



Teaching the Way Students Learn Best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School

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Abstract

Bronxdale High School in New York City illustrates what a successful school looks like when its practices are consistent with the science of learning and development (SoLD). Most students enter the school achieving well below proficiency levels; however, they ultimately outperform city averages in credit accrual, 4- and 6-year graduation rates, and enrollment in postsecondary education. Factors underlying these successes include a caring, safe, collaborative community; advisory structures that build trust and social-emotional skills; the integration of inquiry instruction with strong scaffolding; educative discipline that puts restorative practices in action; and a faculty and leadership committed to “teaching the way that students learn best,” continuously learning together in a community of practice.

The full report can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/social-and-emotional-learning-case-study-bronxdale>.

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As we enter their crowded, buzzing classroom, Mary Zelenka and Pamela Zaiter are introducing a new challenge to their 9th-grade Algebra students. Their goal is to help students distinguish between situations that can be modeled with linear functions and those that require exponential functions. Their challenge: “Survive a zombie apocalypse.” The students have just received these instructions:

Several hours ago, Mayor de Blasio received a report that an outbreak of a deadly new virus has begun in the Bronx. The virus is known to completely control its victims within an hour of contact and quickly turns every living human into a zombie. Each zombie carries the disease and is then able to infect others nearby. Once a human is infected, they will now infect more people. There are currently 1,471,000 people living in the Bronx. Since there is no escape and currently no antidote, your task is to figure out how long it is possible to survive in the Bronx.

Sitting in pairs, the students are working together to understand the problem and are taking notes on what they know, what they need to know, and what their next steps will be to solve the problem. As the class gets to work, the teachers circulate through the class, asking leading questions to help students think about their strategy and clarifying aspects of the mathematics that are needed to implement the strategy. The teachers are prepared for possible misconceptions the students may have about linear versus exponential functions and potential trip-ups, such as confusion between initial values and growth. The teams are diligent and engaged. Hands fly up when students are stuck. Often students answer each other’s questions. The teachers encourage them to think about the question from a different angle or by recalling earlier work the students have done, some of which is on the many posters around the room reminding students of different kinds of equations, with graphs, tables, and solution strategies.

When enough teams have developed answers, the teachers bring the class back together to share their solutions. Toward the end of the class, the teachers pose a new challenge to extend students’ thinking:

“If you were given the choice between more initial zombies but a slower growth rate or fewer initial zombies but a greater growth rate, which would you pick and why?”

This gives rise to a robust conversation that solidifies a key aspect of students’ understanding about exponential functions—that the rate of growth is key to how quickly the zombies infect everyone else.

Introduction

A newcomer to this classroom would never guess that more than one third of the students working on this challenging set of problems are identified for special education, or that virtually all of them come from low-income Black and Latino/a households across the Bronx. Bronxdale High School, a small 9th- through 12th-grade New York City public school, serves a population that has generally experienced little academic success. Although such student demographics are frequently used to explain low expectations, poor student outcomes, high rates of violence, and school cultures of failure, Bronxdale High School represents an exception to these norms.

In 2018, Bronxdale's 4- and 6-year graduation rates (82% and 84%, respectively) surpassed graduation rates of its comparison schools, as well as its borough and city high school averages. A higher percentage of the school's 9th- and 10th-grade students earned sufficient credits to be on track for graduation than their comparison group and borough and citywide counterparts (see Table 1). The school's 2017–18 New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) School Quality Review evaluation rated Bronxdale as “excellent” on rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, effective school leadership, trust, and strong family–community ties (see Table 2). Recently, the NYC DOE designated Bronxdale as a model site for restorative practices—a school that other city school leaders visit in order to learn.

Table 1
Indicators of School Progress, 2017–18

Indicator	Comparison Group			
	Bronxdale	Comparison Group	Borough	City
Earned enough credits in 9th grade to be on track for graduation	94%	80%	80%	85%
Earned enough credits in 10th grade to be on track for graduation	89%	72%	76%	81%
Graduated within 4 years	82%	75%	69%	76%
Graduated within 6 years	84%	80%	74%	80%
Graduated high school and enrolled in college or other postsecondary program within 6 months	60%	53%	52%	59%

Source: New York City Department of Education. (n.d.). 2017–18 School Quality Snapshot: Bronxdale High School (11X508). <https://tools.nycenet.edu/snapshot/2018/11X508/HS/#SA>.

How has Bronxdale achieved these successes? To answer this question, we conducted an in-depth case study focused on the constellation of key factors that have created a culture that affords Bronxdale its successes as the school has continuously evolved. These factors include:

- a compelling vision of students and school as a caring, safe, collaborative community, coupled with structures that build the trust and skills that make this possible;
- the integration of inquiry instruction with social-emotional supports;

- a faculty and leadership committed to “teaching the way that students learn best,” continuously learning together in a community of practice; and
- educative discipline that puts restorative practices into action.

Table 2
Results of New York City School Climate Survey, 2017–18

Section	Respondent	% Positive	
		Bronxdale	City Average
RIGOROUS INSTRUCTION			
Common Core shifts in literacy	Teachers	100	93
Common Core shifts in math	Teachers	100	91
Course clarity	Students	81	75
Quality of student discussion	Teachers	79	69
Academic press	Students	74	69
COLLABORATIVE TEACHERS			
Cultural awareness and inclusive classroom instruction	Teachers	99	91
	Students	93	88
	Combined	96	90
Quality of professional development	Teachers	91	75
School commitment	Teachers	98	82
Peer collaboration	Teachers	99	87
Innovation and collective responsibility	Teachers	95	76
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT			
Safety	Students	88	81
Classroom behavior	Students	67	62
Social-emotional	Teachers	97	80
Personal attention and support	Students	74	63
Peer support for academic work	Students	71	65
Guidance	Students	91	83
Preventing bullying	Students	71	70
EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP			
Inclusive principal leadership	Parents	96	93
Teacher influence	Teachers	99	84
Program coherence	Teachers	97	78
Principal instructional leadership	Teachers	96	83

Section	Respondent	% Positive	
		Bronxdale	City Average
STRONG FAMILY–COMMUNITY TIES			
Teacher outreach to parents	Parents	92	90
	Teachers	96	85
	Combined	94	88
Parent involvement in school	Parents	81	80
TRUST			
Parent–teacher trust	Parents	96	94
Parent–principal trust	Parents	96	93
Student–teacher trust	Students	89	81
Teacher–principal trust	Teachers	98	82
Teacher–teacher trust	Teachers	97	88

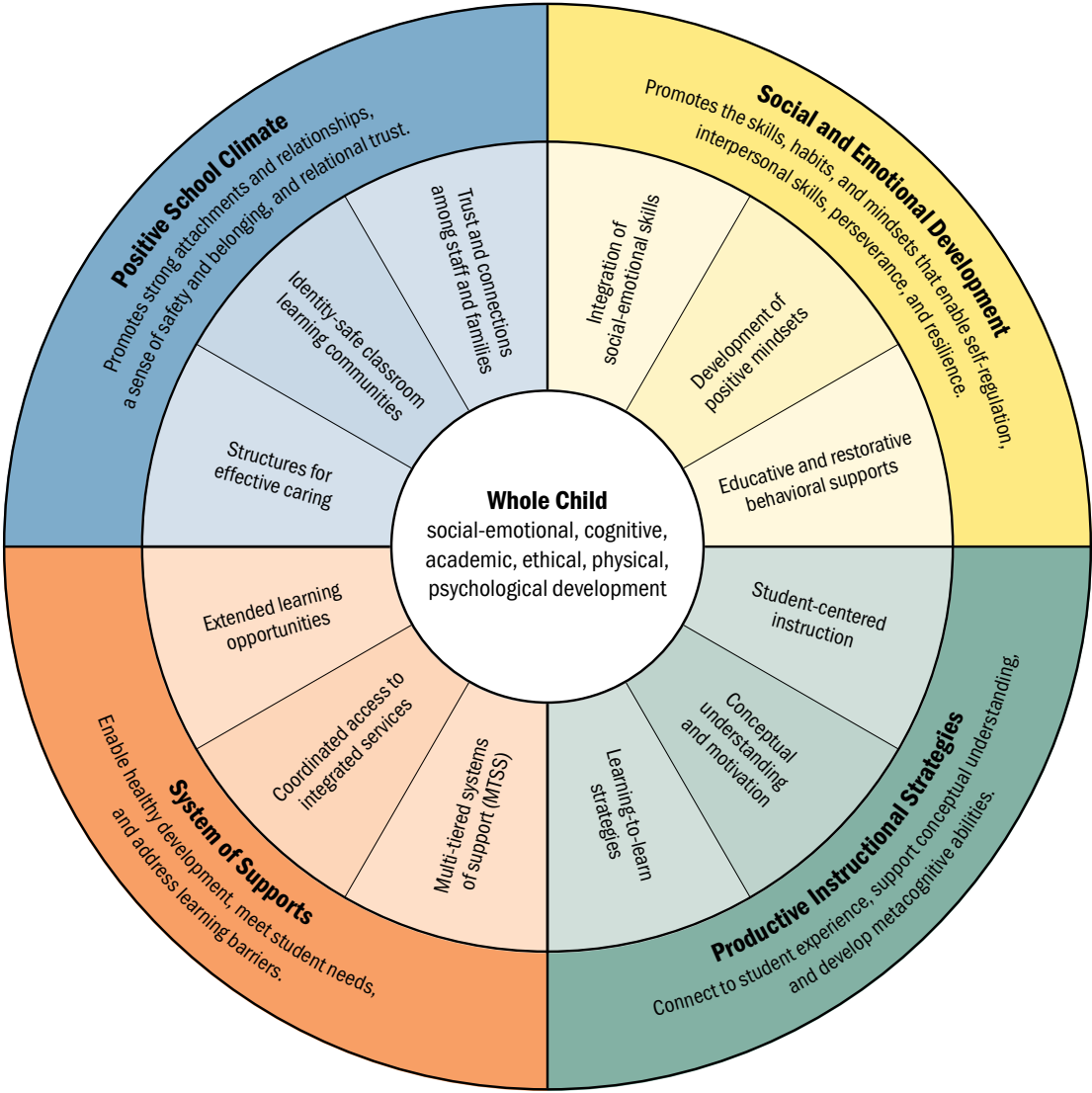
Data source: New York City Department of Education. (2018). *2017–18 school quality guide / HS (online edition)*. New York, NY: Author. https://www.nycenet.edu/OA/SchoolReports/2017-18/School_Quality_Guide_2018_HS_X508.pdf.

These distinguishing factors contribute to Bronxdale’s efforts to teach the way students learn best and are aligned with the science of learning and development (SoLD) that has emerged from neuroscience, cognitive science, and the developmental sciences over the past several decades. As described in several recently published research syntheses,¹ this science supports four principles for educational practice (see Figure 1):

- 1. A positive school environment that supports student success along the developmental continuum.** Features include school structures and classroom practices that support positive, trusting relationships; attachment and emotional connections; physical and emotional safety, including identity safety; and a sense of belonging and purpose.
- 2. Support for the intentional development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, mindsets, and habits.** These skills include self-regulation, executive function, intrapersonal awareness, and interpersonal skills, as well as a growth mindset and a sense of agency that support resilience and productive action. Supports for behavior should be educative and restorative, enabling students to learn how to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and contribute to the community.
- 3. Curricular designs and instructional strategies that support academic capacity, competence, efficacy, motivation, and metacognitive skills.** These designs feature well-scaffolded instruction and ongoing formative assessment that support personalized and collaborative learning, take students’ prior knowledge and experiences into account, and provide the right amount of challenge and support on relevant and engaging learning tasks.
- 4. Multi-tiered systems of support based on a shared developmental framework.** These systems provide personalized academic and nonacademic supports that seek to remove obstacles to learning and address the effects of adversity.²

These SoLD-aligned aspects of school design are supported by Bronxdale’s work with its partner, the Institute for Student Achievement. Additionally, the school engages teachers in ongoing professional learning in a community of practice that is always evolving new practices to meet students’ needs, informed by student development and what works in schools with similar visions.

Figure 1
A Framework for Whole Child Education



Key Factors to Bronxdale’s Success

Vision, Culture, and Climate

Bronxdale’s success begins with its positive school culture. The school conceptualizes itself as a safe, caring, collaborative community in which all community members—staff, students, and families—have voice, agency, and responsibility. This vision sets the foundation for the school’s mission to develop students as “self-reliant, independent learners,” who are “curious and know how to be thinkers” and “creative problem-solvers.”

This vision, which drives organizational and programmatic decisions and choices, is informed by a deep understanding of how systemic social injustice has affected students and the collective responsibility of the school to address those inequities so that students have access to success.

The elements that operationalize this positive school culture and climate include small class sizes, advisory systems, teacher collaboration, distributed leadership, and budgetary autonomy. **Small class sizes**, for instance, create more opportunities for teachers to support students, which enables Bronxdale to be effective as an all-inclusion school. **Advisory** is the essential building block and sustaining force of the school as a caring community. To strengthen students' relationships with adults and with each other, each student has an advisor and belongs to an advisory group that meets as a class two or three times a week. Activities in the advisory include social and emotional learning, community building, and support for academics, as well as college and career readiness. Advisors also serve as the adult link to students' families for information, support, and problem-solving of all kinds.

Teachers are organized into both **department and interdisciplinary grade-level teams**, and they have **scheduled time** to meet, design curriculum and pedagogy, problem-solve around the needs of students, and develop shared norms and goals to form a community of practice. Through a policy of **distributed leadership**, the best ideas of staff are heard and can be enacted. Because the NYC DOE allows principals hiring and **budgetary autonomy**, Bronxdale has been able to hire staff whose values and skill sets match the school's goals and needs, including those who support the school's restorative justice program. Funds can be allocated to those areas the school community feels are important, such as ongoing professional development and staff who support restorative practices.

All of these structures and practices contribute to creating a culture that enables the development of close, caring, and trusting relationships between and among teachers and students; a sense of physical, emotional, and identity safety on the part of all community members; and a sense of community cohesion, value, and ownership. These structures encourage personal investment in the community on the part of all community members, thereby eliciting prosocial behaviors and reinforcing the positive climate and culture.

Inquiry-Based Instruction

Pedagogy at Bronxdale is defined by an inquiry- and project-based approach to teaching and learning, performance-based assessment, and emphasis on the development of growth and academic mindsets. As Bronxdale principal Carolyn Quintana made clear, however, the school's inquiry-based approach "can't happen without taking care of students' social-emotional needs." Teachers thus work to build community, cultivating trusting relationships with students and establishing an environment of belonging and safety. That community, in turn, enables students to take on and persist at the academic challenges of school. Such community building depends on knowing students well, creating safe classrooms, and enacting cultural competence.

Principal Quintana regularly noted that the goal at Bronxdale is to "teach the way our students learn best" to achieve the school's vision for a Bronxdale graduate in the 21st century as "communicative, resilient, [having] literacy in every capacity, world literate—knowing issues, confidence, [having] a plan, empowered, ambitious, self-reflective, critical thinker, community oriented, able to manage emotions, socially aware, flexible, goal oriented, risk taker." Bronxdale teachers understand that this is not a matter of pouring information into students' heads. They recognize the process as dynamic and deeply dependent on students' identities and their existing knowledge, experiences, backgrounds, and interests. As a result, Bronxdale educators' inquiry-based

approach to instruction (1) begins with who and where students are in their learning; (2) provides scaffolds and supports that enable students to move toward deeper learning; (3) involves students in relevant, engaging tasks that have disciplinary integrity; (4) develops students' ability and confidence to guide their own learning; and (5) builds students' voice and agency within the creation of an intellectual community.

The inquiry-based learning at Bronxdale operates on the premise that school and life are deeply connected, and that helping students learn to ask questions, think critically, and pursue answers serves as important preparation for life. This is especially important when students' real-life experiences may contradict society's official narrative. This approach aligns with the evidence from the learning sciences that suggests that, to meet 21st-century learning goals, productive instructional strategies support motivation, competence, self-efficacy, and self-directed learning using curriculum, teaching, and assessment strategies that feature

- meaningful work that connects to students' prior knowledge and experiences and actively engages them in rich, engaging, motivating tasks;
- inquiry as a major learning strategy, thoughtfully interwoven with explicit instruction and well-scaffolded opportunities to practice and apply learning;
- supports to reduce cognitive load and free students' minds to focus on higher-order thinking and problem-solving;
- well-designed collaborative learning opportunities that encourage students to question, explain, and elaborate their thoughts and co-construct solutions;
- a mastery approach to learning supported by performance assessments with opportunities to receive helpful feedback, develop and exhibit competence, and revise work to improve; and
- opportunities to develop metacognitive skills through planning and management of complex tasks, self- and peer-assessment, and reflection on learning.³

All of these features are present in Bronxdale classrooms. The use of performance assessments that allow students to receive feedback and revise to meet standards is particularly important in building students' confidence and capacity to produce rigorous work. Bronxdale's system includes a senior capstone project, known as a "passion project" for which students design a research question in an area of interest, conduct research, write a report, and present their project to their class and to a panel of teachers and others, allowing them to develop and demonstrate deep expertise.

Social and Emotional Learning

Bronxdale has also developed a wide range of strategies to explicitly teach the social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits, and mindsets that students need to succeed in school and in life, as well as to deal with the trauma many of them experience as a result of poverty, food and housing insecurity, and violence in their communities. Substantial evidence shows that such explicit teaching enables academic progress and the development of productive behaviors for school and life.

In all Bronxdale classes, teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on, articulate, and manage emotions; learn interpersonal cooperation and conflict resolution skills; develop executive function and habits of

planning, organizing, and making decisions; and develop a growth mindset and sense of belonging, purpose, and responsibility. The school also explicitly teaches students strategies that can support them in coping, persevering, and treating themselves and each other well. This instruction occurs in advisories as well as other classes.

Teachers, for instance, frequently reteach and provide positive reinforcement for these skills, reminding students of those strategies that will help them see themselves as strong learners and help them learn. Teachers exhibit warm, demanding behavior that expresses confidence in students' abilities to step up to intellectual demands while supporting them in doing so. These supports are integrated into their instructional practices and include students learning relationship skills; practicing how to receive and give feedback in ways that are accountable; becoming acclimated to taking intellectual risks; and developing the capacity to drive their own learning, to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to develop their own voice and agency.

Advisors support students' learning, planning, and engagement in their advisory activities, as well as serving as the adult link to their families for information, support, and problem-solving of all kinds. Bronxdale guidance counselor Nick Boyiatzis commented, "Advisory is where the safe, supportive culture starts and then spreads through the whole school, where students directly air their concerns." Bronxdale social worker Mwaniki Mwangi and Boyiatzis elaborated on advisory as a "culture builder" that contrasts with the often-unsafe experience students have outside of school. Mwangi explained, "Advisory is [the] place where the support starts—where the circle starts. Students deal with all that external stuff." Boyiatzis added, "We want to make the culture in here better than out there."

Marlene Baxter, the school's community associate, explained that the comfortable environment created by teachers enables students "to feel they can be honest, that this is a space where students can be real." Students validate these assertions about the affirming and secure nature of advisory, describing it as "An important place where we talk about reality, like police brutality," and "A place to express myself."

Bronxdale's restorative approach to discipline helps to operationalize the staff's core commitment to create a positive culture and climate in which Bronxdale students can feel that they are cared for and trusted community members. It embraces the staff's faith in the fundamental worthiness of students, the idea that although students sometimes have problems, they are not themselves the problem. Rather, staff see students' sometimes challenging behavior as an opportunity to build knowledge and capacity, not as a character deficit. Thus, helping students and staff to remake the school into a caring community is designed to elicit prosocial student and teacher behavior and allow more productive behaviors to emerge. Students report that because they are more aware of the effects of their behavior on the community, and because they have a responsibility to build the community, they think more about their behavior, which deters harmful acting out.

Accordingly, the school's approach to most infractions takes a nonpunitive perspective that emphasizes consequences and repair to harm. It is a student development strategy that helps students develop prosocial ways of responding to the stresses and tensions that affect them in their daily lives so that they can focus their energies on academic learning. In that sense, the approach is both educative (focused on creating positive norms and teaching useful strategies) and restorative (able to help repair problems or harms). As a student explained, at Bronxdale, "You get a chance to fix what you did. They don't suspend you." Another remarked, "Here we learn about consequences. In other schools, we would get punished for everything."

Principal Quintana explained that restorative practices have value only when there is something to restore. “That something,” she said, is “the community, relationships, and harmony.” As one student commented, “We’re connected. Students and teachers care about you.” Restorative practices aim to establish and sustain relationships, harmony, and that sense of community that is a precursor to community members’ understanding that violating community norms harms their community. Staff want students to understand the importance of taking conscious action to repair the harm done in order to restore the community’s integrity, harmony, and relationships, as well as their membership in it. The renunciation of punitive approaches in favor of consequences enacted through restorative mechanisms helps students understand that there are consequences to their actions beyond themselves that affect other individuals and the environment they care about.

The school’s deep commitment to restorative discipline and practices is also evident in the school’s budgetary allocation to restorative staff, mechanisms, and professional development. Personnel include five full-time positions for social and emotional supports: two restorative deans, one counselor, and two social workers, whose collaborative efforts form the human framework for operationalizing Bronxdale’s restorative approach. Structures, mechanisms, and practices also responsible for enacting restorative approaches include advisory classes, restorative circles, a mindfulness course, individual and group counseling, a Student Support Team, a support staff communication network, peer mediation, and school-based youth court, as well as Peer Group Connections that, through the advisory program, link 12th- and 9th-grade students for the purpose of integrating the younger peers into the school culture.

Personalized Student Supports

Integrated throughout the school are components of multi-tiered systems of academic, health, and social supports that further help to address learning barriers in and out of school. These services are aligned with a developmental framework that is shared by all the adults in the school, coupled with procedures for ensuring that students receive additional help for social, emotional, or academic needs without cumbersome procedures standing in the way.

Medical services. Bronxdale has a partnership with Bronx Montefiore Medical Center, which offers medical services to students at Bronxdale along with students in the other small schools co-located in the building that houses Bronxdale. Students can gain access to health services, including dental care; vision care with free eyeglasses; health education; reproductive health information in advisory classes; and referrals to individual, group, and family counseling with Montefiore social workers and counselors.

Mental health services. School-based mental health supports include a class on mindfulness, as well as intensive interventions through individual and group counseling, which is sometimes organized around common needs, such as grief counseling. To make sure that students feel safe in a neighborhood that can feel unsafe, teachers take positions outside the school at dismissal as signposts of care and safety. Because school holidays can create particular stress for students in extreme poverty, Bronxdale has created a list of places that provide food, activities, heat, books, and computers.

Educational supports. These supports include well-designed special education services and inclusion classes co-taught by expertly prepared special education and general education teachers. Students also have access to

after-school and lunchtime tutoring, Saturday academy, mentoring, a resource room for extra help as needed, and a computer lab for students who do not have access to technology at home.

In addition to these many practices to create physical and psychological safety within classrooms, Bronxdale has developed, within its multi-tiered system of support, specific programs and interventions that address the situations of students who experience adversity and trauma.

Building Capacity for Instruction That Supports the Way Students Learn

To develop and continuously improve educators' capacity to undertake these sophisticated pedagogical and emotionally supportive approaches, teachers are encouraged to take charge of their learning, in much the same way they encourage students to take agency over their learning. The skillfulness and pervasiveness of the educators' approaches to connecting to students' prior experiences and scaffolding their learning toward ambitious curriculum goals are apparent. Bronxdale enables teachers to develop and tailor their pedagogy in this regard by creating a community of practice: Faculty come together regularly in different configurations to learn—much the way that students learn, through inquiry, collaboration, and self-reflection—with students at the center of their inquiry.

This community of practice rests on several significant beliefs about teachers and their learning. First, teachers at Bronxdale are invested with a powerful level of trust to take charge of their own learning and to share their expertise with colleagues. Because faculty members are recognized as empowered agents, teacher learning consists of more than the delivery of professional development; it also involves the active examination of self and practice, connecting that self-knowledge to instructional improvement. Second, faculty learning is enriched because it occurs within a collaborative community made up of peers and external partners. The external partners include the Institute for Student Achievement, which has worked successfully with many New York schools to build student-centered practices over many years.

Finally, the process of inquiry in which staff members engage is ongoing: The school and the practices that define it are continually evolving as the collective knowledge of adult stakeholders evolves. The result is an environment in which student needs are actively examined, and strategies to meet them are continually devised and revised, with continuously improving outcomes as a result. Faculty further problematize their own classroom teaching experiences with Bronxdale students to inquire into students' learning and responses so that they understand how their students learn best. These inquiries help them figure out, individually and collectively, the routines, teaching strategies, and solutions that constitute the best ways to teach their students. Bronxdale hosts a wide variety of configurations for convening its community of practice, including schoolwide professional development initiatives, summer institutes, grade-level team meetings, content area department meetings, specialized committees such as the Student Support Team, different types of coaching, release time planning for teachers, curriculum retreats, interclass visitation, interschool visitation, coaching, peer-to-peer learning and feedback, co-teaching, and new teacher workshops.

Principal Quintana asserted, "Problems don't get solved privately behind closed doors, but through community collaboration. No one person is seen as the only one who can solve a problem. Our structures, such as teams, and practices make and allow everyone to be responsible." These collaborative structures and practices produce collective responsibility and internal accountability for learning, knowledge building, and problem-solving; this, in turn, enables teachers to teach in the ways that Bronxdale students learn best.

Lessons Learned and Policy Implications

The case of Bronxdale High School has important lessons to offer the field, though these lessons do not come in any kind of easy-to-implement “package.” Instead, Bronxdale presents a set of principles and ideas, as well as the outcomes they are designed to achieve, that its stakeholders have developed through the interplay of beliefs and action (on-the-ground practice) in the context of its particular staff, teachers, students, and community. The careful attention Bronxdale pays to this interplay among beliefs, action, and context powers educators’ commitment to and engagement in continuous learning, improvement, and change.

Steady improvements in climate, culture, learning, and outcomes over the past 5 years have been a result of several key elements:

- a clear vision of the student capacities the school is seeking to develop that is integrated into every aspect of school design and instructional practice;
- a safe, collaborative culture that is supported by structures, staffing, and practices, including advisories and classes that integrate social and emotional learning and restorative practices, as well as by staff collaboration;
- meaningful inquiry-based learning implemented through well-scaffolded, project-based instruction and leveraged by engaging and rigorous performance assessments; and
- investments in staff learning both from each other and from other educators who have designed successful schools and programs that incorporate theory and practice regarding strategies for social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, as well as positive identity development.

Implications for Policy

While Bronxdale has autonomously created many of the aspects of a supportive school environment that have contributed to its student achievement success, there are several NYC DOE policies in place that have enabled the conditions for the school’s leadership to do this work. These include:

School-level autonomies. The NYC DOE provides school principals with budgetary, hiring, organizational, and programmatic autonomies so that principals and school communities can make decisions based on the needs and goals of their unique contexts. These autonomies have permitted Bronxdale’s principal to allocate portions of the school’s budget to personnel positions to address students’ social-emotional needs, including two restorative deans; professional development to support staff to develop the knowledge and skills to implement inquiry pedagogy; school-selected external partners that have the capacity to advance the school’s professional development goals, such as the Institute for Student Achievement’s coaches. Principals’ autonomy in hiring staff has enabled Bronxdale’s principal to hire staff specifically suited to the school’s values and priorities, such as content area teachers committed to inquiry pedagogy. Organizational autonomy has enabled Bronxdale to design schedules in ways that help the school achieve its goals for student learning—for example, to change the number of minutes for each class period in order to offer more electives. Programmatic autonomy has also enabled the school to choose deep implementation of restorative practices, require seniors to produce capstone projects, and use performance assessments to evaluate student achievement.

Flexibility in union work rules. The NYC DOE’s contract with the United Federation of Teachers enables schools to modify particular work rules if 51% of staff vote to do so. These provisions allow flexibility in teacher assignments and schedules that may be necessary for the school to enact innovative initiatives. This flexibility has also meant that Bronxdale can, with teacher agreement, define teacher roles to include responsibilities beyond classroom teaching to include participation in school governance, design of curriculum and pedagogy, and membership on grade-level and departmental teams.

Multiple measures in evaluating school performance. The NYC DOE uses multiple criteria and diverse forms of data reflecting diverse perspectives for school evaluation, including statistical student outcome data; parent, teacher, and student surveys; and qualitative data from School Quality Reviews. These multiple measures can provide a nuanced view of schools and capture some of their complexity. The meaningful progress Bronxdale is making is captured and encouraged by New York City’s accountability system, which takes account of critical indicators such as 4-year and 6-year graduation rates; college-going and persistence rates; and school climate indicators related to rigorous instruction, high expectations for students, teacher collaboration, supportive environment, family–community ties, and trust; along with traditional test scores. These attributes of the policy environment are helpful to Bronxdale’s restorative approach. Equally important for these kinds of practices is a regulatory environment in which school practitioners are trusted and given the flexibility and resources to exercise their judgment, while being supported in finding ways to achieve the outcomes their community aspires to.

Student assessment. The performance assessments that Bronxdale has been able to create and use have supported a culture of revision in classrooms and the development of both academic skills and a growth mindset for students. Staff believe that a more fully developed performance assessment system for graduation, such as the graduation portfolio used by the several dozen schools that belong to the New York Performance Standards Consortium, would more accurately assess what their students know and can do and would help them develop stronger critical thinking and performance abilities. They believe such a system would allow them to expand and intensify the deep project work exemplified by the capstone project, which engages students in the ways they learn best. This is a next step for both the school and the system, which allows some schools to undertake these pioneering approaches through a waiver but does not yet encourage this kind of opportunity for all students. In the end, building a school to support the many aspects of how diverse young people learn best requires both on-the-ground investments in practice and supportive policy frameworks.

Endnotes

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