

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 [] Choice

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

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

School Mailing Address 340 Homans Avenue
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Closter State NJ Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 07624-2907

County Bergen County

Telephone (201) 768-3860 Fax _____

Web site/URL https://hillside.closterschools.org/ E-mail dmsmith@nvnet.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* Mr. Vincent McHale E-mail mchalev@nvent.org
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Closter Public School District Tel. (201) 768-3001

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. Melody Finkelstein
(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):
- 1 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 0 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 2 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	22	13	35
K	51	37	88
1	73	56	129
2	56	53	109
3	67	61	128
4	65	66	131
5	0	0	0
6	0	0	0
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	334	286	620

*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):
- 0.3 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 40.8 % Asian
 - 0.9 % Black or African American
 - 9 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 1.5 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 44.9 % White
 - 2.6 % 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	17
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	16
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	33
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	640
(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):

Albanian, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Korean, Malayalam, Russian, Spanish, Turkish

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 12 %
77 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 0 %

Total number students who qualify: 1

8. Students receiving special education services: 16 %
98 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>8</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>12</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>25</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>14</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>2</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>2</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: 2
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	2
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	32
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	27
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	38
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	4

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 19:1

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	99%	97%	98%	97%	98%
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.

The Hillside Elementary School mission is to show a concern for each child and be committed to 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.

In August 2020, families chose hybrid or virtual models for their students. Two additional times during the year, families were able to switch from virtual to hybrid or hybrid to virtual depending on their preference. Both models have shortened school days ending before lunch. In November, an afternoon session taught virtually was added for all students. The hybrid model ran on an A/B schedule with in-person cohorts alternating with asynchronous days. In December, asynchronous days were changed to live-streaming. In February, Kindergarten was able to merge the cohorts due to the size of the rooms and the small number of students in the grade level, joining the preschool program that was five days a week since September. In the spring, the cohorts merged when the CDC changed its guidelines from six feet to three feet of social distancing for elementary students.

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

PART III - SUMMARY

Hillside Elementary School is part of the Closter, New Jersey, community. Over six hundred students fill the halls in grades PreK-4. Most students either walk or are driven by the parents to the building in the small suburb of New York City. The students attend Tenakill Middle School in fifth grade and go onto the Northern Valley Regional High School District for grade nine.

The motto of Hillside is “A Concern for Each Child and a Commitment to Excellence.” The school provides a strong foundation in reading, writing, and math. In addition, the students engage in programs in STEM, hands-on science, technology, library media and Spanish, with dedicated instructional staff in those subjects. Hillside has earned the National Association of Music Merchants Foundation Award as a Best Community for Music Education. Including general music, students can participate in orchestra, band or chorus in the upper grades. ICARE, the social and emotional learning program created in-house, helps to promote a positive school climate and a safe and affirming environment.

The professional composition of the staff includes nearly 60 full-time teachers, additional 45 paraprofessionals, a principal and several office staff and custodians. District instructional support includes a supervisor of curriculum and instruction (often serving as assistant principal), a director of special services, and the district superintendent, whose offices are in the building.

The diversity of Closter is a strong element to its success. About forty percent of the students speak another language at home, including Korean, Hebrew and Spanish. The annual Lunar New Year celebration is one of the most popular programs during the year and would not happen without the support of the parents. Students are provided with specialized English language instruction for those who qualify. In most grades, minority students have become the majority owing to the increased diversity of the region.

Overall, the parent support for the community is one of the most significant reasons for Hillside's achievements. Parents are active at poetry celebrations in the classrooms, during the PTO-sponsored lunch, for fundraising for technology improvements, or on school-sponsored committees.

Hillside likes to consider itself a leader in innovation for elementary education. Several features of the school back up this belief. Teachers are exceptionally well-trained with professional development from the regional partnership, Northern Valley Curriculum Consortium (NVCC), of which Closter School District is a member. New staff members attend a multi-year employee induction program through the NVCC to foster professional growth. Teachers have daily common planning time by grade level as well as additional daily, school-wide common planning time. Each classroom is equipped with the latest technology balanced by diverse reading materials and classroom libraries for differentiated instruction. Fourth graders broadcast the morning announcements each day via YouTube with Hillside News Network (HNN) using studio level equipment.

For the students who need additional support, Hillside provides services from within the school. On hand to attend to emotional growth include a school counselor, a district psychologist and a school social worker. The full spectrum of support is supplemented with basic skills instruction as needed. Additional services include an occupational therapist, speech therapists, and a learning disabilities teaching consultant. Special education teachers provide both pull-out and push-in support. Collaborative models are offered whenever necessary. Multisensory reading instruction is offered as well. Gifted education is also part of the services for students who qualify. Hillside receives shared services from the Northern Valley regional partnership, including a physical therapist and behaviorists. At the earliest ages, Hillside begins with integrated preschool and has additional small group instructional classes.

For the pandemic, instruction has reflected the safety needs of the students. A fully virtual model and hybrid instruction take place daily. Students in hybrid alternate in-person days with live streaming, while separate teachers teach in the virtual model. The technology integration specialist is instrumental in implementation and coaching the staff. Students were each assigned a device to be used in the building. If students needed an additional device for home use, Hillside provides an additional device for online learning. Families were

invited to choose the model and were able to switch during the year.

Finally, in Hillside our core values are that all students can learn and thrive academically, socially, and emotionally with support from staff, parents, and peers; skilled, caring teachers are the most important variable in the classroom and we should consistently provide resources to assist them in life-long learning; instruction should be differentiated and culturally responsive to address students' learning styles in a strong home-school-community connection and to respect Closter's diversity; open and honest communication is vital to creating a positive environment for all. Finally, we believe in the value of diversity and pledge to create a positive culture that safeguards equity, inclusion, dignity, and respect for all.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

The Hillside faculty developed curriculum in conjunction with the NVCC. Teachers from each district write the curriculum for core subjects reflecting primary and upper elementary levels. The school develops its own pacing guide and assessments to reflect the Northern Valley curriculum.

In spring of 2020, the school relied on asynchronous work on learning management systems. Teachers made videos with mini-lessons. Since fall, however, Hillside has both a hybrid, in-person schedule and a fully virtual model in grades K-4, while PreK remains in person. For hybrid, alternating groups are in-person or live streaming on an A/B schedule. Pre-pandemic, the schedule operated on a six-day rotation to support the special area schedule. Students attend virtual learning five days a week. For both models, students meet virtually in an afternoon session. Teachers continue to meet during common planning time to ensure pacing and lessons are adapted for the appropriate model. Each grade level chose which LMS would be appropriate for their learners; therefore, K-2 uses Seesaw, Grade 3 uses Google Classroom, and Grade 4 uses Schoology. Assessments are provided through these platforms. All staff members have been trained on Zoom. The school has a technology integration specialist to help teachers plan activities that meet the needs of the virtual and hybrid environments.

To meet NJ Student Learning Standards, teachers teach the core of the Language Arts program for the K-4 curriculum using materials developed over the years for writing and reading units. Overall, the language arts program fosters a love of reading providing student choice in reading selections. Since teachers plan together, the units reflect diverse materials and core texts. The teachers have relied on the research and techniques of multiple authors and developers. The instruction balances direct mini-lessons with differentiated assignments. Teachers evaluate student writing skills using grade-level rubrics, and they assess independent and instructional reading levels. Writing celebrations at the end of units are encouraged in the spring. In the upper grades, students submit to the Dorney Poetry Competition, through the Northern Valley. Phonics First, an Orton-Gillingham based program to provide multisensory reading instruction, provides fundamentals within the K-2 program. Dyslexia specialists trained the faculty. Hillside can also depend on the school reading specialist. Some of the foundational reading and writing skills also take place with current events as every student receives a monthly magazine. A pre-pandemic highlight of the ELA program includes Reading Buddies when older students meet with younger classes to practice reading and listening skills.

The most important goal of Hillside's mathematics program is for students to explain their reasoning and use various models to address NJSLS. The language spirals up each grade. Grade level teams refine lessons and ensure pacing is rigorous. Math uses mini-lessons of direct instruction with a menu of activities to reinforce or enhance. To support instruction, Hillside uses a textbook as a predictable resource for a consistent scope and sequence.

Pre-pandemic Hillside used a triangulated approach to the science standards with STEM lab, science lab, and classroom-based lessons. For consistency, the classroom teacher attended all three locations to assist in the STEM and science lab activities with specialist instructors. During the pandemic, science is taught virtually and the STEM and science labs are closed. Classroom instruction that is both literacy rich and hands-on continues for science. Each grade level team plans lessons to deliver content, discuss assessments, and meet the state standards using a variety of resources. Problem-based investigation is the primary instructional method.

Using the social-emotional learning curriculum of ICARE, students focus on social awareness, responsible decision-making, and modeling respect within the public discourse. Grade level teams meet weekly to plan social studies lessons to deliver the content and meet standards while the school counselor supports culturally relevant language to use in the classroom. Language arts and social studies often intersect as interdisciplinary for current events and critical thinking skills. Vibrant, reflective discussion and technology-based learning are the primary instructional approaches.

Teachers differentiate instruction with activities that meet the standards and the needs of students, with student choice in which activities to complete or students' need for a reteach or enrichment opportunity. Teachers place Hillside students who are not meeting ELA and/or math standards in the classroom or on benchmark assessment into a basic skills program called Plus to reinforce skills in each grade level.

Hillside uses standards-based report cards to provide feedback for student progress. Daily instruction includes narrative feedback for formative assessments. Teachers can pull students together and assign work based on their strengths and weaknesses. Teacher teams have developed summative assessments, including unit tests, to illustrate the standards. Teachers use the benchmark assessments to inform instruction by understanding patterns and to determine if students have achieved the standards or if they need to reteach standards.

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

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

Hillside has three PreK classes based on the integrated model of instruction. The program has a mix of general education (typical) and special education students. All typical peers must be Closter residents. Hillside utilizes the Tools of the Mind curriculum, a research-based early childhood model combining teacher professional development that helps young children develop the cognitive, social-emotional, self-regulatory, and foundational academic skills they need to succeed in school and to reach each child's highest potential. Melding Vygotskian theory with cutting edge neuroscience research, Tools is a unique approach to teaching and learning with research demonstrating positive outcomes for children and teachers. Via Tools, students participate in thematic based lessons that address the NJ Teaching and Learning Standards. Students build foundational skills in letter formation through multisensory practices and Learning Without Tears handwriting methods.

Like most of Hillside, the pandemic has impacted the PreK program. All students are required to wear masks and our program hours were shortened to allow for increased cleaning and ventilation. The PreK Before Care program was eliminated to limit close contact but the After Care program, created to assist working parents, continued with shortened hours and student cohorts to limit student cross-contamination. On the rare occasion when necessary due to quarantine, preschool classes may be conducted virtually.

Most students in Closter's PreK continue with Hillside's elementary program and teachers articulate skills for grade level progression. Our Primary Teachers indicate the high level of early academic readiness skills displayed by our preschool students. Advantages of attending Hillside preschool include familiarity with the building, routines, instructional staff including special area teachers, and Child Study Team members, which helps promote readiness and success. Students attend full school assemblies and cultural events.

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Just like the core subjects, Hillside teachers develop the other area curriculum collaboratively with NVCC districts. Specialists from each district write the curriculum including visual and performing arts, comprehensive health and physical education, world language, library media, and technology. Teachers write the curriculum using the Understanding by Design format featuring essential questions that address the standards. Full-time faculty, that serve Hillside students only, teach these disciplines.

Pre-pandemic, each student PreK-4 received instruction all year in the discipline, one to two times per week. For 2020-2021, these classes are taught virtually to minimize exposure and cross contamination. Instead of being taught all year, the classes run on a trimester basis multiple times per week. For example, the Spanish teacher accesses the students via Zoom two to three times a week (A/B schedule) and could be working with the fully virtual class or a hybrid class in the building. Physical education teachers creatively adapted lessons to build on skills and engage in aerobic activities. The Library Media Specialist adapted the physical library to the virtual world, utilizing online research and read-alouds to engage students. The visual and performing

arts teachers have shifted their instruction based on material limitations (ex. instruments, art supplies) to reinforce theory and practice in the arts. With the new model, the benefit has been that the teachers are able to focus on only two grade levels per trimester, rather than six grades per week, as they adapt their curriculum to the virtual environment. Whether it is yearly or by trimester, the students receive the same number of hours for the subjects with a live teacher.

Another feature of the overall curriculum is the STEM and science programs. Pre-pandemic, time in the labs was part of the master schedule. The specialists address the Next Generation Science Standards within NJSLS, creating engaging classes with phenomena-based investigations that enhance the science curriculum. Teachers address engineering and coding in the STEM lab featuring activities with robotics, 3D printing, or maglev tracks. The science program also features a vegetable garden and a succulent garden for the students to work in over the growing seasons. Along with other animals in the science lab, Hillside participates in Trout in the Classroom from the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife which helps teach water conservation and life cycle. The environmentalist from the Closter Nature Center also is another compelling science resource for Hillside students.

A final feature of the overall school curriculum is addressing social-emotional learning. Pre-pandemic, classroom teachers taught monthly themes one to three times per month. For 2020-2021, the school counselor led daily lessons related to the monthly themes. The school counselor provides asynchronous presentations and activities for the students. The daily schedule reflects the SEL time and the standards-based report card now includes behaviors related to SEL themes.

3. Academic Supports:

Hillside teachers assess and monitor students for academic achievement throughout the year. Teachers are skilled in interpreting data on disaggregate levels. Within the general education setting, whole group multisensory reading instruction begins in kindergarten. They look at norms and age and grade level expectations. Interventions can begin in the classroom and the curriculum supports differentiated materials and pacing. Regarding federal accountability, all subgroups either meet goals or targets for student performance. Teachers often use small group instruction to work on students' math skills. Yet despite classroom interventions, some students may qualify for a multi-tiered system of support.

Teachers assess students using benchmark assessment at the beginning of the year. This data is used in at least two ways. If students qualify for basic skills based on the performance, they can enter the Plus program. Teachers also use classroom interventions to monitor student progress. At the year's end, teachers recommend the Plus program for students who have consistently performed below grade level in classroom and benchmark assessments.

For students who need further support, a teacher makes a referral to the Intervention and Referral (I&RS) team for additional monitoring. Led by the Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDTC), the school counselor and the principal, additional team members are from general and special education. At an I&RS meeting, teachers present their students who need additional support.

The benchmark data can also provide insight into students who need enrichment and even curriculum compacting within the classroom. The benchmark data is also part of the matrix for the gifted education program. A gifted education specialist can provide pull-out or push-in instruction as part of Hillside Enrichment Program (HEP) beginning in kindergarten. Teachers administer the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) to all second graders and use Renzulli scores as an additional data point to determine HEP eligibility.

After completion of the I&RS six-week monitoring, students who continue to fall below

expectations may then be referred to the Child Study Team for further testing to see if they qualify for special education services. Hillside offers a continuation of services including physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, Orton-Gillingham multisensory reading, collaborative instruction and pull out resource, as well as small group learning communities. Additional services may be out of the district.

The NJ Department of Education has granted Hillside a bilingual waiver. Teachers provide small group instruction and push-in instruction in the general education classroom to students who qualify for English language services. Teachers of English Language Learners have begun to train general education staff on SIOP, a research backed program on improving language acquisition. Students in the ELL program typically enroll for only one to three years. Students exit on multiple criteria, including ACCESS 2.0 scores and class performance. The ELL staff monitor the progress of students who have exited. Based on demographic data at this time, Closter does not have students who qualify for migrant services or homeless services.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

One of the core values on which Hillside has built its foundation is that all students can learn and thrive academically, socially, and emotionally with support from staff, parents, and peers. Hillside has implemented multiple supports to create an environment that is conducive to positive growth. The ICARE curriculum is the main pillar of social and emotional learning. ICARE and the school counselor provide the language to express emotion and the understanding to process the world around them. If students need a break, the counselor implemented Calm Corners with materials for a quick brain break. Additionally, an Eagle Scout built a sensory wall to ease dysregulation. A teacher-student buddy program and social groups led by the counselor assist with students who need regular support.

Fourth graders and three advisors run the Hillside News Network to provide a daily morning news show for the school. American Sign Language and Spanish words of the day, student performances of patriotic songs arranged by the music teacher, and mini-yoga lessons are just a few of the features in the broadcast accessible by private YouTube.

In addition to an engaging special areas schedule, students can visit the vegetable garden or the animals in the science lab. Behind the building is a succulent garden near the playground area. A walking trip to the local bank, post office, or nature center, can be a highlight for the students in addition to other trips to performing arts centers or museums. The entire third grade performs with the recorder at Carnegie Hall's Link Up program. College and career readiness is the core purpose of experiential learning opportunities and related to the standards.

The PTO runs after school programs for students to explore topics including fencing, magic, exotic pets, chess, building robots, video production, baking or Korean fan dancing. Even during the pandemic, the ASEP program continues to virtually engage students outside of school.

On special occasions students may dress up. Monthly school spirit days are routine. During Read Across America, students dressed in cultural attire, sports gear, and pajamas to help celebrate reading.

Teachers continue with professional development during the pandemic. The principal has led "Pop-Up PD" featuring the good work of the Hillside staff. A continual cycle of improvement and implementation is core to instruction and student learning.

During the pandemic, the Hillside community is engaged and thriving despite the challenges and changes to instruction. The staff and students are upbeat in the classroom and committed to learning.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

Two of the core values Hillside believes in are a strong home-school-community connection and that open and honest communication is vital to creating a positive environment for all. A few strategies include monthly principal newsletters, use of an LMS in each grade, presentations on curriculum and student motivation, as well as frequent messaging through a parent portal. The school also has relationships with community organizations that are helpful for strengthening the foundation of the Hillside experience.

One of the most important features of Hillside is the Parent Teacher Organization. The PTO is active in each classroom, provides school-wide assemblies, helps sponsor trips, and has provided technology upgrades such as the equipment for Hillside News Network and Promethean Boards in the classrooms. The PTO added air conditioning to each classroom. The Korean Parent Group, a subset of the PTO, is also very active to ensure clear communication between the school and families. The PTO runs the After-School Enrichment Program four days a week and the daily lunch program featuring local restaurants.

Since the pandemic, Hillside has offered multiple methods to improve communication and support for

families. Over the spring, the mental health professionals in the district manned a hotline for questions and concerns. The staff directed callers to the appropriate resources within the county and state. In September 2020, the staff made a video about the safety precautions students would follow, such as temperature checks and mask-wearing. Later, a week of parent engagement nights took place to help with online learning taught by the district occupational therapist, nurses, school counselors, and elementary teachers. The topics were on student motivation, literacy, creating a space at home optimal for learning, and technology assistance for parents. The ELL department hosted evenings on the school-to-family partnership. Parents attend regular “Coffee with the Counselors” online to ask questions and receive tips.

In the local community, several groups help the students. An environmentalist from the Closter Nature Center makes several appearances each year bringing in a variety of animals into the classroom, highlighting the importance of protecting habitats. The Rotary Club donates dictionaries to the 3rd grade. The students frequently collect for the Closter Food Bank, and former students have completed gardens and a sensory wall to earn Eagle Scout badges.

In addition to the NVCC, partnerships with The College of New Jersey’s iSTEM program, Lucy Calkins and Teachers College, and Gravity Goldberg, LLC, have provided ongoing professional support.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

One of the core values of Closter Public Schools is that skilled, caring teachers are the most important variable in the classroom and we should consistently provide resources to assist them in life-long learning. Hillside supports this belief in several ways. First, the school provides teachers with release time to attend professional learning with the Northern Valley Curriculum Center. NVCC offers over 120 classes on instructional strategies, curriculum content areas, social and emotional well being, and technology. Since the pandemic began, NVCC has offered drop-in workshops to support staff throughout the consortium of schools. Some topics have included online assessments, virtual classroom management, culturally responsive PD, and grade level or subject level round tables. Professional learning is a tenet of the Hillside experience.

Additional services from NVCC benefit Closter and Hillside. New teachers complete a three-year professional learning academy with courses on instructional leadership, classroom management, student collaboration, assessment, and action research. Teachers from another district coach new staff and Hillside mentors work with new teachers to explore challenges that arise during the year. These teachers meet with the principal monthly.

Second, in addition to release time, the master schedule reflects a commitment to professional culture. Grade levels have common planning time each day as well as an additional time slot for school-based professional development or meeting time. In the common planning time, the principal has led PD that reflects the instructional needs at the time based on student data and classroom observations. Topics have included differentiated instruction, online assessment, engagement, and student motivation. Staff book clubs also help to support staff. Recent selections have included *Lost at School* (Greene, 2014), *Engaging Children* (Keene, 2018), and *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2013). Faculty meetings, technology PD, and other meetings are held during the common planning time.

Administrators provide two professional development days for staff. The most recent in-service day offered a menu of activities from which teachers could choose based on their own personal goals. Outside consultants also work with staff on a variety of topics on these days. More often, district leadership provides modules for learning within the PD.

Finally, outside organizations assist with professional learning. Staff members are encouraged to attend conferences through the International Dyslexia Association, the NJ Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, the Art Educators of NJ, the NJ ASCD, or the NJ Science Teachers Association. At other times, Hillside has provided professional development from external developers embedded during the year including universities, non-profits, and other professionals.

4. School Leadership:

For Hillside, strong leadership is essential for providing a nurturing educational experience for the students. The principal has a network of stakeholders who support decision making based on the district's core values and help in the leadership of the community.

Teacher participation in long-term planning and daily events is helpful. During school wide common planning time, the principal runs several monthly meetings that speak to this commitment. For example, the Steering Committee provides feedback to reflect on past practice and improve communication between grade levels. The School Improvement Planning committee provides guidance on evaluation and professional development goals. The Pandemic Response Team was formed to address the ongoing needs related to an open school building during COVID-19. The principal also runs TOP, the new teacher orientation program, which has both non-tenured staff and tenured staff together discussing upcoming school events and how to handle them.

The principal can rely on several individuals to assist in the leadership of Hillside. The superintendent, director of special services and the supervisor of curriculum and instruction work in the same building and provide daily support, including conducting teacher evaluation. The supervisor of curriculum and instruction is also the part-time assistant principal since Hillside has a large number of students and staff members. The school counselor, LDTC, and social worker are instrumental in supporting the emotional growth of the students and providing assistance to parents as needed. For technology leadership, the technology integration specialist and the network administrator provide guidance and staff support. The principal also meets with the school members of the association to confer on staff concerns weekly. The principal and the nurse meet nearly every day to discuss the health concerns during the pandemic to review data and guidelines.

The district psychologist, school principal, school counselor, district social worker, district director of special services, school nurse, and school LDTC make up the Hillside Forum. The group discusses individual students who may need additional support and ensures the staff have the proper resources for assisting the students.

The teachers collaboratively articulate their curriculum and their student needs at least two times a week. They look at data regarding benchmarks and teacher-created assessments. Other topics could be best practices and lesson plan writing. For this pandemic year, teacher teams identified priority standards they would teach each trimester and communicated these to parents. Administrators may be at these meetings but the staff run their own PLCs as they see fit as autonomy and trust are important to the culture of Hillside.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

Hillside believes instruction should be differentiated and culturally responsive to address students' learning needs. A few features that have helped meet the core values include integrated models for special education, collaborative teaching, providing Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol for English learners inclusion, and the ICARE curriculum for all students that features social awareness and respect as two monthly themes. Staff attend on-going training on how to successfully integrate differently-abled learners.

Hillside can rely on a network of resources that provides support for cultural awareness. The first resource includes the Korean Parent Group within the Parent Teacher Organization, which provides a strong network of families to help navigate American schools. Additional resources include the district's Diversity Council, which examines current practice and planning for the future to be culturally responsive, the Bergen County Diversity Initiative, that is aligned to the NJ statute for featuring history of LGBTQ+ and individuals with disabilities in secondary education but locally extended down through kindergarten, and the NVCC, which offers workshops on culturally responsive teaching.

To provide voice for students with special needs, techniques include a parent advisory committee with the special services department and a recent parent and staff night, which featured the Nurtured Heart Approach. Additional communication includes a newsletter from the ELL department featuring tips for working with English learners.

One of the highlights of the school year is the Lunar New Year celebration. Korean and Chinese families sponsor the event that features dancing, songs, martial arts, games, costumes and video presentations. Students perform and teachers dress in traditional attire. The 3rd and 4th grade orchestra plays a traditional song and all students learn the words. Each year features a different country that celebrates Lunar New Year and the students learn how people celebrate in similar as well as unique ways. Even though students were unable to gather due to the pandemic, the parents organized a video on past celebration highlights with an educational component about the holiday for all to enjoy.

Hillside class and school libraries are updated to reflect diverse authors and illustrators that feature characters from many backgrounds, as literature is often a mirror, window or sliding door for cultural experiences. Through the Bergen County Diversity Initiative, the Amistad Commission and the Holocaust Commission, Hillside has lists to draw on that represent stories featuring LGBTQ+, individuals with disabilities, Black Americans, Asian Americans, immigrants, and other groups, themes on tolerance and social justice, and ideas that help promote cultural awareness.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Hillside Elementary School uses the ICARE program to deliver social-emotional learning competencies to students. During the 2020-2021 pandemic year, the school leadership identified that a strong social-emotional curriculum was necessary for the Hillside learners.

The School Safety Committee developed the ICARE Program ten years ago to address NJ's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying statutes and to better address students' social-emotional learning. Led by the school counselor, the committee membership includes a teacher from each grade level, an administrator, a health and physical education teacher, and parent representation. ICARE stands for Integrity, Caring, Attitude, Respect and Empathy. Hillside added additional SEL topics: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. Each topic is a monthly theme in the building. Social Awareness was added in 2020-2021.

Elements of the program include monthly lessons by competency. Pre-pandemic, other elements include ICARE Buddies with older and younger students getting together to work on the theme together, an ICARE chant, and ICARE-themed assemblies. As opposed to lessons addressing ICARE only one to two times per month, the ICARE School Safety Committee and school counselor had advocated for a more explicitly taught program. Research backs up this instinct. According to CASEL (2020), the four benefits of an effective SEL program include: 1) a decline in student anxiety, behavior problems and drug use, 2) overall improvement for academic and social competencies that help the school climate, 3) long-term improvements in academic and social skills, and 4) the cost-benefit analysis of an SEL program is better for the school. Daily ICARE assists in the development of these skills, as well as further fostering common language in the school community. Also when a situation that arises that is delicate or controversial, ICARE is able to provide lessons that are sensitive to the needs of the students, particularly with tragedy, violence, and bias.

Due to the pandemic, administrators made schedule changes for virtual and hybrid learning. Even with a shorter day, administrators kept ICARE as a priority in the schedule. Taught asynchronously by the school counselor, teachers are able to implement these lessons each day on the monthly theme, differentiated by grade level. The school counselor uses materials that are digital and have multimedia features. The implementation of the daily ICARE lessons has deepened conversations and provided much needed emotional encouragement for the community. Both students and staff feel supported, and ICARE has been instrumental in fostering engagement during the pandemic.