

Creating a Supportive Environment in Elementary School

Escalante and Mayer's Approach to Supporting Social-Emotional Well-Being and Academic Success

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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, a sample of schools was recruited that had received “well developed” ratings on their New York City Quality Reviews while serving a population of 70 percent of more students whose family income made them 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 were 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 a pair of elementary schools that have been recognized for their success in developing a supportive environment for students, one of the six core elements of the Framework for Great Schools, the guiding framework for NYCDOE policy in 2015-16. This has been accomplished by addressing students’ social-emotional learning at Jaime Escalante Elementary School and Maria Mayer Elementary School. At these schools, leadership and staff recognize that students’ academic success is closely tied to students’ sense of belonging, self-esteem, and ability to advocate for themselves.

The Jaime Escalante Elementary School works to drive academic success by supporting social-emotional well-being. As a high school principal in the analytic study commented: “What looks like academic trouble could be because of distress at home, and what looks like social-emotional distress could be upset over a poor math performance. They go hand in hand; you can’t get to one without the other.” Jaime Escalante

has made a recent push to further integrate and elaborate efforts to support social-emotional well-being and academic success through schoolwide initiatives directed in parallel toward students and teachers.

Maria Mayer Elementary School works to ensure that all students, staff, and parents feel like they belong within the school. Leadership and staff have been deepening their commitment to compassion for all members of the school community by reflecting on the impact that life outside of school plays on school performance; teachers and students alike are encouraged to consider how “everyone has something going on.”

“What looks like academic trouble could be because of distress at home, and what looks like social-emotional distress could be upset over a poor math performance. They go hand in hand; you can’t get to one without the other.”

—Principal at a participating school

Related Snapshots

This snapshot aims to describe the experience inside two elementary schools that have successfully created a supportive learning environment for students and a supportive working environment for staff. For a look at how a supportive environment can be nurtured in middle school, see the [Kuhn snapshot](#). To see a snapshot presenting 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](#).

Jaime Escalante Elementary School: Students in the Lead

Jaime Escalante Elementary School sits on a side street of a bustling neighborhood in an outer borough of New York City. Eighty-five percent of the school’s roughly 500 students are Latino, and almost all of them hail from families whose income makes them eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. A mostly veteran staff serves students from the surrounding neighborhood, and school survey data indicate that 98 percent of parents are satisfied with the education their children receive. Teachers agree, with 98 percent indicating that would recommend their school to parents, which is well above the city and district average.

*O*n an unseasonably cold day in March, a third-grader hurries up the steps of Jaime Escalante Elementary School. Today is an important day, and Mari does not want to be late. Mari and her classmates have been studying the culture and customs of Spain, and today her class is meeting with a flamenco dancer who will begin to teach the students this traditional dance so that they can perform it for the school at the end-of-year festival. Third-graders at Jaime Escalante have been involved in this cultural exploration all year as their teacher worked to bring in elements from Spanish culture and history. In social studies, for example, the third grade learned and wrote about the country’s people and history; in science, they covered the plants, national flower, and tree; in art, they painted a mural featuring representations of the country’s culture; in physical education, students played Spain’s most popular sports and games.

At Jaime Escalante Elementary School, two major programs tie together the work that students do throughout the year. First, each grade is assigned a country, which students investigate across different subject areas. While this celebration and exploration of multiple cultures builds students' appreciation for diversity and creates value for myriad learning experiences throughout the year, the school's participation in an intensive character education program is designed to develop students' confidence as individuals and as learners. Through the character education program, both staff and students learn to model positive social-emotional behaviors like self-advocacy, respecting others, listening, and perspective-taking. The school began this work by first engaging staff in coming up with a vision, learning how to teach and model positive habits to students, and forming a team of teachers responsible for leading the work within the school. Once adults in the building were on board, they began to introduce character education concepts and structures to students. The central focus is providing students with multiple opportunities to take on leadership roles and to exercise their voice.

Three years into this character education work, the school has developed a culture of modeling positive behaviors that permeates conversations inside and outside of the classroom—so much so that teachers say it is not always necessary to make explicit connections for the students. Students are now bringing up character education on their own, as one fifth-grade general education teacher noted: “They’ll just pop out and say—if we’re doing a read aloud—‘Oh, you know, this character is doing [character trait],’ and then they’ll explain it; they’ll describe it; they’ll give the example... They’ll go, ‘Oh, I did that once when I...’ Then they’ll give their personal example.”

As soon as she puts her bag on the hook, Mari stands next to her teacher, waiting to receive the attendance report. As the attendance monitor, it is this student's job to deliver the attendance count to the office each day in time for morning announcements, which begin right at 8:15. This announcement time is earlier than it used to be; in fact, in a reflection of the student voice that has been built into the fabric of Jaime Escalante's culture, this change is something that this third-grader and other peers helped to put in place. A group of students, with help from their teacher, had asked the principal for announcements to be moved to first thing in the morning. The principal listened to their arguments, and the change was made. Being an active member of the community is an important part of being a student at Jaime Escalante Elementary School. The school is careful to send the message to students that they belong and are responsible for their own and their peers' success and happiness.

The school's assistant principal (AP) recalled a comment from a fifth-grade student who had initially been quiet but eventually became the student who read the morning announcements: “You know, when I was younger, I was very shy. And I wouldn't speak, and I didn't share my ideas. But all of a sudden, I found my voice. And now I talk, and now I share my ideas. And I'm not afraid. And I'm listened to. I know that when I speak, I'm listened to.”

ACADEMIC WORK COMES TO LIFE

Having delivered morning attendance, Mari heads back upstairs to her classroom. In English language arts, the third-graders are reading a story about two groups of children who fight over use of the playground. As the class reads together, Ms. Rios pauses first to remind students of the importance of listening to others and thinking about their point of view (perspective-taking), and then to ask whether the children in the story listened to one another. Mari is seated in a group with four other students. Her group talks and agrees that the kids in the story did not listen at first, but started to over time. Mari writes down what she thinks would have happened in the story if the characters had listened to each other sooner.

Later in the day, Mari receives her paragraph on Peru's independence from Spain back from Ms. Rios. She and a partner then trade essays to give each other peer feedback, strengthening their communication and collaboration skills. Mari reviews the rubric for the essay and notices her partner only included one supporting detail when she needed to have two. Using a sentence starter from her list, she says to her partner, "I see there is one supporting detail. Is there another one I didn't see?"

Well beyond morning announcements, there is a strong effort at Jaime Escalante to integrate academic work with their intensive character education program. A group of teachers at the school dedicates time to generating ideas for where to make these connections within curricula: "There's a representation of teachers [who] discuss [the character education program] and possible ways to infuse it into their instruction. And then they share it out at their grade-level meetings," explains the AP. Analyzing characters in stories through the lens of a particular character trait (e.g., "What might have happened if the character had listened?") and analyzing the decisions historical figures made (e.g., "Was Henry Hudson proactive?") are two of the most natural places for tying character education and academic work together. Describing a lesson in her third- and fourth-grade special education class, one teacher explained the benefits of pulling the two together: "The lesson was on comprehension and text-to-self connections, but it also gave them an opportunity from the social-emotional standpoint to kind of open up conversations about how they were feeling in a safe environment."

STUDENTS TAKE OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

In social studies, Mari's group is reading about the Crusades. Each student has been assigned a role for this unit. Mari is the predictor, and her job is to consider what she has learned and make predictions about what she will learn next. After reading independently for ten minutes, she and the predictors from other groups meet together to talk about how to do their job best. From this discussion, Mari gets an idea for evidence to check and brings the idea back to her group.

Teachers use peer teaching to develop leadership skills, self-regulation, and build students' sense of responsibility, not only for their own learning but also for that of their peers. Students are assigned roles to

carry out as they read a text, such as discussion director, summarizer, vocabulary enhancer, and predictor, rotating from week to week. Each student gets time to meet with peers in the same role from other groups to collaboratively discuss what they are doing and any challenges they are having. A fifth-grade teacher elaborated on building this sense of responsibility and ability to reflect: “We made the connection of how is this going to help you in your life? So for example, you have a job and your group is depending on you to do your job; what happens if you don’t do it? And we talked about how that affects the group members.”

In math, a fourth-grade teacher describes a different system for encouraging peer-to-peer support in learning in which students are paired with a partner and check in with each other after each question to ensure that they are progressing together. The teacher elaborated: “If your partner’s made a mistake, you’re going to stop and work together on that. So you know, you are kind of your brother’s keeper as opposed to just, ‘Finished, I’m done, I’m ready to move on.’ You have to make sure that everybody is able to meet the goal of the lesson.” Taking responsibility for another student’s progress is another way that students take ownership of their learning and develop a sense of purpose at Escalante.

*O*n parent-teacher conference night, Mari sits between her mother and Ms. Rios, holding her self-evaluation sheet and examples of work from class. Nervously, she goes over what she wrote, explaining to the adults, “For the math test, I didn’t do as well because I didn’t practice very much. So I set my goal higher for the next one, and I’ll practice more.”

After having established a culture that reinforces positive habits and behaviors through lessons, classroom activities, and schoolwide structures during the first two years of this work, the school’s next big push is to have students begin leading parent-teacher conferences. This year, teachers are helping students from kindergarten to fifth grade prepare for conferences by having conversations with students when they finish an assignment so they are aware of their performance and progress. They also provide scaffolds for the conference, such as reflection sheets. One teacher remarked: “I tried it out for the first conference. I created a little evaluation for them: ‘What’s something I loved learning so far this year? What’s something that I did really well? What’s something that I struggled with?’” Another teacher is implementing a check-in every two weeks to engage students in metacognitive goal setting and to help them get comfortable talking about their work and behavior. Meeting individually with two to three students each morning, he takes a few minutes to discuss the same three things: “‘What do you do well? What would you like to do better? Let’s make a plan.’” During the first round of student-led conferences, most students were shy and read their reflection sheets to their parents, but this time teachers are working with students to look at it, remember what it says, and then talk to their parents directly, strengthening their self-advocacy and communication skills.

During these conferences students review the goals they are working toward in reading, math, writing, and leadership, which they keep in a binder and revisit throughout the year. Teachers use various practices for tracking students’ progress toward goals. One fourth-grade teacher explained, “In my class we have accountability partners—this is a trial right now—so you know your goal and also you know your partner’s goal. Every now and then I’ll ask, ‘Hey, what’s so-and-so’s goal?’ to see if they know it, but it’s written down. So what you’re really there for is to guide them to make sure that’s a specific plan. Along with the goal comes, ‘Here’s how I’m going to achieve my goal.’”

STUDENTS EXERCISE THEIR VOICE

Escalante has taken deliberate steps to build both teachers' and students' capacity to give actionable feedback to support effective goal setting. Administration selected the text *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* for staff to read, and the teacher team dedicated to improving feedback led discussion and development of one of the concepts from the book. The foundation of their feedback philosophy entails giving a single piece of feedback, or "Just one thing." Students have been supported to develop the skill of identifying and offering the most

important piece of feedback to a peer. Using the rubric for the assignment (or in the case of lower grades, a checklist), students first reflect on their own work and then review and offer one piece of feedback on another student's work. Helping students to give constructive feedback was a process, as one teacher recounted: "I thought, first of all, I could just solve this with a conversation; you know: 'Say something helpful.' That was incorrect. So I had to come up with a list of things that are appropriate and helpful to say: 'I notice that you struggled with blank; I notice your piece was great because...'" Another teacher described another challenge: "In fifth grade ... we had conversations about what it means to give someone feedback and how to remove your emotions from that. So for example, you may have to give feedback to someone that you don't love, but should you give them negative feedback just because you don't really like them? Of course not. So we talked about that." Escalante's clear expectations and support structures have made it possible for teachers and students alike to learn about effective feedback practices, further strengthening students' communication skills.

The school's AP recalled a comment from a fifth-grade student who had initially been quiet but eventually became the student who read the morning announcements: "You know, when I was younger, I was very shy. And I wouldn't speak, and I didn't share my ideas. But all of a sudden, I found my voice. And now I talk, and now I share my ideas. And I'm not afraid. And I'm listened to. I know that when I speak, I'm listened to."

At Escalante, students feel they have a voice that matters. The student government is composed of fifteen students from all grade levels who are charged with collaboratively bringing ideas from peers to the school's administration. Students have been instrumental in decisions that affect many aspects of school life, such as the timing of morning announcements, diversifying lunch options, and choosing a charity for the school to support. Adults model respect for students and, in turn, students feel that they belong and are valued. The principal commented, "One student recently said to us, 'We don't have to always agree with the adult.' They can speak and the adult listens to them."

One of the most important opportunities for students to use their voices comes at the end of the year, when the school puts on a culminating fair celebrating the cultures, languages, and peoples of the countries they studied. In this multiday event, students are in charge of presenting their work to parents, teachers, community members, and special guests through art, dance, theater, and other projects they have developed over several months. The event gives students the chance to demonstrate leadership. As the AP said: "It's their work, and they're excited to share it with people. They love that chance to be really great at something and to show it off to someone."

Escalante's integration of world cultures into coursework across the disciplines brings academic learning to life for students, who have a unique chance to understand another country through many lenses. As they gain appreciation for other people and places, they develop positive strategies through the many

opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning at the school. The rich learning opportunities provide a place where students know they belong and can contribute to their school community while sparking intrinsic interest and adding value to lessons and activities that help the student to explore their assigned culture. Both within the classroom, where students evaluate their work and take on leadership roles in group projects, and across a myriad of other activities they help coordinate as the proud hosts of their annual fair, students are taking part in an enriching and empowering learning experience.

Maria Mayer Elementary School: Encouraging Belonging through Compassion

Maria Mayer Elementary School dominates a residential street deep in an outer borough of New York City. The school's roughly 900 students are children of recent immigrants, and three-quarters of them hail from families whose income makes them eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. A mostly veteran staff serves students from the surrounding neighborhood, and school survey data indicate that 96 percent of parents are satisfied with the education their children receive. Teachers agree, with 96 percent indicating that would recommend their school to parents, which is well above the city and district average.

Alexiah runs up the stairs from the entryway and reaches the second floor at Maria Mayer Elementary School. Ms. Noriega, the parent coordinator, smiles warmly and greets her, "How are you doing? Did you do anything exciting this weekend?" Alexiah tells her about a visit with her cousins. Ms. Noriega listens and nods, complimenting her on her bracelet before continuing down the hall. Smiling, Alexiah heads to her classroom.

The staff at Maria Mayer Elementary School aim to send a consistent and clear message: everyone in the school community should feel like they belong and are cared for at the school. As such, everyone should expect to be treated with compassion. This starts with Principal Carolyn Walker's interactions with her staff and continues with the way the staff interact with each other, the way the adults in the school interact with students, and the way students treat each other. Principal Walker discussed how she emphasizes this through professional development focused on perspective-taking: "[Last year,] in the first faculty conference, we talked about accepting the child for who they are. This year I had showed a TED Talks video about accepting people for the way they were. We also read the book *If She Only Knew Me*. Because I think it's important for people to understand that everybody has something going on."

Compassion is also reflected in teachers' awareness of their students' individual circumstances and personal challenges. "The teachers create an atmosphere in their classrooms where students feel accepted," one teacher explained. They do this by greeting students, asking them about their personal lives, and sharing details about their own lives. This allows them to be open about their own lives and share with teachers and staff when they have a problem. "That's probably the one of the most important things for me: that [teachers] are warm, caring individuals, and that comes across when I interview them," said Principal Walker. The response to intervention (RTI) coordinator gave an example of how one teacher's compassion and understanding helped a student with autism handle his volatility: "He comes to school late. I think that already sets him off, which is understandable. And so ... if he's late, [his teacher will say,] 'It's not your fault.' Once you take that [blame] away from him—'I didn't drive myself to school. I'm only five.'—now he knows. 'Okay, you're not blaming me.'"

STUDENTS TAKE OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

The class settles in to finish a math worksheet from the day before. Alexiah is already done and is helping Marco with a challenging question. When she was in kindergarten, Alexiah would frequently have outbursts. One minute she would be sitting at the table, scowling at the animal cards that had been passed out, and the

next minute, her cards would be strewn on the ground and she would be across the room dumping out the art supplies box all over the floor. Ms. Reed, the RTI coordinator, was in the room to calm Alexiah down frequently.

These days Ms. Reed is rarely called in. Though Alexiah still sometimes gets upset, she now has a toolkit of strategies she has learned to draw from. For example, when she gets upset she might stop what she is saying and get up and get a drink of water. Because her teacher knows that this is her strategy, she is allowed to leave the room and cross the hall to the water fountain. Today, her teacher comes over to congratulate her for helping Marco. Beaming, Alexiah marks down her points on the ClassDojo board under “Helping Others.”

At Maria Mayer, students are asked to take on leadership roles to drive collaborative learning in small groups. Teachers assign one member of the group who has shown a high level of proficiency in a particular skill to be the expert for their group for a lesson or activity. This designated “wingperson” changes based on the activity and the strengths of the students so that all students get a chance to be in this role. Teachers report that students are excited about the role and often ask to be assigned it.

One teacher described how it works: “When we’re working on a particular skill or activity, [the wingperson is] someone who we feel really mastered the concepts.... So that student now has to take ownership. They’re the leader. They’re the expert at this particular skill.... They have to help the other students who are a little weaker in that area. They also have to be understanding, and they’re not doing it in a vicious way like ‘Oh, you need help; you don’t know anything.’ [Instead] they’re saying, ... ‘I can guide you along here.’”

While having a wingperson is a common way to structure peer-to-peer learning, other teachers come up with other methods. A fourth-grade teacher commented, “Here we’ve taken an approach that the teacher is going to step back and give the student the opportunity to take ownership of their work and their learning. They’re in groups of five or six, and they need to complete a task together. They each have roles so they feel that sense of leadership. Regardless of what their role is for that day, they have a job and they know that they need to complete it.”

Across the school, teachers provide students with the rubrics that will be used to grade their work and then give students feedback based on those rubrics. Teachers also guide students to give feedback to each other using rubrics, which develops their capacity to be supportive to their peers while engaging in learning.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING HIGHLIGHTED THROUGH ACADEMICS

I t’s time for class to begin, and Alexiah is settling into her seat as the PA system crackles and the voice of her second-grade classmate begins the morning announcements. Alongside the other news and activities is a sentence on responsibility that she and her class came up with: “You show responsibility by taking care of things that you borrow, like a book from the library or your friend’s toy, and bringing them back when you said you would.” Alexia cheers along with her classmates as the sentence that they worked hard on is shared with the school.

A set of monthly character skills and behaviors that are discussed and worked into different areas of school life form the backbone of Mayer’s approach to character education. The whole school gets a chance to reflect on values at the beginning of every day during the morning announcements, when a student representative reads a sentence on that month’s character trait prepared the day before by his or her class. Over the course of the year, every class, from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, gets a chance to collaborate on a sentence to be read by their representative. Teachers take time to talk about each sentence and trait. A fourth-grade general education teacher explained: “Every day during the announcements they’ll give a sentence ... and then in the classroom we’ll give *our* sentence for the day.”

When math is done, Mr. Matthews begins the science lesson. Alexiah and her classmates have been learning about how animals prepare for the winter. Some animals, like monarch butterflies, fly all the way to Mexico to spend the winter months where it is warm. Alexiah considers how nice it would be to be in Mexico and how she would like to be beautiful like a butterfly. But she knows that humans are doing things that make it hard for monarch butterflies to survive. Mr. Matthews explains that pollution is causing global warming, which means that the butterflies have to migrate farther north to reach the right habitat. It also causes sudden, strong storms that can kill off millions of butterflies at once. Finally, the class talks about how people are killing the milkweed plants the butterflies eat. Alexiah is troubled and wonders what she can do to help the butterflies. Mr. Matthews asks the class to write an essay about how people are responsible for taking care of the environment and what we can do to be more responsible in our community. Alexiah chews on her pencil for a moment and decides to write about making a milkweed farm for butterflies.

Teachers at Mayer strive to find many opportunities to incorporate character education into discussions about academic work to infuse the work with personal value. A fourth-grade teacher explained: “I use *Cinderella* ... and one of my students read the first paragraph again and said, ‘You know, the king was sad; he lost his wife, he wanted a mother for his child.’ So they were able to—through this story—to sympathize with the character, and that’s often what we will pull out and ask them to make connections—with characters through their writing.”

Another teacher shared an example from social studies: “In fourth grade they do explorers, and then they do colonists. We do a whole unit on New York and Henry Hudson.” She asks students to look at Hudson’s actions and think about what these show: “‘Would you have done what he did? Why did [many people] see it as unfair?’ ... Because we compare and contrast all the different explorers who came to New York, they can really get a picture.”

STRUCTURES TO BUILD SELF-ESTEEM ARE IN PLACE

*A*fter lunch, the classroom is buzzing with activity. It's literacy block, and the assignment is to write a persuasive essay to parents on why they should let the class have their "dream pet." As her grade's student government representative, Alexiah had been asked by the principal to propose an idea for a project, and everyone seemed to like her "dream pet" idea. Alexiah carefully copies down key facts about rabbits into her notebook and smiles.

At Mayer, student government offers a chance for students to develop leadership skills, self-advocacy, and be a genuine part of school decision making. In student cabinet meetings, presidents from each grade bring ideas from their peers and share them with the principal. Through this, they learn about delegating responsibilities and being leaders, and they see that their ideas can make a difference in their school.

During elections for grade representatives, candidates prepare and give presentations to their own classes, each of which elects a nominee. Once nominated by their class, they repeat their presentations in other classes in their grade. Elected grade representatives then have the opportunity to work with their own classes and other representatives (on the student cabinet) to collaboratively make changes within the school.

On one occasion, the cabinet came to the administration with requests from their fellow students to get new bathrooms. While the representatives discovered that this idea would have been too expensive, the principal agreed to part of the request and had mirrors installed in the girls' bathrooms. In the process, the students learned about budgeting and feasibility of the projects they were suggesting.

One teacher reported that "[the principal] incorporates [students] into the dialogue of what's going on in the school. Let's say they don't like the school lunches. They have to convince and persuade people. So it's showing children another way and putting it on a grander scheme than 'here's an essay and here's an assignment.' Because when you do this project ... something's going to come out of it. And what came out of it was better choices for them in the lunchroom."

Supporting students' social-emotional well-being goes hand in hand with ensuring academic success. This point was highlighted in an example that Principal Walker recounted of a student facing many difficulties: "We had a child who graduated last year from fifth grade, but he was here since he was little. He went into an ICT [integrated co-teaching] class and then he was in self-contained. His teacher left that year, the AP that he was close to left that year, the principal retired that year, so you know, everything happened at once. And that child came to me and said, 'I just feel like everyone left me; no one's there for me.' After that he was my project. He was someone I embraced. I made sure [his] teacher was aware of the situation, and was there for him and filled that void. We removed him from the self-contained and put him in an ICT. He was a child who was in a shelter, you know, I met with the mother. His dream was to have a basketball team, and I hadn't had one. So we started a basketball team; he was on the team. And just to see that growth and see how he really started to shine—because he was always struggling as a reader—he had a great year with that teacher.... He finally felt like someone loved him again."

Research Methods

Findings are based on structured interviews with four teachers and one school leader at each of two schools (rated “well developed”) in the fall, followed by a focus group and semi-structured interviews with the same participants in early spring.

SCHOOLS

The two schools featured in this study are part of a larger study of eleven unscreened schools that received a rating of “well developed” on the NYCDOE Quality Review in 2013–14. Schools are identified in this report with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. At the time of recruitment, the population of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at the selected schools was greater than 70 percent. These schools’ 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.

Table 1 provides general details regarding the demographic composition of the participating schools.

Pseudonym	Grades Served	Approximate Enrollment	% Hispanic	% Black	% Title I Eligible	% ELL	% IEP
Jaime Escalante	ES	500	>85%	>10%	>90%	>20%	>10%
Maria Mayer	ES	900	>45%	>10%	>75%	>20%	>10%

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. Of the eight teachers who were recruited and interviewed, the majority were general education teachers; one special education teacher was in each group.