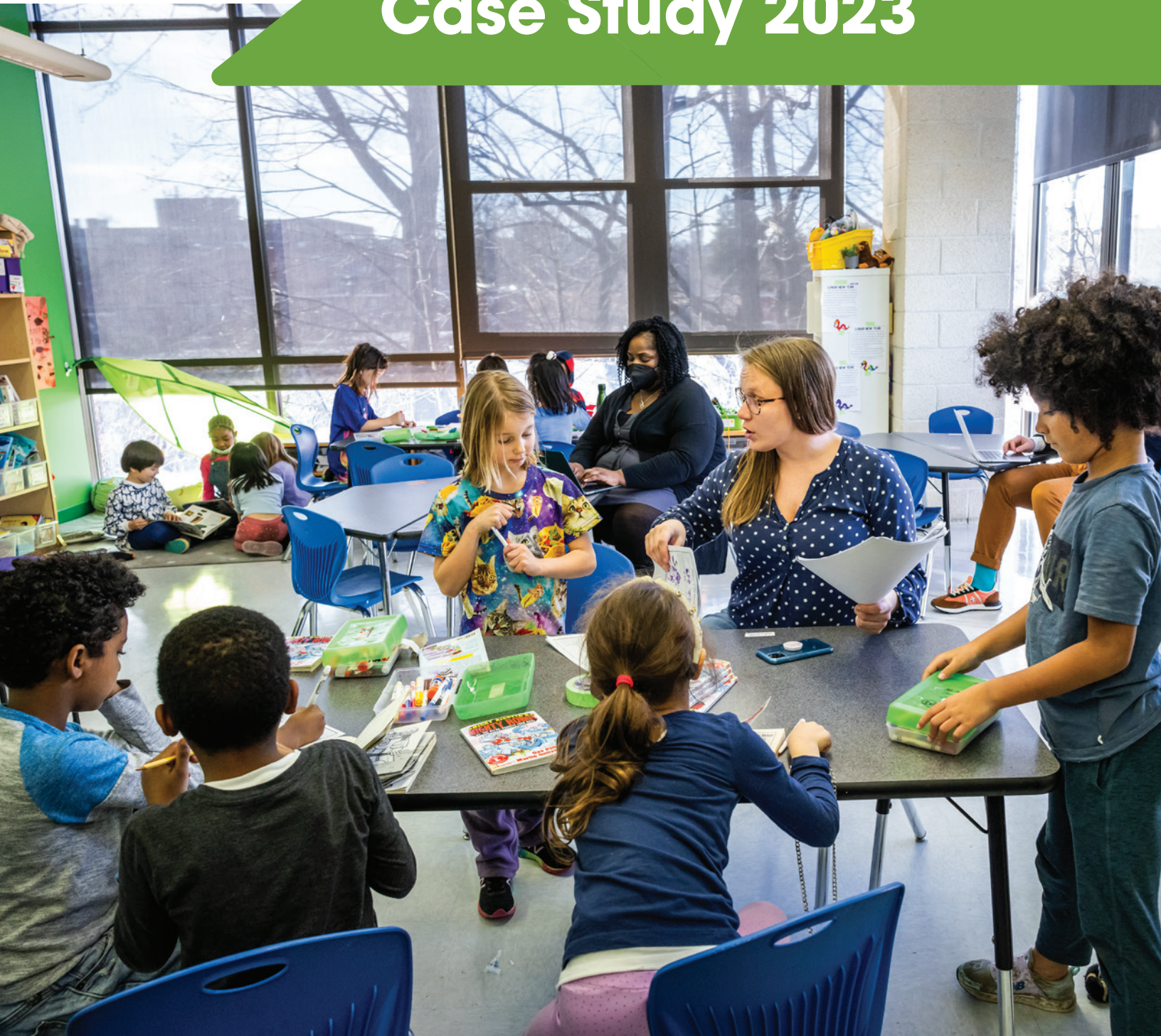




# Developing Equitable Classroom Transition Practices

at Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School

## Case Study 2023











# SUMMARY

## Overview

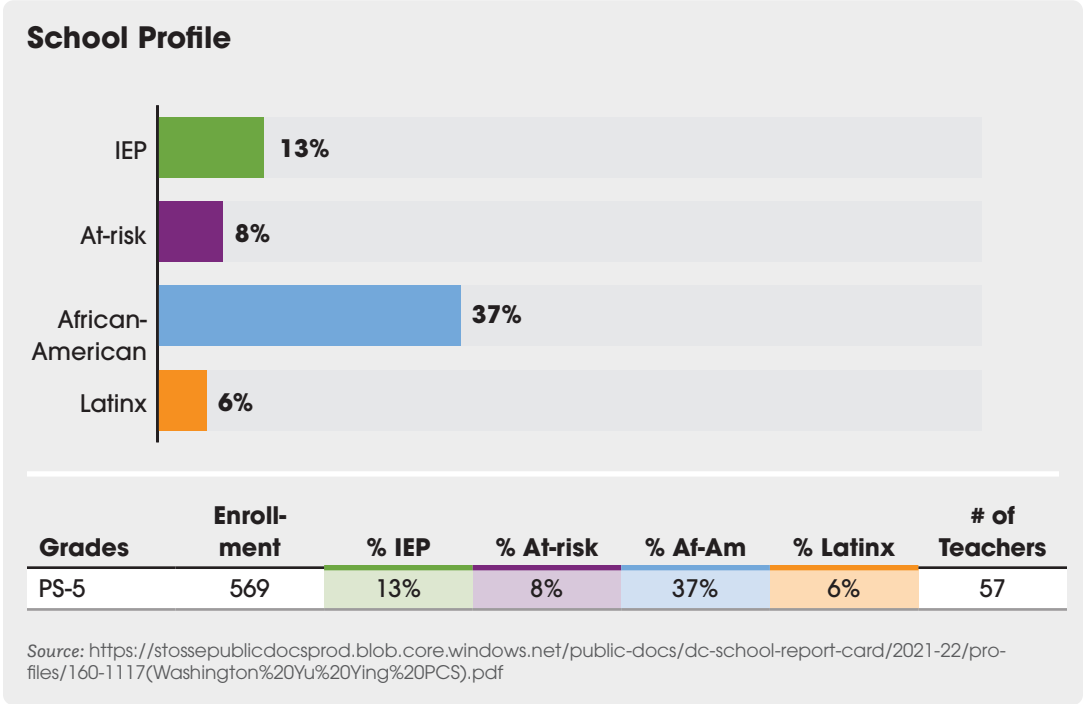
As part of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) grant, sponsored by the Washington, D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, The Ability Challenge and Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School (Yu Ying) recently completed a two-year professional learning partnership rooted 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.

Yu Ying is a unique environment, situating a Chinese-English dual-language elementary model, with an International Baccalaureate focus, within the walls of a lottery admission public charter school. In this case study, we will provide a snapshot of the work completed, discuss promising practices, reflect on challenges, and describe the growth opportunities that remain upon completion of the grant period.

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# School Profile

Yu Ying serves elementary school students in grades Pre-K3-5, in a Chinese-English dual-language immersion model. Students at the school alternate between Chinese and English language classrooms over the course of the week. Located just around the corner from the Catholic University in Northeast DC, the school serves a diverse population of learners from throughout the city.



# Core Challenge & Theory of Change

In an effort to maximize instructional time, Yu Ying’s Assistant Principal for Early Childhood and the first grade teaching team sought to create a higher level of consistency across classrooms with respect to within class



transitions. Instructional transitions, when managed too loosely, can result in lost learning time and disruptions. The teachers and leadership team at Yu Ying identified the management of these transitions as a critical improvement area, particularly relative to students with disabilities, whose learning differences can present as disruptions or deviations from the classroom norm during transitions. Consensus among faculty members was that ~5% of all students were driving the vast majority of disruptions, and that creat-

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*Their working theory stated that **if** teachers set and maintained clear expectations for transitions, **then** students would understand the behaviors that are expected of them, classroom transitions would occur more quickly and with fewer interruptions, and more time could be spent on instruction.*  
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ing higher levels of overall transition consistency would drive an increase in desired behaviors, while freeing up teacher time to address whichever misbehaviors persisted after instituting changes.

To address this challenge, English and Chinese teachers from the first grade team created a testable theory of change around the tightening of transitions. Their working theory stated that if teachers set and maintained clear expectations for transitions, then students would understand the behaviors that are expected of them, classroom transitions would occur more quickly and with fewer interruptions, and more time could be spent on instruction.



## Desired Outcomes

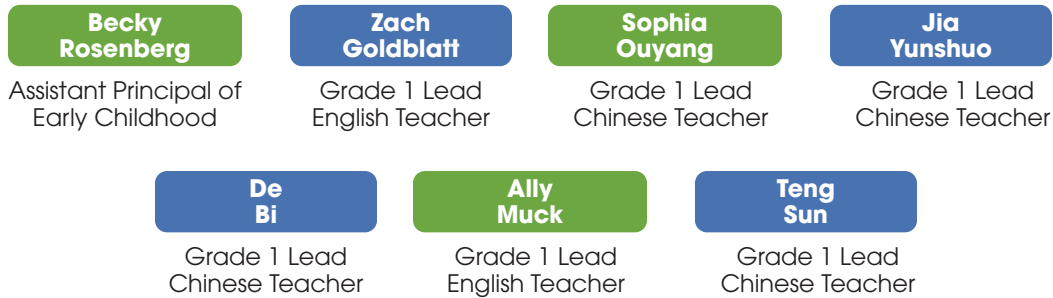
The ultimate goal of this project was to improve student outcomes, particularly for students identified as having disabilities (i.e. students with IEPs). The critical intermediate step towards achieving that outcome was both increasing the amount of instructional time on task in classrooms, and improving the quality of student engagement during that instructional time. Classroom transitions, particularly for younger kids, represent a significant opportunity to reclaim time spent off task. The project attempted to achieve these outcomes 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
- collecting objective quantitative and qualitative data on the extent to which identified interventions are working on six-week-cycles.



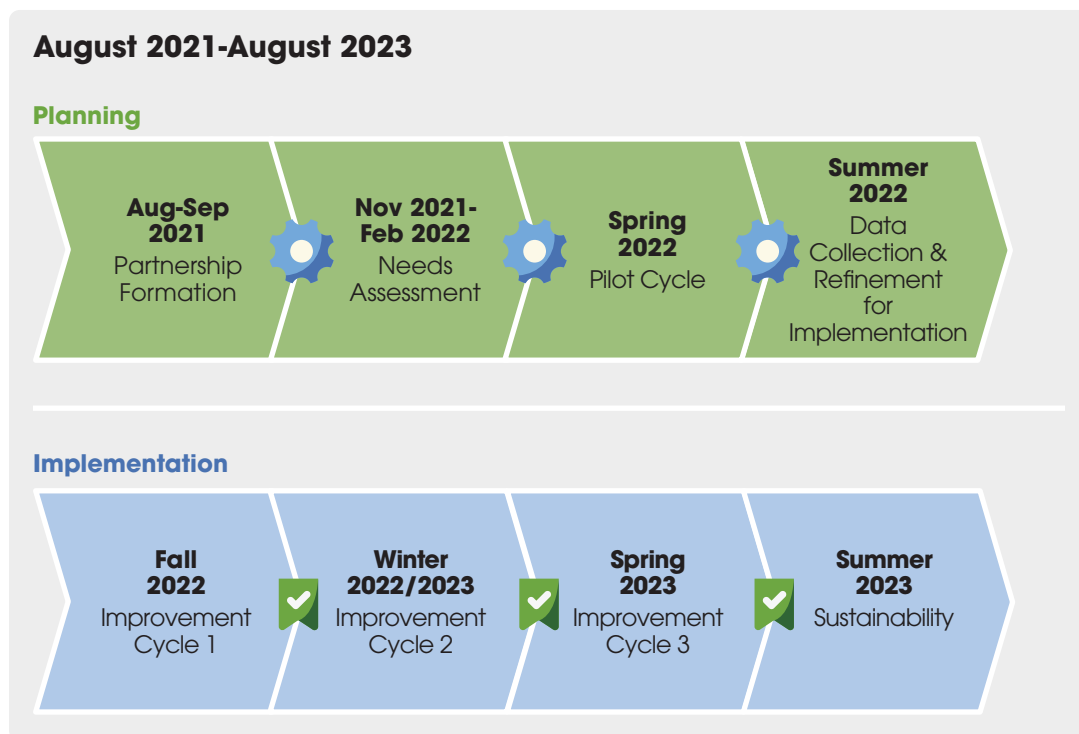
## Personnel

The Yu Ying team was comprised of all first grade teachers and their school leader. Other members of the Yu Ying leadership were brought in throughout the project.



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

Upon forming the partnership, ABC conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of Yu Ying's program, aligned to the **THRIVE Framework for Quality Special Education** (page 17), to understand baseline educator and leadership competencies. Using the assessment results, a team of leaders and educators at Yu Ying identified the areas in which they most craved improvement strategies - the need for more structured approaches to within-class transitions in the early grades.

ABC met regularly with the first grade team, during their existing collaborative meeting time, to engage in three continuous improvement cycles.

- ✓ For the **first cycle**, the team focused on the length of transitions, agreeing to work together to get them done in under three minutes. The team also developed a list of strategies they would subsequently use across cycles, and tracked that data to see if





some strategies were more effective in delivering timely transitions. Those strategies included:

- Clear verbal directions prior to transition
- Repeating verbal directions during transition
- Positive narration during the transition (e.g., “I see three friends putting their markers away in the marker bin”)
- Use of song and/or singing to signal specific tasks (e.g., clean up song)
- Use of a timer
- Giving back time if transition is completed early
- Use of visuals
- Use of class jobs

Data review after the first cycle revealed that, while transitions were smoother, because each classroom chose a different kind of transition to monitor, length of transition time was not an effective core measure to truly understand whether transitions were improving (for example, the transition from lunch is naturally longer than the transition from morning meeting to centers). As such, the team determined to focus on the same transitional moment across all classrooms, with an emphasis on a shift that could theoretically occur in three minutes or less.




 During the **second cycle**, the team found that data collection for short transitions was very challenging. To simplify the process, the number of strategies being monitored was reduced to only the highest-frequency strategies across the team. Data collection rebounded, and at the end of that cycle, the team surfaced the need to get aligned on not just the kind of strategies being used, but on what quality implementation of those strategies really looked like. The team invited a school leader to come in to model transitions in a few classrooms, and subsequently debriefed to create more comprehensive norms about what constitutes excellent transition practice, including what readiness looked like at the completion of the transition.


 The data collected in the second cycle, coupled with consequent reflections, led to the realization that there are some core components of all transitions that ought to be agreed upon and used routinely, such that they became second nature for students and educators alike. ABC categorized those steps in an easy to remember mnemonic — ACERS — which teachers used throughout the day in **cycle three**.

### ACERS Transition Framework

<b>ALERT</b>	Give lead time to students before the transition.
<b>CALL FOR ATTENTION</b>	Get attention and set the stage for the transition. Wait for 100% attention.
<b>EXPLAIN EXPECTATIONS</b>	Task, Time, Team, Talking - Explain what will happen (task) in multiple ways (written, verbal, pictures), how long they have to do it (time), the team they're working with (e.g., independent, table groups, etc.), and expectations for talking (silent, volume 1, etc.).
<b>RELEASE, REINFORCE, REDIRECT</b>	With 100% attention, release students to their task, reinforce positive behaviors with narration, and redirect off-task behaviors with narration, as needed during the transition.
<b>STOP/START</b>	Start the transition timer as soon as students are released and stop it as soon as the transition is over.



Teachers noticed a shift in their perspectives through implementing improvement cycles with such rigor. “Teachers don’t necessarily conduct a lot of data collection on the most mundane things in a classroom,” notes AP Becky Rosenberg, “Rather than make assumptions about what was going on in classrooms, now we had real information.” The information led to many “ahas.” For example, because Yu Ying students alternate between Chinese and English classrooms throughout the week, there is an increased need for consistency across teaching teams. Some students were causing disruptions in one of their classes but not the other, while others were presenting challenges no matter which classroom they happened to be in on a given day.

**Fidelity of Implementation**

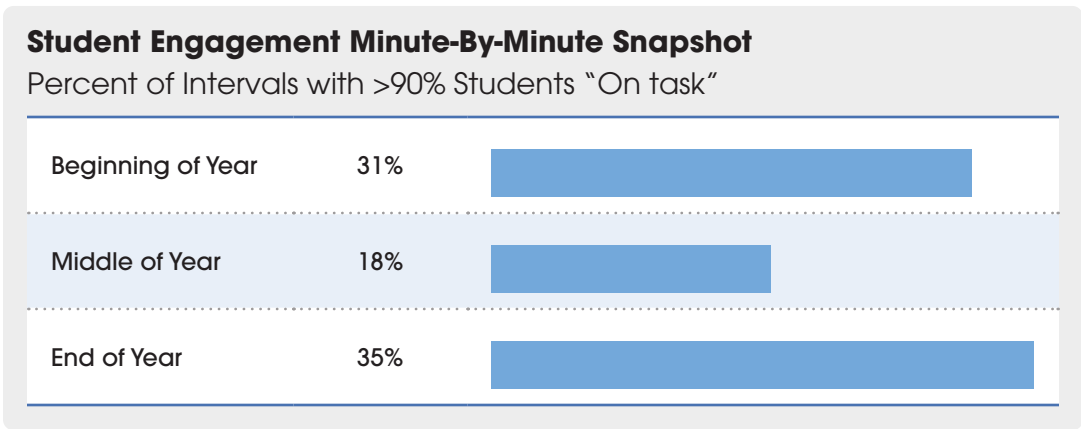
The following chart breaks down the team’s implementation of the core elements of continuous improvement for each cycle of change.

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

**Results**

Through implementing new strategies for transitions, educators at Yu Ying are seeing results, which can be categorized in two domains: quantitative and qualitative indicators.

Our quantitative data indicates that students are more likely to **stay engaged and on task** during classroom transitions as a result of these interventions, as both the number and percentage of classroom intervals wherein more than 90% of students were on task seems to have increased throughout the first year of implementation.<sup>1</sup>



Classroom observation data revealed that, after participating in these improvement cycles, the first grade team has a more substantial grasp of their students’ overall needs and better understands how their transitions are an important part of overall classroom management.

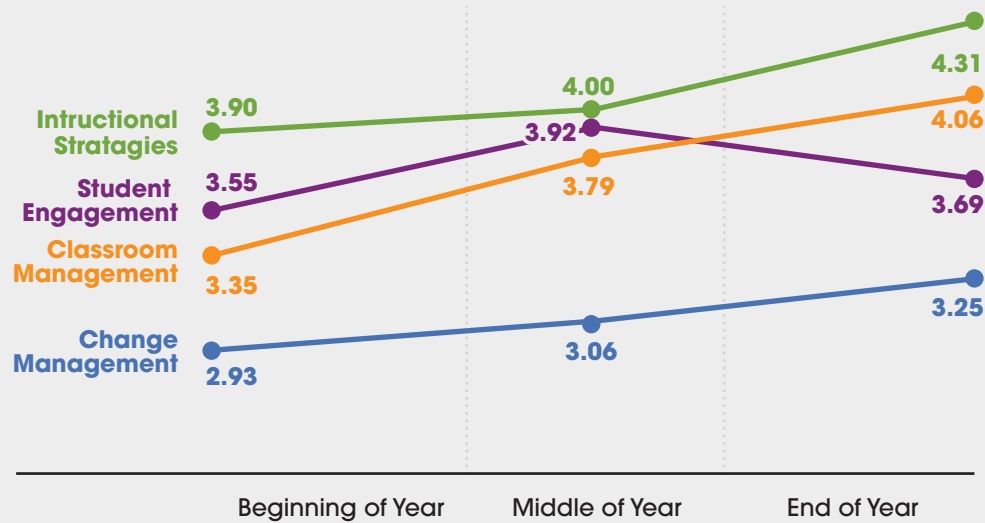
Educators also saw a 4.4% increase in their belief that they are capable of impacting student engagement and learning — also known as **educator self-efficacy**.<sup>2</sup> When the scores are further broken down, it is clear that educators felt more confidence around influencing outcomes through classroom management and instructional strategies at the end of the year. They also felt more effective in influencing changes in the school community. Interestingly, while their feelings about their influence on student engagement went up from the beginning to the end of the year, Yu Ying educators actually fluctuated a bit in this domain, with their strongest scores emerging in the middle of the year.

<sup>1</sup> As measured by ABC’s Classroom Engagement Observation Tool.

<sup>2</sup> 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	2.93	3.06	3.25
Classroom Management	3.35	3.79	4.06
Instructional Strategies	3.90	4.00	4.31
Student Engagement	3.55	3.92	3.69

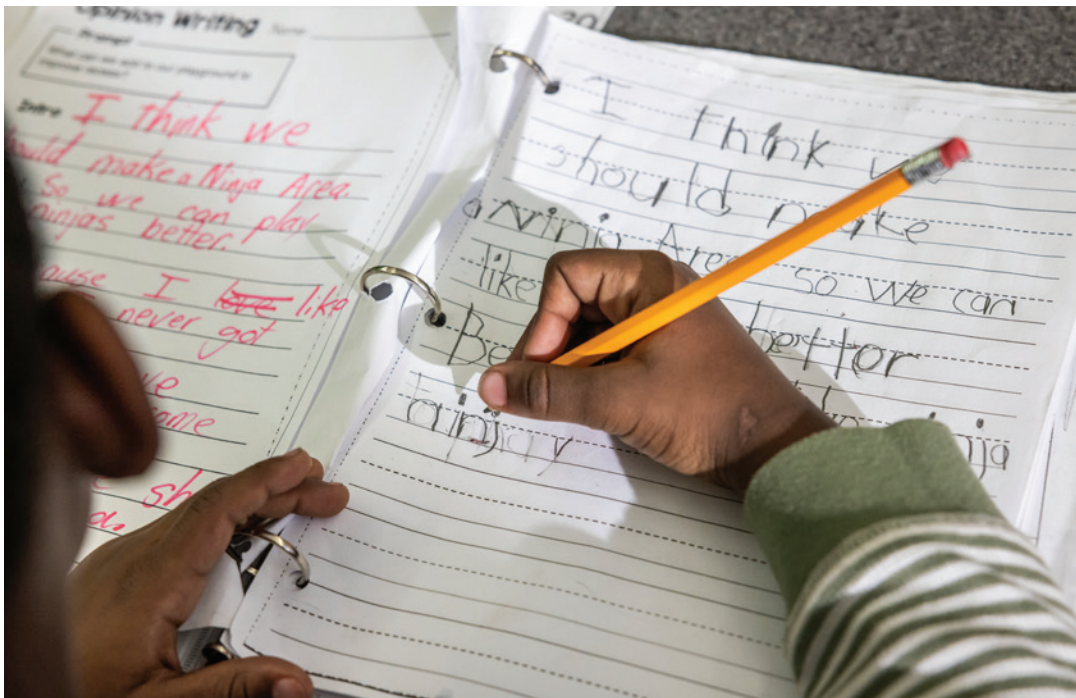
Educators at the school are in an ongoing process of reflection about their approach to continuous improvement. Zach Goldblatt, a third-year teacher working at the school, notes that the continuous improvement process has allowed him to mentally “slow down” and really reflect on the classroom practices he uses. “Focusing on a single kid’s behavior, one at a time, in a group collaborative setting is really valuable,” he noted, “The growth is happening because we’re actually implementing the things we’re talking about.”

“One of the biggest learnings,” says Ms. Rosenberg, “Is that there are no quick fixes to improving the quality of instruction. Some of the newer teachers in the school were hungry for explicit strategies, which can be helpful at times, but the real magic of improvement work is to collectively identify both problems and solutions. That’s where the real learning for educators takes place.”

.....”  
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.....”

## Obstacles, Reflections & Areas for Growth

The teachers at Yu Ying are making significant strides with respect to leveraging the power of continuous improvement, but obstacles and areas for growth remain. One ongoing challenge related to differences in approach between the Chinese-language and English-language classrooms, and the ability of peer teacher support in implementing strategies. “I can eavesdrop on a Chinese-language class,” Mr. Goldblatt notes, “But might totally miss the mark for what was actually happening and what the instructions were.” While teachers have routines and habits for collaboration across lines of







language difference, some strategies don't translate well between the two kinds of classrooms, making consistent implementation difficult to both execute and measure.

Another challenge was the consistent use of collaborative time to drive strategic objectives. While the school creates regular time for teachers to plan together, the team felt that to sustain the level of structure they'd adhered to during the project, it was most helpful to have an outside partner present and facilitating. "My hope is that we can expand this work to multiple grade levels," says Ms. Rosenberg, "but the support from outside partners is key, because a lot of this is really like being an amateur social scientist, and many of our teachers aren't accustomed to that kind of work."

## Sustainability & Next Steps

Teachers at Yu Ying are eager for more opportunities for structured collaboration, and for observational feedback that is aligned to that collaborative work. While classrooms have piloted different strategies relative to improving transitions, there's an emerging sense that more standard practices from

classroom to classroom might be easier for both teachers and students to manage. Should all classrooms, for example, adopt a two minute count-down timer for within-class transitions? Doing so might seem overly rigid to some teachers, but it would make conversations about strategic improvement more concrete. Continuing to implement the ACERS structure is one way Yu Ying will keep building those shared practices.

That said, teachers have different perspectives on what the most promising strategies might be. Some, for instance, rely heavily on the use of incentive reward systems, while others remain skeptical of that practice. As such, educators are hungry for new strategies that might complement the ones they're already using, to make sure they're not leaving any stones unturned in the pursuit of coherent, aligned improvement goals.

As Yu Ying's first grade teachers return to school to start the next school year, it is clear that they will be well-prepared to establish strong practices around classroom transitions, understanding that explicit structure and clear expectations go a long way toward keeping students engaged and on task, especially some with diverse learning needs.





# 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.

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## 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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