

U.S. Department of Education
2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [X] Title I [] Charter [] Magnet[X] Choice

Name of Principal Mrs. Megan Desmarais
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Northfield Elementary School
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 104 Main Street
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Northfield State MA Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 01360-1022

County Franklin County

Telephone (413) 498-5842 Fax (413) 498-5459

Web site/URL https://nes.pvrsk12.org/ E-mail desmaraism@pvrsk12.org

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent* Patricia Kinsella E-mail kinsellap@pvrsk12.org
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Pioneer Valley Regional School District Tel. (413) 498-2911

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board President/Chairperson Ms. Julie Burke
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

**Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, leave blank.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The electronic signature on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Data should be provided for the current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 2 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 0 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 1 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 3 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
- Suburban
- Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	6	2	8
K	7	12	19
1	12	4	16
2	16	7	23
3	10	10	20
4	16	13	29
5	18	10	28
6	9	14	23
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
Total Students	94	72	166

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0.6 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 0 % Asian
 - 0.6 % Black or African American
 - 0 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 1.2 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 90.5 % White
 - 7.1 % Two or more races
 - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2019 - 2020 school year: 5%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	6
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	3
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	9
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	174
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.05
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	5

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Hiligaynon, Moldavian

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 2 %
3 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 51 %

Total number students who qualify: 84

8. Students receiving special education services: 27 %
44 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>7</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>2</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>7</u> Developmental Delay | <u>12</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>5</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>10</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>1</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 5
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	13
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	10
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	17
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	2

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 13:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

Northfield Elementary School is deeply committed to providing a safe, engaging, and inclusive teaching and learning environment that promotes respect, responsibility, and academic excellence.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

The District followed a fully remote model for the first three weeks of school with the exception of our “special population” students who attended in-person from the start. Our preschool and kindergarten classes started the year with the full in-person model as they were designated as special populations, although some kindergarten families initially chose the remote learning option. First through sixth graders followed a hybrid model for most of the year, which included two days of in-person learning and two days of remote instruction with cohorts alternating Fridays. The entire District moved to a full remote learning model from mid November through mid January due to COVID cases in the area before resuming the hybrid model. We began full in-person learning on April 5th with only 10 students remaining remote.

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

Northfield Elementary School has not been able to offer very many school choice slots in recent years due to classroom capacity. When they are available, applicants have typically been accepted into our program simply because the number of requests had not exceeded the openings. If that was the case, we would use a lottery system.

PART III - SUMMARY

Northfield is a rural New England community nestled in the northern Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts. This farming town is geographically unique in that it is the only town in Massachusetts that borders both New Hampshire and Vermont, and the only community bisected by the Connecticut River.

Northfield Elementary School (NES) is part of the Pioneer Valley Regional School District (PVRSD) which serves the towns of Bernardston, Leyden, Northfield, and Warwick. There are three schools in our district: Bernardston Elementary, Northfield Elementary, and Pioneer Valley Regional School which serves both middle and high school. Within the last two years, both Leyden Elementary School and Warwick Community School were closed and merged with Bernardston Elementary and Northfield Elementary, respectively, due to low enrollment. Sustaining our programming with limited resources is a challenge for small districts like ours.

NES is committed to building within each student a strong educational foundation and preparing them to successfully meet challenges of the future. Our goal is to help each student grow in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits. Teachers encourage initiative, individual and group responsibility, critical thinking, and creativity. We expect that all students will develop a strong sense of community and will become active members of their classroom community, their school, and their town.

While no longer located in the town of Northfield, Northfield Mount Hermon (NMH), a private high school in neighboring Gill partners with us to provide our third through fifth grade students with French instruction. This relationship allows NMH to establish a class where their high school students can further develop their fluency in French through an instructional role while our students are afforded the opportunity to experience another language and culture.

The Dickinson Memorial Library is just a five minute walk from our school which allows our students easy access to its programs and resources. Monthly or bimonthly, our classes visit the library, where they have greater access to books and resources. These visits also provide an appreciation for all that a local library has to offer. Students are encouraged to sign up for library cards, and there is much outreach to families from the librarians. In addition to class visits, one librarian will often come to NES to publicize upcoming events, engage in special projects at the school, and collaborate with classroom teachers to ensure they have the resources they need for quality instruction. Because we follow an early release schedule on Fridays, the library offers upper grade students access to the library as a place to “hang out” after school. They also provide special workshops, movies, science activities, and clubs in which many of our students participate.

Since we serve two small towns, parent involvement is high and teachers come to know our families quite well through routine communication and family involvement. Our annual Open House typically yields at least 90% family participation including children, parents/guardians, and grandparents. Teachers are able to meet with most, if not all parents during our fall and spring parent-teacher conferences. Conferences were held remotely both last spring and this school year, which we found to be equally successful. We are fortunate to have a strong Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) which organizes several family events throughout the year such as Pumpkin Palooza, Family Dance Night, Bingo Night, and Spring Carnival. All of these are always well attended and enjoyed by children, caregivers, and community members. Teachers are always able to secure parent volunteers for special classroom projects and field trips.

The parents of school-aged children in our community are willing to advocate for their children’s education and have consistently supported the school budget at town meetings. In recent years, our district has faced budgetary challenges. When cuts were being proposed, families attended School Committee meetings to express their concerns. Families have consistently fought to maintain the programs that are valued in this community. Most recently, our elementary band program, which had been temporarily reduced, has since been restored due to family advocacy.

Northfield Elementary School is a positive school community built on a foundation of professionalism, collaboration, flexibility, and relational trust. While it may not be the first thing one would think about in

terms of what makes a school unique, it is important to speak about the positive adult community that has come to exist at NES. Five years ago, our district entered into a partnership with Chip Wood, co-founder of the Center for Responsive Schools, and his team from the Center for Courage & Renewal who were, at the time, piloting a program called Leading Together: Building Adult Community in Schools. At that same time, the principalship at NES was changing hands and our school was selected to participate in this unique and exciting professional development opportunity. A team of four teachers and the principal embarked on a three-year journey of learning how to develop relational trust, shared leadership, and a sense of belonging within the NES adult community. We learned that a key variable in the success of a school is the degree of relational trust among the adults within a school community. We learned how to lead our staff in activities and protocols that would build trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to our work with students. As a school team, the staff developed adult community guidelines, read inspirational poems, journaled, reflected, and learned protocols for discussions that include a space where all voices can be heard and listening openly is valued. The Leading Together practices are intended to support the “work before the work.” This approach builds capacity for schools to achieve great success no matter the initiative, because the adult community is strong and cohesive. When we started this work five years ago, we could not have imagined how valuable it would be in managing schooling during a pandemic. As you read on, you will get a sense of the profound impact that Leading Together has had on this small town, community-centered school.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

The PVRSD is in its second year with a new district curriculum coordinator after several years without this position. Prior to losing this position due to budget reductions, the district had begun working toward developing a cohesive curriculum program, especially in the area of English Language Arts (ELA). The district adopted the Teachers' College Reading and Writing Project Units of Study in Reading and Writing authored by Lucy Calkins. Teachers utilize a reading and writing workshop approach and provide authentic learning experiences for students. Educators discovered some gaps in this program and therefore supplement with a variety of resources to fill those gaps, especially in the area of phonics instruction in the early grades. This has caused a loss of the continuity needed for student growth. During the last few years, the district identified this as an area of need, and with the support of our new curriculum coordinator, we formed an ELA Curriculum Committee last winter. Proudly, this committee was able to maintain its goal of researching best instructional practices and reviewing research-based programs even when the pandemic hit last spring. During this school year, several teachers piloted the Collaborative Classrooms Literacy (CCL) program and the committee decided to adopt this program for implementation schoolwide in the fall of 2021. This particular program was selected because it offers a comprehensive ELA program which includes the following key elements: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, and writing. This program also includes an intervention component that is designed to align closely with classroom instruction. Our committee values the CCL program's integration of social-emotional learning into its lessons, its high quality mentor texts, and its routine opportunities for student choice and voice, which are essential for student engagement. Understanding the need for systematic implementation and thorough professional development, the district will be contracting with the company to engage in yearlong training.

To assess student achievement in ELA, we use several universal screeners: Track My Progress, Benchmark Assessment System, Words Their Way spelling inventory, and On-Demand writing assessments. We conduct data meetings several times throughout the year to track and analyze student performance, determine which students need further intervention, and create groupings for tier two interventions. Progress monitoring occurs during the course of these interventions and is reviewed at follow up data meetings so that program adjustments can be made as needed.

Our math instruction is based off of the Math Expressions program which was selected due to its alignment with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This program focuses on the essential grade level standards, includes many problem solving strategies, and incorporates aspects of essential math practices outlined in the CCSS. In addition to the program itself, teachers have developed hands-on games and activities to support a deeper grasp of math concepts and ensure student engagement. There has been an increased use of strategies, such as number talks, to develop strong number sense and computational fluency. A math workshop model is used in many classrooms which allows the teachers to differentiate instruction and provide student choice. Students are also afforded self-paced individual practice opportunities through the use of a computer program called IXL. Student progression within this program is one measure of student achievement, along with frequent informal formative assessments, unit assessments, and a program called Track My Progress. These provide teachers with several data points to closely monitor student learning and provide interventions as needed.

Our recent developments in science education relate to incorporating science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) into daily teaching. This integrated approach provides many entry points for students to interact with real-world problem solving and to use critical thinking. Students learn that making mistakes is a natural part of the design process and rather than giving up, they revise their plan and try again. Not only are students participating in hands-on experiments and explorations, they are also gaining skills to support innovation, a skill needed in today's workforce. NES has partnered with The Hitchcock Center for the Environment, located on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst. Through a Mass Cultural Council grant, our students have benefited from this enrichment program for the past three years, with the last two continuing in a remote model. Students are given various challenges such as designing a roof that will capture rainwater, designing a method for filtering storm water, and designing a method to prevent soil

erosion.

Social studies is often integrated into reading instruction and experienced through current events presented in subscriptions such as Scholastic News. Students learn about community building, geography and mapping, and local, US and world history, as well as gain understanding of citizenship. Students often demonstrate their learning through individual and group projects that include class presentations. Student choice in topic and presentation mode are valued. Since the History and Social Sciences were revised in 2018, teachers have been informally piloting new materials as we work toward updating our curriculum.

During the pandemic, our goal for academic programming has been to continue with the district grade level curriculum. To achieve this, teachers collaborated with colleagues to establish priority standards and identified the most essential elements for teaching and learning within each unit. While the content of instruction remained somewhat similar to previous years, presentation and pacing adjustments were needed. Teaching to students in the classroom and online simultaneously depends on skillful use of technology and takes more time. In some cases, teachers were able to use their typical approaches in a Google Meet using a document camera to display their visual supports. In other cases, teachers prepared interactive Google Slides, utilized Bitmoji classrooms, placed students in breakout rooms for partner and small group work, and created assignments in Google Classroom. From the beginning, it was important to give teachers the autonomy to determine their own approaches based on their individual readiness. As teachers became more confident, they explored new programs and experimented with more advanced technology techniques. Teachers learned alongside students and there was a common understanding that we were all in this together. Mistakes were made and struggles were visible but both were accepted as part of teaching and learning during a pandemic.

1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):

1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:

Our preschool program prioritizes social-emotional learning and provides a strong early-academic experience. In addition to the Responsive Classroom approach used throughout NES, our early educators utilize S'cool Moves, Zones of Regulation, Second Step Social-Emotional Curriculum, and our newly installed sensory hallway to promote self-regulation and pro-social interactions. Additionally, emphasis is placed on gross and fine motor skill development. Teachers provide individualized instruction and modifications to meet students at their developmental levels. Preschool students engage in many co-constructed and child-initiated thematic topics during whole class lessons, small group activities, and strategically designed centers for play. Core content areas align with the Massachusetts standards and frameworks for Early Childhood as well as with our kindergarten through sixth grade Massachusetts standards to set the stage for future success.

During the 2020-2021 school year, preschool and kindergarten were designated as “high needs” groups who qualified for full-time, in-person schooling. Prior to the first day, teachers held individualized classroom visits for children to become familiar with safety protocols. Countless modifications were made and protocols were put in place to create a safe, yet engaging learning environment. These included social stories about mask wearing and social distancing, three-dimensional visual aids, stickers, and tape to mark six-foot distances, and plexiglass dividers to provide safe, yet interactive play areas.

Teaching Strategies Gold, anecdotal notes, and narratives are used to assess and document student development. Developmental screenings are administered each fall and service providers re-screen students of concern in the winter. Our district has set a goal to increase early intervention. These assessments allow providers, such as the occupational therapist, physical therapist, and speech language pathologist to intentionally push into classrooms to support ongoing student development in the early stages.

While preschool follows a specific set of guidelines, it is fully integrated into our elementary school community. Preschoolers participate in schoolwide events, and our preschool teacher participates in the NBRS 2021

district's professional development. While teaching resources and programs may differ, our curriculum selection process includes the preschool perspective to ensure continuity in our programming. This, in conjunction with a concentration of early intervention resources and collaboration between preschool and kindergarten staff assures that students can seamlessly transition to kindergarten.

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

All NES students participate in music, art, physical education, technology, and library once a week for a forty-minute period. Additionally, our fourth through sixth graders can elect to participate in our band program, which includes weekly lessons and ensemble experience. Due to COVID, much of this year's band instruction took place virtually. Although students could not play together, instruction included piano accompaniment which supported their aural skill development and ensemble practice. All other specials were held both in-person and online for remote students by using a concurrent teaching model. Specialist teachers provided engaging technology tools and meaningful approaches, which were similar to those of classroom teachers.

Our general music curriculum focuses on singing and movement and uses developmentally appropriate activities based on grade level and experience. Younger students move their bodies expressively and rhythmically to a variety of folk tunes and classical music. They begin to read music using a system of icons and syllables, and progress to standard musical notation. Students study the instruments of the orchestra, participate in fun body percussion activities, and continue with music reading and writing. Older students learn about famous composers of various musical genres. They also demonstrate an understanding of rhythmic reading skills by participating in bucket drumming.

Art classes provide a rich visual arts curriculum that incorporates the study of art styles, art history, and a broad range of art mediums. Students learn about different cultures and art forms. Art curriculum is aligned with state frameworks and supports students in problem solving, exploration of materials, art interpretation, and sharing ideas. The art teacher and classroom teachers collaborate in order to integrate art into students' grade level curriculum when appropriate.

Technology begins in kindergarten, and students learn basic skills such as logging into programs and manipulating touchpads. By sixth grade, students can confidently utilize technology tools in meaningful ways and safely navigate the internet with purpose. Our school uses G-Suite for Education and our students learn how to proficiently utilize Docs, Slides, Sheets, Gmail, and Google Classroom. Students also learn about the importance of Digital Citizenship and gain experience in coding. The technology and art teachers collaborated this year to help their students create an online gallery of their work, to delve into artist statements, and to present their work digitally.

Physical Education provides students with a variety of opportunities to learn discrete movement skills such as throwing, kicking, and catching as well as to participate in competitive and cooperative games and activities. Emphasis is placed on encouraging physical activity for life-long pleasure and fitness. Our Physical Education teacher provides a consistent message of "strive for your personal best." This message is reinforced during our district's fall Turkey Trot and our spring Fun Run. While team games were more limited this year, students were able to focus on their own skill development whether in-person, or online using a Bitmoji Classroom.

At this time, we do not have a formal health and wellness program. Our school nurse visits classrooms for brief lessons on proper handwashing, puberty education in our upper grades, helmet use while cycling, etc. However, our district recently received a health grant and we anticipate a formalized program will begin next fall.

3. Academic Supports:

We use a variety of universal screenings to assess our students' progress over time. Data meetings are used to review assessment results and, using a team approach, we identify students in need of tiered intervention. After a period of time, if a student is not making effective progress with

targeted and varied interventions, a team member requests a child study team meeting so that we can delve deeper into the student's learning profile and determine the most appropriate next steps. At times, we will make a referral for a special education evaluation.

When qualifying for special education services, teachers design specially tailored instruction to address each area of the child's disability. Our special education staff provide a safe learning environment to allow for risk taking. Special educators choose from a variety of strategic interventions and programs. We focus on the five components of reading to close the achievement gap with programs such as: Seeing Stars, LIPS, Wilson, and Heggerty. As with regular education interventions, progress monitoring occurs to gauge the effectiveness of the student's programming.

We strive to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students within their home district so that students may remain with their peers and families may continue to be closely involved with their child's programming. NES houses two district programs that have been established to meet the complex needs of some of our students. One program is designed for students with low cognitive abilities with or without behavioral challenges, and the other program provides a therapeutic classroom environment where students develop social skills, learn self-regulation techniques, and gradually reintegrate into their general education classroom.

English Learners (ELs) receive daily instruction from our English Language Learner (ELL) teacher. This instruction targets the four domains of language: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The ELL teacher consistently collaborates with classroom teachers to provide instruction that works in parallel to classroom content. Because we are a low incidence district for ELs, the ELL teacher is able to provide one-to-one instruction and support. Having ELs is new for our school and this is our first year with a designated ELL teacher. This position has been especially helpful in providing additional family support during our schoolwide remote instruction. While following the hybrid model, our ELs were designated as "special population" and attended school in-person daily. The ELL teacher's role includes outreach to families. Since we have had several transitions between learning models, communicating with these marginalized families has been extremely important. This open channel of communication has allowed clear instructions and expectations to reach these students and families during a particularly challenging school year.

When reflecting on why we were nominated for this prestigious award as an Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing School, I conclude that several factors likely play a role. First, as summarized above, we have made a great commitment to building a positive adult learning community. When adults are happy to be at work and willing to have meaningful conversations about student learning, student achievement improves. Second, our staff engages in professional conversations about teaching and learning. We consider new ways to improve our practices, examine the effectiveness of our core curriculum, and readjust interventions when needed. Lastly, each fall we pore over our state testing data. We spend time on individual student scores, but more significantly, we analyze test items and identify patterns that may point to standards or clusters falling below state average and strategize for how this can be addressed in lesson planning.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

Here at Northfield Elementary School, we strive to engage and motivate our students within a positive environment throughout all parts of every school day. This means that during every classroom lesson, we first address their social and emotional needs utilizing the perspective of the Responsive Classroom routines and structures. Our morning meetings throughout the building assist our students so they start each day with a feeling of belonging and worth. This is done through activities and sharings, as well as learning about the day to come. Students are offered content through multiple formats, with opportunities to grow confident and share their thinking and strategies safely with their teachers and their peers. Teacher language plays an important role in confirming that each person in our community has a voice that should be heard.

To promote belonging and sense of community, we hold monthly All School Meetings. These gatherings provide opportunities to recognize and celebrate student learning and student contributions to our school community. Our 6th graders lead these meetings, gaining leadership skills and confidence with public speaking. In fact, all of our students develop comfort in speaking, singing, presenting, or performing in front of their school peers. We believe that these meetings send a message to our students that they matter and that we are all here for them. Another way that our students step into modeling roles for younger children is during mixed grade buddy partnerships between classes. The confidence developed in leading the school or leading a younger child serves our students well as they move on each year.

While we have not been able to maintain all of our usual practices during this pandemic, engaging students in their daily learning has remained a focus. This was especially challenging when our school shifted into full remote learning for two months. Teachers put forth great effort to design interactive instruction using various technology tools such as interactive Slides and Jamboard. Teachers continued to include valued structures such as Morning Meeting, which was adapted for online learning when necessary. Teachers also began to give more emphasis to helping students develop a growth mindset to assist in this strange new mode. They provided supportive online classroom environments so that students would want to fully engage.

Many of our students continued to thrive, but some required additional measures to draw them in and keep them attending school. Our district worked diligently to get technology into the homes of our students, including hotspots where needed. When students were absent, or did not reappear after a break, teachers immediately communicated with families and tracked this information. Attendance tracking forms were created so that all instructors serving those students were aware of the concerns and were part of the support team.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

It is our intention to work closely with all children and caregivers in order to ensure that all students achieve their personal best. We have high expectations for all students and hope that each child will leave this school with an excitement for learning and a motivation to excel.

During normal times, our school community enjoys a variety of activities, many of which are PTO sponsored. In addition to those mentioned earlier, we contribute to and engage in our community in more ways than can be described here. Some examples are: holding an annual Thanksgiving Food Drive with donations delivered to the Northfield Food Pantry, partnering with the Northfield Fire Department for visits and fire preventions programs, field trips to the Quinn Sugarhouse during sugaring season, and walking field trips to the locally owned Creamie for ice cream cones in June.

To ensure parents are well informed, a monthly newsletter is distributed, regular emails are sent, and robo calls made to communicate upcoming events and important information. This year, we utilized surveys frequently to gather necessary information to support our transitions from one model to another. Administration and teachers offered parent forums through Google Meet to review our plans and answer

questions.

During COVID, mental health support was provided for families in bimonthly letters that addressed issues such as anxiety and parenting challenges during a pandemic. Parents and children received individualized support as needed. Support was also available to teachers as they managed their own mental health while learning to do their job in a whole new way. Weekly, the School Adjustment Counselor visited classes online to maintain connections with all students. She also continued to meet with individual students on her caseload.

Teachers found themselves in families homes, virtually, and caregivers received a window into the way classrooms are run and instruction is delivered. While this may have been unsettling initially, this became our new normal and an appreciation for each others' role grew. Parents have learned how to better support their own children with their academic endeavors and have come to know their children as learners.

The school staff worked hard to support students and parents who were struggling with remote learning or attendance. While we remained persistent, we showed empathy and compassion while strategizing with parents.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

The positivity modeled by staff at NES is reflected in the responses of families and the happiness of the student body. This positive community is strong because everyone has a voice, is valued, and feels supported by others. Collaboration is constant here: teachers act as professionals and establish boundaries, actively listen to colleagues, and assume good intentions. This is evident in data meetings when staff present their data in an equitable manner, ask clarifying questions, and respectfully negotiate decisions. Staff and administration lead through example rather than directives. This is mirrored in the school norms and positive environment. True leadership and community building inspires others to modify their actions through positive social modeling.

During the summer, a school reopening committee was formed to prepare for the enormous task of redesigning our school model to fit hybrid learning. Immediately teachers were involved in decision making around all aspects of hybrid teaching and learning. To prepare for a new instructional model that would be highly dependent on technology, staff participated in a multi-day training on creating interactive Google Slides to ensure that teachers had ways to engage our remote students as well as to have a structure to facilitate peer interactions. The learning curve was steep as many of our teachers had previously shied away from technology. The district also set aside ten days for teacher preparation and training prior to the start of school, during which time additional technology sessions were offered. Educators and support staff engaged in self-exploration, peer training, and guided technology instruction. It was critical that all staff had access to this training as all would be responsible for teaching students in new and creative ways. It was also important that the training opportunities were differentiated and allowed for choice so that we were meeting teachers' individual needs.

To allow teachers to continue to develop their craft, we reserved additional planning time every Friday. This allowed opportunities for grade-level collaboration, creating newly designed lessons, and developing new assessment methods. In addition, teachers were given time to prepare materials to be sent home to our remote and hybrid learners for their home days. Regular meetings were held throughout the year to reconnect and identify areas that needed more attention or revision as our learning model shifted. Staying connected with one another has been pivotal to our success.

4. School Leadership:

Since NES is a small school, there is one principal with no other formal leadership positions within the school. We do, however, have two other groups that play a key role in shared leadership and collaborative decisions making. We have three Teacher Leaders who work with the principal and curriculum coordinator to plan professional development, provide perspective on staff needs, and generate ideas for school improvement efforts. Additionally, we have a School Culture Advisory with three teachers serving. This

group is responsible for working with the principal to support a positive school culture.

There are also some positions, such as our adjustment counselor, early childhood specialist, school psychologist, and behaviorist who take on leadership roles with teachers and staff in their areas of expertise. With grant funding last fall, we were able to hire a part time social-emotional learning (SEL) coordinator who was available to support teachers and students in whatever capacity needed. During this pandemic, we were able to gather a team together to examine various SEL screeners and select one for use this year. This became another tool in our tool box.

Our principal, a former teacher, is someone who listens to teachers, who values teachers' autonomy, and who trusts the professional judgment of teachers. Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, our school began to explore the Leading Together model for building a positive adult climate. We spent many faculty meetings and professional development days establishing norms and protocols that allowed for open conversations among faculty, staff, and the principal. This ongoing work became the bedrock for the solid school community that emerged once COVID began.

When COVID hit, none of us, including our principal, had any previous experiences to draw from to prepare for redesigning instruction for our new learning models. There was not one person with all the answers. It became even more important to turn to one another for ideas, perspectives, and out-of-the-box thinking.

Educators approached things a little differently when "COVID school" began, and our diverse approaches were fully supported. All ideas were heard and valued. As a leader, our principal did as much as she could to help teachers organize their thinking, set up their spaces, learn technology, process, and problem-solve during the early pandemic weeks and beyond.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

While the town of Northfield does not have a lot of racial diversity, we do have economic diversity, diversity of family experiences and structure, and learning differences within our school community. These differences are embraced and supported through our inclusive approaches, collaborative efforts among staff in various roles, and commitment to providing a wide range of programming and services to support all students.

Most of our teachers have participated in Responsive Classroom training and have built their practice around respectful teacher language, building a classroom community, and providing explicit instruction around common schoolwide expectations. By modeling this level of respect between teachers and children and between adults, children learn that mutual respect benefits all and allows for a safe and productive learning environment.

In our teaching of local and American History, we prioritize the experiences of Indigenous and enslaved people. For example, we have made connections with Native leaders in the community through the Mt. Grace Land Trust. Those leaders have worked with our students by sharing stories and information about the natural world. In our World Geography and Cultures curriculum, emphasis is placed on a deep understanding of the similarities in five of the world's major religions and how those commonalities shape cultures around the world.

Over the course of this last year, prompted by recent events in our country, our staff shifted our professional development focus to developing a deeper understanding of racism. Last spring, the principal supported teachers by providing articles, words of support and encouragement, and guidance on how to speak with students about the disturbing events happening in our country. Over the summer, we offered copies of *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo to all staff and throughout the year have been engaging in small and large group conversations on specific chapters and topics. Our two full-day inservices were geared toward anti-racism work and

recognizing implicit bias. This anti-racism work will continue beyond this year. We are a school that responds to what is going on in the world. We do not ignore or shy away from difficult conversations and topics. We are willing to process and explore ideas and experiences in order to give the best support to children.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Maintaining our sense of community has been the one essential practice that has allowed us to continue to successfully educate our students during this pandemic.

When we closed in March, there was no hesitation. Everyone knew that we needed to quickly adapt and somehow stay connected to our students, our families, and one another. We truly had no idea what we were going to be facing in the weeks to come and at that time, never imagined we would not be resuming our normal lives even a year later.

Our number one priority was to reach out to families and students to make sure everyone was safe and accounted for. Student well-being was our main focus for the first few weeks of the pandemic. Would children be left home alone? Would family members lose their jobs? Would our students lose loved ones? We started slowly. Reaching out to reluctant students and matching them up with specific staff members would become a common practice throughout the remainder of the year. Days were spent finding ways to help students stay connected with their teacher and their classmates by using Google Meets with low demand and high interest activities, such as read aloud, games, snack time, and morning meeting. Gradually, teachers began more formalized remote instruction and creativity kicked into high gear. Because the expectations remained realistic, teachers took risks and experimented with new approaches. Grade level teams were established to support peer collaboration and Fridays were reserved for this important work.

Meanwhile, our adult community created various school spirit opportunities such as the following: staff lined the parking lot driveway and held signs with inspirational messages on a cold Saturday morning during our first packet pick up, we participated in a district parade through all four towns on a rainy Friday night, and we recorded videos with “We miss you,” messages to send to families. We went the extra mile for our students and community. We established from the onset that we were in this uncertainty together. Families felt our support and compassion, and they frequently expressed their gratitude for our efforts. Teachers felt appreciated and valued by families. We had launched into what would be a new way of working with our families which had a positively impact on our students throughout the year.

Our work with our colleagues was equally important. Every staff member in every area had shifted to remote teaching. This was brand new to all of us, and for the first time, we were all on a level playing field. We turned to each other for support, ideas, and camaraderie. We, the NES adults, were in this together and knew we were greater together. Our collegial connections grew stronger. We were reminded to be flexible and adaptable, even when that caused discomfort. Our vulnerability and willingness to be imperfect propelled us forward-- again and again.

The energy and effort we put forth last spring to maintain our community, while not sustainable long-term, laid the foundation for the year to come. Families rallied. They became an integral part of the daily education of their children. While juggling their own work and parenting, they met unfamiliar and often challenging demands of online school. They became fluent in Google Classroom, Google Meets, and email correspondence. They saw that teachers were standing with them to support and educate their children in the most disconcerting of circumstances. We had developed a true partnership with our families.

Throughout the last year, we have faced and conquered extraordinary challenges. Our school system was not designed to operate in the way that we had to embrace, yet we did it. With students at the forefront of our work, we have accomplished what seemed impossible only a year ago. Because of the relational trust, teamwork, and family support, our school has become a stronger, more cohesive community. When this is over, we can look back at our experience and confidently say that we did all we could for each and every student and family at Northfield Elementary School.