

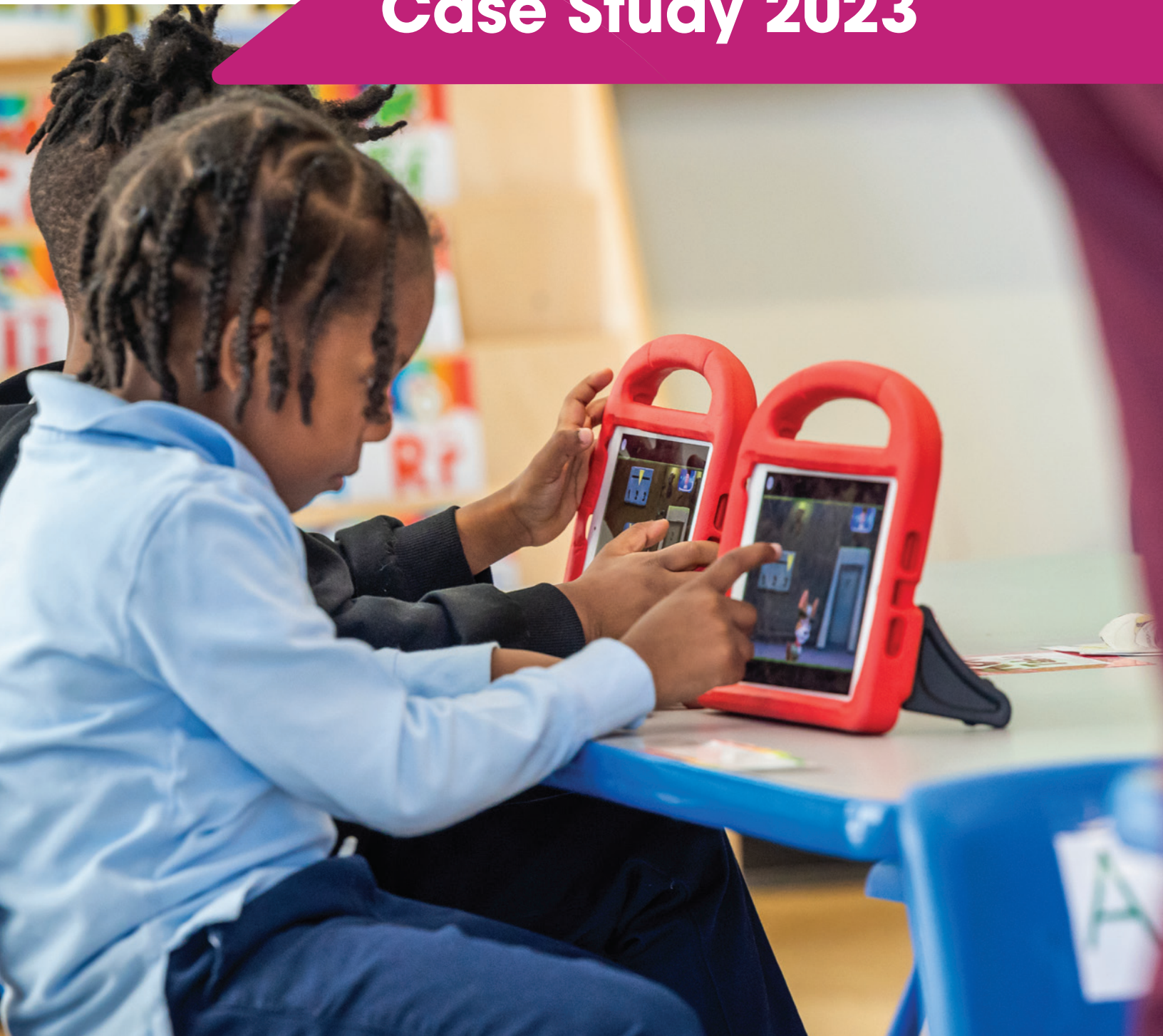



the ability
challenge

Using Continuous Improvement to Support Effective Educator Response to Interfering Student Behaviors

AppleTree Parklands @ THEARC

Case Study 2023



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SUMMARY

Overview

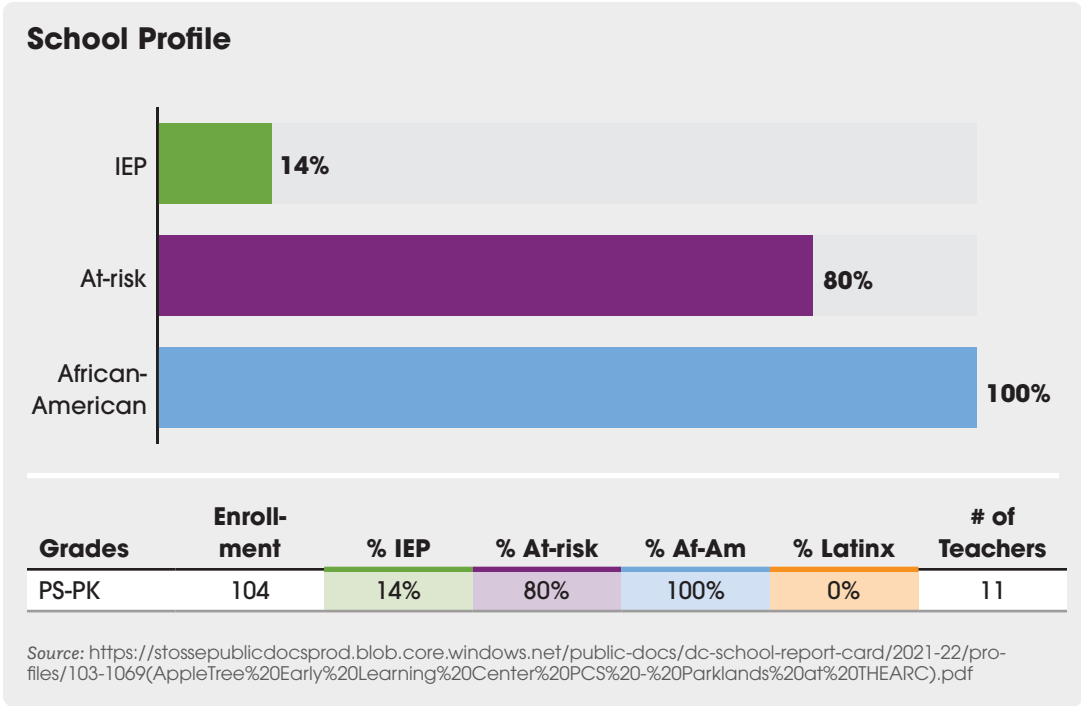
As part of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) grant, sponsored by the Washington, D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, The Ability Challenge and the AppleTree Parklands campus recently completed a two-year professional learning partnership rooted in the discipline of improvement science. The goal of the project was deceptively simple: to build targeted collaboration strategies among groups of educators in order to improve teachers' self-efficacy, and ultimately improve engagement and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Like schools throughout the world, AppleTree Parklands continues to wrestle with the downstream effects of the COVID pandemic, and while educators at the school have made progress, there is still much work left to do. In this case study, we will provide a snapshot of their continuous improvement work, discuss promising practices, reflect on challenges, and describe the growth opportunities that remain after a year of planning and a school year of implementation.

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School Profile

The AppleTree Parklands @ THEARC campus is a public charter school serving three- and four-year-old children in pre-S and pre-K classrooms. AppleTree Parklands is part of a network of early learning schools run in partnership with the AppleTree Institute, whose mission is to be instrumental in closing the achievement gap before children enter kindergarten, and in doing so to transform the lives of the children. Situated near the Maryland border in southeast DC, the Parklands campus serves families from a range of neighborhoods in and around Anacostia.





Core Challenge & Theory of Change

Students arrive at AppleTree Parklands with a range of experiences, and since the onset of the pandemic, educators have observed a notable spike in instances of classroom disturbance rooted in student behavior, a phenomenon that may be linked to delayed socialization as a consequence of government-mandated isolation. Whatever the causes may be, the school used the partnership with ABC to build their capacity to address these disruptive behaviors.

In particular, educators from the school came together, through structured professional learning, aligned to six-week-long improvement cycles. During

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*The theory of change posited that **if** teachers developed new student engagement strategies, **then** students would be less likely to express disruptive behavior, **and** classrooms would experience more learning time on task, leading to greater student outcomes.*
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those cycles, educators adopted new behavior intervention strategies, used those strategies during classroom practice, monitored improvement using short-cycle data collection tools, and adjusted according to what those tools told them.

The theory of change posited that if teachers developed new student engagement strategies, then students would be less likely to express disruptive behavior, and classrooms would experience more learning time on task, leading to greater student outcomes.

Desired Outcomes

The ultimate goal of this project was to improve student outcomes, particularly for students identified as having disabilities (i.e. students with IEPs). One of the core intermediate steps in achieving outcomes for three- and four-year-olds is to increase overall student engagement. In collaboration with ABC, the school staff measured the increase in engagement as “time on task” and collected relevant data using an intensive rubric rooted in assessing student behaviors during core instruction on a minute-by-minute basis. Educators attempted to improve time on task through an emphasis on continuous improvement practices, which included:

- collective identification of the challenges that need addressing;
- rigorous observation, rooted in providing direct feedback on the extent to which educators are addressing the challenge in real-time;
- group professional learning on challenge mitigation strategies; and
- objective quantitative and qualitative measures of the extent to which identified interventions are working on a six-week-cycle.



Personnel

While all members of the staff ultimately participated in the project, AppleTree's core team consisted of a cross-functional group of leaders and educators.



Tara Young

Principal



Dana Boston

Teacher



Lolita Fields

Teacher

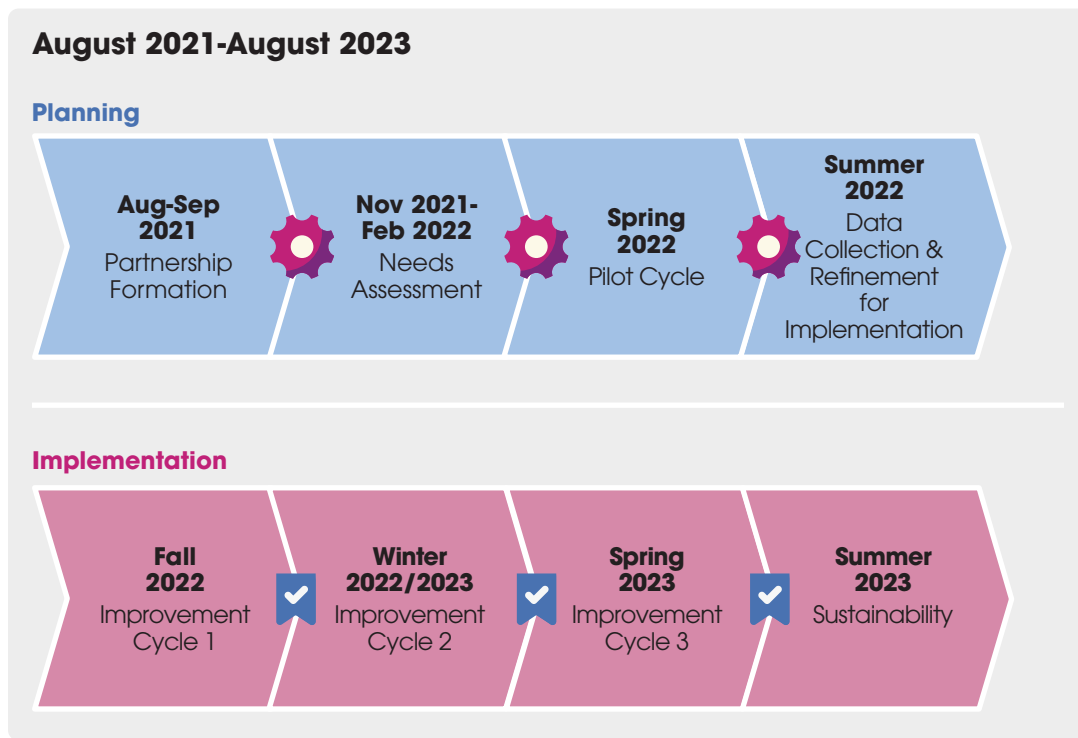


Jorden Gayden

Behavior Support
Coordinator

The Ability Challenge's team facilitating and managing this project included Sarah Sandelius (CEO) and Kristen Briggs (Managing Director of Program).

Timeline





PROJECT DETAILS

Process

After forming a partnership between AppleTree Parklands and ABC, the first step was to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, aligned to ABC's **THRIVE Framework for Quality Special Education** (page 17), designed to understand baseline educator and leader competencies at the school. Using the assessment results, a team of leaders and educators identified the areas in which they most craved improvement strategies, linking those ideas to data unearthed in the assessment.

Focusing on proactive approaches to addressing student behavior, the team's initial hypothesis was to leverage a leader-led observation and feedback intervention process. Unfortunately, shortly after conducting the assessment, the school leader departed. The team subsequently pivoted to focus on understanding and responding to the most severe behaviors, in a way that didn't depend explicitly on the leader pushing into classrooms.

ABC worked with the school's continuous improvement team members to refine their idea, better understand student behaviors, and plan for ways to respond to students over the course of three improvement cycles.

✓ The **first cycle** revealed that the initial hypothesis was correct, that severe behaviors were in fact a prominent issue throughout the school, and that there existed an opportunity to build teacher knowledge about both the functions of those student behaviors, and how responses might change once teachers understand those functions. ABC subsequently facilitated a two-part training on these topics, after which teachers developed tighter, more nuanced approaches to their planned responses, while building a battery of suggested replacement behaviors for severe misbehavior.

✓ ✓ Teachers then engaged in a **second cycle**, where they implemented the responses planned in the workshop and collected data on the subsequent frequency, intensity, and student response to implementing replacement behaviors. The data from that cycle showed promising results and also highlighted the need for using student-facing data to help generate student buy-in.





In the **third and final cycle**, teachers refined their data trackers, based on student responses and relative levels of buy-in. Some teams continued to develop strategies for the students they focused on in the prior cycle, identifying the need for sustained intervention before moving on, while other teams identified a new set of behaviors to tackle using a similar analysis and intervention protocol. ABC worked with staff to determine what, if any, new systems needed to be created to implement improvement strategies.

Fidelity of Implementation

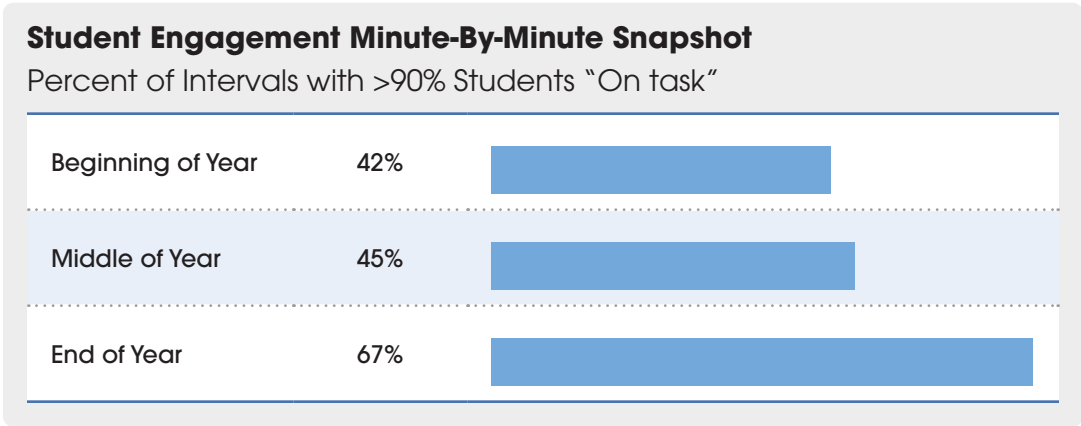
The following chart breaks down the team's implementation of the core elements of continuous improvement for each cycle of change.

Core Elements of CI	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Collective Analysis of Needs & Root Causes	Effective	Effective	Effective
Use of Data to Drive Decisions	No Evidence	Developing	Effective
Collaborative Team Decision-Making on Objectives	Developing	Developing	Effective
Professional Learning Linked to Improvement Objectives	Developing	Effective	Effective
Reflection on Practice and Adjustment	Developing	Effective	Effective

Results

By adopting new behavior strategies, and being more intentional about implementing strategies they had previously tried, educators at AppleTree Parklands experienced concrete results, which can be categorized in two domains: quantitative and qualitative indicators.

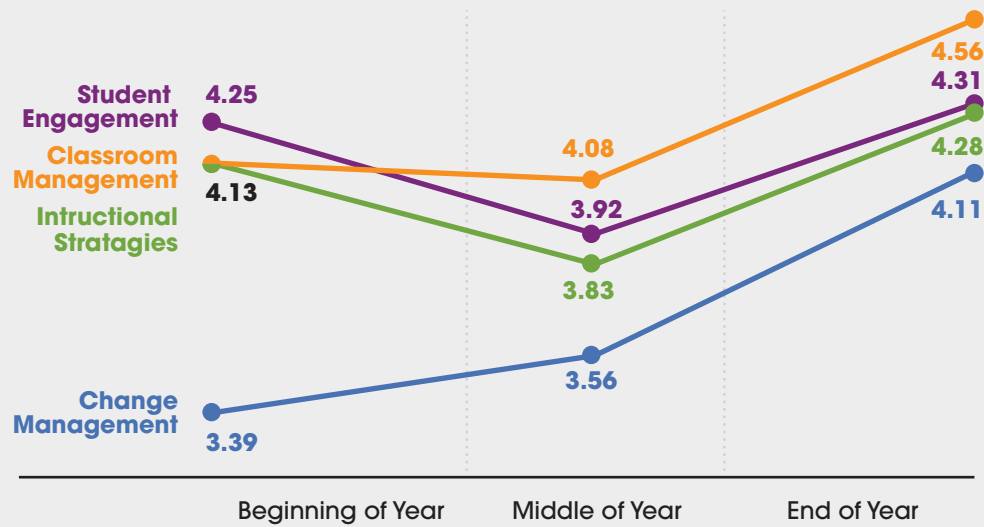
Quantitative data indicates that AppleTree’s focus on improving the way teachers respond to challenging behaviors paid off. For example, in just one year of implementation, ABC observed a 25% increase in **student engagement** as measured by increases in the number of classroom intervals where more than 90% of the students in the school were on task. This seems to be the result of increased educator focus, as ABC observed meaningful improvements in instructional quality among educators in every area measured, including how educators respond to challenging student behavior in real time. Data was collected using two different approaches: first, a student engagement tracker,¹ which was deployed three times throughout the year; and 2) teacher-created individual student behavior trackers that were used daily and weekly, targeted to specific use within their classrooms.



Additionally, the team saw a 3.5% increase in their **self-efficacy**,² which has also been shown to be a leading factor that has a correlation to improved student outcomes. Teacher self-efficacy is the belief that they are capable of impacting student engagement and learning, leading to educators being more likely to set challenging goals, engaging in more planning, showing more perseverance in solving problems and adjusting their teaching strategies when faced with difficulties. The educators at AppleTree Parklands saw increases in each domain of self-efficacy from beginning to end of year surveys.

¹ As measured by ABC’s Classroom Engagement Observation Tool.
² As measured by a modified version of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Survey, Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing and elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 783-805. ABC used the tool’s Short Form and added three questions to measure teacher’s feelings of efficacy in managing change in their communities.

Scores Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale Modified (average out of 9)



	Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
Change Management	3.39	3.56	4.11
Classroom Management	4.13	4.08	4.56
Instructional Strategies	4.13	3.83	4.28
Student Engagement	4.25	3.92	4.31

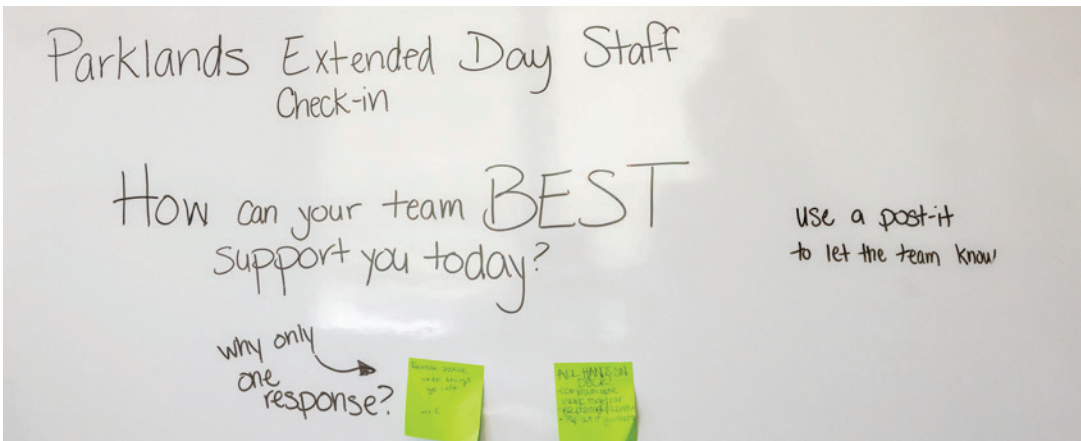
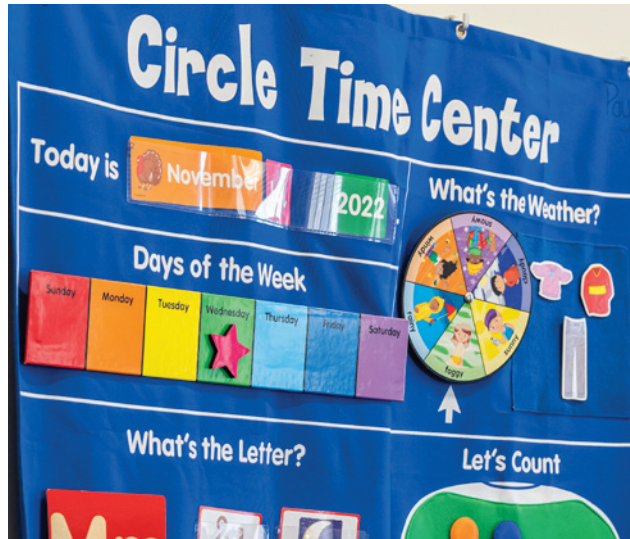
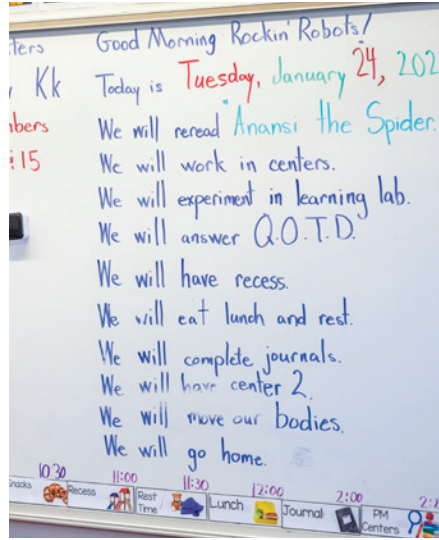
Qualitatively, educators report that they are still reflecting about the project, and their attitudes are shifting as a result of participating in continuous improvement cycles. At the end of year close-out meeting, teachers remarked about how the continuous improvement process helped them refine how they managed interfering behaviors. According to one teacher, “(We) do have a sense of self-efficacy. If I am doing (things in the classroom), it will impact my students in a certain way. Identifying the functions of behavior and putting into place an intervention shows them that with time, they can see some results. We gotta keep at it...can’t just keep switching strategies. Overall, we’re seeing that.”



Tara Young, the principal, appreciated the customization of the process. “It’s not coming in and saying we have all the answers,” she says, “We collect data, we meet, and if what we’re doing isn’t working, we tweak the approach. Then we tweak again. That’s why teachers are willing to talk. It involves them in the process.”

Dana Boston, a pre-K teacher, agrees, and craves more targeted observations. “I used to do instructional rounds with my co-teacher,” she says. “Getting substitute coverage to do that is hard, since every school is short-staffed, but pairing with someone who has better data than you on something is a good way to focus on improvement.”

.....””
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Obstacles, Reflections & Areas for Growth

Despite making strides during the first years of implementing this project, the team also encountered notable obstacles and continues to identify areas for growth. First and foremost, the project took a few months to get going into the school year and trust building was an important early component of the work, which is not atypical for projects that involve both partners and schools.

Administrative turnover may have also been considered an additional obstacle, which isn't unusual in the context of schools serving historically marginalized communities. AppleTree Parklands changed principals in between school years 1 and 2 of the project, meaning that the work had to "restart" once a new administrative team was in place. Fortunately, the new school leader was enthusiastic about carrying out the project, and she rightfully assessed whether the identified focus areas of improvement aligned with her goals as an incoming school leader.

Beyond that, teachers in the school still crave feedback on their implementation of improvement strategies, and would like to see more systematic and regular ways to gauge and respond to student behavior - not only for the students who are demonstrating the most interfering behaviors, but for all students.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, changing educator approaches and mindsets relative to students with disabilities is a deep, ongoing process. When it comes to diverse learners, there is certainly a more asset-based approach throughout the school, and a generosity of spirit relative to discussing students' ability to transcend disruptive behaviors. Even where those behaviors are still occurring, teachers are asking what they can try next, rather than throwing up their hands in frustration. This is, of course, a work in progress, but there is reason for significant hope.

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Sustainability & Next Steps

As this work continues, teachers and leaders at AppleTree Parklands see significant opportunities to incorporate more best practices from other environments into their school. In particular, educators noted the need for “upstream” interventions that set a stronger behavioral tone in the classroom, as in the current environment they’re too often resorting to corrective behaviors after disruptions. Some educators even mentioned the idea of building family and community partnerships that help reinforce student behavior expectations outside of the classroom. “If we build partnerships with the families,” Dana Boston said, “maybe we could have more constructive understanding of how the inside and outside school factors interact.”

Beyond forging those relationships, leaders at the school are hoping to create more replicable data instruments that can be used to assess the effectiveness of behavioral interventions. More structured observation would help, of course, as would capacity to conduct real-time, in-the-moment coaching and feedback conversations during those observations.



THRIVE FRAMEWORK



Based on compelling research from across the sector and input from thousands of practitioners, ABC’s THRIVE framework outlines the five core elements of a high-quality special education program. Within each element, success indicators offer a roadmap for the essential **knowledge, mindsets, and practices** required of leaders and educators to set the **conditions for authentic inclusion**. Schools that implement these elements are transforming how they meet the needs of diverse learners—empowering them to learn and thrive.

ELEMENT 1

Culture of Inclusion

Leaders set and hold staff accountable for a bold, clear, inclusive vision and aligned practices. Educators believe that all students can learn and grow and deeply value an inclusive, collaborative school environment.

ELEMENT 2

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

Leaders manage the implementation of evidence-based, standards-aligned, culturally-responsive curriculum with clear outcomes and sequenced units of study. Educators facilitate meaningful and supportive relationships with students and deliver instruction that provides access to grade-level content for diverse learners.

ELEMENT 3

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

Leaders are familiar with special education laws and understand their role in ensuring quality programming. Educators understand how disability impacts learning, know their legal obligations, and collaborate with peers to deliver integrated support that meets each student’s needs.

ELEMENT 4

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

Leaders allocate resources and put in place effective systems to manage the execution of quality special education programming in their context. Educators are knowledgeable about and implement those systems paying close attention to data and adjusting course as needed.

ELEMENT 5

Meaningful Family Partnerships

Leaders prioritize building meaningful partnerships with families and provide resources to staff to make those partnerships happen. Educators enter into effective, reciprocal relationships with families centered on empathy and cultural competence.

THRIVE FRAMEWORK

Each element is further defined by a set of **success indicators** that break down each element into sub-components for **effective implementation**, listed below.

ELEMENT 1

Culture of Inclusion

KNOWLEDGE & MINDSETS

- Belief that serving exceptional learners is a collective responsibility
- Belief that all students can learn and grow
- Belief that an inclusive school environment benefits all students
- Understanding of the leaders' role in shaping culture
- Understanding of the components of effective change management focused on inclusion

PRACTICES

- Creation of a bold, clear vision for inclusion
- Implementation of an action plan for making or sustaining inclusive change
- Implementation of practices for mitigating bias
- Effective formal & informal collaboration

- Basic understanding of the impact of disabilities on learning
- Clear roles and responsibilities for special education

PRACTICES

- Writing of clear and effective documents
- Design and delivery of programming tailored to individual student needs
- Effective IEP Team meetings
- Effective practices for progress monitoring
- Regular compliance monitoring
- Integrated provision of related and other services

ELEMENT 2

Student Centered Curriculum and Instruction

KNOWLEDGE & MINDSETS

- Knowledge of evidence-based instructional and assessment practices for diverse learners
- Strengths-based understanding of student potential

PRACTICES

- Use of clear teaching outcomes
- Use of standards-aligned, inter-dependent units of study (academic and social-emotional)
- Use of data to make instructional decisions
- Use of intentional differentiation and specialized instruction for diverse learners
- Use of collaborative approaches to instruction
- Effective planning and co-planning
- Fostering of supportive relationships and learning environments for students

ELEMENT 4

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

KNOWLEDGE & MINDSETS

- Understanding the relationship between tiered systems of support and special education

PRACTICES

- System for identifying and delivering services to students in need of intervention
- Equitable and efficient staffing and resource allocation
- Whole school schedules designed to facilitate collaboration and inclusion
- Continuum of placements that honors least restrictive environment
- Tracking and use of data for continuous improvement of systems
- System for Child Find, referral and evaluation for special education

ELEMENT 3

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

KNOWLEDGE & MINDSETS

- Familiarity with special education laws

ELEMENT 5

Meaningful Family Partnerships

KNOWLEDGE & MINDSETS

- Belief in the value of engaging with parents and families as partners
- Belief that parents and families want the best for their children
- Belief in the value of engaging with empathy
- Understanding cultural competence

PRACTICES

- Effective and regular communication with families
- Family training and development

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