

# AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS: HOW WE THRIVE

## Prince William County Schools

Virginia



*Kaiser Permanente knows healthy schools support improved learning for children and higher job satisfaction among teachers and staff. That's why every year we are proud to sponsor America's Healthiest Schools, one of the country's longest-running national recognition programs honoring schools for their achievements in supporting the comprehensive health needs of students, teachers, and school staff.*

*In partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the annual awards recognize schools for implementing best practices and policies in up to nine topic areas related to advancing the physical, mental, and social-emotional health of staff, students, and families.*

*In 2024, 879 schools across 30 states were recognized, including seven from Prince William County, Virginia.*

Sitting just outside the nation's capital, Prince William County is home to nearly 90,000 students and more than 13,000 full-time school staff members. This year, 7 schools from the county took home America's Healthiest Schools awards across multiple topic areas. All of them were recognized for the Kaiser Permanente-sponsored award, "Cultivating Staff Well-being."

Prince William County is the second largest school division in Virginia. With the backdrop of the Potomac River, the county's population is diverse, and the majority of its students identify as Hispanic, African American, or Asian. Almost 30% of students are English language learners.

Kaiser Permanente applauds the district's accomplishments this award cycle and is proud to highlight some of the stories from several of the award-winning elementary and middle schools.

### Supporting School Health Services

At Minnieville Elementary School in Woodbridge, Virginia, the team focused much of their efforts on supporting student health services, one of the two categories in which they were awarded.

The school provided case management to students with chronic health conditions and was also able to provide referrals to other providers when applicable. The school health team

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proactively engaged families via email and text messages for on-site physical health screenings. This year those screenings ranged from routine immunizations and hearing and vision to asthma and dental checks. School nurses and qualified staff oversaw all the screenings.

Screenings to support student health were a priority at neighboring Kilby Elementary as well, where the staff used electronic monthly newsletters to inform parents and guardians about different health events, which included their annual eye screening in partnership with the Lions Club for all kindergarten and third grade students.

### **Strengthening Social-Emotional Health & Learning**

“Strengthening Social-Emotional Health and Learning” is another award category sponsored by Kaiser Permanente. It’s an area where Prince William County leans in across all schools, with a division-wide program providing resources and support to create opportunities for both implicit and explicit social-emotional learning (SEL). Each school designates an SEL coach who helps build staff capacity to meet their own and student SEL needs, assists in implementing schoolwide programming to support positive climate and culture, and helps guide educators in developing tools and practices that increase students’ emotional and social competencies.

Parkside Middle School in Manassas, one of the schools recognized for how they strengthen social-emotional health and learning, utilizes these county resources. The school counseling department, in partnership with school social-emotional learning coaches and district leads, rely on advisory lessons to raise students’ awareness of social-emotional learning competencies like self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and more. A highlight of their efforts is that students don’t just participate in the lessons; they are part of the process by reflecting on the competencies and identifying areas for improvement.

At Kilby Elementary, staff are also engaging in creative ways to build social emotional skills. One mainstay in every classroom is a peace corner. This is an area stocked with stress balls, coloring books, timers and reflective journals that acts as a calming space for all students to use. Teachers and staff read the reflective pieces students write while in the peace corners and then follow-up to check on how they are feeling.

### **Increasing Family & Community Engagement**

At Victory Elementary School in Bristow, the staff looks to engage beyond students, inviting families in for activities like multicultural nights, picnics, bingo, and other activities that help create a welcoming environment. This is why they were recognized for increasing family and community engagement. From these events to inter-school competitions - and even a BMX bicycle demonstration - fun isn’t something the staff shy away from.

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“School can be hard at times, incorporating these fun activities really adds to the experience,” said Carol McQuillan, a fifth-grade teacher at Victory. “Our students talk about it at home, and love to participate in building each other up. We are creating memories that they will take with them when they leave.”

Kilby Elementary also hosts several parent and family activities throughout the year. During each event, caregivers have a chance to provide feedback through online surveys. This method allows parents to weigh in on school practices and relevant topics in a culturally inclusive way as the virtual option allows for language options and reporting feedback privately.

### **Cultivating Staff Well-Being**

One overwhelming through line in all the award-winning Prince William County schools was the role of teachers and staff in creating a healthy school environment that allows everyone to thrive.

“The most important lesson we learned was the value of teamwork. We were able to rely on and assist each other whenever necessary, thanks to the supportive leadership that respects and values each team member,” said Yamina Gaspari, a teacher at Parkside Middle School. “Working in an environment where you feel appreciated, respected, and heard motivates you to exceed expectations. As a result, teachers come to work feeling happy, and this positivity is evident in their classes, and benefiting the students.”

That sentiment was echoed at Minnieville Elementary School, where they support staff in myriad ways, including beginning each meeting with a relationship building icebreaker question, creating breakrooms with fresh flowers and Keurig machines and outdoor spaces with umbrellas, hosting quarterly all-staff events like potlucks and coffee talks, and including staff shout-outs in a weekly newsletter.

When summing up what was most important to their success, all these Virginia winners said collaboration was crucial. In the end, teamwork is what meets the needs of students, staff, and the community. That’s how you become one of the healthiest schools - or districts - in America.

“The guidelines for the America’s Healthiest School award offer a roadmap for success through best practices.” said Sarah Basler, a school counselor at Minnieville. “If your school is considering applying, I recommend taking the initial assessment. This process identifies areas for growth, allowing your school to set and achieve goals.”

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*The America's Healthiest Schools awards reinforce the mission of Kaiser Permanente's Thriving Schools initiative, which works to strengthen the health and well-being of school communities across the country, so every school succeeds, every employee excels, and every child thrives.*

*Kaiser Permanente is proud to be a partner in health to districts like Prince William County throughout the year. For more information on Thriving Schools, visit [kp.org/thrivingschools](https://kp.org/thrivingschools) or follow @thrivingschools on X.*

*[Learn more](#) about the America's Healthiest Schools awards.*

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