happen with flexibility.**

Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School offers a 45-minute flexible period like WIN known as the Individualized Learning Pathway (ILP). All qualifying students receive pull-out small group instruction during this time, whether it be "*response to intervention in reading,*" support for English

language learners, or gifted and talented instruction. Students who remain in the classroom continue to develop "*their connection with the standards*" by practicing skills through online learning programs. Principal Charles Bartlett feels the ILP period ensures that students do not forgo core instruction to receive remediation or enrichment. Bartlett shared:

> **We don't run into that situation where we're stealing time from the core instructional minutes to give children supplemented work, because it's the double-edged sword of ... giving them work that they need because they're not ready for what they're doing, but then we're pulling them away from what they're supposed to be doing.**

At **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**, classroom teachers organize their ILP period in stations. Students travel to different parts of the room to engage in an activity that either reteaches a skill or provides enrichment. Kelly Sogluizzo, a fifth-grade teacher, performs real-time assessments of her students while implementing activities during her ILP period:

> **How I set [my ILP period] up is by utilizing rotating centers. So, I'll have a small group where I'm working on those specific reteaching skills, or sometimes it's an enrichment skill, where I feel like these kids really need to be pushed. They can do it. Let's challenge them. I'll do that for 15 minutes and then I'll switch. Then they can work on that skill, or maybe something else they need practice with, [via] an interactive activity.**

Andrea Della Fave, vice principal at **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School**, explained to the research team that a hallmark of the ILP period is flexible grouping. Students are routinely assessed and receive interventions as needed. **This approach to intervention prevents students from being indefinitely placed on a basic skills track.** Likewise, students who qualify for the gifted and talented program are not discounted from intervention support simply because they qualify for enrichment in one or more academic areas. Fave shared:

> **The whole idea [of ILP] is that it's not the old-fashioned concept of basic skills where a child is labeled and they're in basic skills forever. The idea of ILP is, even within the classroom, teachers are working within fluid flexible groups, and a teacher is working with a group on this particular standard or skill this week or this day. Once the child masters that skill, that group dissipates and then maybe they start working on something else. If a child does have to leave the room for an RTI intervention, they may not necessarily be in that RTI intervention forever. They may be coming back into the classroom. It's not like 10 years ago or 20 years ago when if you were a basic skills child, you were always a basic skills child. I think that has also changed—the concept of, "It's okay, there is a trajectory of learning, and every child knows where they are, and they move." It's okay because you can be a gifted and talented kid, but still have ... weaknesses in some of the most basic mathematical operations, [and] you have some kids that are not**

> **gifted and talented [but] they're like whizzes at math facts. There's strength and weaknesses in every child. I think a system like this gives every kid the ability to shine in certain areas and then the ability to work on other things at certain times.**

To maximize the ILP period for students and teachers alike, the administrative team at **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School** made staffing changes. Instruction during the ILP period focuses heavily on math and language arts. The vice principal told the research team that asking those teachers who lead instruction during the ILP time to also prepare science lessons "*would not really be fair.*" So, students at **Joseph F. Brandt Elementary School** and other elementary schools in the Hoboken Public School District receive science instruction from a designated science teacher rather than their homeroom teacher. Fave added:

> **That ILP period created another layer of staffing that sometimes people don't understand. Because what it did was it shifted science into a special—not a special like art or gym—but it required us to hire teachers independently. Science is no longer taught in the regular classroom. We made that decision to keep the homeroom teachers teaching ILP, and we made the determination that science would be taught as a special. And so, what ends up happening is, it's a whole department, basically, at an elementary level that you don't see in other elementary districts. If you think about it, we're talking about … 15 additional teachers across the district that are in the budget to support ILP. But it's well worth it.**

Educators at **Good Intent Elementary School** have instituted a similar daily flexible period called Enrichment and Intervention (ENI) for the last "*5-plus years.*" As the name suggests, this period is designed to suit every student's needs—whether they might benefit from an enrichment opportunity or intervention support. The instructional staff in each grade level host ENI in their classrooms at the same time during the school day; students are encouraged to seek out support from their various teachers as needed. A teacher shared that this setup helps his students practice taking initiative to seek out "*any makeup work… tests,*" or additional academic support in preparation for middle school.

Likewise, another educator explained that her students do not view the need to seek extra help "*as a punishment, because they want to continue learning.*" Part of what supports this mindset is that students do not need to sacrifice other instructional time to benefit from additional support. She shared:

> **I don't think that they view it as a punishment, because they want to continue learning. And I think it's the [comfort] level that we all [have]. So fourth grade, our ENI periods are at the end of the day, so we're all doing the same thing. So they don't feel like they're missing out from their homeroom because we're all doing the same thing. And they'll say, "I have to go back to science and social studies to finish my lesson." So they'll come to me, get what they need to get done, and then**

they might have to go to another [ENI] teacher to finish their work. So they don't look at it as a punishment. They look at it as, "Hey, you know what? I didn't finish. I need some extra help. I'm going to go here." And they take that initiative to do it because they're not missing out on anything.

Middle School

At the middle school level, flexible periods look a bit different. Older students tend to appreciate having autonomy over their daily schedule. Consequently, some of the middle schools the research team visited designate their flexible periods for both academic support and arts integration. Peter Daly, the principal at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, referred to this flexible time, called "*Six Period*," as a "*catchall*" for meeting students' needs.

We have a lot of different things going on here [during] Six Period. ... If they are identified as students in need of support [in math or language arts], we make sure that those students ... have their [content-area] teacher as their period six support teacher. That is ... a Title I-funded class for those teachers who are providing support for those students who are in need of it. But during period six, that's [also] our band period. Students may have band, they're going to go to period six, but they also might ... go to art. They might just have a study hall, for lack of a better word. ... We have students who aren't in need of that support, but they play six sports and they're in AAU and Teitelman sports and dance and all these things. And they can use that time to get some help from their other teachers if they need it. ... It's a catchall. We use it for a lot of fun stuff. So, we had a Taylor Swift party [and] we are having a March Madness party this Thursday.

Teitelman educators determine student placements into academic support for Six Period by math and language arts grades, test scores, and teacher recommendations. Charlsie Dehorsey, a seventh-grade math teacher, explained how she organizes this time in her classroom:

One day a week is focused on the basic skills that they should have learned back in elementary school. The other four days [are] primarily making sure that they understand the materials that we're learning right now. It might be homework help, it might be working on an old assignment, redoing an assignment; it's all individual.

When asked about whether the administrators face pushback from students who are scheduled into academic support for Six Period, Superintendent Gregory Lasher, who is a former principal of **Richard M. Teitelman**, remarked that he has witnessed "*a few tears*" from students in the past. Ultimately, Six Period is designed to bolster student success, and academic support is a feature of that plan for many students. However, Lasher and his staff understand that these decisions are not

always as simple as placing a student in math support when they crave the opportunity to play in the band. Lasher explained that implementing Six Period is a matter of considering students' needs—the whole child—on an individual basis.

> **One size doesn't fit all when it comes to kids. You try and do what's best for the kid. And yes, sometimes there are a few tears because they don't want to do what's best for them. We know what's best. ... We also appreciate the importance of kids wanting to be involved in extracurricular activities after school. So, we try and get as much time on the books [during the school day] as we can so that they can do other things [after school]. We also, now listen, I mean we're all governed by the test score monster sometimes, but we also appreciate the need for social-emotional development. That kid [who] needs extra math help kind of needs to be in band a little bit, too, because that completes the whole kid. It really is a "Monty Hall 'Let's Make a Deal'" with every kid, and it's complicated at best.**

Dawn Dolinsky, an eighth-grade language arts teacher, has noticed that the opportunity to place out of an academic support during Six Period can motivate learners to apply themselves to their coursework. She discussed negotiating with her students; if they "*prove*" that they are proficient in her content, they can participate in an extracurricular activity for a few days per week during Six Period instead of attending her intervention lesson:

> **I think sometimes that's very motivational for the students, as well, because they don't want to do supplemental work. A lot of them would be perfectly content to stay exactly where they are and continue to move along at that pace; [however,] they have something else that they'd like to do and it ends up being a split time situation, [I'll say,] "Prove to me that you understand this. Let's make some strides in the academics and then ... two days a week you get to go to band and enjoy the thing that you love." I think, very often, that motivates the Title 1 kids and the Six Period kids to really work harder in that time to earn ... the ability to follow their passions.**

Reading-Fleming Intermediate School takes a comparable approach to their flexible period, known as Excel. Like Six Period at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School**, all supplemental instruction at Reading-Fleming Intermediate School takes place during the Excel period. Principal Anthony DeMarco gave the research team a sense of how Excel unfolds each day:

> **The premise behind Excel ... is that no student gets pulled out of core instruction for anything that's enrichment or any supplemental instruction. So, things that happen during the Excel block are band, chorus, orchestra, any instrumental music lessons, [and] any IEP-driven supports that are in kids' IEPs. Kids who don't have an IEP but receive support, like what [the intervention teacher] does [also receive support during the Excel block]. [Qualifying students will] go see their speech**

> teacher. Gifted and talented is its own class that happens during [Excel] time.
>
> And we follow a 6-day cycle, so on any given day, a kid could be doing a different thing during Excel. All our blocks are 63 or 64 minutes. What we did formally this year is we took that Excel block and cut it in half. So, if you have Excel [during] Block 2, you'd have a Block 2A and a Block 2B.

An hour-long flexible period such as Excel is uncommon in most schools. However, DeMarco sees value in **providing students with a chance to participate in more than one activity during Excel.** He believes that offering music education during the regular school day guarantees access for all students; Excel makes this possible:

> Our [Excel period] is bigger than ... what all the [recommended] models have. Ours is literally like a block in the schedule, just like all the other blocks. ... I would say 70–75% of our students are in some type of vocal or instrumental [class], and that all exists within the [regular] schedule. If I pull that outside the schedule and put it outside the school day, it's going to [create] a barrier. For me, it's an equity concern ... the district doesn't have money to provide busing for it. You have to pay teachers to be there to teach. And plus, even if we were to pay teachers, we can't provide that [bussing] transportation. Then it's like, only the kids who can either walk [to school] or [who have] parents [who can] drive from the school or pick them up at the end of the day have access to it.

A math interventionist noted that **the Excel block allows him to identify and support as many students as possible**. Some of his colleagues working in other districts are not able to reach as many students due to time constraints for intervention services:

> We do a really good job progressively identifying kids ... who need that support. ... We're still seeing, currently, in math support over 100 fifth and sixth graders [during Excel] at least 2 days during a 6-day cycle, sometimes 3 days. ... I've talked to colleagues [in other schools] who are in the same position as me, and I'm able to do so much more for math students than what they can do in their districts because we're given the amount of time that we're given [during Excel] that's uninterrupted and doesn't interfere with their core subjects.

Since gifted and talented instruction, or "*Stretch*," takes place during Excel, all students can participate, even if they have not officially tested into the program. One of the fifth-grade social studies teachers believes this is an "incredible" practice:

> Something recently that our Stretch teacher started is [that] he has days available where he might not necessarily take the Stretch or the gifted and talented groups, and he'll reach out to the [teachers] and say, "Hey, I have these 2 days available. Can everybody pull together [a group of] 10 to 12 students who might not normally qualify for Stretch, but [who] you think ... would benefit from

some of the hands-on STEM? Those kids are given that opportunity in Excel to participate in projects and programs like that. It's been incredible. I mean the self-confidence boosting alone, kids come back and they're like, "I'm working with the Stretch teacher." I even had a parent reach out recently and they were like, "My child keeps saying they're working with the Stretch teacher." [And I tell them], "We know that there's certain struggles they're having in the school year, but I recommended [your child] because I see that motivation, I see that desire to learn and succeed." I think that's incredible that our staff gives those opportunities for all the students.

DeMarco mentioned that a significant challenge for implementing Excel is reaching those students who do not participate in any activities or receive any targeted academic supports. While this presents a challenge, he noted that these students make up only a fraction of the population:

The most challenging Excel student is the student that does not hit any of the markers that you've been hearing about. They receive no services on either extreme; they're your average student. Maybe they're apathetic and really not a go-getter for anything. They play no instruments, they do nothing. ... Then the parent will be like, my kid doesn't do anything for Excel. What's this Excel time? They don't do anything. I would say, as a principal, maybe I hear that a couple times a year.

High School

At **Ocean City High School**, administrators split their 55-minute lunch period into two segments known as "*Flex Lunch*." After students finish eating, they spend the rest of the period engaged in a self-selected activity. Some of their choices include academic or social-emotional supports, physical activity in the gymnasium, or study hall. Principal Wendy O'Neal believes the purpose of Flex Lunch is "*threefold: help those [students] who are struggling, number one, and get to the root cause of why they were struggling. Number two, offer choice to the kids and offer flexibility to the kids. And number three, build school culture.*"

Flex Lunch is a practice that "*has outlived the pandemic.*" During its inception, O'Neal was intentional about garnering staff buy-in. Many teachers felt "*apprehensive*" about the change; so, the administrative team recruited a committee of 20 staff members—two administrators, teachers from every department, and a guidance counselor—to support the rollout. Once O'Neal "*laid out the logistics*" of Flex Lunch, the teachers on the committee were open to "*really sell[ing] it throughout the building.*"

Scheduling for Flex Lunch begins with students and teachers making their selections through an adaptive online scheduler at the beginning of each marking period. The teachers elect to host either academic support or an extracurricular activity in their classrooms, and the students choose where they would like to "*flex out*" each day. This digital platform clearly supports the success

of Flex Lunch at **Ocean City High School**. An administrator feels that having "*systems in place*" for implementing Flex Lunch is key, and "*technology [plays] a big part*" in ironing out the logistics. Moreover, a strong schoolwide attendance tracking system is vital for keeping track of students as they move throughout the building.

While most students choose how they spend their Flex Lunch each day, teacher- or staff-identified students receive academic or behavioral support as their Flex Lunch placement. The guidelines for Flex Lunch were designed to support the I&RS process. Students who are identified as struggling in a particular subject, per "*teacher recommendations and academic ineligibility*," are assigned a Flex Lunch with a teacher in that academic department. Likewise, students who "*struggle with discipline*" receive support from a wellness counselor or a social worker during their Flex Lunch. O'Neal believes this support is crucial, as "*unless it's just being a little bit late to school, there's some underlying cause to [students'] behavior that's causing the discipline.*"

Students assigned to an academic or behavioral support Flex Lunch placement can "*earn their way out*" over the course of the marking period. Notably, these students do have some autonomy over their weekly Flex Lunch schedule. **Ocean City High School** operates on a 4-day cycle; students are expected to attend their assigned academic or behavioral support Flex Lunch placement 3 out of the 4 of days. Therefore, those students can "*flex out*" to any placement they choose for 1 day in the cycle.

Another function of Flex Lunch involves building school culture. Post-pandemic, O'Neal noticed a decline in the number of students attending after-school clubs and activities. So, the administrators decided to offer some of those extracurricular opportunities during Flex Lunch. By offering the "*core meetings*" for these clubs and activities while students are already in the building, Flex Lunch helps increase student engagement and strengthen the school community.

5.5 Robust Postsecondary Pathways Anchored by High Expectations

Several Promising Practices schools demonstrated excellence in facilitating students' postsecondary success by providing nearly universal access to AP and dual enrollment coursework. In addition to the expectation that all students will take college-level courses, **College Achieve Central and Greater Asbury Park Charter Schools** as well as **Passaic Preparatory Academy** offer a robust range of postsecondary supports including college tours, counseling, internships, and technical certifications.

Interviewees at **College Achieve Central Charter School** shared that they increase AP access for

high school students with the expectation that all students, including those with IEPs, will take a minimum of three AP classes. Describing how they craft their AP program, Executive Director Corri Tate Ravare shared:

> It's backwards mapping. We say, first, all students are going to take three APs. So, we start there as the goal. It's like, "Okay, so then, how do you do that?" Then, it's which APs do you offer? Because different APs have different pass rates. We know there are some scholars that are going to be able to take AP Statistics and they're going to be able to pass that AP Statistics exam, but not all scholars are. We also offer AP Seminar, which has a higher pass rate. We want to set a very high standard set—a very high goal—but then do the work to craft a program where every student really has a chance to be successful. Our students with IEPs are also taking three APs.

College Achieve Central creates a culture of high expectations by removing typical barriers to AP access. Ravare continued:

> Other schools say, "To be in an AP class, you have to have this GPA." To me, they're gatekeeping in a way. Whereas we are like, okay, set the high standard for all students and then create the environment where every single student can be successful. And that does mean being a little bit creative in terms of which AP classes you offer.

In addition, interviewees attributed their successes in AP access and pass rates to the expectation that all teachers participate in the College Board AP testing and grading training annually, and all AP teachers serve as AP exam graders for College Board. This practice allows teachers to gain insight into the College Board's standards for passing AP exams. Ravare shared:

> Our high school also has a very strong relationship with the College Board in terms of getting that training every single year. All of our teachers who teach [AP], they do the training on the grading process, so they know this is how [the] College Board determines success. You kind of have the cheat code of what the College Board is looking for in terms of passing. They get that training, so they know [how] to approach instruction for AP.

Joyce James, Grades 4–8 vice principal, explained that College Achieve Central's backwards mapping approach extends to the earlier grades:

> Further down, that backwards map is where we come into play. Exposing the littles, gearing them up and getting them ready in middle school. And, sending them out to high school ready with best practices, best study habits, and foundational things they need to be successful [in AP]. So, we prepare and expose middle school students to the expectations of taking AP courses.

Angelica Ewaska, Grades 4–8 supervisor of instruction, expressed the interconnected framework of expectations that begins in kindergarten and follows through to twelfth grade:

> **Although there are different standards, ... elements, [and] new concepts each year, [there's] a thread between kindergarten and twelve grade. That thread is on a continuous path of consistency. And it supports [students in] knowing what the expectations are, how something in third grade applies to sixth. They can see that interconnection in their own mind, and that's something that we make sure we facilitate as well.**

Additionally, aligning with the network's shared mission of "*thru high school, thru college,*" **College Achieve Greater Asbury Park** uses a data-driven approach to enroll students who may struggle to pass AP exams in high-success college credit-bearing classes. According to Data Coordinator Monica Hancock:

> **We look at that AP-ready data in the SAT and PSAT. And if for some reason we don't feel like a student's going to be successful in an AP course, we give them the opportunity to take [a college credit] class. We also then bring in dual enrollment as a second option for acquiring college credits if, after conversations with the teacher, looking at data, [and] looking at progress, if we're not confident that student is going to be super successful with an AP exam, we give them a second option for accruing that college credit before they leave. And some students take advantage of both. But we do also know based on SAT, PSAT, NJGPA, which students are more likely to be successful on an AP exam versus a dual enrollment class.**

College Achieve supplements its school-year efforts to facilitate postsecondary success with a robust summer program called "*Summer of a Lifetime*" (SOAL). Hancock explained:

> **Our goal is for every student to be accepted into at least one 4-year university, ideally, the top colleges and universities, meaning the ones that have the highest college graduation rate. We want to get kids into colleges that are well known for getting them through and to graduate. Part of that is the dual enrollment. Part of that is the AP. But there's also Summer of a Lifetime, which is an opportunity for students. It starts in fourth [grade], sprinkling some of this experience down into the upper elementary. It is primarily high school-focused, where 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. ... They study in colleges and universities with professors. They pick a major and they're fully immersed for anywhere between 1 and 3 weeks on the college campus to be exposed to not only college life, but that level of coursework.**

SOAL has a particularly strong partnership with Princeton University, focused on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM). The program specifically aims to serve low-income, predominantly Black and Latino high school students from Asbury Park, Neptune, Paterson, and Plainfield. It is provided at no cost to students and families through a discount from Putney Student Travel, supplemented by subsidies from the school.

Another school with an exemplary culture of postsecondary success is **Passaic Preparatory Academy**, a selective sixth to 12th grade school where students declare an interest-based learning pathway in their freshman year of high school. They currently offer six humanities-based pathways that include criminal justice, dance, digital art, music, technology, theater and video production, and social media. Interviewees share that this pathway approach helps to **strategically group students based by interest, assists in relationship-building, and supports students to develop an identity within the school.** Students travel their chosen pathways for all 4 years of high school and often gain access to internships and other work-based projects in their senior year.

Like the College Achieve network, **Passaic Preparatory Academy**'s principal described a culture of "*setting the bar high,*" having "*clear expectations*" of students, and "*letting students know they will be placed in AP coursework.*" This culture begins in the middle school grades with access to high school level coursework. It continues with all students having the opportunity to enroll in AP courses in sophomore and junior year, without any need to "*test in*" (aside from the barrier of admission to the school itself). According to Principal Stacy Bruce, the result is that the majority of students at **Passaic Preparatory Academy** take at least three AP courses:

> **Our eighth graders take ninth-grade English I [and] Algebra I. That the district's model. But for English I, it is only offered here and at the other academy. So, we are exposing them to high school curriculum in eighth grade. Once they get to high school, they begin with English II, and they all have the opportunity to be placed in AP courses starting sophomore and junior year, for AP English Language and Composition and AP Literature and Composition. We also only offer AP histories. We give a lot of exposure to AP courses. I think by doing that, by giving them that exposure and not having students test into it, we're really setting that bar for them. It's a high expectation. So, 100% of our students take at least three AP courses.**

Passaic Preparatory Academy emphasizes the inherent value in exposing students to college-level coursework, and it provides multiple supports and alternatives to those who might struggle with AP curricula. One educator shared:

> **There could be arguments of people saying, "Well, they're not all AP students and they shouldn't all be placed in there," but they're all getting AP exposure, they're getting an opportunity to have an understanding of what college courses run, how they look. Outside of that, we do also offer dual enrollment courses. So, I think that by exposing them to an advanced curriculum, we really push them. We have tutoring available for all students. It's flexible. It's based on teacher hours. It's**

> **not a set tutoring curriculum. It's on an as-needed basis. The opportunities are absolutely there for kids who are struggling, but we keep that bar high, and we march to it.**

To provide dual enrollment as a supplement to AP coursework, **Passaic Preparatory Academy** has developed strong partnerships with New Jersey colleges and universities including Kean University, Montclair State University, William Paterson University, and Passaic County Community College. Courses align with **Passaic Preparatory Academy**'s interest-based pathways including performing arts, teaching, and world languages. The identification of students for dual enrollment begins as early as middle school. A Passaic educator shared:

> **The way we identify kids is [screening tightly for] their ability to have self-discipline and time management. The first crop of them are identified freshman year. We have an exceptionally accelerated group in the middle school that take Algebra I in seventh grade and Algebra II in eighth grade. Once they've started freshman year and go through the first semester of freshman year, if they have straight As or straight As and one B, we enroll them to take the entrance exams for ... college. And then many times, I think in the last 2 years, most of those kids, maybe 80% of them, enter [dual enrollment]. They begin their coursework the summer before their sophomore year, a two-credit orientation course. Then we give them off in the fall, and they take their first college class in the spring of their sophomore year. So, we ease them into it.**

The school provides additional opportunities for students who were not selected for early college during middle school or freshman year to test into the program. An educator explained:

> **A large chunk of our sophomores take the ACCUPLACER exam because we offer dual enrollment for chemistry and AP [English] Language and Composition. In order for them to be eligible for their dual enrollment credit, they have to pass that ACCUPLACER exam. That exam is kind of two-fold. It helps us identify kids who do well on that, and we get a second crop of kids for early college. We say, "Hey, you scored within this range on the ACCUPLACER. Are you interested in early college?" Those kids are starting a little bit later, but we get a group from them as well. So, we have two different pools that we pull from to put into the early college program.**

Passaic's "*biggest partnership*" is with Passaic County Community College (PCCC). **By combining AP, dual enrollment, and online and in-person community college courses, over a dozen students graduate annually with an associate's degree from PCCC.** This requires quite a balancing act regarding scheduling and transportation, and the school provides additional supports to ensure that students can manage the heavy load. A Passaic educator described:

> **Mondays and Wednesdays, that's when they take the bus to go to PCCC. The remaining days ... they have a study hall, which is two full periods where they get to kind of catch up. They get to reach out to their professors if anything is bothering them. Perhaps something has not been graded, they can reach out back to us. There's a very supportive counselor, she is the one that's in charge of it. Those two full periods [are] just for their own completion of work, and I think it's quality time.**

They additionally offer college tours during the school year and the summer—often with peers in the same pathways—as well as a teacher mentorship program. The educator continued:

> **For the mentor program, teachers can sign up for it. There is a list of students, and if you particularly knew a student, say for example I had a student in sixth grade that is now in the twelfth grade, I would take them. And if not, the counselor shares who you are matched with. Then we set up a meeting to say, "Here are 10 things that need to get done for college and what you need to prepare for." If there are things they need help with, they tell us. If I'm not able to help them, I point them in the right direction. Or help them with a college essay or an application. So, it just gave them another resource of who they can go to.**

Passaic Preparatory Academy rounds out its postsecondary pathways with a robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) program funded by a NJDOE Perkins V Grant. They create opportunities for students to obtain professional certifications while attending high school, including in Adobe, Pro-Tools, Real Estate, and 911 dispatch.

5.6 Caroline L. Reutter School: A Conceptual Math Program

Basic skills instruction (BSI) for mathematics at **Caroline L. Reutter School** used to follow a push-in model with periodic pull-out support. Kristen Hayden, a current district math coach and former BSI math teacher, noticed that "*many*" of her students "*were either going toward the special education route or living in BSI throughout their elementary years in the district*" despite this extra support. After administering a math inventory assessment, Hayden discovered that her students struggled with foundational skills. She later assigned the inventory assessment to the entire class and found that non-BSI students struggled with the same basic concepts. This motivated Hayden to initiate a transformative journey, guided by research-informed insights and long-range persistence. What began as a simple inventory of math skills evolved into a comprehensive and innovative approach to math instruction over 3 years, dramatically changing how students at **Caroline L. Reutter School** engage with mathematics across grade levels.

Drawing from experts in the field such as Jo Boaler, Marilyn Burns, Christina Tondevold, and Graham Fletcher, Hayden began implementing strategies that encouraged students to think critically and understand the reasoning behind mathematical solutions rather than simply memorizing formulas. Students participated in baseline and mid-year progress monitoring assessments for which they were required to "*use their mathematical strategies*" and "*most important[ly], explain their reasoning.*" Hayden then introduced math toolkits to help her students bridge the gap to conceptual learning. The toolkits provided structured approaches that students relied on when faced with formulaic and word problems.

Reutter's approach applies the Concrete, Representational, Abstract (CRA) model to basic skills math instruction, progressing students from using physical objects (concrete) to drawings (representational), and eventually to symbolic math (abstract). The model box is a diagram that helps students visualize and structure mathematical operations in a coherent way. This "*invention*"/"*innovative adaptation*" aligns with the principles of Joe Boaler, Marilyn Burns, Christina Tondevold, and Graham Fletcher, who advocate for conceptual learning. Incorporating the model box as a matter of procedure also helps students develop a sense of ownership over their learning. Students periodically reflect on their work and correct mistakes as they complete each step of the process. The model box, other visual aids, and a hands-on approach (such as number lines, blocks, fraction tiles, and scales) help students transition from concrete to abstract thinking. By introducing these spatial concepts, students develop a mental framework to understand mathematical relationships, which enhances their problem-solving skills and spatial reasoning, critical components of math education.

Teachers at Reutter emphasize understanding the relationships between mathematical operations, such as why multiplication is different from addition, rather than merely memorizing facts or standard algorithms. For example, using questions like "*Why is four times five not nine?*" helps students delve deeper into the underlying concepts instead of relying on tricks or rote steps. This contrasts with the typical approach to math, which often focuses on mastering standard algorithms without necessarily understanding the logic behind them.

The teachers also emphasize the role of the part-whole relationship in understanding Early Numeracy Counting Principles according to the Number Sense Trajectory, as well as being fluent with the fundamental mathematical operations which are integral to this approach. A teacher explained, "*Every mathematical problem revolves around finding either a part or a whole, which is essential for distinguishing operations like multiplication and addition.*" While students may memorize multiplication facts up to a certain point, they often struggle to apply this knowledge flexibly without visual aids or specific tricks. By framing mathematical expressions in terms of building (composing) or unbuilding (decomposing) quantities using directionals (north, south, east, west), students better conceptualize problems.

All students who receive math instruction within Tier 2 or Tier 3 in the multi-tiered system of supports undergo a similar lesson structure. One-third of the class period is spent on a class goal, fluency-aligned "*strategy-based lesson.*" During the strategy-based lesson, students are "*working*

with the model box or an instructional tool that can aid as a model/visual during the strategy, in order to build up their math fluency ... [and] gain their confidence in letting them determine that they can actually figure out their math." The second third of the class period is a standards-aligned lesson that incorporates strategies learned in the "*strategy-based lesson,*" which includes relationships, benchmarks, connections, and patterns in order to foster conceptual understanding even with the most abstract standards. Standard lessons are supported by using models/representations and virtual manipulatives from the Brainingcamp software.

Then, for the remainder of the math block, students are grouped and they either perform independently or meet with the teacher for "*goal groups.*" While the strategy-based lesson can be driven by the fluency-aligned or even standard-aligned class goal, goal groups—which can be small group or one-on-one instruction—are driven by individual student goals. Teachers are responsible for generating the materials from which they lead instruction during goal groups. Jennifer Cockerill, a fifth-grade math teacher, shared that she usually "*pulls*" one goal group per class period. She takes notes during each session and references her previous notes to ensure that she is tracking each student's progress toward mastery of the content.

Theodore Peters, principal at **Caroline L. Reutter**, expressed that students' awareness of their individual math goals helps build their confidence. There is a sense of comradery in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 math classes that follow this model:

> **The kids are also fluent with their knowledge of where their goals are, [of] which, especially at the intermediate school level, they need to take ownership. A lot of these students are kind of down in the dumps because they realize that they have not been succeeding with math [but] their eagerness to participate in the Tier 2, Tier 3 classes is there because they look around and they know every kid's in the same boat ... and now they're starting to feel comfortable with how to complete math. So, from being withdrawn in a Tier 1 class, kind of in the back, not getting all the support [they] need, and it's not clicking, now they're in a classroom environment that's more conducive to their learning. It's also fluid between Tier 2 and Tier 3. So, if a student is demonstrating that they are understanding the different strategies to a much greater level, if they're in Tier 3 and they're demonstrating growth in the [math reading inventory] and also in i-Ready, we move them up to Tier 2.**

The fluidity of this model is what makes it unique, according to Hayden. The staff were clear in establishing that this program "*is not a track system.*" Peters reiterated, "*We don't want [students] to live in BSI forever.*" Hayden went on to explain that, by creating a program that spans Tier 2 and Tier 3 support, Reutter educators endeavor to ensure that Tier 3 students are well established, prepped, and positioned to "*crossover*" into "*a more standard, faster pace*" Tier 2 class if they show growth on their midyear progress monitoring. Hayden continued:

[The] goal is ultimately to have these kids mathematically independent. If we layer the intervention support to this extensive degree, and students progress over time, the next question is, are students still capable of progressing if/when support is scaled back? This question leads to careful monitoring of individual student data, grade level academics, and student behaviors, if a transition to the next tier is to be predicted. We typically transition a Tier 3 student to a Tier 2 level based on the middle-of-the-year-diagnostics; however, teacher observations, weekly/ monthly student data, and student behavior are also taken into consideration. Transitioning students in the middle of the year allows us to scale students [more quickly] in a more secure way. Students that are performing two or three grade levels below [standard], typically don't have enough time remaining within our district to wait until the end of the year to transition. If students are showing the signs of progression and readiness, i.e. socially, emotionally, and academically, transitioning students sooner rather than later has been an extremely helpful factor in producing more Tier 1 students over time before graduating from the district. "My goal as a math coach, in a K–6 district is to educate, assist, and aid in securely transitioning as many students to a Tier 1 status as possible before they graduate. That's everybody's goal.

Recognizing that not all students fit neatly into these categories, the school developed a "*Tier 1.5*" group—bubble students who performed just below Tier 1 but still needed targeted help. These "*1.5*" students are identified as needing remediation, while Tier 2 and Tier 3 students receive both intervention and remediation on a conceptual level. This flexible system allowed students to move between tiers through CRA (Concrete, Representational, Abstract)/DOK (Depths of Knowledge) exit tickets or QFAs (Quick Formative Assessments), which present increasingly difficult problems to assess a student's ability to manage more advanced/complex concepts associated with grade level standards. The exit tickets/QFAs not only serve as diagnostic tools but also foster a culture of continuous improvement, helping teachers gauge when students are ready to advance or when additional supports are required.

What started as an attempt to fix a deficit in basic math skills evolved into a broader reimagining of math education at **Caroline L. Reutter School**. Initially, the goal wasn't to improve test scores—it was to help students to navigate complex problems without relying on rote memorization. By focusing on the "why" behind mathematical operations, the school helped students build a deeper, more meaningful relationship with math. The perseverance of the coach, coupled with the school's and district's commitment to innovation, paid off as the results have been transformative for the entire student body.

With the total support, guidance, and facilitation of the district's administration team, Jaime Doldan, the supervisor of curriculum, Principal Ted (Theadore) Peters, and a team of teachers started to lay the foundation and implement this new innovative Math Intervention Model. Reutter educators assert that their math program can serve as a model for schools that want to

move away from rote learning toward a more conceptual, comprehensive, student-centered approach to education. The coach leveraged research-based strategies, implemented targeted interventions, and equipped students with the tools they need to succeed.

This math model now spans across grade levels, which include Grades K–6, and is incorporated into IEPs that tend to special needs and multilingual learners alike. Distinct plans are tailored to each grade level, ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed. What began as a problem-solving endeavor in one class has now evolved into a holistic and scalable model that continues to drive student success.

5.7 Orange Preparatory Academy: Technology Integration Across the Curriculum

Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation is a unique school in that it serves only eighth-grade students. Over the last 2 years, staff at this school have adopted two large scale technology initiatives: a partnership with Verizon/Digital Promise and the Learner-Active Technology-Infused Classroom framework. While these programs are still relatively new at Orange Preparatory Academy, the teachers and administrators at this school have already developed an important understanding of what it takes to implement these kinds of programs at a high level. Their insights may inform a greater conversation about technology integration in similarly situated schools across New Jersey.

Verizon Innovative Learning Schools and Digital Promise

During the 2023–24 school year, **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation** became a Verizon Innovative Learning School (VILS). Through this program, Verizon works "*side-by-side*" with qualifying schools to provide each student an up-to-date device equipped with a 4-year Verizon LTE data plan. Furthermore, VILS collaborate with Digital Promise, a global nonprofit organization focused on educational equity across research, practice, and technology. Digital Promise leads professional development and provides curriculum to help VILS educators leverage technology in their classrooms and beyond. Any public school district or public charter network in the United States where at least two of the schools (1) serve middle/high school students and (2) have a free and reduced-price lunch participation of 65% or higher can apply to join VILS.

According to Nicole Sequeira, **Orange Preparatory Academy**'s technology coordinator, the VILS program has been widely beneficial for her students: "*Accessibility is key because these devices are infused with a Verizon LTE. So, no matter where these students are, they're able to work on their device.*" Furthermore, the district's enthusiasm for the Verizon partnership has increased student engagement overall. Sequeira shared:

> **We started off the school year with a big celebration, a big roll out, to get the students excited [about the VILS program]. We had some STEM-related activities**

> **to show [the students] all the things that they can use with the technology. [Now, any time] I have to give [the students] a different loaner [Chromebook], they're like, "Is my Verizon computer back yet? I want it back." So, I think the way that they're utilizing [the devices] is keeping them more engaged as far as what I've seen. Having these devices ... does make a difference in student engagement.**

The Verizon and Digital Promise partnerships also provide school staff with several benefits, from in-house professional development to virtual learning sessions. Each Verizon Innovative Learning School must appoint a full-time, school-based coach to support teachers with integrating the new technology into their classrooms. This staff member receives a minimum of $25,000 to oversee and support the program's implementation. Responsibilities for the VILS coach include 1:1 coaching with teachers, participating in ongoing professional learning, and providing feedback to the greater VILS team through required surveys and data collection. Terra Phipps, the former technology coordinator, is now the VILS coach at **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation**.

Although Phipps was not available to meet with the Promising Practices Project research team, Halstead spoke about Phipps's impact as the VILS coach:

> **The way Phipps moves through the building is in the capacity of, "I'm here to support you." The staff know her because she used to be the tech coordinator, and when she was the tech coordinator, she did some of this coaching even though it wasn't part of her job. She comes from a coaching background, and so this is the work that she's comfortable doing. The staff is comfortable with her.**

Halstead also shared a glimpse into the planning procedures for a VILS coaching round with Phipps. A program-specific walkthrough form was mentioned as a tool for identifying areas of strength and need in classrooms:

> **Basically, what happens is the VILS coach goes into the classroom and ... [looks] for the items that are outlined on [the] walkthrough form. ... It is not an evaluative piece or tool; it's simply to give [the coach] some talking points. ... All teachers have been trained on the tool. ... They know that this information is not shared with administrators. ... It's simply for [Phipps] to sit down with the teacher and develop a coaching round based off of what she saw [and] what she didn't see.**

In terms of school-wide VILS professional development, the entire staff at **Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation** participates in three virtual "*learning experiences*" with representatives from Digital Promise each year. Halstead indicated that these trainings have been well received by her staff. She told the research team, "*There's a lot we can learn from Digital Promise.*"

Student Technology Team

A key component of the VILS program involves leveraging a Student Tech Team. Verizon defines the Student Tech Team as a cohort of students who can provide troubleshooting support for the devices, create video guides for their peers, and support the rollout of STEM-related activities. Learners interested in joining the Student Tech Team must fill out an application. In addition to building their technology acumen, learners on the Student Tech Team also develop leadership and professional communication skills. The entire school community benefits from the work of the Student Tech Team, which, in turn, increases student voice throughout the building.

One of the Tech Team's main responsibilities is managing all the student Chromebooks. Additionally, Tech Team's members help teachers troubleshoot issues with their Promethean boards and printers. They also create technology-related tutorials, like what to do if your Chromebook is "*running super slow*," for students and staff. In short biographies on the "Meet the Tech Team" webpage, some students reflect on their interest in this role:

> **I joined the Tech Team to learn more about technology and to help people. I've worked with computers before, and this year I hope to help teachers and students grasp a better understanding of their Chromebooks.**

> **Although my technological skills are average, I am here to learn and improve. I want to be a software engineer or a cyber security engineer and I believe that this class may help me come nearer to my goals.**

Sequeria cited the Tech Team as an integral part of ensuring all students have access to the technology they need for daily class participation.

> **I have three sections of a Tech Team class. It's not a graded course, it's a pass or fail, where my students take on the leadership role. Let's say a student shows up and their device is low on battery. Well, guess what? They're not missing out on instruction today because my Tech Team students will deliver them a charged Chromebook, charge their device for them, and return it at the end of the day. It's just seamless. ... That's something that we pride ourselves on.**

These students are clearly an integral part of the school's growing technology culture.

Learner-Active Technology-Infused Classrooms

Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation is in its second year of implementing the Learner-Active Technology-Infused Classrooms (LATIC) framework. This framework "*includes problem-based Authentic Learning Units (ALUs), a collection of structures that put students in charge of their own learning, and powerful teacher facilitation of learning.*" Orange Preparatory Academy leverages their VILS partnership to enhance their work with LATIC.

Despite the expected growing pains of implementing a new program, Halstead is a proponent of the LATIC framework. She has witnessed some of her teachers "*who struggle with classroom management and organization*" gain confidence in these areas through student empowerment. For example, LATIC teachers maintain a "*resource table*" where their students can find materials to aid their comprehension, such as dictionaries and graphic organizers. The LATIC framework emphasizes the need for differentiated learning materials. Some students may not require a graphic organizer to orient their thinking. However, by making the graphic organizers available on the resource table, students can assess their understanding of the content and seek out support on an individual basis.

Amanda Ressler, an English language arts teacher, is one of 11 educators Halstead selected to implement LATIC. Ressler has seen success with the framework in her classroom, particularly regarding student-centered instruction:

> **The student engagement when we have student-led classroom experiences is just much stronger. It makes my job easier too, because I don't have to be doing cartwheels around the room, doing every little thing. It's hard to set it up, but when it is underway, the lesson is mostly run by student choices. So, giving [students the] opportunity to take ownership and find their own reason [for] why things are important. I think just higher engagement, higher buy-in.**

The LATIC framework is governed by five paradigm shifts and 10 principles "*which research shows are present in successful classrooms*." One of the more challenging paradigm shifts for Ressler and her LATIC colleagues is replacing their traditional "*Lesson First*" approach with a "*Felt Need First*" approach to student learning. The LATIC framework explains, "*Students delve more deeply into content and retain more when their efforts are driven by a personal 'felt need' to learn*." This definition seems to make sense to Ressler; the challenge lies in weaving that expectation into the curriculum:

> **I'm always asking about ... this idea of learning from a "felt need." I understand it as the concept of finding real-world applications for student learning. And we do these Authentic Learning Units that are based on ... a "felt need" and authentic application. And finding ways to fit them into the curriculum or make things fit has been a little bit difficult. That's something we always talk about. ... Honestly, a lot of these areas we haven't tackled yet as a cohort because there's still a lot, there's still a long way, I think, for us to go.**

Halstead noticed that some of her educators were struggling to conceptualize the practical reality of implementing all aspects of the LATIC framework with fidelity, so, she sought to observe it in another school. From that moment forward, she was sold on the framework's merit:

> **When I went and I saw [LATIC] in action, I became completely sold ... to the point that now I'm trying to facilitate some opportunities for my LATIC teachers to go see what it looks like. ... Because even our phenomenal teachers struggle with,**

"How do I do this and make sure I keep pacing going?" We're not lost on that. That's a real struggle. It's a good struggle, but it's a real struggle. ... [So] we're going back to the basics with this. I'm going to get the teachers into some buildings so they can see [LATIC in action]. And then, when we do that, we can press the restart button, and I think it will be a different experience for my staff. ... This is a work in progress.

Halstead reflected on what it takes to implement both the VILS program and the LATIC instructional approach at a high level. Her succinct explanation was "*district support,*" and she went on describe how that support looks in Orange:

LATIC, they pay 100%. We don't take anything for LATIC out of our own budget. It comes through the district and through Title 1 funds. But beyond financial support, I have to say that [the district's] support of the work that we're trying to do here most of the time is really, really, really strong. ... The fact that I know and my staff knows that [Superintendent Fitzhugh] is going to show up and he's going to be there for us, it makes a difference. ... If we have pieces in the district that impede our ability to run Verizon or LATIC or anything else, it's just really one or two phone calls and we get the support we need. So, the support from the district level makes a big difference. It makes a big difference.

5.8 Sara Gilmore Academy: Supporting Early Literacy for Everyone

The **Union City School District** faced the threat of a state takeover in 1989 due to consistently poor academic performance, particularly in reading and bilingual education. The majority of Union City's students then and now come from low-income immigrant families, many of whom speak Spanish as their primary language. During the 2021–22 school year, 84.0% of the district's student population was economically disadvantaged, 33.7% of the students were English language learners, and 72.1% of students' home language was Spanish.

District progress since 1989 is evidenced by the success of **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**, a Grade 1 through Grade 8 arts integration magnet school. In the 2021–22 school year, 57.8% of Gilmore's students were economically disadvantaged, and 49.0% were non-native English speakers. Gilmore's proficiency rates prior to the COVID pandemic were 97.3 in literacy and 85.8 in math, significantly higher than the state's average of 57.9% in literacy and 44.5% in math. Post-COVID, proficiency rates at Gilmore saw a slight decline, but continued to far outpace the state average, with a 92.9% proficiency rate for literacy and 70.4% in math.

Additionally, Sara M. Gilmore's performance based on averaged residuals ranks in the top 10% of all elementary and middle schools statewide. Gilmore Academy has been recognized for its high and consistent academic achievement through the following awards: National Blue Ribbon Schools award (2004, 2014), New Jersey Start School award, Best Practices award, New Jersey High Performing Rewards School, National ESEA Distinguished School, and Leeds Gold Certified School. Respondents attributed several interconnected supports to their success: a model early learning component, a word-soaked curriculum, arts integration within a framework of multiple intelligences, and a tailored bilingual instructional program. Some of the interviewees, including Silvia Abbato, the Superintendent, saw constant development of human capital and a talent pipeline as particularly important ingredients of their "*secret sauce*."

Model Early Education Program

Previous research has demonstrated important impacts on youth development from well-conceived pre-K programs (Heckman, 2011, and Barnett, 2008). As a district, Union City has prioritized building a system of early childhood education programs that are "*top notch and reflect evidence-based, high scope curriculum.*" Under the state's Abbott Preschool program, the district created a universal pre-kindergarten system that identified a flagship preschool exemplar, and invited other public and private providers—including "*mom and pop shop*" providers, whose programs may have been limited to snacks, naps, and TV time—to work with the flagship school to close the quality gap between preschool providers throughout Union City (Barnett & Jung, 2021).

Leveraging the state's investment in preschool programming, Union City was able to hire more qualified early educators, provide extra training that ranged from English as a second language to project-based learning, and hire more content specialists and coaches (Kirp, 2015, p.47). Building cohesion within a mixed delivery system that includes district public schools and private providers is uncommon in New Jersey. Private providers are not required to adhere to parameters of the district. This work deliberately avoided the "*schoolification*" of Pre-K or pushing developmentally inappropriate practices onto early learners. The idea for a universal system came out of the need for better preparedness of early learners and the lack of physical space to accommodate the number of preschool-eligible students in the city:

> **The plug for [this program is that] the first cohort that went through a full early childhood program [demonstrated considerable achievement.] So that tells you the difference because our little ones leave the kindergarten classrooms ... reading and writing, which was unheard of years ago.** – Silvia Abbato, superintendent

> **Some of the kids coming ... into the first grade here are reading at a third-grade level. —** Geri Perez, assistant superintendent

"Word Soaked" Curriculum and Arts Integration

Another component of the district's strategy to improve was the implementation of a "*word-soaked*" curriculum. The district's curriculum was designed to saturate students' learning experiences with language, constantly exposing them to new vocabulary, reading materials, and opportunities for verbal expression. At **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**, each school day has three periods of uninterrupted literacy instruction, two periods of math, one period of social studies, and one period of science. Literacy experiences can exceed the district's nonnegotiable minimum of 90 minutes, as other curricular materials and experiences are anchored in literacy skills.

Literacy blocks have become more specific since the COVID-19 pandemic, becoming acceleration periods to aid in the recovery of learning for students across the district. In schools like **Sara M. Gilmore**, which may not need as much recovery, they instead do more MIAD work. MIAD, or Multiple Intelligences Arts Domain, is a program modeled after Howard Gardner's theory of intelligence and creativity that believed "*creativity occurs when someone produces something new that first seems odd but becomes accepted by people who have knowledge about it*" (Morgan, 2021). Children are regularly told that everyone is smart but in different ways. This program has been in existence in the district since 1978. Through this, students can engage in a selection of elective courses of their choosing, developed by faculty members and intended to meet the needs and add to the experiences of all types of learners.

Electives are not typical in elementary school settings, but the district and school leadership believe in the program and its impact on students. Elective choices include:

Ballet Tales	7 Habits of Highly Effective Kids	JV Forensics
Dance and Explore	Changing History Through Film	Poetry Corner
Animation I & II	Inventing the Line	Pawprints
Screenwriting	Una Bella Lingua	Yearbook
Behind the Scenes	"You'll Be in My Heart"	Kidwitness News
Salsa	Performance Ensemble	Chess
Reduce, Reuse, Recycle	A Whole New World	Opera
Science of Fairy Tales	Middle Eastern Dance	Biomes
Beyond the Pages	Sign Language	Greek Mythology
Ballet Bridges	The World of Dinosaurs	Fitness
Varsity Forensics	Wonder Years of Music	Robotics
Sound on Stage	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	Murals
Beginner Guitar	Learning about YOU	Latin Culture
+	College and Career	

MIAD course development ideas typically come from faculty members' interests and passions. The faculty develop coursework that is aligned to the New Jersey instructional standards, but are different from anything else that might happen during the school day. The school day has acceleration, remediation, and arts focused classes. The arts-based courses are done in partnership

with professional agencies like the Metropolitan Opera or with talented community members. The courses run in cycles, so that students are not in the same class for the full school year and have the opportunity to sample different offerings from Grade 1 to Grade 8. These art-integrated experiences culminate in a performance event, where the students are able to demonstrate what they learned about the desired topic and how it is connected to the curriculum.

Parents have also been engaged as teaching artists. **Tapping into the diverse interests and talents of the parent community, Gilmore has had parents teach art-based courses that included violin, animation, ballroom dance, and more.** Gilmore's administration has also been intentional about acknowledging the contributions of parents by awarding them "*Parent Educator Awards*" at the end of each year. Geri Perez, assistant superintendent, explains how culturally engrained this practice has become:

> **We tapped into that and it really ... set something in the culture in all these partnerships, where the parents and teachers work together. ... People are very quick to dismiss the arts because they think there's no time, because you have to get ready for math and you have to get ready for language arts, [but the arts are] probably the last thing you should take away. It builds a student's confidence, it takes a student where their interests lie, and you really make connections to the real world with the arts. It makes creative thinkers problem solvers. And I feel like, in a nutshell, that's probably the crux of the success that we see coming from here.**

Evidence of the "*word-soaked*" curriculum, art integration, and professional art partnerships are apparent on the walls throughout the school. The hallway walls have vocabulary-rich writing and displays of the writing process, alongside representations of historical figures that students have researched and written about. The art on display reflects students' lives, showcasing their work and the content they have learned. Examples of culturally responsive teaching are also visible, where the concept of "*mirrors*" provides students with reflections of their own culture, and "*windows*" offer glimpses into different cultures.

Tailored Bilingual Instruction

The 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 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. An educator shared:

> **In Union City, 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. Different from 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 (English as a second language) 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.

Additional School Supports

Outside of the models established for the district, **Sara M. Gilmore Academy** also offers an after-school enrichment program for ELA and math based on teacher recommendations, classroom grades, and standardized test scores; homework help for students in need during dismissal; and opportunities to participate in after-school programs like hydroponics and robotics. Prior to COVID, there was also peer tutoring during lunch. Currently, peer tutoring is incorporated into the extended day, and there are peer tutors in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade working with first and second graders across schools.

District Supervisor Susana Rojas explains the return on investment with peer tutoring supports and how they extend beyond academics:

> **We're getting a return on our investment there. And they're also working not only on the academics but on the social-emotional skills. Talking about kids coming back post-pandemic, the little ones, especially our first and second graders, we see that they're having trouble navigating relationships, maintaining friendships. And so, these are some of the things I instructed those students, those peer tutors, to work on with the kids. So, the priority first is to work with them on their homework target. They identify if [and] whether the child is maybe struggling a little bit in math or in ELA [and] they help them with that. They work with them, [on] social-emotional [learning], and then ... they eat with them. That's so important, right? Because breaking bread together, what a beautiful thing. They eat dinner with them from 4:30 to 5 p.m. and I instructed them, even if you're not going to eat the food here with them, to go with them. Pick up the food, you sit with them and you make those connections because, just like we're sitting here at a table ... they have that time to just converse with the students.**

Developing Human Capital

Educators at **Sara M. Gilmore** report that professional development is provided through high-quality professional learning activities that are aligned with teaching and learning standards. Weekly PLC meetings are embedded into staff schedules to facilitate discussions on instruction and the implementation of new initiatives. This serves as a time for educators and administrators

to collaborate. **Monthly staff meetings allow for more extensive conversations on schoolwide initiatives.** Sara M. Gilmore Academy complies with all district-mandated professional development workshops, particularly in ELA, mathematics, STEM, and social-emotional learning. Professional training opportunities are offered to staff through job-embedded coaching, external expert assistance, on- and off-campus workshops, conferences, and digital online resources.

Principals may not typically receive much early literacy training; however, that has been institutionalized in Union City. An early literacy workshop that was initially intended for teachers was made available to principals when one principal asked if she could sit in.

> **She said, "Do you think I can join the teachers after school?" I said, "Sure." So then, after that, other principals started coming in and 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. And it was ... a great experience for the administrators.** – Silvia Abbato, district superintendent

Learning opportunities also bring together administrators, teachers, and parents in the school community. Each month, there is a book club that seeks to *"build schoolwide love of literacy,"* according to Krystle Santaniello, district supervisor.

There is a described culture of teaching and learning at all levels in the district. This training allows administrators to further develop their skills as instructional leaders in subjects beyond their initial areas of expertise, which enables them to better support and provide feedback to teachers. Alongside the culture of learning is a culture of *"all hands on deck."* Somedays, even district-level administrators can be directly involved in the day-to-day. An example of this is when district leadership, including assistant superintendents, stepped in to serve as interim principals during a wave of retirements. The district is mindful in selecting and training new leaders, ensuring that they are well-prepared to step into their roles.

In addition to leadership development, Union City places a strong emphasis on the role of instructional coaches. **Instructional coaches are integral to building consistency across the district and providing support to struggling teachers.** Coaching is their sole responsibility, and they are deeply embedded in classroom activities, working directly with teachers. They conduct model lessons, provide teachers feedback, and work with small groups of students, ensuring that both teachers and students receive the targeted support they need to succeed.

Teachers are given support in the classroom, encouraged to learn from peers, and given opportunities to lead as well. Michele Beleza-Cowan shared:

> **From the very onset of joining this team, the leadership has been incredibly supportive, transformative, if you will. They believe in people. They allowed me to take risks as a teacher and then they allowed me to take risks as an administrator.**

Mrs. Abbato let me be part of a curriculum team very early on in my career. And that's just belief in people. It spurs me to work even harder, and I think it has that effect on a lot of people. But in terms of leadership, I'm fascinated by it. I think it makes a huge difference when teachers feel supported. And I think that's part of the secret sauce, if you will, that we have here, is it's a journey we take together. The teachers. If you can support a teacher, you are supporting the children. We all go into this relationship together and I think that has a strong influence on our outcomes. Leadership from top down, just in the curriculum, in the classrooms, helping teachers when they fall and get back up. It's just been very powerful for me as a 25th-year employee.

Union City is well known for the stability of its leadership; most of the people interviewed as part of this study had been students in the district and worked their way through the ranks, reflecting a deliberative policy of maintaining culture by developing their own people. Gilmore's principal began as a middle school bilingual teacher, then advanced to the positions of literacy coach and vice principal, before eventually becoming the principal. By partnering with institutions like New Jersey City University (NJCU) to recruit student teachers and build a teacher pipeline that identifies and nurtures talent early on, they are able to cultivate new teachers and have them come in prior to certification to gain an understanding of the curriculum, culture, and expectations of the school and district.

Data is King

Leaders at **Sara M. Gilmore** rely heavily on data to inform instruction and decision-making throughout the district, using it as a tool to identify gaps and areas of improvement. At the start of each school year, **students undergo diagnostic tests to provide teachers with initial insights.** This is followed by regular benchmarking and formative assessments throughout the school year, all managed through the district's chosen platform, ED Connect. ED Connect was described by district leaders as being "*an invaluable system,*" enabling them and teachers to drill down on individual student skill levels.

While state funding support for this platform has lessened, Union City and 59 other districts in the state continue to find value in it. The district has been able to integrate professional development into the use of these assessment systems, ensuring that administrators at all levels, from senior to school-based, as well as teachers, can easily generate and interpret reports. Teachers can access assessment results immediately after administration, allowing them to benchmark student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. Over the years, Union City has also developed in-house assessments tailored to its unique needs. Assessment data is further reviewed at administrator retreats, where feedback is shared, sometimes leading to feelings of embarrassment or motivation, but is perceived as always driving improvement and deeper understanding among all stakeholders.

Cultural and Community Connections

At **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**, there is a strong focus on fostering an inclusive and multilingual school culture where connections with students and parents are deeply valued. The staff's commitment to creating an environment where every child and parent is known helps to build trust and investment in the school community. With nearly 400 students, the school still takes pride in knowing each family personally, intending to make it rare for anyone to feel like a stranger when they come to the door.

> **[I] had the privilege of [discovering] that the crux of everything in Union City ... is the connection to the community and families. ... We were calling those families; we were visiting those families. And that was how we were able to create those connections and children felt that we were invested in them**. – Susana Rojas, early childhood supervisor

This welcoming atmosphere extends to parents who are invited to engage with the school in various capacities—whether through attending events, participating in classrooms as visitors or teaching artists, joining book clubs, or using the community room for community events. The new building was designed with two spaces primarily for community use. The school also prioritizes cultivating teachers who share this philosophy.

Being able to discern band-aid solutions from long-term sustainable change has been key to the success of **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**. When addressing the issue of high school dropouts, district leaders recognized the need to shift focus from just the high school level and instead conduct a root cause analysis, beginning interventions as early as middle school. Key to sustaining changes like these has been a commitment to data-driven, informed decision-making. **By consistently using ongoing diagnostics of student learning, skill assessments, and benchmark testing, the district ensures that teacher instruction remains tailored to students' needs.** This evidence-based approach, alongside training leaders to be instructional guides, onboarding trained coaches and content specialists, and integrating teacher collaboration and shared best practices, fosters a learning environment centered on growth and high expectations.

5.9 University High School: Supporting Postsecondary Success with Love and Accountability

University High School's state ELA scores are in the top 10% of all middle and high schools. And even with a poverty rate (82%) more than twice the state average (37%), University High School students graduate at the same rate as their peers across the state (91%). University educators attribute these outcomes to their emphasis on building a strong culture of love, support, and accountability for high expectations. They intentionally hire educators who are committed to these qualities, and they loop student cohorts with vice principals to create a strong relational

foundation between students, teachers, and administrators. They have a strong focus on literacy across the curriculum, and access to college-level coursework for all students.

Staff stressed that a key to all of their outcomes, including high graduation rates, is making kids feel cared for and making school a place they want to be. They highlighted student accountability as a key practice that correlates to their high graduation rates. They expressed, "*One of the most impactful things here at University High School that directly correlates [to student outcomes] is the level of love and the approach to how we hold our students accountable. Because accountability is important. It also allows them to be receptive to the accountability measures that we put in place for them.*"

Educators also shared how paradigm shifts from deficit thinking to strength-based perspectives, transformative language, and shared visions of students' success as "*scholars capable of higher levels of learning*" are contributing factors to their increases in student graduation rates, dual enrollment participation, and partnerships with colleges and universities. Highlighting the use of paradigm shifts and transformative language, an administrator shared, "*Initially that wasn't the language used here, but now most staff reference students as these are our scholars. It's something that begins to start transforming and transpiring from all of us, because it's just a different level of expectation when you say 'scholar' and when you say a 'student.'*"

Intentional hiring practices were also noted as a key factor in improving student outcomes. Administrators expressed the importance of strategic recruitment and the intentional hiring of staff who carry similar values and a "*passion for teaching and compassion for students.*" To highlight this point, Amir Billups, the chair of social studies and career and technical education, expressed, "*I think one of the most impactful things at University is the staff that we have. It extends beyond the people sitting in this room ... the staff we have come with a level of compassion. That's important to me. ... I need to see that. I can see other things, but for me in hiring and selecting it's the compassion.*"

In sharing how intentional hiring can be replicated in other schools, Vice Principal Shavon Chambers shared, "*Being strategic about who you recruit ... won't happen overnight. But put enough people that are student-oriented. And that's what this work is about. But you can't buy it. It has to be innate for you.*" In terms of setting expectations for new hires, Chambers shared how she approaches setting standards particularly around literacy: "*I also had a conversation with every last one of the people that we brought on [for] social studies, around this focus on literacy. So, no one was unclear about what the game plan was when they came onto the social studies team. I'm not saying that that in and of itself is the only contributor to [improved literacy], but I will say that has been a consistent contributor that I think definitely has some impact.*"

Both administrators shared that the use of intentional assessments during interviews is a critical component to strategic hiring. In sharing how he implements intentional questioning, Billups offered, "*I would ask, 'What are some of the things that you see yourself contributing to the overall school experience? What cocurricular experiences do you see yourself contributing to the Phoenix family?' And thankfully, a lot of them are able to articulate some really cool things. And I think that that also contributed as well.*" Administrators also highlighted how they model the values they want to imbue in **University High School** scholars: "*The passion and the compassion for young people, to me, comes in the*

door before the staff. And the students feel it. Because I walk with that every day. For me, [there's] no other way to educate children if you don't start with that. And that, to me, is one of the most impactful things here at University High School."

To address the wide range of student needs, educators highlighted the use of individualized student success plans for each student in the building. These assess each student's needs, access to supports, and goal-setting. Social Worker Lawren Bridgeforth-Monroe shared:

> **We allow our scholars to come to the table and be a part of a lot of our planning activities, as well ... What will help you in order for you to get where you need to be and how can we assist you? Realizing that each and every scholar is different. I think one of the ways that we are very impactful is that we'll do individualized plans with our scholars; we identify our students as opposed to saying that they have a behavioral issue.**

Collectively, stakeholders collaborate to plan, create, and implement actionable and individualized student success plans, noting the purpose of this practice is to provide direct intervention to ensure that students are at the "*level they need be.*" This includes high engagement with students, parents, administrators, school social workers, and guidance counselors. To support the use of early warning systems, data tracking, and individualized success plans, they create small groups of students experiencing challenges. Known as "*At Promise Scholars,*" those students receive weekly support in the form of anger management, decision-making, grief support, and conflict resolution. At Promise Scholars are students who are "*rising above their current challenges.*"

Bridgeforth-Monroe noted the key to their student success is awareness of the whole child and the implications that adverse childhood experiences can have on learning and outcomes, sharing:

> **We make sure that they're doing well emotionally, mentally, and physically in order for us to educate them. It's very challenging to tell a youngster, "Take a test" or "Learn this lesson" [when] they may not have had anything to eat that particular morning or they're stressed out. We deal with the fact that some of them come in the door with some invisible trauma. And it's our job to identify what that trauma is and then assist them as to how they can navigate and get through life. We're very intentional about it.**

Creating and using internal rubrics and common standardized assessments as early warning systems can also impact students' successes. Interviewees noted that these practices allowed them to create their "*own data cycles organically.*" They also shared the importance of developing student-friendly rubrics. Billups explained:

> **One of the things that I definitely attribute to some of that success was developing ... literacy within the social studies content. Prior to that, we had just been using [the] NJSLA rubric [for] the research-simulated task. The critique of that particular**

rubric was that it's not as student-friendly. I wanted something that kids could take, they could pick it up, they could look at the language and say, "Here's why I got the score on this. Here's what I need to do next to improve my writing," so on and so forth. We were really intentional about developing that tool to make it more student-friendly.

Interviewees also shared that internal assessments not only guage student mastery of skills that connect to learning standards, but also assess students' readiness for NJSLA, and are given schoolwide. Vice Principal Chambers shared, "T*eachers know the standards. But you [also] need to know the skills that live in the standard. Not everybody can do that. So, we took it upon ourselves to say, let us design these cold standardized assessments based on what you teach.*" Noting the benefits of this practice, interviewees shared that internal assessments "*allow for real-time data-tracking for teachers and administrators.*" Data tracking is a key focus of this school, and the administrators shared that they are constantly and consistently assessing student data and keeping students better informed of their data: "*The kids started talking about their data for the first time. You had kids going up saying, "I got a 63. What'd you get? And that's without the curve." So, that starts with transparency.*"

In describing one of their most innovative and impactful practices for improving student outcomes and graduation rates, educators expressed that looping vice principals, department chairs, and guidance counselors with students for all four years of high school generates accountability, ownership, and partnership with students. They reflected that, through this practice, "*students realize they can trust you and they're more receptive.*" Chambers feels that looping is, "*innovative because it's not just about their grades, it's also about what sports the students are involved in, what clubs are they involved in. They are inviting you to their sweet 16 and you really get to know them. The relationship between students and administrator is not limited to the classroom; it's throughout the entire building.*"

Educators shared how this practice builds partnerships with students, and noted how it facilitates a deeper understanding of student capabilities that translates into proactive collaboration between grade level administrators and teachers. Chambers explained:

That partnership is one that really helps all students no matter what their academic strength is. I've never experienced that anywhere else before. And sometimes you may be apprehensive, but now that they're juniors, I am ecstatic for their senior year. And I think that is something that translates to your work as the grade level administrator with each group of teachers that you move up with. 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.

Educators also noted how looping facilitates a student-centered approach and assists in building students' trust in administrators' responsiveness to meeting their needs. Doretta Sockwell, ninth-grade English teacher, reflected on how this unique approach supports students' academic

performance: "*Some scholars need a little bit more love than others. I've been at other schools. This is the first school where it is truly student-centered. Usually it is academic- or data-driven. However, in order to get the data, you have to meet the basic needs of the students. And I think that's what the other schools are missing. So, once you get the trust of the students and you respond to their needs, the data will come.*"

Between the 2018–19 school year and 2021–22 school year, **University High School** saw an increase in NJSLA-ELA proficiency rates, and surpassed the district and state, increasing from 26% to 49%. In sharing attributing factors to their school's success, educators noted that the implementation of a schoolwide focus on integrating literacy across content areas was key in not only graduation rates but their students' performance in ELA. Billups shared, "*We were all on the same page in bringing critical practices when it comes to developing literacy. And that's something that's still front and center for the work that we do across the board, as well as across all content areas. Looking at that and staying focused, it may seem like a single focus that may or may not change things drastically, but we've seen benefit in having that focus on developing literacy across all content areas.*"

Educators also shared how text selection, making learning material relevant for students, and using multiple ways for students to demonstrate mastery are key factors to their success. For Sockwell, "*My second point is the instruction, the level of rigor, and text selection. Because the students trust me, they're like, 'Which book are we reading next? We really enjoyed that first book. Which short story, which poem are we going to read now?' If you can get them with the first text, you've got them for the next 10 months. And I've been successful in doing that.*" In describing how the integration of literacy across content areas and making learning material relevant for students impacts student outcomes, Billups shared:

> **It's really just about relevance. And then, even more important than that, this idea of developing critical thinking. One of the biggest vehicles for developing critical thinking is learning critical approaches when it comes to developing literacy. How do I interpret information that's given to me? How do I interact with it regardless of the medium, whether it's written, whether it's visuals and things like that, or even if it's conversational, what can I decode from what's being told to me explicitly or what's implicit? That's guided a lot of the work that we've done.**

Integration of social-emotional learning and project-based learning were also noted as key approaches to improving students' outcomes and increasing opportunities for them to apply what they learn in real-life contexts through collaboration and research. Interviewees also shared that project-based learning topics ranged from women's rights to LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and environmental protection issues. In describing her students' experiences of project-based learning, Sockwell recalled, "*Prior to that, they didn't think that environmental protection impacted them directly. After project-based learning, they realized just how much it does. It also gave them an opportunity to collaborate and to research.*"

Educators also saw their recent expansion of partnerships with colleges and universities as a contributing factor to student outcomes. An administrator noted that all students attending

University High School have the option of dual enrollment—taking classes for college credit while still in high school—and shared, "*We have expanded our college partnerships drastically. We have the first partnership with an HBCU in the [Newark] district, which is [with] Howard University. But we also have [partnerships with] Rider University [and] Rutgers University. In total, we have seven college partnerships that offer varying credit options for college courses. The highest is Essex County, with 60 credits.*" Highlighting dual-enrollment partnerships, interviewees noted that students who take dual-enrollment courses with Essex County College have the opportunity to obtain 60 college credits and graduate with an associate's degree while still attending high school.

They also noted that removing barriers to college-credit courses in high school and increasing options for student enrollment have had a direct impact on academic outcomes, student interest in college level courses, and participation in dual enrollment. One administrator noted:

> **Put it in front of them; they want it. They are hungry. The percentages have increased, in [terms of] the number of students who have access to the associate's degree program. It's transformed this drive in them. You can't make up for the reality of who's in these courses, but you can for who has opportunities to take the courses. I think just leveling up the opportunities for them. They're there, they're ready, and we cannot get in the way and be a barrier to them excelling beyond what we can envision or imagine for our young people.**

Representation of students with disabilities was also emphasized in dual-enrollment courses and interviewees expressed, "*Every dual-enrollment cohort has at least one student with an IEP. All the professors are very accommodating.*" Similarly, educators noted that students with disabilities are also represented in AP classes and expressed that intentional information-sharing by school counselors is a key practice: "*Whether it's a student in our general education population or special needs population, all the kids are afforded the same opportunities.*"

An administrator shared how these practices of increasing college-level courses, removing barriers, and promoting student accountability transforms student and parent perspectives: "*I think the scholar motivation and parent motivation [are important]. So, for me, I've seen the mindset shift in scholars. We have some amazing scholars who walk in the door every day, who are ready to learn and capable of learning and just exude excellence.*"

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 decision-making, professional development, and 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 possibility for 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, as well as 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 herein 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, a small sampling of some of the state's most effective educators have shared expertise that is quite germane to the mandate of the Department of Education's new Office of Learning Equity and Academy Recovery. This report contributes to this critical work the voices and wisdom of educators across a range of grade levels, disciplines, ranks, and roles.

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