

**EDUCATION
FORWARD DC**



Transcend

Supporting Student and Staff Well-Being

School Pilots in Action

May 2024

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Contents

- Executive Summary 3
 - Key Impacts 3
 - Key Insights 3
- Background..... 4
- Practices Piloted 5
 - Strong Start in Spanish 5
 - Rethinking Lunchtime..... 6
 - Adult Wellness 7
 - Adult Crew Experiences 7
- Impact Insights & Lessons Learned 8
 - Insights..... 8
 - Lessons..... 9
 - Start Small 9
 - Prioritize Adult Mental Health..... 9
 - Be Flexible.....10
- Conclusion10
- Acknowledgments10

Executive Summary

In spring 2023, Education Forward DC partnered with four DC school teams that were interested in piloting new approaches to support student well-being. Ed Forward DC funded and Transcend—which supports communities to create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments—supported Bunker Hill Elementary School, H.D. Cooke Elementary School, Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter High School, and Two Rivers Public Charter Middle School to implement evidence-based interventions tailored to their specific needs. Through a Community of Practice (CoP) facilitated by Transcend, these school teams also learned best practices around piloting new initiatives in schools and how to scale a new approach effectively.

Key Impacts

1. **Tailored approaches in addressing the needs of diverse student populations** can enhance students' self-esteem and self-efficacy and promote a sense of belonging and inclusiveness within the school community.
2. **Incorporating social-emotional learning principles into everyday school practices** can help create school environments where students feel secure, cared for, and connected.
3. Focusing on adult wellness with **targeted support and resources to enhance staff mindset and readiness** can foster a supportive community environment conducive to student success.

Key Insights

1. **Start Small.** Although it can be tempting to launch a new initiative with all of its components at full scale, there is value in starting small. Pilots that were more successful articulated a comprehensive long-term vision and then tested parts of that program piece-by-piece in small settings.
2. **Prioritizing Adult Mental Health can lead to a Positive School Environment.** Creating a positive learning environment and school culture requires valuing and addressing the well-being of the adults within the school community. All of the pilot schools recognized the need to address adult well-being as an essential part of a new initiative, even for those that were seemingly very student-facing.
3. **Flexibility Fosters Effectiveness:** A willingness to adapt and refine approaches based on evolving needs and insights enabled schools to respond dynamically to challenges and opportunities and was a crucial factor in ensuring the success of pilot programs.

The experiences of the pilot schools offer a window into how school leaders interpret student and staff well-being data and utilize it in decision-making to improve school culture.

Background

Educators have long recognized that student well-being is an essential component of a positive school culture and climate. Since school year 2017-18, the Panorama Social Emotional Learning Survey has empowered schools, including traditional public schools and public charter schools in the District of Columbia, to evaluate third grade through 12th grade students' well-being in four domains: School Environment, Support and Motivation, Quality Relationships, and Self-Perception. Echoing national trends, COVID-19 significantly impacted DC students' and teachers' mental health, highlighting the growing importance of school-based mental health initiatives. While [post-pandemic results](#) show overall higher student satisfaction ratings, specific aspects like sense of belonging and self-efficacy have not notably improved over pre-pandemic levels.

In conversations with educators across DC, [Education Forward DC](#) (Ed Forward DC) found that leadership and staff were working tirelessly to address the urgent challenges around these areas but wanted support in understanding what interventions were most effective. Ed Forward DC approached that need with two complementary investments. The first included funding early-adopter schools in administering the Panorama survey to equip them and the District with actionable data on student well-being. The second was a grant program to assist four schools in piloting evidence-based mental health interventions. The goal of this investment was to support schools in testing and evaluating interventions tailored to their specific needs, while also fostering collaboration and shared learning among participating schools. Through this targeted support, the program aimed to address urgent mental health challenges within school communities and identify effective strategies for improving student well-being through strengthening their sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Each school assisted by this program received about \$50,000 from Ed Forward DC to fund their pilot related to school well-being including a Whole Child Lunch Block ([H.D. Cooke ES](#)), providing clinical mental health supports to school staff ([Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS](#)), implementing Strong Start in Spanish ([Bunker Hill ES](#)), and engaging in Adult Crew Experiences ([Two Rivers PCS](#)). They were also invited to join a Community of Practice (CoP) led by [Transcend](#). Schools formed a pilot team that included administration, teachers, and counselors and identified an initiative that they wanted to pilot in their school community. Through three in-person sessions and one virtual session, Transcend walked teams through the process of Learn, Envision, Build, and Try (see figure 1), as part of the CoP.

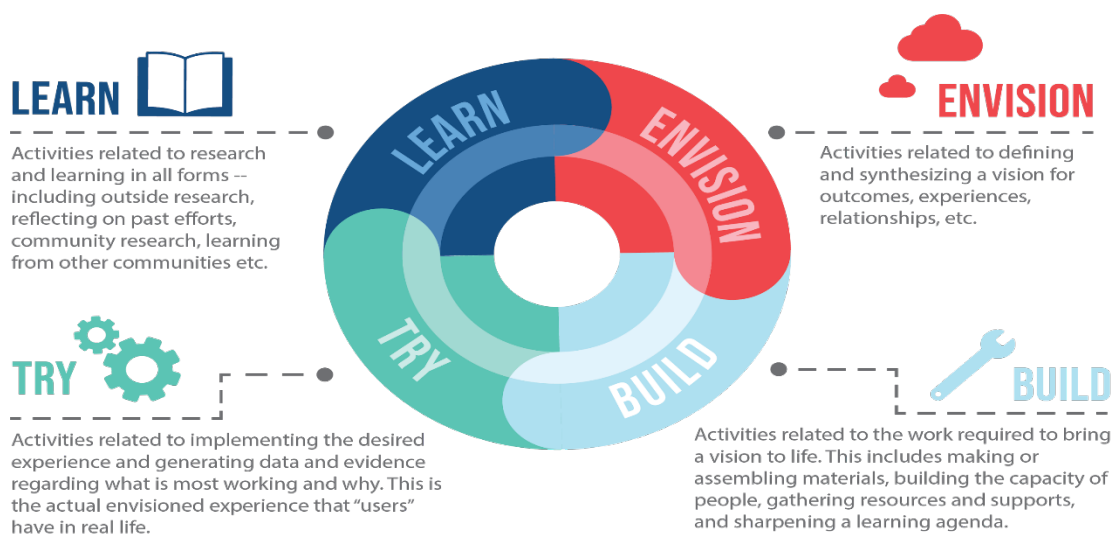


FIGURE 1

Transcend also provided support and advice to schools on how to pilot and measure the impact of their chosen interventions effectively. The CoP experience allowed participants to spend dedicated and significant time on their school-based mental health (SBMH) work, connect with local school leaders, share resources with each other, and learn from other school leaders attempting to support their community's well-being.

Practices Piloted

Strong Start in Spanish

Bunker Hill Elementary School sought to improve the well-being of its emergent bilingual (ELL) students by helping them feel more included. According to the school's Panorama results, these students reported feeling less prepared and in need of additional support. The school team, comprised of the principal and two teachers, took proactive steps to address these challenges through their pilot program centered on the "Strong Start" approach (see figure 2).



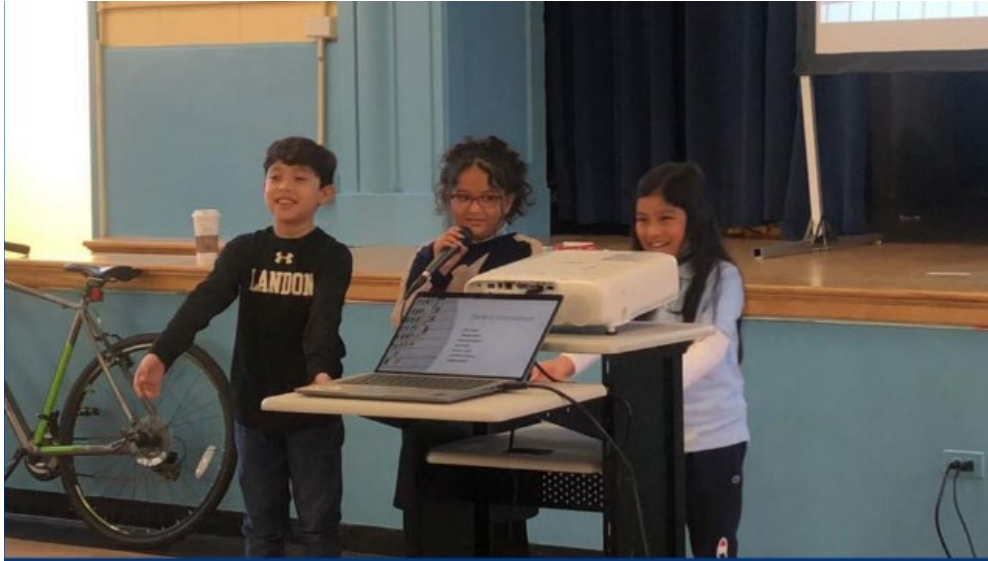
FIGURE 2

Strong Start, a series of activities designed to foster connection and engagement among students, is a component of [Transcend's Whole Child model](#), a trauma-informed, social-emotional learning model with a multi-tier system of support rooted in an understanding that children's academic success is linked to their overall well-being. Recognizing that Strong Start yielded positive results for some kids but not all, the pilot team adjusted the experience by having ELL students lead Strong Start in Spanish.

Bunker Hill selected a group of third-grade ELL students to lead their peers in engaging with the Strong Start activities. These student leaders underwent training by their pilot teacher to deepen their understanding of the Strong Start practices and build strong relationships with one another. The pilot started with a few students in one class leading 2-3 parts of the five-part curriculum. Over time, students began leading during monthly town hall meetings with the entire school. They led all five Strong Start components and conducted the activities entirely in Spanish. This hands-on approach not only empowered the ELL student leaders but also provided their peers with valuable opportunities to learn and connect across language barriers.

The pilot team surveyed both the students who took part in the pilot as well as their parents to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the pilot. The feedback from both students and parents revealed

that the pilot had a positive impact on students' self-esteem and self-efficacy and strengthened students' feelings of connection and inclusiveness. As one parent commented, their student "now feels more included at school and is not embarrassed to form friendships with more kids that don't speak Spanish." This feedback also provided the Bunker Hill pilot team with clarity on how to improve the experience. Through ongoing efforts to expand and refine this program, Bunker Hill continues to demonstrate its commitment to fostering a supportive and welcoming environment where every student has the opportunity to thrive.



¿Como cree que el proyecto ha influenciado en la autoestima de su hijo?
" Positivamente - [redacted] - esta muy motivado el dice se siente en familia y esta aprendiendo nuevas expresiones en español el se puede expandir mas en su aprendizaje y esta asombrado de como existen muchas maneras de aprender y las experiencias que el esta teniendo hacia lo nuevo y lo desconocido.

Rethinking Lunchtime

In response to an observed increase in behavioral incidents during lunchtime after returning to in-person learning during the 2022- 2023 school year, the H.D. Cooke community wanted to reimagine students' lunchtime experiences. To accomplish this, the team from H.D. Cooke, which included the principal, assistant principal, and literacy teacher, expanded successful practices from academic settings to the 3rd grade lunch period, leveraging principles from the Strong Start initiative, a key aspect of the Whole Child Model. Students were warmly greeted at the lunchroom door, allowing for a positive tone to be set and facilitating re-centering after recess. Additionally, students were granted the freedom to choose their seating to foster a sense of autonomy and agency. Furthermore, a safe space was made available for

those seeking additional privacy and support during lunchtime, ensuring that all students' needs were acknowledged and addressed.

Implementing the lunchroom pilot program resulted in tangible benefits for both students and teachers. Overall, lunchtime became a more peaceful environment with fewer behavior referrals. Additionally, the team observed improvements in adult wellness, with teachers sharing that they felt more relaxed during lunchtime which allowed them to connect with both their colleagues and students. Due to this initial success, H.D. Cooke expanded its focus to include staff and families, implementing initiatives such as a staff lounge refresh, adult mindfulness opportunities, and wellness activities during Family Fridays. The reception has been positive, with teachers recognizing an improvement in their own wellness and leaders noting a more centered, calm, and welcoming atmosphere within the learning environments.

Adult Wellness

Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter High School (TMA) partnered with the Center for Wellbeing in School Environments (WISE Center) at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital for its pilot program focused on supporting the well-being of its staff through individualized care for educators. A team that included the Associate Head of School, the Clinical Counselor, the Clinical Social Worker, and a Licensed Clinical Social worker from WISE provided individual wellness support—a departure from the WISE Center's previous approach of providing small-group wellness support services—to teachers during their conference periods, offering 1:1 consultations and targeted counseling sessions.

The school prioritized adult wellness as a means of promoting positive outcomes such as teacher retention, teacher-student relationships, and student achievement, all of which are closely linked to teacher well-being. As a result of the individualized support, TMA staff reported feeling more valued and supported and appreciated the consideration given to their well-being. Looking ahead, TMA plans to expand the availability of WISE Center services and support for staff, aiming to provide more engagement opportunities throughout the week.

TMA's approach recognizes that effective adult wellness initiatives require adequate time for planning, scheduling, and implementation. As a result, TMA intends to incorporate these supports into its master and school calendars for SY2024-25, ensuring that staff well-being remains a central focus of its organizational culture and operations. Ultimately, TMA's commitment to prioritizing adult wellness underscores the importance of supporting educators to cultivate a positive and thriving school community.

Adult Crew Experiences

Two Rivers Public Charter Middle School also focused on educator well-being as a way to support students by piloting Crew at the adult level. Crew is a community-building structure similar to Advisory, derived from the [EL Education model](#). The goal of Crew is to positively impact student wellness, behavior, and culture through relationship building, academic monitoring, and character building. Students are assigned a Crew and Crew leader and stay with this group for multiple years allowing students to build positive connections with their Crew and Crew leader. Initially, the school team made up of the English Language Arts teacher, physical education teacher/Athletics Director, and the network Director of Culture, Climate, and Equity, planned to involve the entire middle school staff in the pilot, aiming to enhance their capacity to deliver impactful student Crew experiences. However, upon recognizing challenges related to staff readiness and mindset, the school shifted its focus to a subgroup of teachers from a specific grade level who required additional support in implementing Crew with students. To

address this need, the school organized an off-campus retreat specifically for these teachers, providing opportunities for team building, clear communication, and relevant work to enhance their capacity to deliver impactful student Crew experiences. By providing targeted support and resources through the off-campus retreat, the school demonstrated its dedication to supporting staff development and fostering a positive school culture conducive to student well-being and academic achievements.

Building on the success of their targeted grade-level adult retreat and their efforts to understand staff dynamics and needs, the pilot team has continued to iterate on their pilot initiative with their final three adult Crew meetings. These sessions included a focus on understanding how love languages impact work relationships and a two-part series that helped crew members decipher "Conversations that Matter". These adult Crew experiences allowed the team to deepen their relationships and work to effectively communicate with each other and students in a way that had not been previously seen.

The school team plans to meet over the summer to develop a scope and sequence for signature Adult Crew experiences in SY2024-25. These school-wide signature events consist of a fall ropes course, a mid-year relaxation and recharge retreat, and an end-of-the-year city-wide scavenger hunt.

Impact Insights & Lessons Learned

Insights

By emphasizing holistic approaches to mental health for students and staff, schools can effectively support the well-being of their community. The pilot initiatives within the CoP surfaced some valuable insights into promoting student well-being and positive school culture.

Engaging in inclusive language practices and empowering students to lead activities in their native language can foster inclusivity and strengthen connections among students, regardless of language barriers. Initiatives like Strong Start in Spanish at Bunker Hill Elementary highlight the effectiveness of **tailored approaches in addressing the needs of diverse student populations**. These efforts enhance students' self-esteem and self-efficacy and promote a sense of belonging and inclusiveness within the school community.

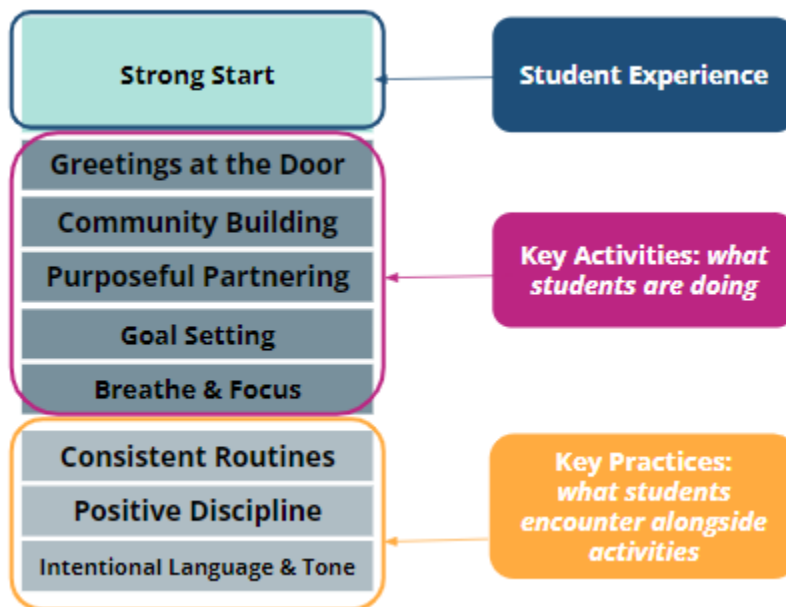
Incorporating social-emotional learning principles into everyday school practices can help create school environments where students feel secure, cared for, and connected. This was demonstrated through programs such as the lunch block changes at H.D. Cooke. Schools foster an atmosphere conducive to student well-being and learning by creating peaceful spaces even in non-academic blocks such as lunch. Some pilots also extended support initiatives to include staff and families, emphasizing the holistic approach needed to nurture a supportive school community.

Supporting educators promotes both staff and student well-being. Schools that offer personalized wellness support demonstrate their commitment to valuing and supporting the holistic health of their staff members. Moreover, initiatives like Two Rivers' Adult Crew Experiences and TMA's focus on adult wellness highlighted the importance of **targeted support and resources to enhance staff mindset and readiness**, which ultimately foster a supportive community environment conducive to student success. These pilots recognize that prioritizing staff development and fostering a positive adult culture is critical to creating nurturing and thriving school communities.

Lessons

Start Small

Members of the CoP discovered that school-based mental health pilots thrive when schools establish a clear vision for the component they intend to pilot and devise a plan to systematically test individual aspects of the component over a period of time. More successful pilots articulated a comprehensive long-term vision and then tested parts of that program piece by piece in small settings. By following this guidance, they gained rapid insights and expanded the pilot progressively.



With the urgency to help students and improve their experience, school leaders might feel the push to pilot new programs school-wide from the outset which often creates challenges. Starting too large can make it difficult to capture meaningful evidence to track progress of specific program components. When new insights emerge, school teams may struggle to pinpoint which aspects of the extensive rollout contributed to these discoveries. The inability to correlate findings with specific program components can

hinder school teams' ability to discern which aspects should be sustained within the school.

Effective pilots begin by testing individual elements of a broader vision and then gradually scaling up. The breakdown above illustrates the Strong Start experience, delineating key activities and practices.

The Transcend team coached schools to begin their pilot by launching one key activity (like greetings at the door) or a key practice (like positive discipline). Once the piloting team has learned from this test and collected meaningful evidence to support the practice, then it is recommended that they add another key activity or key practice to their pilot. This process continues until teams have tested the entirety of their vision.

"I think [the start small approach] was helpful to remind us [that] when we have ideas you don't have to start with all of them or every single person, it can be just a smaller group or a single idea to see if it's working or see if it's something we want to continue," said one of the leaders at the CoP.

Schools can achieve meaningful change without overwhelming their resources or stakeholders by incorporating a balanced strategy of starting small while maintaining a broader vision.

Prioritize Adult Mental Health

Creating a positive learning environment and school culture involves more than just meeting students' needs; it requires valuing and addressing the well-being of the adults within the school community.

Regardless of whether an initiative targets students or adults, the active participation of well-supported adults is crucial, as they contribute their capacity, time, and energy. H.D. Cooke Elementary School, for instance, initially aimed to enhance the student lunch block experience. However, midway through their planning process, the team recognized the necessity of ensuring that adults were also grounded and centered during this time. This realization prompted them to shift their focus towards including the support of adults to create a productive environment that promotes the well-being of both students and staff. Addressing adult mental health is essential for fostering a nurturing and positive school environment where both students and adults can thrive.

Be Flexible

Engaging in the piloting process underscored the importance of flexibility as schools navigate diverse initiatives aimed at enhancing student and staff well-being. The experiences highlighted that rigid adherence to predetermined plans may inadvertently hinder the effectiveness of pilot programs, but maintaining flexibility allows for refinement based on evolving needs and insights. For instance, the success of initiatives like the Whole Child Lunch Block stemmed from the schools' ability to pivot their approaches midway, incorporating new learnings and prioritizing aspects crucial for fostering a supportive environment. Similarly, initiatives targeting adult well-being, such as Adult Wellness and Adult Crew Experiences, underscored the need for tailored support and iterative refinement to address staff readiness effectively. Flexibility thus emerges as a cornerstone, enabling schools to respond dynamically to challenges and opportunities, ultimately fostering holistic well-being within the school community.

Conclusion

The pilot process and CoP allowed schools to experiment with and refine their school-based mental health initiatives. Through iterative testing and dedicated time for envisioning, innovation, feedback, and reflection, school teams gained clarity and positively impacted their communities and school culture. Commitment to the prioritization of school-based mental health continues to build momentum across the District, with more LEAs using the Panorama SEL survey and collaborating with partners like Transcend.

Soon, we will have a more accurate picture of student well-being across the city: as part of its [strategic priority to foster student and staff well-being](#), The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) intends to launch a city-wide school climate survey. As the four pilot schools demonstrated, schoolwide data on staff and student well-being can play an important role in helping school leaders test out new initiatives to improve school culture and the well-being of their community.

Acknowledgments

Education Forward DC funded this initiative to support schools in testing out an evidence-based approach to improving their school-based mental health programs. Bunker Hill ES, H.D. Cooke ES, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS, and Two Rivers PCS were chosen through a competitive process to participate in the pilots. Selected schools received direct funding from Ed Forward DC for their pilots and participated in a Community of Practice led by Transcend to support the design and implementation of their pilots. Ed Forward DC thanks the Transcend team for their partnership with this project, including Shamaa Lakshmanan, Alisha Neptune, Samina Noorani Kingsley, and Jenn Perniciaro.

Education Forward DC envisions a DC where students starting furthest from opportunity can chart their own path and thrive. We accelerate the work of visionary education leaders to foster a city of high-quality,

equitable public schools for every DC student and family. Through a dedicated focus on recovering from the pandemic's negative impacts, growing high-quality public school options, addressing racial inequities, recruiting and retaining excellent leaders, and fostering equity-centered change, we believe DC can continue its progress and become a national model as the first city to guarantee every student access to an excellent education. Over the next five years, we aim to double the proportion of schools providing students with the learning experiences they need to thrive.

Learn more about our work at www.edforwarddc.org and on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).

[Transcend](#) supports communities to create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments. They help communities start and sustain school design journeys that move them from inequitable, industrial-era learning to learning that is equitable and responsive to the opportunities of the 21st century. Since 2015, Transcend has partnered with nearly 450 schools and districts serving over 1.2M students (80%+ BIPOC) across 30+ states.