

# Maya Angelou Elementary School: Moving toward Greatness

*One school's improvement journey understood through the lens of New York City's Framework for Great Schools*

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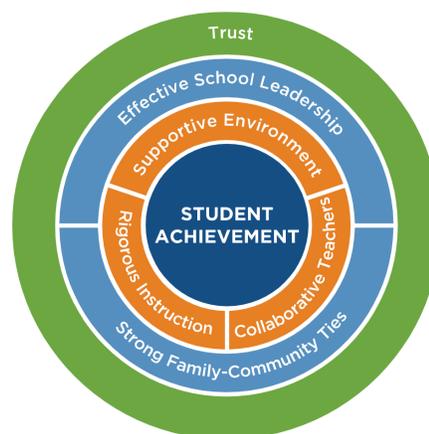
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## Introduction

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). This resulted in a series of reports starting with an analytic study of eleven schools all rated “well developed” according to their most recent NYC Quality Review, in which experienced educators conduct a visit that includes observations, student work reviews, and conversations with staff, students, and parents to gauge school performance across multiple indicators of effective instruction, culture, and systems. Accompanying the analytic study are three snapshots that examine specific elements of practice in a subset of schools. The following snapshot focuses on specific changes one principal made over the course of a six-year effort to build trust and improve the six key elements of school quality. Names of the school and individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity.

The school’s story of change is told through the NYCDOE’s Framework for Great Schools. The Framework for Great Schools was developed based on previous work by the NYCDOE and draws heavily on work by researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, presented in the 2010 book *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* by Anthony Bryk et al. According to this framework, urban school reform rests upon six highly interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements: a supportive environment, rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, effective school leadership, strong family-community ties, and trust. Each of these six supports is deemed essential in that the likelihood the school will make significant improvement in math and reading reduces to less than 10 percent if there is a substantial weakness in any single support.



### Maya Angelou Elementary School

When Jaqueline DiFiore began her first year as principal at Maya Angelou in August of 2009, she arrived at a school where teachers, many of whom had been on staff for decades, generally kept their classroom doors shut. Regular collaboration was not a part of the school culture. Ties to the community were frail. In an area with a large population of undocumented English Language Learners, many parents feared coming into the school, and outreach to parents was uncommon.

While new to Angelou, DiFiore was a veteran principal who had a vision of where she wanted to move the school. She began by focusing on an area of strength at Angelou, reengaging staff in an existing literacy program that offered extensive written resources and professional development, and instituted key changes to enhance collaboration. Through other smaller changes, she was able to help build a stronger sense of community and supportive environment.

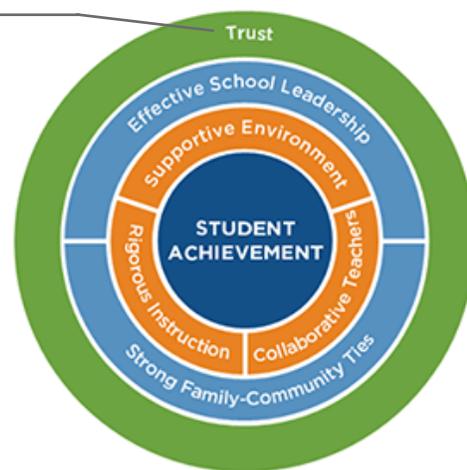
In her second year as principal, she put in place basic support structures, including multiple weekly common preparation periods, and seized high-quality PD opportunities for her staff. By the third year, this work had begun to gain traction, and she started to see teachers taking more ownership and pride in developing their professional community and supporting student learning. Trust was gradually building within the Angelou community. Teachers began to work together and learn more about their students

through conversations, journaling, and outreach to parents. Parents in the community were gradually coming to more events at the school.

Throughout a six-year turnaround at Angelou, indicators across multiple aspects of New York City's Framework for Great Schools, from academics to supportive environment, have gradually improved and the school ultimately earned a "well developed" rating on the Quality Review in 2014. The sections that follow offer a closer look at how Principal DiFiore and the Angelou staff achieved this improvement.

## TRUST

Relationships between people are the foundation of the work of schools. When these relationships are trusting, stakeholders can take intellectual and professional risks, and improvement is possible. DiFiore realized from the beginning that establishing this trust was at the heart of her work: "I needed to really connect with the people. I needed to build that sense of trust with them, let them understand that this was about supporting them in the work. When I came in, my opening conference with them was about the fact that I'm here to support you, but my order of priorities is the children, then you. So if your priority is your students, then we're fine. We're all starting at the same place, and then my job, in supporting you to support them, is to get you the resources you need."



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Initially, while pushing hard with teachers for rigorous instruction, she went out of her way to connect with teachers on a personal level. In her first year as principal, one staff member lost a spouse. DiFiore responded by immediately asking staff to let her know if they wanted to attend the funeral, and sixteen people did so. She recalls: "So, I got some subs in, I rearranged schedules, and we were able to have those people leave early to go. That wasn't me trying to impress someone; that was being humane—this is a community. I think that was one of the turning points."

DiFiore then followed up from these initial symbolic actions with structural changes to the school. She established committees that included a range of voices and invited different teachers to be involved in meetings that had for years been attended by the same closed group. When others in the school pushed back by calling into question what was being discussed in other meetings, she shared minutes with the whole school.

As time went on, this tone of collective responsibility for the success of the school and the welfare of the students also led to more comfort among teachers to reach out to the community more proactively. DiFiore notes: "Up until two years ago, that happened minimally. You know, nobody's going to spend their prep time making a phone call. Now it's more proactive. Now they're calling the parents, where before they wouldn't." As teachers responded to this fairness and transparency and as they began to

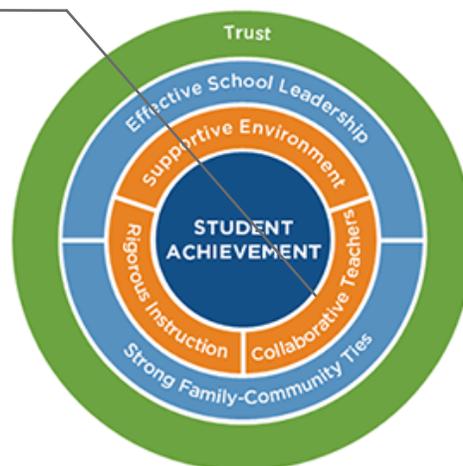
demonstrate trust in her and each other, DiFiore focused on gradually releasing her control to teachers. “At a certain point, without realizing it even, I just kind of took a back step, and then they were able to go with it.” She allowed staff to select their own grade leaders, and within their department and grade teams, teachers began building their own sense of professional behavior. “Now, without prompting, they are really involved and they’re having that conversation.”

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## COLLABORATIVE TEACHERS

Research indicates that professional sharing and guidance, strong collaboration in planning, and regular reflective dialogue result in true shifts in practice. When DiFiore arrived, however, only about half of teachers reported engaging in regular collaboration. Five years later, this number had climbed to more than 70 percent.

DiFiore spent her first year setting expectations and shifting school culture to support her intended shift toward a much stronger collaborative culture. A pivotal moment came as the school began to plan for the next year. Going against the school’s prior policies, DiFiore involved a broad swath of the school’s stakeholders in end-of-year planning: “It was the classroom teachers; it was the cluster teachers; it was the guidance counselor; it was the ESL teachers, SETS [special education teacher support], speech, you name it. They saw that when we had the conversations, everyone was sitting at the table.” Also new to the staff was her method for assigning students to classes. In the past, there had been no formal method, which led to decisions without a clear foundation. DiFiore instituted a system in which she had teachers complete a student profile sheet that listed key data points and comments for every student. In a collaborative session at the end of the year, they then discussed each student to surface specific needs and how they might be met. In instituting this new process, she was able to send the message that decisions that had once been opaque and individual were instead transparent and collaborative.



At the end of her first year, seven teachers left the school, and those who stayed were expected to engage in deep professional collaboration. To support these expectations, she took the critical step of

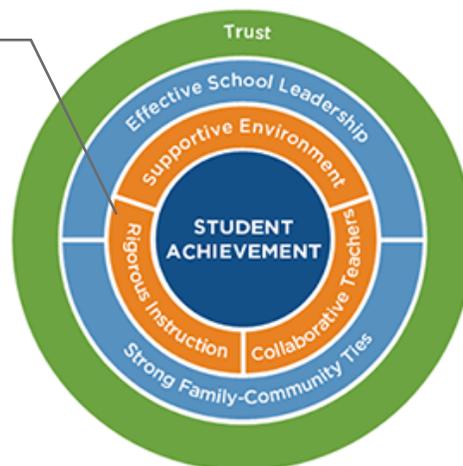
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establishing common prep periods, which ensured that teachers had time to meet five days a week. Over time, these opportunities helped develop a culture of collaboration, which was seen in planned meetings and impromptu discussion alike. For instance, DiFiore notes, “In the beginning, conversations didn’t happen during lunch; everybody lunched alone. Now they lunch together. They are talking about the work, they’re talking about the kids, they’re helping each other out.”

## RIGOROUS INSTRUCTION

Schools with rigorous and responsive instruction have curricula that are well aligned across and within grades. Once a coherent instruction is in place, it must be supported by pedagogical methods that balance development of basic and higher-order skills with application of knowledge in the creation of authentic work products.

During her first year at Maya Angelou, DiFiore saw a need for basic instructional supports. The school's most recent Quality Review placed it at "underdeveloped with proficient features" in the quality of instructional practice. Strategically, she chose one focus area to build on, rather than tackling everything at once. "We launched with writing," she explains. "At that time literacy was their strength." DiFiore decided to leverage existing support by reengaging staff in an existing literacy program that offered extensive written resources and opportunities for high-quality professional development. In year two, DiFiore brought in network coaches to do model lessons in guided reading: "They were coming in, establishing the expectations. 'Okay, so now I've done this in this classroom; six of you have come. You go back to your grade. When I come back in four weeks, I'm expecting to come in and we're going to visit you.'" By year three, having created other foundational structures in the school, DiFiore was ready to push hard on instructional rigor: "We had the collaboration piece in place at that point. We had the scheduling piece in place. Expectations were clear around PD. I think then it was just focusing on the instruction and what would work, what additional resources did we need."



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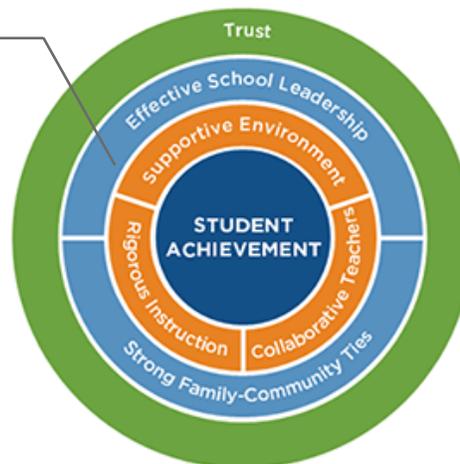
DiFiore had supported teachers to take on the intensive work of aligning their instruction to high-quality academic standards while ensuring that activities and projects deepen students' understanding. She explains: "In terms of developing the rigor from where we were to where we are now..., teachers have aligned instruction to the Common Core Standards. We align the question stems to the depth of knowledge, building the academic language for instruction.... So that piece has really tightened. Now [we are working on] consistency." To encourage consistency, teachers are given time to collaboratively plan highly detailed lesson plans. DiFiore comments, "Their lesson plans are so informative. It maps everything out, and if we're asking to make sure that your teaching point, the lesson objective, is linked to that overarching question, that you're differentiating instruction, that you're taking into consideration ... [universal design for learning] strategies to make sure your kids can engage ... the lesson plan itself delineates each of those aspects."

By the sixth year of the school's turnaround, Angelou's Quality Review rating in instructional practice had shifted to "well developed." Moving forward, DiFiore aims to shift from alignment to differentiation: "The teachers are gathering a lot of data. They know the kids. We know their strengths. We know where the gaps are. And we've been adjusting instructional practice; we've been tweaking lesson plans and finding the available resources, carving out that extra time on task, and just the extra time to actually meet to

plan. I think where we are right now is tightening up what is actually happening when we adjust those lesson plans and implement the changes.”

**EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

If change to the instructional core is to occur, it must be driven by a strong leader who has a coherent vision for instruction and who shares the task of integrating new approaches into ongoing work with teachers in the building. In the year prior to DiFiore’s arrival, this coherent vision was lacking. About 40 percent of staff at Angelou reported that school leadership communicated a clear vision for the school in the 2008–09 school year. By early 2014, this was up to 70 percent.



DiFiore took specific steps to establish her vision and inspire staff to “get on board.” As a new principal in an environment where many staff members were set in their ways, she needed an early success to gain traction. In her first year, a focus on existing strength and systems the teachers were familiar with helped her to inspire and build trust with teachers. In order to clearly delineate her vision and how to achieve it, she selected two texts for staff to read in the first year that aligned with

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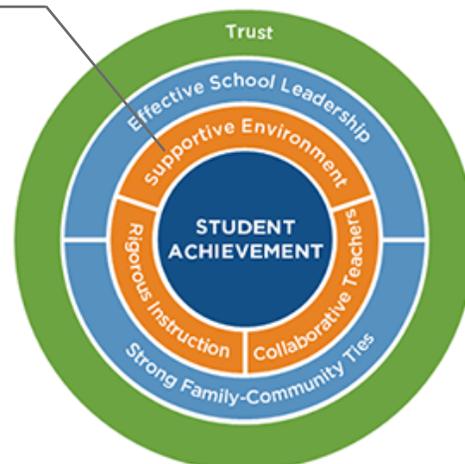
their focus on literacy: *Strategies That Work*, for strengthening reading comprehension, and *Making Revision Matter* for writing. “That was something they responded to, because the reading/writing was a comfortable spot for them,” she notes. By the end of her second year as principal, teachers saw distinct improvement in students’ reading and writing as a result of their effort.

To begin getting teachers moving in the same direction regarding instruction, DiFiore set up several cabinets and invited staff whom she understood to be established and trusted by the school community. Building alliances lent her approach credibility: “You look to [identify] points of leverage; you look to see who the staff feels they can trust and then tap into those individuals.” She made sure to include SETS, ESL, and at-risk support staff, as well as the United Federation of Teachers representative: “Early on, decisions that are made for the school community were always made in collaboration with these individuals so they felt they had a voice.”

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## SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

A student-centered learning environment is one where students feel safe, perceive that their teachers have high expectations for them, and receive individualized attention. When DiFiore arrived at Maya Angelou Elementary School, the learning environment was a clear area of weaknesses. Barely more than 20 percent of teachers felt strongly that order and discipline were maintained in the school, according to the School Survey. Over the next five years, this steadily climbed to more than 70 percent. Similarly, the proportion of teachers who strongly agreed that teachers treated students with respect rose from 49 percent to almost 70 percent in the same time.



DiFiore's first step in making this change came not through work in the classroom but rather in the staff room. In her first year, DiFiore encountered attitudes and behaviors from teachers that were clear obstacles to creating an environment where students felt welcome. She would hear teachers making

disparaging remarks about students' countries of origin, or how this affected what academic performance could be expected from a student. She explains that "[teachers'] expectations around the kids were very low, and they had a comfort level in just saying things without thinking there would be repercussions." She identified addressing these issues as an early and important change to make at the school. She started by setting up individual conversations with teachers who made disparaging remarks about students, and she communicated clearly that these comments were no longer tolerated: "It did take difficult conversations... Just setting basic nonnegotiables about what you can and cannot do, what is not going to be accepted, and starting to hold people accountable."

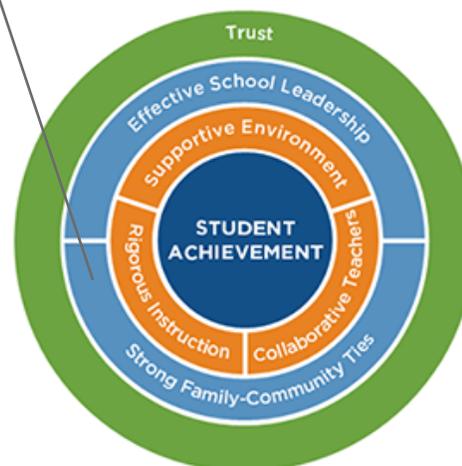
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She found that these conversations began to set a tone that gradually changed the environment. Once these conversations were taking hold with adults, DiFiore focused on one other key location outside the classroom: the school entrance. DiFiore is clear about the importance of greeting students at the door in the morning to get a sense of their personal circumstances and to establish a supportive presence for everyone: "If a teacher is complaining that a child is distracted and he can't stay in his seat, [I ask the teacher,] well, did you stop to ask him, did he have breakfast? 'Who brought you to school?' Those are some of the key questions we ask."

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### STRONG FAMILY-COMMUNITY TIES

Strong parental involvement bolsters teachers' credibility in the eyes of students, which translates into safety and order within the school. When DiFiore arrived, that credibility was not in place. Some parents came into school frequently, while others, many of them recent immigrants and some of them undocumented, did not feel welcome in the school building. DiFiore took one initial key step that communicated that she cared about her whole community: she hired local translators who spoke Spanish, Arabic, and Bengali, the three most common languages among her population. In one case she drew upon the linguistic skills of the school's crossing guard to avoid a delay in understanding and addressing a parental concern. "Sometimes you have to be creative and draw on every resource you can," DiFiore notes.



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She then began to set up events including family literacy and math nights, a set of fifteen workshops for parents to learn about nutrition, public art workshops with a community-based program, and a Saturday program for families who were learning English at which parents

shared dishes from their native countries while students read poetry and performed skits. DiFiore also maintained a close relationship with the staff of an existing community YMCA afterschool program housed in the building. She partnered with one YMCA counselor to design the school's logo, which itself was a concept developed with input from students and teachers.

Over time, parents who were once reluctant to set foot in the building became more comfortable. Building trust with parents has taken time but is beginning to pay off. DiFiore reflects: "I think now we have overcome that [hesitation to come in] to a huge extent. [Parents see that] it's okay to come in, it's okay to participate." This is evident in the latest round of parent-teacher conferences, during which the school reported nearly perfect attendance by parents.

### CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO TRUST

In DiFiore's experience at Angelou, perhaps the most important element of success throughout every area of the work has been to consistently back words with action. "You can only say it so many times, but then it becomes in the action," DiFiore reflects. "When you come in and you say, 'You know, this is not a "gotcha" situation. I'm not coming into your room to pick something you're not doing and nail you on it.' It's 'I'm coming in, I'm looking to see where the strengths are, where the gaps are, and then how can we fix it together.' And I can say that until I'm blue in my face, but [you need to] see me actually starting to help you and coming in there and getting into it with you—'Let's figure it out,' and 'Let's try this,' 'Send this child to me and let me see'—and actually getting into it. [That] takes time. And I think that was [what] we needed to have evolve that brought us to this place."

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