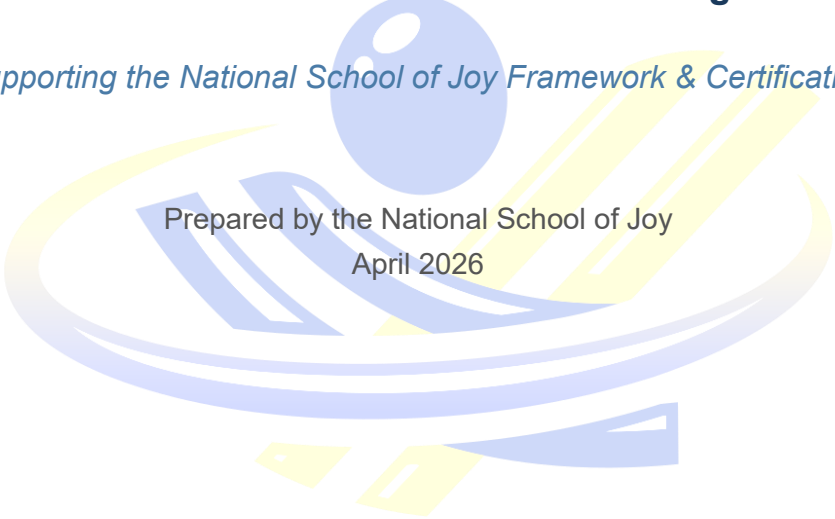


THE CASE FOR JOY

National Research Report

**Why Joy as a Core Value Is the Strategic Priority
School Districts Across America Need Right Now**

Supporting the National School of Joy Framework & Certification



Prepared by the National School of Joy
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JOYFUL COLLABORATIVE, LLC
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Executive Summary

Across the United States, school districts are grappling with a persistent set of interconnected challenges: declining student engagement, rising rates of youth mental health crises, chronic absenteeism, and teacher burnout. Test scores have recovered unevenly from the pandemic, but something deeper remains unresolved. Students and educators alike are showing up to schools that, by most structural measures, function — but do not feel alive.

A growing number of districts have recognized a critical and often overlooked missing ingredient: Joy.

Joy is not a soft aspiration. It is a research-backed, outcomes-linked, operationally strategic value that shapes how students engage, how teachers perform, and how communities invest in their schools. Districts from Philadelphia to Jackson, Mississippi; from Washington, D.C. to Rockwood, Missouri are embedding Joy into their core values, strategic plans, and culture frameworks — because the evidence demands it.

This report documents which school districts across the nation have formally incorporated Joy as a core value, synthesizes the tangible outcomes associated with Joy-centered environments, and makes the case for why the National School of Joy Framework and Certification is the structured, scalable pathway that districts need to move from aspiration to verified excellence.

Key Finding

Districts that embed joy, belonging, and social-emotional well-being into their strategic foundations see measurable improvements in student achievement, attendance, teacher retention, family engagement, and school climate — precisely the metrics that school boards, funders, and communities use to evaluate district success.

Part I: The National Landscape — Districts Embracing Joy as a Core Value

The following profiles represent a cross-section of U.S. school districts that have formally elevated Joy as a named core value, strategic pillar, or central organizing theme in their district plans. These districts range from large urban systems to mid-sized and regional districts, demonstrating that the Joy imperative transcends geography, demographics, and district size.

District Profiles

1. School District of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA)

Student Enrollment: ~200,000 | **Grades:** PreK–12 | **District Type:** Large Urban

In its 2023 Strategic Plan, the School District of Philadelphia formally enshrined Joy as one of four foundational core values alongside Safety, Equity, Collaboration, and Trust. The district defines Joy as the value that "inspires active engagement and belonging."

This framing is significant: Philadelphia explicitly connects Joy to the conditions that make learning possible. The district's strategic planning process engaged more than 8 Advisory Groups, hundreds of survey respondents from across the community, and a Steering

Committee, and Joy emerged as one of the values most consistently surfaced by students, families, and staff. The district's own research revealed that fewer than half of surveyed students felt they consistently belong at school, enjoy being at school, or feel welcome — a crisis the district directly addresses through its Joy value framework.

2. Jackson Public Schools (Jackson, MS)

Student Enrollment: ~22,000 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Urban

Jackson Public Schools has gone further than almost any other district in the country by building an entire strategic pillar called "JPS Joy." In its published Strategic Plan, JPS articulates a comprehensive philosophy: "A joyful educational environment is foundational to learning and development. Joy in schools and across the district is cultivated through a holistic approach that prioritizes academic success and emotional well-being, creative expression, social connections, and personal fulfillment. When scholars and educators alike feel a sense of joy, the entire community thrives."

JPS Joy is not positioned as a program or add-on — it is a district-wide strategic commitment that encompasses classroom environments, athletic facilities, playgrounds, school buses, and central offices. The district explicitly commits to fostering belonging, nurturing trusted relationships, and promoting the kind of risk-taking and inquiry that fuel lifelong learning.

JPS Joy Commitment

"We commit to fostering a sense of belonging, nurturing trusted relationships, while promoting the kind of risk-taking, engagement, and inquiry that are vital for lifelong learning throughout the district." — Jackson Public Schools Strategic Plan

3. DC Public Schools (Washington, D.C.)

Student Enrollment: ~50,000 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Large Urban

DC Public Schools' five-year strategic plan, A Capital Commitment, centers on the concept of "joyful and rigorous learning" as the primary experience it is building toward for all 117 schools in the district. The plan states directly: "Students flourish when they feel valued and safe and have a sense of belonging. DCPS will continue strengthening relationships to ensure students' experiences are culturally affirming and safe so they can focus on what matters most: joyful and rigorous learning."

DCPS pairs joy explicitly with academic rigor — modeling the framework that these are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing conditions. This framing has direct implications for professional development, curriculum design, school climate investments, and community engagement strategy.

4. Portland Public Schools (Portland, ME)

Student Enrollment: ~7,500 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Mid-Sized Urban

Portland Public Schools' 2024–2029 Strategic Plan, unanimously approved by its Board of Education in June 2024, includes a core strategic initiative to "increase the capacity of schools to create and implement whole-school systems, SEL curriculum, and relationships that promote a joyful, supportive, and safe school culture."

The plan also speaks to "instilling a joy of learning in our students" through universally accessible and equitable curriculum as a named strategic goal. Portland models Joy not as a

climate add-on, but as an academic strategy: joy of learning is a measurable outcome that shapes curriculum and instruction.

5. Rockwood School District (St. Louis County, MO)

Student Enrollment: ~22,000 | Grades: K–12 | District Type: Suburban

Rockwood School District's published core values explicitly state: "We find joy in our work and believe in kindness and mutual respect for all." This framing is notable because Rockwood applies Joy not only to students but to the entire school community — staff, families, and all stakeholders. Joy is a value that shapes organizational culture, not just student programming.

Rockwood's values framework also connects Joy to the idea of schools as "warm, welcoming places where children, staff and families thrive," recognizing that the lived experience of community members in school buildings is itself a strategic outcome.

6. Chula Vista Elementary School District (Chula Vista, CA)

Student Enrollment: ~25,000 | Grades: K–6 | District Type: Suburban

Chula Vista Elementary School District's vision and values statement articulates a commitment to "promoting the joy and importance of learning for all students." The district pairs joy with its aspiration for students to be "high-achieving, innovative thinkers" who are "self-reliant, and confident" with a "lifelong love of learning."

This integration is instructive: Chula Vista positions joy not as separate from academic outcomes but as the motivational and emotional foundation upon which academic identity is built.

7. Seattle Public Schools (Seattle, WA)

Student Enrollment: ~51,000 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Large Urban

Seattle Public Schools' strategic work explicitly uses the language of "joyful learning" and "sparking joy in reading" as strategic frameworks. Their early literacy strategy centers family engagement and community partnerships around "sparking joy in reading for all students," recognizing that joy of learning — not just skills instruction — drives long-term literacy outcomes.

Seattle also uses "excellent teaching and joyful learning" as paired goals in their equitable math teaching practice framework, specifically to serve Black and African American students. Joy is thus positioned as an equity strategy, not merely a quality-of-life aspiration.

8. Minneapolis Public Schools (Minneapolis, MN)

Student Enrollment: ~33,000 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Large Urban

Minneapolis Public Schools' Equity and School Climate framework explicitly includes a commitment to "promote BIPOC staff engagement, joy, inclusion and retention through affinity spaces, advocacy, and professional development."

This framing breaks important new ground: Joy is here applied to the workforce experience. Minneapolis recognizes that staff joy and engagement are inseparable from student outcomes, and that retaining educators of color — critical for students of color — requires cultivating joyful, affirming work environments.

9. RePublic Charter Schools Network (Nashville, TN / Memphis, TN)

Student Enrollment: ~3,000+ across network | Grades: 5–12 | District Type: Charter Network

RePublic Schools, a charter network serving students in Tennessee, has explicitly adopted joy as a “strategic move” in its school improvement work. The network’s leadership has stated: “Incorporating joy and happiness into what we do is not only commendable but is imperative to how we move.” RePublic has implemented district-wide joy initiatives including gamification during structured time, requiring the first ten minutes of every class to be “full of joy” for students, and joy-centered student showcases tied to elective programming.

10. Concord Public Schools & Concord-Carlisle Regional School District (Concord, MA)

Student Enrollment: ~4,000 | Grades: PreK–12 | District Type: Suburban

Concord Public Schools’ 2023–2028 Strategic Plan explicitly names joy in learning as a vision outcome: “Students of Concord and Concord-Carlisle Regional Schools actively seek varied pathways through which they achieve their potential and find joy in learning.” The district further commits that “Our students will find their passion, be joyful learners, and be empowered to chart their path to success.”

Joy of learning is woven into the vision of the graduate in Concord, positioning it as a long-term outcome of schooling, not simply a daily experience.

District	Location	Joy Integration
School District of Philadelphia	Philadelphia, PA	Formal core value: 'Joy inspires active engagement and belonging'
Jackson Public Schools	Jackson, MS	Full strategic pillar: 'JPS Joy' — holistic framework covering all school spaces
DC Public Schools	Washington, D.C.	'Joyful and rigorous learning' as primary student experience goal
Portland Public Schools	Portland, ME	Strategic initiative for 'joyful, supportive, safe school culture'
Rockwood School District	St. Louis County, MO	Core value: 'We find joy in our work and believe in kindness'
Chula Vista Elementary SD	Chula Vista, CA	Vision: 'Promoting the joy and importance of learning for all students'
Seattle Public Schools	Seattle, WA	'Joyful learning' as equity strategy; 'spark joy in reading'
Minneapolis Public Schools	Minneapolis, MN	Joy as staff retention and equity strategy for BIPOC educators
RePublic Charter Network	Nashville / Memphis, TN	Joy as explicit strategic move; structured daily joy practices
Concord Public Schools	Concord, MA	Vision: Students 'find joy in learning' as graduate outcome

Part II: The Evidence — What Joy Produces

The embrace of Joy as a core value by leading districts is not sentimental. It is grounded in a substantial and growing body of research connecting positive emotional environments, social-emotional learning, and well-being-centered schooling to measurable academic and operational outcomes. The evidence is clear: Joy is not in tension with achievement — it is one of its most powerful drivers.

A. Student Academic Achievement

Research consistently demonstrates that positive emotions — including joy, hope, and pride — are directly associated with higher motivation, deeper engagement, and improved academic performance.

- A landmark meta-analysis of 424 SEL studies encompassing more than 500,000 students across 50+ countries, conducted by Yale researchers and published in *Child Development*, confirmed that students in SEL programs demonstrate increased academic achievement, higher attendance, improved grades, and stronger school functioning.
- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) synthesizes hundreds of independent studies showing that SEL participation leads to an average academic performance improvement of 11 to 17 percentile points over comparison groups.
- Positive emotions, including joy, boost students' belief in their own abilities — a factor known as self-efficacy — which in turn drives motivation, persistence, and effort on academic tasks.
- Long-term studies demonstrate that the positive effects of joy-aligned, SEL-integrated learning environments persist for years after the intervention, including improved graduation rates, postsecondary readiness, and adult employment outcomes.

B. Student Attendance and Engagement

Chronic absenteeism is one of the most urgent challenges in American public education today, and the research points to school climate — specifically whether students feel they belong and enjoy being at school — as a primary driver.

- Students who feel welcomed, valued, and joyfully engaged in school have measurably better attendance and are less likely to disengage or drop out.
- The School District of Philadelphia's own data revealed that fewer than half of students surveyed felt they consistently belonged, were welcomed, or enjoyed being at school — directly linking school climate to attendance and achievement challenges that the district identified as its primary crisis.
- Research from the Learning Policy Institute confirms that when students feel connected to school community, they have improved mental health, better academic outcomes, and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.
- Schools that implement restorative practices and social-emotional learning alongside joy-centered culture show significant decreases in depression, anxiety, and truancy, as well as improvements in attendance and achievement.

C. School Climate and Safety

School climate — the overall quality of the school environment as experienced by students, staff, and families — is one of the strongest predictors of student outcomes. Joy-centered environments produce demonstrably stronger climates.

- CASEL’s research confirms that schools implementing joy and well-being focused SEL programs see consistent reductions in bullying and aggression, improved feelings of safety and support, and stronger student-teacher relationships.
- A meta-analysis of 213 studies found that universal SEL programs have a significant, positive, school-wide impact on standardized test scores in reading and math, overall course grades, and reductions in suspensions and office discipline referrals.
- The Good Behavior Game — among the most researched joy-and-community-aligned classroom programs — has shown benefits not only during the school year but lasting into adulthood, including lower rates of substance use, delinquency, and suicidal ideation.

D. Teacher Well-Being, Retention, and Effectiveness

The United States is facing a severe and worsening teacher shortage. Joy matters enormously here, because teacher joy is directly linked to teacher retention — and teacher retention is directly linked to student outcomes.

- A landmark longitudinal study of 1,193 teachers found that teacher emotional exhaustion negatively predicted student achievement gains ($\beta = -.18$), while teacher engagement positively predicted student learning outcomes ($\beta = .24$), after controlling for student socioeconomic status and prior achievement.
- A meta-analysis of 46 studies found a moderate positive effect size ($d = 0.41$) for the relationship between teacher well-being and student achievement, with the strongest effects for elementary students.
- Teachers with higher life satisfaction were 43% more likely to be effective in the classroom. Teachers with higher grit were 31% more likely to outperform their peers.
- Research from the University of Washington Tacoma confirms that teachers who report greater professional joy are more likely to remain in the profession, reducing the costly cycle of turnover that disrupts student-teacher relationships.
- A study of happiness training for primary school teachers found that teacher self-reported effectiveness increased significantly ($p < 0.001$) and was maintained over time — with teachers reporting more engaging classrooms and stronger student participation.

The Joy-Retention Equation

Every percentage point reduction in teacher turnover translates to cost savings, continuity for students, and improved instruction. Districts that cultivate professional joy directly reduce the financial and human cost of chronic teacher attrition — which national studies estimate at \$20,000 or more per teacher departure.

E. Mental Health and Student Well-Being

The youth mental health crisis is the defining challenge of this generation of students. The CDC reported in 2023 that 40% of high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or

hopelessness, roughly one-third experienced poor mental health, and 20% had seriously considered suicide. Joy-centered environments are among the most evidence-supported responses.

- School-based mental health and SEL programs — the structural expression of a joy and well-being commitment — lead to decreased emotional distress, more positive attitudes about self and others, and fewer externalizing behaviors.
- Students in joy-aligned, SEL-rich schools report increased feelings of safety, stronger relationships with teachers, and greater belonging and inclusion.
- Research shows that when students feel connection to school community, they are less likely to experience mental health crises and are more likely to seek support when they need it.
- Schools that incorporate joy-centered practices see measurable reductions in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and exclusionary discipline — which disproportionately harm students of color.

F. Equity and Community Impact

Joy is not a luxury for well-resourced districts. The research demonstrates that joy-centered, well-being-focused environments are especially powerful for students from historically underserved communities.

- Seattle Public Schools explicitly frames joyful learning as an equity strategy, targeting it specifically for schools with high populations of Black and African American students in both literacy and mathematics.
- Minneapolis Public Schools connects staff joy to the retention of BIPOC educators — recognizing that diverse, stable faculties are critical for equity and student success.
- Research confirms that targeted interventions in well-being and SEL have produced a 17-percentile-point gain in achievement test scores for students in high-need urban and rural schools.
- Family engagement — which joy-centered school climates cultivate — is a documented driver of student achievement, disciplinary improvements, and long-term graduation rates.

Part III: The National School of Joy Framework — From Aspiration to Certification

The Gap That Exists

The research is clear. The demand is real. District leaders across the country are signaling that Joy matters. And yet, what is missing is a structured, rigorous, nationally recognized framework that translates the aspiration of Joy into operational practice — and certifies schools for achieving it.

District strategic plans are powerful statements of intent. But without a standard framework, common language, defined indicators, accountability structures, and a recognition pathway, Joy remains an inspirational value rather than an operational reality. Schools that commit to Joy need:

- A shared definition and philosophy of what Joy-centered education looks like in practice.
- A self-assessment and school-level diagnostic tool.
- Professional development and implementation guidance for educators and leaders.
- A set of measurable indicators that connect Joy to student outcomes.
- A certification or recognition process that validates and celebrates Joy-centered schools.
- A national community of practice and network of certified schools.

What the National School of Joy Framework Provides

The National School of Joy Framework is the first rigorous, research-grounded national system purpose-built to certify, support, and celebrate schools that place Joy at the center of their educational mission. It fills a critical gap that no other existing framework addresses.

The Framework provides districts and schools with:

- A nationally recognized certification that signals commitment to the whole child and evidence-based practice.
- Structured guidance for embedding Joy across all dimensions of school life: instruction, climate, leadership, family engagement, community connection, and educator well-being.
- A common language and measurement system that enables progress monitoring, board accountability reporting, and external communication.
- Professional development aligned to joy-centered practice that supports teacher retention, instructional quality, and school culture.
- Connection to a growing national network of certified Joy schools and districts.

Why Districts Should Act Now

The convergence of a youth mental health crisis, teacher shortage, chronic absenteeism epidemic, and post-pandemic achievement gap has created a moment of urgency that Joy-centered leadership directly addresses. Districts that establish themselves as Joy-certified leaders now will:

- Differentiate themselves in competitive teacher recruitment markets where educator well-being is a top consideration for prospective hires.
- Strengthen alignment with community and family expectations for whole-child education.
- Create measurable, narrative-rich accountability data that resonates with school boards, funders, and state education agencies.
- Establish a foundation for sustainable academic improvement that addresses root causes rather than symptoms.
- Position themselves as national models and thought leaders in 21st-century school design.

The Competitive Advantage

Districts across the country are already embracing Joy — from Jackson, Mississippi to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; from Seattle, Washington to Washington, D.C. The question is not whether Joy matters. The question is whether your district will be a leader in defining what Joy-centered excellence looks like.

Who the Framework Serves

The National School of Joy Framework is designed for every type of district, at every stage of the Joy journey:

- Districts that already have Joy in their strategic plans and want to operationalize it with rigor.
- Districts that recognize the crisis of student disconnection and are looking for a proven framework for response.
- Districts seeking to improve teacher retention and well-being as a pathway to instructional quality.
- Districts committed to equity who recognize that joy-centered environments are equity-advancing environments.
- District leaders who want to build a culture that attracts, retains, and energizes the educators and students their community deserves.

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Conclusion: The Moment Demands a Framework

The districts profiled in this report represent a leading edge of a national movement. From the largest urban systems to regional and suburban districts, education leaders are recognizing that Joy is not a luxury or a fringe aspiration — it is a foundational condition for everything that schools are supposed to produce.

The evidence is powerful and consistent. Students in joyful, well-being-centered environments achieve more academically, attend more reliably, experience less distress, and graduate more prepared for life. Teachers in joyful environments are more effective, more likely to stay, and more capable of building the relationships that learning requires. Communities that invest in joyful schools build stronger bonds between families and educators and see broader returns in civic engagement and social trust.

What has been missing is the framework — the common language, the structured pathway, the standards, the certification, and the national network that transforms Joy from a word in a strategic plan into a verified, celebrated way of being.

The National School of Joy Framework exists to fill that gap. It invites every district in America — wherever they are in their journey — to take the next step toward being the kind of school community where students, educators, families, and community members show up ready to engage, learn, and thrive.

The research is clear. The districts are moving. The time is now.

Join the National School of Joy.

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