

Creating a Supportive Environment in Middle School

Kuhn's approach to supporting social-emotional wellbeing and academic success by leveraging deep knowledge of students

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Introduction

During the 2014–15 school year, the New York City Department of Education’s (NYCDOE) Office of Instructional Policy engaged Eskolta School Research and Design to conduct an investigation into implementation of the Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE). To learn about how strong schools structure their work, Eskolta recruited a sample of schools that had received a “well developed” rating on their New York City Quality Review while serving a population of students of whom 70 percent or more are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This group of schools achieving high-quality ratings while serving a relatively high-poverty population was described as the “five percent,” as they comprised only 5 percent of schools in the system. At the eleven sampled schools from among the “five percent,” 55 interviews with teachers and leaders were conducted and analyzed.

The resulting analytic study, available in full [here](#), highlighted two major groups of findings. First, teachers at these schools were regularly tasked with seeking solutions to key problems and given the support to take action. Leadership often identified the focus of such work at these schools, and then ensured teacher teams were given the agency and ownership to pursue promising courses of action. When more expertise was needed, high-performing teachers were treated as ambassadors for the school and sent to receive professional development, which they were then expected to “turnkey” back to the rest of the school community. This approach to shared leadership appeared to be a consistent and valued feature of these schools’ approaches and helped to build a culture of trust.

In addition, teachers at these schools operated in a culture of experimentation. Such a culture appeared best cultivated in schools in which routing structures had been established to support collaboration, including common preparation periods and additional scheduled meetings. Leadership appeared to hold teachers accountable for collaboration and progress, but not for success. Indeed, teachers were actively encouraged to try new things and expect failure along the way. “It’s okay to be wrong,” one principal stated. “What’s not okay is being content at being wrong.” At schools where this trait was the strongest, teachers reported that they discussed their failed experiments with their colleagues as a matter of course and that their leaders framed even formal observations as low-stakes and formative.

Three snapshots were prepared to further explore and describe notable strengths of four of these eleven schools (see *Related Snapshots*). In the analytic study and all three snapshots, school and individuals’ names have been changed for anonymity. This report is one of those snapshots.

This snapshot focuses on one school, Deanna Kuhn Middle School. It focuses on how the school has developed a supportive environment, one of the six core elements of the Framework for Great Schools, the guiding framework for NYCDOE policy in 2015–16, and helps the school address the city’s stated expectations that “systems and structures are in place so that each student is known well by at least one staff member.” In particular, the school has employed a flexible, responsive leadership style along with a well-structured dean position to build supportive relationships between adults and students. These decisions have helped the school utilize deans to put in place individualized academic plans, detentions used as interventions, a formalized group for low attenders, and structures that support student recognition.

Related Snapshots

This snapshot aims to describe the experience inside a middle school that has successfully created a supportive learning environment for students and a supportive working environment for staff through knowledge of students. To learn about two elementary schools that have focused on developing a supportive environment that is deeply integrated into their academic work, see the [Escalante/Mayer](#) snapshot. For a look at one's schools improvement journey through the lens of the New York City Framework for Great Schools, see the [Angelou snapshot](#). For insight into creating a supportive environment in high school, see the [Horton case study](#).

Deanna Kuhn Middle School

Deanna Kuhn is a small New York City middle school of approximately 200 students. Nearly 90 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and staff report that the school serves a significant population of students who are coping with transient housing. The school strives to ensure that all students have a teacher who knows them and with whom they feel comfortable talking about their personal lives. However, rather than instituting a schoolwide social-emotional curriculum or standardized training in social-emotional support, Kuhn uses a more flexible approach, allowing staff to assume roles that interest them and to customize content to specific students.

Staff have opportunities to get to know students in a weekly advisory group, which most teachers in the building lead, and through an after-school program the school offers with a partner organization Monday through Friday. In addition to creating these structures, leadership at Kuhn has facilitated the staff's ability to respond to individual students' needs by being open to suggestions from teachers. The principal recounts one example of how a teacher who had received a rating of "ineffective" from school leadership using the district's teacher evaluation system identified classroom management as an area to improve. He began to discuss strategies with his mentor and other teachers in his department and came up with a lunchtime activity to build relationships with his students. The principal notes, "That was a really nice strategy for him to just relax with the kids, so the kids could see him as a person. That has translated into his classroom practice because the kids are a little less standoffish, and they're more willing to listen, and they're more willing to engage with him because they see him a little differently now."

In another example, a seventh-grade English teacher noticed that a student who did not have an Individualized Education Program was drawing in the margins of his assignments instead of doing work. The teacher requested an additional Friday intervention block to work with students, like him, whose needs were not covered by existing programs. She explains, "I've just seen for that particular child it worked really well; he's made serious gains. He still moves a lot slower, but you don't see the doodling on his work, and you see a lot more light bulbs go off and a lot more accuracy in his writing."

“One of our sixth graders, Noah, I’d say he fits right into the target population right from the get-go. He’s got some real behavioral issues, some academic issues... He doesn’t like to sit down; [he] gets off task, craves a lot of attention from the teacher but in a way that disrupts the learning process for all the other students in the class.... I didn’t have any behavioral issues with him in the gym at the beginning of the year, and I was able to talk to his ELA teacher and his social studies teacher [who said] that he was giving them a little bit of trouble. I’ve noticed that [it helps] just being able to show up every once in a while, not even for a behavioral issue, and just pull him [out of class] for a little walk, and just kind of have a conversation with him and find out his likes. He’s a big, big baseball guy. So we’ll talk baseball up and down the hallway once, put him back into class; [it] has really helped to manage some of his issues in the classroom.”

DEANS

At the center of this approach are Kuhn’s three deans, who make it a priority to get to know students intimately and seek out unique ways of supporting individual students in daily life. In recent years, Kuhn has gradually created more time for this role. Deans have reduced course loads, freeing blocks of time for them to provide individualized support. These blocks are intentionally distributed throughout the day to ensure there is a dean available every period. During these hours deans engage in a number of activities, including working with the administrative team to resolve incidents, responding to teachers’ calls, and pulling students out of class for one-on-one discussions, detention-intervention, or issues that need to be escalated because of their severity.

While the deans are also classroom teachers, the work of this three-person team starts in two locations outside the classroom. Each morning, two deans are stationed outside the building to greet students as they arrive and take note of how students are starting the day, while a third is in the cafeteria with the students having breakfast. Dean Dave Abbot explains: “Typically on a day-to-day basis, I either have a first-block dean or a prep. Campbell and I are outside greeting the kids as they come in, making sure that everything is okay and that little things that we notice don’t become big things.” Being outside in the morning helps students feel welcome and creates an opportunity for informal check-ins with parents to hear how things are going at home. In addition to greeting students at the door, the deans focus on interactions with students in the hallways and cafeteria.

Remarks one dean, “The thing about our position is that because we have that flexibility [in our schedules] that teachers don’t have ... if we see a problem, we can address it then and there. We can pull a student from a classroom. We can find out what’s going on. Or if a teacher notices a situation, they’ll refer a student to us. We also make recommendations, and the administration is great with stuff like that. Whenever we come to them saying, let’s say, ‘We’re worried about X student,’ they’re always gung ho about ‘What would you like to do? How would you like to approach this?’ and finding time within our schedule for us to meet with those students. We kind of use that to get to the heart of the situation.”

SECTION SHEETS AND INDIVIDUAL ACADEMIC PLANS

The deans are also charged with proactively cultivating students' awareness of negative responses to difficult situations. This can occur through one-on-one conversations that deans have with students in the hallways early in the day. For students who are struggling in their classes, this is formalized in "Section Sheets," on which students track specific academic and behavioral information and that teachers sign at the end of each class. As one dean explains, "Section Sheet is basically a daily accountability form that is their proof to show that they've been academically and socially responsible for the day. Students can do things like earn free time in the gym with certain teachers ... through showing they've been holding up their end of the bargain academically and showing good behavior."

For students in Dean Abbot's class, Section Sheet has been expanded into an Individual Academic Plan (IAP), in which the student and a teacher generate goals, track progress, identify steps for how to improve, and revisit this information every marking period. "So within that IAP we're going to be tasked with having to know the student's academic standings and their goals in terms of their academics, but also their social makeup. What are their likes? What are their dislikes? What it is that they do that they would want to share with us? And then, over time, as that relationship builds with the teacher, it would develop and become a living document.... A part of that is going to be ... making sure that we model the right behaviors and that students see this, that they are explicitly taught this, and that they are given strategies to handle themselves appropriately in social situations."

Dean Dave Abbot recounted the unique strategy he used with one student who was having behavioral issues in class: "Usually, in the beginning, he would come in with a chip on his shoulder and very angry, and [he] didn't really understand how to communicate what was really taking place with him, either because of pride or because he felt no one cared."

"We were able to meet on Fridays during advisory block. I spoke with administration, and we came up with a plan on the fly and set it in motion. I pulled him, we found out what was going on in terms of his academics, things that were taking place in school and outside of school that might have been a cause of some of the issues that he was having. And we also worked out. So we did things like working out with [boxing] pads. He's very energetic, so [it was about] just draining some of that energy from him in the gym. He's also part of the basketball team—having him work out and getting some of that high energy out that way also. Over time, he has also earned rewards based on the things he likes, such as a boxing kit, where he gets to punch around one of those [speed balls]."

"So it's helped him, I believe—it's not perfect, but it's a work in progress—but I've started to notice that he became calmer, and he was a lot more approachable. He started to drop those walls because he realized there are people who really do care about him and are invested in him. And so it's been, I believe, very good for him. His grades have improved; he's focused—focusing more.... He's not perfect, but I believe he has come a long way since the beginning of the year."

DETENTION-INTERVENTION

Metacognition—the awareness of one's own thinking—is a key skill for managing one's behaviors and emotions. At Kuhn, detention-intervention is designed to cultivate students' metacognitive awareness of

their own repeated behaviors. In detention-intervention, students write down the reason they were sent to detention and what they can do to improve that situation. The purpose, Dean Rubin Warner explains, is to make “the kids understand that ‘I’m here because of this.’” This simple but structured opportunity for reflection is accompanied by good record keeping so that the repeated reflections of students who are regularly sent to the deans can be reviewed to identify patterns. “Some kids will come in and say, ‘He did this,’ and eventually—I save all of [the reflections]—I show them back to them. It kind of gets the kids who at this age think everything else is [the fault of] somebody else to start looking at themselves internally and trying to decide, ‘Okay, this same action has happened, and one day it was [Mr. Campbell] who sent me, another teacher another day, but it was the same action.’ And that’s what starts to get the students to thinking and moving forward.”

Warner explains: “I’ve had conversations with students where I said, ‘Look, I see something else happening. I want you to remember that so-and-so normally bumps into you and it’s not an issue, but today, you’re already mad. I want you to recognize that so that you don’t take it out on him for this issue that you’re already mad at, and have you end up in front of me.’”

ATTENDANCE GROUP

A second key group of students are those with low attendance. The deans identify students who are struggling to come to school and bring them together in a lunch group that meets about once a month. During these meetings, they talk about the importance of attendance, have students set goals, and then on a rotating cycle go over their progress and restart the goals if needed. Warner explains, “We’re talking about ... the importance of attendance from a multifaceted approach—so, in terms of what it means for the student, in terms of discipline and developing those skills of being on time and responsible. And we’re dealing with it from the point of view of the schools and how this affects getting into a good high school or a good college, because [time] budgeting is often tied to attendance.”

After highlighting the potential impact of low attendance, the team asks students what is keeping them from attending and which strategies could help them meet their goals: “Whether it’s getting together with a buddy or getting an alarm clock ... we provide resources or interventions for students. The extreme would be having an ACS [Administration for Children’s Services] case opened because the situation is out of the student’s control, or if it’s something that might be out of the control of the parent and the student—let’s say, housing or lack of housing and having to move a lot or issues within the family. We try to have the students discuss and problem solve and also find ways to help each other.” Over time, students have become connected to the school through this work. As one dean reports, “They feel empowered and a part of the group.”

STUDENT RECOGNITION

The school also supports the larger student body by celebrating students’ successes. Students who make the dean’s list or the principal’s list are visibly celebrated with their photos, biographies, and future goals and aspirations posted on a wall in the school. Says Warner, “Students will pass by and say, ‘How do I get on this? What does my average need to be?’ Students are now advocating for themselves because they want to be recognized as being the top tier of academics at our school.”

High attendance is another place for positive reinforcement. Students who have few to no absences and who arrive on time are rewarded through a program that is highly visible in the school: “We just took them to see *Annie* where we rented out the whole movie theater and we took them to Manhattan. So the kids that are doing it, they feel they are rewarded. And those kids who need scaffolding, need help, we offer that, we offer an incentive to move up.... We brought in one of the students who ... wasn’t at 100 percent [attendance], but since we brought him into our incentive program, he [hasn’t missed] a day. He said if he misses the bus, he walks to school. The kids get motivated by it.”

The time and effort that adults at Kuhn are putting into getting to know students as individuals and finding ways to interact with them has made a palpable difference. As Dean Rubin Warner notes, acknowledging this impact is not always easy for students, but they find their own ways of expressing their gratitude: “One student who recently had a breakthrough that I’m proud of—this is an eighth-grade student who is new—came in the eighth grade, is perpetually absent, comes from two prior schools between [grades] six and eight, from another state, has had issues with drugs and other issues, and just comes in with an attitude: ‘I’m mad at the world.’ When anybody looks, he’s ready to throw down and fight, and every time you say something to him, it’s a battle: so, ‘pull up your pants,’ everything. Yesterday we had another battle in the lunchroom.

“So after school, he’s leaving, he’s walking past, and he grumbles something and shoves something into my hand, and he storms out of the school. He’s walking through with his friends and he’s cussing me out, and I didn’t look at it till he got to the door. And then I look at it and I realize what it is. It was his graduation picture, and then on the back of it he writes, ‘Thank you for never giving up on me and getting me where I am now. You’re like a pops I never had.’ He covered it up with a paper so that the other boys wouldn’t see. But you know, it’s letting me know that we are getting through.”

Research Methods

Findings are based on structured interviews with teachers and school leaders at a middle school rated "well developed" in the fall, followed by a focus group and semi-structured interviews with both returning and new participants in early spring.

SCHOOL

The school featured in this study is part of a larger study of 11 unscreened schools that received a rating of "well developed" on the NYCDOE Quality Review in 2013–14. The school and individuals are identified in this report with pseudonyms. At the time of recruitment, more than 90 percent of students at the selected school were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This school's experiences provide insight into how teachers and leaders in schools that have been acknowledged for success are facing the challenges of meeting Citywide Instructional Expectations while serving the New York City public school population.

PARTICIPANTS

Individual teachers were recruited through the placement of posters and sign-up sheets in the schools' central offices. Principals also communicated directly with their staff to inform them that the opportunity to participate was available and voluntary. Once teachers signed up for the study, principals scheduled their interviews. At the school featured in this study, the seven staff members who were interviewed included ELA, math, social studies, physical education, and special education teachers, some of whom act as part-time deans.