

PURSuing EQUITY FOR BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

**CAPITAL CITY:
AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY
COMMITTED TO WHOLE-CHILD
LEARNING AND WELL BEING**

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In 2023, Envision Learning Partners (ELP) and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) embarked on a research study to identify and learn from schools that demonstrated positive outcomes for Black and Latine students with learning differences (including students with disabilities and multilingual learners). After a review of data from secondary schools across the country, the study team identified two schools for a more in-depth study, which was conducted during the 2023–2024 school year. This case study shares inclusive structures and practices from one of the identified schools, Capital City. Permission to identify the school's name was granted by the school's Board of Directors. Image releases for the photos included in the report were granted by students, families, and staff members.

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ABOUT ENVISION EDUCATION

Founded in 2002, **Envision Education** is a nonprofit charter management organization that administers four public charter schools in California (San Francisco, Oakland, and Hayward), and provides professional learning services through its consulting division, Envision Learning Partners. Envision Education was approached by the Oak Foundation to conduct this study based on its schools' track record of successful outcomes for its Black and Latine students with learning differences.

Envision Education's mission is to transform the lives of students—especially those who will be first in their families to attend college—by preparing them for success in college, career, and life.

Envision Learning Partners is a nationwide consultancy amplifying best practices of Envision Schools. With expertise in driving transformational student outcomes through high-quality performance-based assessment, ELP partners with a nationwide portfolio of school and systems leaders to drive impact at scale.

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PURSUING EQUITY FOR BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

CAPITAL CITY: AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO WHOLE-CHILD LEARNING AND WELL BEING

INTRODUCTION

As ethnic and racial diversity of students in the United States has increased, the challenge of ensuring that students of color with disabilities have an equitable education has emerged as a pressing challenge in U.S. public schools. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of students receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has risen from 13% in 2012-13 to 15% in 2022-2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Of the students receiving special education services across the country, 17% are Black and 14% are Hispanic/Latine¹ (2023). Black and Latine students with disabilities (SWDs) are more likely to experience multi-marginalization of race and ability in public schools, as reflected in lower average graduation rates (Rhodes, 2021). Black and Latine SWDs lag in academic achievement in reading and math (Wei et al., 2013) and are disproportionately disciplined out of school with suspensions and expulsions (U.S. General Accountability

Office, 2018). Latine SWDs who are also multilingual learners (MLLs) face even greater challenges, as many schools may not correctly identify these students for the special education services they need (Carnock & Silva, 2019) or provide sufficient specialized instruction for language development (Park & Thomas, 2012). These populations continue to warrant increased attention from policymakers, educators, and researchers.

The student subgroups that are the focus of this research include Black, Latine, and multilingual learners with mild to moderate learning disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities and language-based disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia), neurological differences (e.g., attention deficit, sensory processing disorders, executive function challenges), and emotional disturbance. We recognize that this list excludes students with significant cognitive and health impairments—specifically those who

¹ While many of our sources use “Hispanic” to identify students with origins in Latin American countries, we have opted to use the gender-neutral term Latine, since Hispanic focuses on native language.

benefit more from specialized instruction in personalized settings. Because the inclusive setting of the learning systems we are studying in this project are general education classrooms, the study focuses on students with IEPs whose disabilities allow them to receive instruction alongside general education peers.²

We chose to prioritize these subgroups (including MLLs) because they have been historically marginalized in K–12 public schools and excluded from mainstream educational opportunities. Despite federal court rulings and education laws that prohibit race-based segregation (*Brown v. Board of Education*) and disability-based segregation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), Black and Latine students continue to be segregated at the neighborhood, school, or classroom level, and students with learning differences are often segregated in self-contained classrooms or through tracking of students into courses with lower expectations of rigor (Oakes et al., 2004; Maldonado et al., 2018). In particular, data analyses have shown that Black students are disproportionately assigned to special education services and self-contained classrooms, leading to ongoing disparities in their access to core academic learning opportunities, and compounding the effects of broader school segregation by income and racial/ethnic background (White et al., 2019; Cosier et al., 2020). While the federal definition of “high inclusive environments” is 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2018), in 2022–2023, only 62% of Black SWDs and 66% of Latine SWDs—compared with 70% of white SWDs—were taught in “high inclusive environments” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

About the *Pursuing Equity for Black and Latine Students with Learning Differences Study*

The research question guiding our study was,

“What structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices create the conditions for Black and Latine students with learning differences to accelerate their learning and thrive in secondary schools?”

We searched for public and public charter middle and high schools across the United States that had a strong reputation and track record of supporting the well being and academic success of Black and Latine SWDs (including MLLs). We initially identified four schools that agreed to participate in phase one of the study, which included school leader and staff interviews and document/data review. From these four schools, we narrowed our sample to two case study schools that had the right demographic composition (at least 50% Black and Latine students and at least 10% SWDs) and that had relatively stable school leadership and staffing to support continuity of the school’s program for students with learning differences.

We conducted case study data collection at these two secondary schools in order to more deeply understand the way inclusive school learning structures, systems of support, school cultures, and instructional practices interact to create learning environments that are associated with positive outcomes for Black, Latine, and multilingual SWDs.

Data collection at each school occurred during the 2023–2024 academic year and included interviews with school leaders, school staff, seven to eight Black and Latine SWDs and their caregivers, focus groups with at least two groups of six to ten students at different grade levels, and observations of classes, public exhibition nights, professional development/staff meetings, and students’ presentations of learning. We also included existing survey data from surveys administered by the school and student outcomes data from school report cards, as well as other documents (e.g., program descriptions, accreditation documents, websites). We inductively analyzed qualitative data using both a grounded analysis approach (coding based on emerging themes) and a deductive approach (informed by our theoretical framework).

(See Appendix A of the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings for a full description of our research study methodology, and Appendix B of the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings for a review of literature on inclusive school structures and practices.)

² In addition, we recognize that the disabilities listed above are quite different from each other, and thus, students will have a range of different learning needs. We do not purport that students with all different types of disabilities will benefit equally from specific interventions. We recognize that even among those who are able to learn alongside general education peers, there is wide variation in learning needs. For this reason, we acknowledge the limitations of this research project’s findings and that individual learning needs call for more individualized solutions.



Capital City Public Charter School is housed in a modern three-story building

CAPITAL CITY: AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO WHOLE CHILD LEARNING AND WELL BEING

Capital City Public Charter School, situated in the northeast quadrant of the District of Columbia, enrolls slightly more than 1,000 students from pre-K (ages 3–4) through 12th grade. Across grades, 25% of Capital City students are Black; 65% are Latine/Hispanic, and 75% qualify for free or reduced lunch.³ The overall graduation rate for Capital City High School is 93.5%, and 100% of its graduates, including those with learning differences, apply and are accepted to a college. In the middle school, 17.5% of students are SWDs and 56.5% are MLLs. In the high school, 25.9% of students are SWDs and 29.3% are MLLs.

During the 2023–2024 academic year, we conducted qualitative data collection activities to understand the school design features that may be associated with the success of Capital City’s students with learning differences. This case study focuses on the inclusive structures, systems of support, classroom practices, and assessment strategies that contributed to positive academic outcomes and well being for Black and Latine students with learning differences, specifically SWDs and MLLs with disabilities.

The framework in **Figure 1** and the overview below summarize the key inclusive school design features that

³ Being eligible for the Free or Reduced Lunch Program is one indicator of family resources, but the district’s report card uses a different set of indicators for “Economic Disadvantage” (see Table 2). The district’s definition includes: “Students who are receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, experiences homelessness and/or is a ward of the state (Child and Family Services Agency/CFSA).”

were observed at Capital City, which will be described and illustrated in more detail in the rest of the case study.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Inclusive Classroom Structures and Practices

- Almost 100% of SWDs and 100% of MLLs are included in general education classes for at least 80% of their school day, with the exception of a small handful of SWDs with learning needs requiring more individualized services (e.g., students with cognitive and physical disabilities), who spend the majority of their day in self-contained special day classes.
- In core general education classes (humanities or English language arts [ELA]/social studies, math, science) in which SWDs and MLLs are integrated, classes are co-taught by a general education teacher and an “inclusion teacher” (with special education certification). While this is a more resource-intensive classroom model, Capital City has made a strategic resource commitment to sustain the co-teaching approach.
- Within these classes, instruction is frequently organized using a workshop model, station teaching, and/or small group instruction (alternative teaching), with individual check-ins.
- In all classes observed, teachers applied Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and English Language Development (ELD) strategies, and in some cases, we also observed culturally responsive teaching, curricula, and extra-curricular opportunities.

Supports for Adult Learning and a Culture of Collaboration (Including Caregivers)

- In order to support and sustain the co-teaching approach in inclusive general education classes, all teachers receive monthly professional development from the special education leads in each school, as well as meeting monthly with the school culture leads (the coordinator of school culture and the social-emotional learning specialist)⁴ to be trained on restorative justice⁵ approaches to respond to behaviors, to examine and act on data from an education app that allows for

real-time communication about specific students, and to use a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum during advisory/crew.

- The school also supports and encourages general education staff to earn special education certification through a partnership with an outside program so they are dually certified.
- Most importantly, co-teaching teams (general education and special education teachers) have protected daily planning and meeting time so that they can meet regularly in order to debrief lessons and plan their next lessons together, with specific shared students in mind. This culture of collaboration, respect for each other’s areas of expertise, and equity of voice in planning lessons result in shared responsibility for the learning of all students with learning differences.
- The school invites caregivers of students to regularly communicate with their child’s teachers, advisor, and school leaders, and they feel respected when sharing their input on individualized education plans for their children.

An Inclusive Culture and Positive Behavioral Supports That Center Student Voice and Well Being

- Students and their caregivers most frequently cited the caring relationships that Capital City promotes between teachers and students as a major reason that they felt the school supported their well being and academic progress.
- Students felt that the smallness of their school, small class sizes, and the fact that they had attended the same school with their peers for a long period of time (sometimes since pre-K) created the conditions for a family-like community among peers and staff.
- Students and caregivers frequently cited advisors (of their “crew” or advisory class) as well as other teachers, coaches, and staff (particularly inclusion teachers) as a source of caring and reliable support.
- Dedicated staff members (coordinator of school culture; SEL specialist) are also focused on building relationships with students, monitoring data about students who may need more SEL and/or academic

⁴ The coordinator of school culture is sometimes known as the “dean of students” in other schools. The social-emotional learning specialist was a new position at the three schools in 2023–2024 and the role was still being defined at the time of the study. These roles are not specifically to serve SWDs/MLLs, but they are important to building an inclusive school culture.

⁵ Restorative justice in schools is a process that helps resolve conflicts by focusing on repairing harm and building relationships. It is an alternative to traditional punishment and aims to create a positive learning environment.



Students at Capital City High School engage in student-led groupwork

supports, supporting teachers in using restorative justice approaches to respond to behaviors, and planning activities to build a positive community culture.

- Student voices are invited into school culture decisions and taken seriously (e.g., in grade-level community meetings, leading inquiry meetings to elicit student voice to develop plans for addressing cyberbullying and school graffiti).

Authentic, Competency-Based Assessment and Grading

- Competency-based learning and assessment (referred to as “standards-based grading” by the school) level the playing field because they focus on supporting all students to meet the same (or sometimes modified) learning targets, rather than sorting students by achievement levels or “on time” completion. What this looks like in practice at Capital City is that stu-

dents have multiple opportunities to learn, revise, and resubmit their assessments after receiving feedback from their teachers and as much time as they need within a marking period to demonstrate mastery.

- There is a culture of “everybody finishes,” rather than leaving behind those who struggle or who need more time to finish. While this may be challenging from the point of view of managing a range of achievement levels in a single class, teachers have learned to differentiate instruction and assessment in ways that allow for more advanced students to move forward in their learning while still allowing students needing more time and support to complete work from prior units of study.
- Capital City teachers assign work that is authentic and project-based. Capital City is an expeditionary learning school,⁶ and students often complete inquiry-based fieldwork outside the school; go on overnight

⁶ Expeditionary learning schools are part of a network of schools affiliated with the EL Education national nonprofit education service provider. See <https://eleducation.org/who-we-are> for more on EL Education.

camping trips; learn through internships, the arts, or athletic activity; or complete a passion project (“senior expedition”) that has an authentic connection to the real world. These types of projects facilitate student engagement while still presenting academic challenge in ways that prepare students for college, careers, and lifelong learning.

- Quarterly student-led conferences and presentations of learning at certain milestones (8th grade, 12th grade) are assessment events that center student voice and provide students an opportunity to reflect on their learning and articulate how they have grown in front of an audience of teachers, caregivers, and peers.

Leadership Supports

- The commitments to fully inclusive classrooms, co-teaching, and inclusive practices are made possible by a leadership team that prioritizes creating the conditions for adult learning and collaboration, creating inclusive school cultures that center student voice and well being, and sustaining the implementation of these design features.
- These leaders set the vision and expectations, and follow through on ensuring that the conditions for implementation are supported both fiscally and through ongoing cycles of data review, observations, and collaboration to solve problems and maintain fidelity to the school’s inclusive instructional model.

- The leaders seek external professional services and expertise when needed. For example, when initially designing their inclusion program, leaders requested consultation with the Council for Exceptional Children to share best practices for inclusive schools. They received support from an expert (Julie Bost) to devise a Co-Teaching Quality Indicators Guide. Leaders also partner with the KIPP Special Education Fellowship to encourage dual certification of general education teachers.

Because of Capital City leaders’ relative stability over the years of the school’s existence, expertise in inclusive school environments, and commitment to ongoing learning and adjustments as they meet challenges head on, the school has been able to weather the storms of COVID lockdowns, staff turnover and staffing shortages, and budget uncertainty while maintaining its reputation among local families who have children with disabilities as a place where SWDs can thrive, finish high school successfully, and be accepted into colleges. The relatively high levels of enrollment of SWDs that the school has consistently attracted and enrolled have allowed it to sustain its co-teaching staffing model for the near foreseeable future.

The remaining sections of this case study report provide additional detail on these five key design features and how they were implemented at Capital City, a community that prioritizes inclusion for all learners as well as whole-child learning and well being.

Figure 1: Overview of Key School Design Features That Support the Success of Black and Latine Students With Learning Differences at Capital City

Leadership Supports

- Consistent leadership with expertise in inclusive education and expeditionary learning school model
- Commitment to supporting co-teaching with staffing resources
- Ongoing investments in adult learning for inclusive classroom approach
- Data-driven problem-solving cycles, seeking external partnerships/expertise as needed
- Partnering and communicating with families

Supports for Adult Learning and Collaboration (Including Caregivers)

- Protected co-planning time with co-teachers
- Monthly PD on special education/ELD strategies and tools
- Monthly PD with coordinator of school culture/SEL specialist on restorative justice, SEL curriculum, High-Five app, and planning school culture events
- Encouragement and support for dual certification for general education teachers to earn special education credential
- Partnering and communicating with caregivers (IEP meetings, student-led conferences, presentations of learning) and communication with responsive advisors, teachers, and school administrators

Inclusive Classroom Structures

- Full inclusion of SWDs & MLLs in general education classes
- Co-teaching and “push in” supports
- “All support block,” after-school tutoring, STEM club

Inclusive Classroom Practices

- Application of UDL principles
- Use of ELD strategies, translanguaging, bilingual teachers
- Asset-based, culturally responsive teaching, curricula, and extracurricular opportunities

Inclusive School Culture & Behavior Supports

- Small school, small class sizes
- Advisory/crew—caring relationships with teachers
- SEL curriculum
- Restorative justice approach to respond to behaviors
- Real-time communication and use of data to intervene with specific students
- Grade-level meetings, invitation for student voice in decision making and problem solving

Authentic, Competency-Based Assessment & Grading

- Use of authentic forms of assessment (student-led conferences, presentations, senior expedition, work-based/service learning)
- Opportunities to receive feedback, revise, and resubmit assignments to meet learning targets
- Individual pace for learning
- Grading based on mastery, not for sorting students

CAPITAL CITY'S HISTORY AND SCHOOL MODEL

Capital City was founded in 1999 as an elementary school by a group of parents and teachers, the first parent-founded charter school in Washington, DC. In 2008, the school added a grades 6–12 upper school, and in 2012, when the school relocated to a new building, a separate middle school was created. The pre-K and elementary school are located on the ground floor, the middle school on the second floor, and the high school on the third floor of the same building. In 2011, Capital City was recognized as an Expeditionary Learning Education Mentor School, being one of the top performing schools in the national network of 165 schools. This case study focuses on the middle school and high school.

Mission Statement of Capital City

“Capital City enables a diverse group of students to meet high expectations; develop creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; achieve deep understanding of complex subjects; and acquire a love of learning along with a strong sense of community and character. We will graduate young adults who are self-directed, intellectually engaged, and possess a commitment to personal and civic responsibility.”

Capital City describes its academic approach as having four common elements across its three schools. The below descriptions are abbreviated excerpts from Capital City’s school website.

- **Deeper Learning:** ... deeper learning skills—critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication and learning how to learn—are the core focus of instruction at Capital City. Through them we build a foundation in traditional academic subjects and foster an understanding of grade level content and skills.
- **Authentic Experiences:** ... learning should be compelling for students and connected to the real world. Students in all grades engage in in-depth studies called learning expeditions. Through expeditions, students participate in fieldwork, meet with experts, engage in research and in turn become experts themselves. Stu-

dents share their expertise with others through projects and by presenting their work to a real audience.

- **Personalized Instruction:** ... Low student to teacher ratios, daily advisory or class meetings, on-going assessment of progress and strong parent-school collaboration support our approach to personalization. Capital City classes use the workshop model to tailor instruction for individual students. A class typically begins with a whole-class mini-lesson in which new material is introduced. The bulk of the period is devoted to working on assignments and projects where students work independently or in small groups while teachers provide targeted assistance and assess student progress. ...
- **A Whole-Child Approach:** ... a strong social curriculum where students develop social skills within the context of a nurturing community. The arts are vital to our whole child approach and support creative expression in all grades. ... [A]ll students are provided instruction in visual arts, music and drama, and arts are integrated into the core curriculum. We also support the health and wellness of students through a comprehensive sports and fitness program, health education, and building a healthy environment.

Capital City’s Staffing Design Reflects Its Commitment to Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Capital City is committed to supporting full inclusion of SWDs and MLLs in general education classes. This is possible because school leaders have raised and allocated resources to hire sufficient numbers of “inclusion teachers” (special education teachers with additional training in English language development) to serve as co-teachers in the classes where SWDs and MLLs are assigned. In the middle school (grades 5–8), there were 17 general education teachers and 16 special education teachers serving as inclusion teachers in 2023–2024. In the high school (grades 9–12), there were 23 general education teachers and 10 special education teachers serving as inclusion teachers in 2023–2024. The racial/ethnic backgrounds of school staff include a relatively high percentage of Black and Latine staff members (66.6% in the middle school and 47.7% in the high school).⁷ The co-teaching arrangements and small class sizes at Capital City are reflected in relatively low student-to-teacher ratios (8.2 to 1 at the middle school and 8.1 to 1 at the high school). Class sizes that we observed ranged from 15 to 22 students in core academic classes.

⁷ Data on the demographic backgrounds of teachers and most of the data in this section come from the school report cards on the district’s website.

SWDs and MLLs also receive additional specialized and small-group instruction with special education or ELD certificated staff as required by federal/district regulations, during times when all students are receiving supplementary supports and tutoring (“academic/all support blocks” in the middle school, “foundations” classes in the high school). Class sizes for these sections were six to eight students.

In each school, general education and inclusion teachers are also supported by their school principals, a director of student services, the ELD specialist, case managers, a coordinator of school culture, an SEL specialist, and mental health therapists from a contracted community-based mental health services provider. Five to six SWDs in each school also qualify for dedicated aides. The high school staff includes a transition coordinator (specifically for SWDs) and an internship coordinator.

Per-pupil spending at Capital City in 2023 was \$30,706.33, nearly \$3,000 more per pupil than the district average (\$27,730.55). This higher level of spending is due to the higher number of SWDs and MLLs that Capital City enrolls compared with the average across the district (18.3% SWDs and 14.5% MLLs) and additional fundraising by the school to support its inclusive model.

Table 1. Capital City's Faculty/Staff Demographics (2023–2024)

	Middle School	High School
Total Staff (Leaders + Teachers)	45	47
Male	33.3%	29.5%
Female	66.6%	70.5%
Black/African American	45.2%	31.8%
Latine/Hispanic	21.4%	15.9%
White	26.2%	25.0%
Asian	0.0%	2.3%
Multiracial	2.4%	2.3%
Other/Unknown	4.8%	22.7%
Student-to-Teacher Ratio	8.2 : 1	8.1 : 1
Staff Retention Rate From Previous Year	64.0%	81.4%

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Middle School and High School

Table 2. Capital City's Student Body Demographics (2023–2024 School Report Card)

	Elementary School (Pre-K3–4th Grade)	Middle School (5–8th Grade)	High School (9–12th Grade)
Total Enrolled	326	338	351
Black/African American	20.2%	22.5%	29.1%
Latine/Hispanic	68.7%	67.2%	65.2%
Multiracial	3.1%	4.4%	2.8%
White	7.4%	3.8%	2.0%
Asian	1.0%	2.1%	1.0%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
Students With Disabilities	19.6%	17.5%	25.9%
Multilingual Learners	58.9%	56.5%	29.3%
Economically Disadvantaged	41.7%	39.1%	36.5%
Homeless	1.0%	1.5%	1.1%
Foster Care	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Elementary, Middle, and High School

SCHOOL OUTCOMES

Graduation and Postsecondary Enrollment

At Capital City, 89% of students overall graduated within four years and 93.2% within five years (in the 2023–2024 academic year). This is more than 10% higher than the district percentages. (Table 3 provides detailed comparisons of overall school data, data for SWDs and for MLLs disaggregated, between Capital City and the district.) In addition, 80% of SWDs at Capital City graduate within four to five years as compared with 61% (four-year) and 66% (five-year) at the district level. Capital City MLLs graduate at a rate of 90% within four to five years, compared with 68% at the district level. Last, while 100% of Capital City graduates apply to and are accepted to a college, nearly 69% of all Capital City graduates and 62% of graduating SWD immediately enrolled in a post-secondary institution within six months of graduation. This last figure is nearly twice that of the district (32% of SWDs enrolled in a post-secondary institution within six months). These results show that SWDs graduating

from Capital City are more likely to have experiences and supports in their school that have prepared them to make a successful transition to postsecondary education.

We do not know the extent to which these academic outcomes might be attributed to selection effects of students (and their families) self-selecting into Capital City, which admits students who have applied to the school by lottery (at the lower school) or when spaces open up (middle and high schools). Enrollment characteristics indicate that the percentage of students at the Capital City middle school includes about 10% fewer students with economic disadvantage than the district as a whole (not disaggregated by school level), but a significantly higher percentage of MLLs (56.5% at Capital City vs. 14.5% at the district level) and a comparable percentage of SWDs (17.5% at Capital City vs. 18.3% at the district level). At the high school level, Capital City's student body includes about 11% fewer students with economic disadvantage than the district as a whole, a higher percentage of MLLs (29.3% vs. 14.5% at the district level), and a higher percentage of SWDs (25.9% vs. 18.3%).

Table 3. High School Graduation Rates (four-year and five-year) and Post-Secondary Enrollment for Students With Disabilities, District and Capital City, 2023–2024

	District All Students	Capital City All Students	District SWDs	Capital City SWDs	District MLLs	Capital City MLLs
4-Year Graduation Rate	76.1%	89.0%	61.1%	78.9%	68.3%	89.5%
5-Year Graduation Rate	78.8%	93.2%	66.4%	80.0%	62.5%	≥90.0%
Post-Secondary Enrollment Within 6 Months of Graduation	53.8%	68.9%	31.8%	61.9%	34.1%	50.0%

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Middle School and High School

Attendance and Disciplinary Actions

Other relevant indicators of student well being and engagement in school are their attendance rates and disciplinary data. School report cards for Capital City and the district (See Table 4 below for data specific to SWDs) allow for comparisons of data on chronic absenteeism and reports of disciplinary incidents for SWDs at Capital City Middle School and High School and for district middle schools and high schools. The data indicate that the percentage of SWDs in both Capital City Middle School and High School are significantly lower for chronic absenteeism, out-of-school suspensions, and incidents of violence, and lower for in-school suspensions. Data on “in-seat attendance” (ISA; percentage

of days students are present) for Capital City as a whole is favorable, as reported in its accreditation document “Student Performance Analysis.” In 2021–2022, the ISA for Capital City was 91.1%, compared to an average of 85% across the district. SWDs at Capital City had an ISA rate of 88%, compared to 81.5% in the district; MLLs at Capital City had an ISA rate of 92% compared with 88.4% in the district.

The percentage of SWDs expelled from school appears to be higher for Capital City Middle School and Capital City High School than the figures for the district overall (0.2%), though the exact figures for Capital City Middle and High School are not included in the DC School Report Card.

Table 4. Attendance and Disciplinary Data for Students With Disabilities, District and Capital City, 2023–2024

	District MS	Capital City MS	District HS	Capital City HS
Chronic Absenteeism*	44.4%	37.3%	62.1%	49.5%
Out-of-School Suspensions	17.9%	1.5%	17.5%	4.0%
In-School Suspensions	3.9%	<1.0%	2.2%	<1.0%
Expulsions	0.2%	<5.0%	0.2%	<1.0%
Incidents of Violence	16.9%	1.2%	12.6%	2.3%

* Chronic absenteeism is defined as “the number of students who were absent 10% or more of the instructional days in which they were enrolled in school.” (DC School Report Card, 2024)

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Middle School and High School

Academic Achievement Data

While SWDs and MLLs at Capital City fare well in terms of their graduation and postsecondary outcomes, as well as behavioral/attendance outcomes, relative to their peers in district middle schools and high schools, academic outcomes measured by traditional standardized tests (in this case, the PARCC tests) are not as robust. This is not entirely surprising, as previous research and experience have shown that standardized test scores are less meaningful or valid as measures of student outcomes for SWDs and MLLs, and for these reasons, alternate assessments for SWDs and MLLs have been developed across most states (Katsiyannis et al., 2007). The data in **Table 5** suggest that SWDs at Capital City Middle School are not performing at a substantially lower level than their peers in the district on traditional academic measures. Overall student test score data for Capital City Middle School may also be driven by the middle school’s high percentage of MLLs (56.5%) compared with 14.5% MLLs at the district level. The test score performance

of Capital City’s MLLs at the middle school was substantially lower than for the district.

At the high school level, standardized test scores show SWDs and MLLs at Capital City performing at a substantially lower level than their peers in district schools, particularly in math. MLLs in particular seem to perform at a substantially lower level at Capital City on the standardized tests than MLLs across the district high schools. We do not know whether these academic indicators should be treated as outcomes of school design and interventions, or as indicators of the characteristics of students who self-select to enroll in Capital City. At the high school (see **Table 6**), there is also a higher percentage of MLLs (29.3% vs. 14.5% at the district level) and a higher percentage of SWDs (25.9% vs. 18.3% at the district level).

Overall, these state test achievement data are consistent with Capital City’s internal testing results using the NWEA MAP assessments, which allows for longitudinal tracking (whereas state testing was paused for two years

Table 5. District Testing Results for District and Capital City Middle School Students, 2023–2024

	District MS Overall	Capital City MS Overall	District MS SWDs	Capital City MS SWDs	District MS MLLs	Capital City MS MLLs
ELA Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	36.8%	21.0%	11.4%	10.5%	25.8%	13.2%
ELA Approaching, Meeting, or Exceeding Expectations	54.5%	43.5%	22.8%	19.3%	45.2%	33.9%
Math Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	22.8%	10.2%	7.6%	7.0%	17.3%	4.8%
Math Approaching, Meeting, or Exceeding Expectations	43.5%	30.8%	17.7%	12.3%	40.4%	25.3%

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Middle School and High School

Table 6. District Testing Results for District and Capital City High School Students, 2023–2024

	District HS Overall	Capital City HS Overall	District HS SWDs	Capital City HS SWDs	District HS MLLs	Capital City HS MLLs
ELA Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	34.4%	14.5%	10.4%	≤5%	13.5%	6%
ELA Approaching, Meeting, or Exceeding Expectations	54.5%	34.3%	22.8%	22%	45.2%	22%
Math Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	22.8%	3.3%	7.6%	≤5%	17.3%	≤5%
Math Approaching, Meeting, or Exceeding Expectations	43.5%	19.6%	17.7%	10%	40.4%	12.8%

Data source: DC School Report Card (2024), Capital City Public Charter School – Middle School and High School

during the pandemic). The school’s accreditation document “Student Performance Analysis” suggests that pre-pandemic, students were making more progress and demonstrated academic growth at levels above predicted levels based on prior achievement. Following the pandemic, student testing results show slower growth and smaller percentages of students across groups meeting expected growth levels in ELA and math, with a small upward trend for growth in math in 2022–2023. It would be an understatement to say that the global pandemic had a destabilizing impact on instruction, student learning and engagement, school staffing, and even the validity of testing measures. (Recent reports from the National Center for Education Statistics show continued declines and gaps in academic achievement for all groups

nationwide following the COVID-19 pandemic.) However, Capital City is not a school that has historically focused a great deal on preparing students for tests, drilling students using test items, or pushing teachers to spend instructional time on test prep. While the PARCC and MAP ELA and math tests are one valuable indicator of student learning, they may be poor measures of the types of learning that Capital City values most, which we will explore in depth in the next sections.

The following descriptions provide more detail on the structures, classroom practices, cultures, and systems of support that we identified as key elements of Capital City’s design that contribute to the outcomes we have described above.

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INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

In this section, we start by describing in more depth the way that Capital City implements fully inclusive learning environments for SWDs and MLLs by the way it organizes where and when these students are learning and the way it organizes teaching staff and other supports to facilitate student success. We follow this with details about the types of inclusive classroom practices that we observed during our classroom visits.

Inclusive Structures

At Capital City, students with learning differences (SWDs, MLLs, and dually identified MLLs with disabilities) are fully included in general education courses. In the middle school, where every core academic class (humanities or ELA/social studies], mathematics, science) includes SWDs and MLLs, these classes are taught by co-teaching teams

of a subject-area teacher and an “inclusion teacher” (special education certified with ELD training). In the high school, SWDs and MLLs are assigned strategically to certain class sections of a course co-taught by a subject area teacher and an inclusion teacher.

In addition to their regular core and elective courses, SWDs and MLLs at the middle school have an additional academic support block (ASB) period two times a week to meet with their inclusion teacher or ELD teacher. During those blocks, students receive more targeted instruction aligned to their IEP goals and are assessed to monitor their progress toward their goals. All students in the middle school also have an “all block” period four times a week, when general education students and students with learning differences receive a second block period of ELA instruction for skill reinforcement. During those times, students with IEPs receive small-group instruction from an inclusion teacher and MLLs receive small-group instruction from the ELD specialist.

Additional Supports for SWDs & MLLs (Middle School)	Additional Supports for SWDs & MLLs (High School)
- Academic support block (resource class with inclusion teacher or ELD specialist)—two times weekly - All block (ELA skills reinforcement for all students; SWDs with inclusion teacher, MLLs with ELD specialist)—four times weekly	- Foundations math, ELA, or social studies course (resource class with inclusion teacher)—two block periods* weekly - Homework center—after school daily “Eagle Hour” (faculty office hours)—once per week - Introduction to research class (11th grade SWDs/MLLs to prepare for senior expedition)—two block periods weekly

* “Block periods” are 53 minutes long at the middle school and 85 minutes long at the high school. Academic blocks in the middle school meet four to five times a week. Academic blocks at the high school meet two times a week.

At the high school, while the majority of SWDs and MLLs take core courses alongside general education students, some students with IEPs take “foundations” courses in ELA or mathematics (in addition to their inclusion classes in those subjects) in a context that is similar to a resource class.”⁸ During these classes, the inclusion teacher chunks lessons—that is, breaks down parts of the general education curriculum, previewing the curriculum or providing instruction at a slower pace. The foundations class provides extended time for students to access the curriculum and demon-

strate their learning. The high school also has a homework center after school and “Eagle Hour”—a type of catch-all period during the day, when students can go to teachers’ office hours for extra tutoring, make up work/assessments, earn community service hours by volunteering to assist school staff, or complete independent work. Students at the high school are also offered a STEM after-school program that pays students who participate. Because this program is open to all students, a few of the SWDs we interviewed reported participating in that program.



.....
A Capital City High School teacher checks in with a student during small group work

8 A resource class is a space where SWDs receive specialized instruction in a small-group or one-on-one setting for part of the day, several days a week.
Capital City – An Inclusive School Community Committed to Whole-Child Learning and Well Being

Co-Teaching Models

Within the four inclusion core classes that we visited, as well as during academic support block and ELD classes, the most common form of co-teaching that we observed was “stations” teaching, where students interact in teams to complete a separate learning task at each station. Some of the stations required collaborative or independent work (without teacher facilitation), while two of the stations were facilitated by each of the co-teachers because the tasks required instructional support. We observed two exceptions to the station model: 1) In one high school environmental science class, students were grouped by their progress on an extended inquiry assignment so that the teaching team could provide differentiated supports for students depending on how much support and direction they needed. In this case, the two instructors circulated among the groups to check in with students in their assigned groups; 2) In a middle school ELA class, co-teachers planned for small-group instruction following whole-group instruction, with the inclusion teacher planning to pull SWDs and MLLs into a small group to provide additional instruction and reinforcement to help students work on their assignments.

Commitment to Co-Teaching

In order to create fully inclusive classes that are co-taught, Capital City leaders have made a commitment to staffing the schools with sufficient numbers of special education certified teachers, allowing them to redesign when and where students with IEPs receive core content instruction and more personalized instruction. In the middle school, out of 33 teaching staff, 16 are inclusion teachers who are assigned to specific general education classes. In the high school, 10 out of 33 teachers are inclusion teachers, assigned to co-teach inclusive sections of core courses. In one case we observed, a STEM inclusion teacher at the high school was a co-teacher assigned to co-teach sections of two different courses (Environmental Science and Advanced Algebra) as well as serving as an advisor. This commitment to staffing sufficient numbers of special education staff for the co-teaching model to work is supported financially by the school’s relatively high enrollment of SWDs (also with higher levels of specialized supports needed, which is associated with greater levels of funding per pupil). Capital City consistently attracts families of SWDs due to its strong reputation among families with SWDs and MLLs. Capital City also does additional fundraising in the

community to support its model, with a grant proposal writer on staff. The per-pupil funding at Capital City was \$30,706 in 2023–2024 (compared with the district’s per-pupil funding of \$27,730). The Capital City leaders acknowledged that reliance on steady enrollment of SWDs can be tenuous and is seen as a risk. However, since coming back from the COVID pandemic school closures, which devastated many families with SWDs, school leaders are committed to the full inclusion and co-teaching approaches to improve the quality of instruction for students with learning differences.

The school has also made staffing decisions to provide additional supports for students with learning differences (and all students) outside of general education classes to support whole-child learning and wellness. In addition to the inclusion teachers, the middle school employs six dedicated aides, one reading specialist, one ELD specialist, and an instructional coach, as well as a case manager and a director of student services. The high school employs five dedicated aides, one ELD specialist, one mental health specialist, one college counselor, a transition coordinator, an internship coordinator, as well as a case manager and a director of student services. (Each school also has a coordinator of school culture and SEL specialist, whose roles are described more fully in the section on an inclusive school culture.) These teams are overseen by the chief inclusion officer, who leads the inclusion program across schools.

To ensure that co-teaching is being implemented in effective ways, school leaders use an observation instrument developed and shared by Julie Bost (2019), the [*Co-Teaching Quality Indicator Observation Form Guide*](#), during their class walk-throughs on a regular basis. Leaders use the guide to provide targeted feedback to co-teachers and provide opportunities for them to reflect on and improve their co-teaching practices. Examples of the quality indicators include attention to the types of co-teaching models being employed,⁹ how support is implemented, how teachers share responsibilities for leading routines and activities, how teachers are taking an active role in instruction, intensity of instruction, and use of specialized instruction to meet IEP goals.

Another support for co-teaching is a collaborative unit/lesson planning template used by co-teachers. **Figure 1 in Appendix B** shows one page of the planning template, which exists as a shared Google sheet. Using this tool, co-teachers select the types of co-teaching that are occurring during a lesson using a pull-down menu of the six models. They

⁹ The six types of co-teaching listed in the *Co-Teaching Quality Indicator Observation Form Guide* include alternative teaching; one teach/one observe; one teach/one support; parallel teaching; station teaching; and team teaching. For more details on each type of co-teaching and implementing co-teaching, see Murawski & Bernhardt (2015), *An Administrator’s Guide to Co-Teaching*, or Friend (2008), *Co-Teaching: Creating Successful and Sustainable Programs*.

identify specifically designed instruction for IEP students. Examples of specifically designed instruction include modifications of assignments, strategic grouping, specific scaffolds (e.g., use of multiple choice for pacing, fill-in-the-blank questions for scaffolding, graphic organizers), and choice. They also specify how planned activities tap into Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles—multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of expression and action.

During a pre-observation interview, one of the inclusion teachers (co-teaching fifth-grade ELA) described the co-planning process using the collaborative planning template in this way:

So the way it's done is [general education co-teacher] would have the general education plans. We share a planning tool together that lays out learning targets, that lays out what we're going to do at each part, and it also lays out the materials that we'll use. So she'll put that in first and then I come back behind her. So obviously this is a few days or a week before class. I'll come back in behind her, I'll look at the materials and the lesson for the day, and that's when I start to make accommodations to the work. And obviously I'm thinking about the needs of the inclusion students, the abilities of the inclusion students, and the timing and the space that we have. Sometimes I do pull them into small groups and things like that. So that's one of the big things that happens behind the scenes is me adapting the work to make it more reachable for some of our students.

This approach of having the general education content teachers developing a first draft of the lessons, and then having the inclusion teacher adding and modifying instruction and assignments, seems to be a common approach at the high school level as well.

This co-planning process results in teachers feeling that there is mutual respect and recognition of their respective areas of expertise. One 11th-grade ELA co-teaching team described how they each contribute to lesson planning in terms of how they accommodate for the range of learners in their classes while applying UDL principles to make lesson materials accessible for everyone:

11th grade general education teacher: Yeah. I definitely think just commenting on your philosophy, it's very rooted in accommodation. A lot of our students with IEPs are receiving accommodations that not everyone

is doing, but from a sheltering and UDL perspective, the questions are going to be accessible to anyone. So they could theoretically do it independently without extra accommodations or without these things. But yeah, it's definitely going to matter for each student. That's where [inclusion co-teacher] is the expert.

11th grade inclusion teacher: And I'll say as far as differentiation is also concerned, that class also has a couple of really accelerated students. ... [general education co-teacher] teaches AP for 11th grade, and her mind is always thinking on that side. ... So she will, if there's an honors task, because there's also honors students in the class, so they might have to do one extra thing. They might have to present something that no one else has to present or present something longer . . . or answer additional questions or something like that. So she is pushing the thinking for the accelerated students in that class in those ways.

Co-teaching is not a simple and easy approach to implementing inclusive classrooms—it requires the financial/staffing resources to have dedicated staffing for inclusion classes, regular time for co-planning, respectful, trusting relationships between co-teachers, and ongoing monitoring to ensure that the co-teaching team is implementing co-teaching with fidelity and quality. In addition, the type of instruction and how the co-teaching team actually implements the curriculum can make a difference for the learning experiences of SWDs and MLLs, as well as all learners. The next section addresses the types of instructional practices that we observed at Capital City during class visits that we see as critical for classroom learning environments that are truly inclusive.

Inclusive Practices

Inclusive classrooms at Capital City feature the use of four primary instruction and assessment practices that are confirmed by prior research to be effective, particularly for Black Latine, and MLL SWDs. (See **Appendix B in the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings** for a review of research.) Based on our observations, the four practices that we observed and theorize to contribute to the learning of students with learning differences at Capital City included practices aligned to:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles
- English language development (ELD) strategies
- Culturally responsive teaching
- Authentic Intellectual Work

capacity to actively participate in making choices in service of learning goals.”¹⁰ UDL focuses on designing learning environments and instruction in ways that all students with diverse learning needs can engage in learning rigorous content, master the content, and demonstrate their mastery (similar to the way a ramp or sidewalk cutout provides building access and street mobility for all types of people). CAST has translated these principles into more detailed [guidelines](#) that educators can apply to designing classrooms and learning activities.

We found the use of UDL guidelines to be consistently visible across the four core content classes, as well as two elective classes and two academic support block classes that we observed. **Table 7** summarizes some of the UDL-aligned practices that we observed across these eight class visits:

Universal Design for Learning practices

The purpose of the UDL framework (CAST, 2024) is to guide “the design of learning environments that are accessible, inclusive, equitable, and challenging for every learner. Ultimately, the goal of UDL is to support learner agency, the

Table 7. Examples of Classroom Practices Aligned to UDL Guidelines

UDL Practice	Examples Observed at Capital City
Engagement: <i>For purposeful, motivated learners, stimulate interest and motivation for learning.</i>	
The physical environment is accessible to all students and all styles of learning.	• Station teaching (sometimes heterogeneous and sometimes homogeneous grouping) • Strategic grouping of students for small-group instruction, allowing for differentiation of supports • Flexible seating spaces and furniture
Opportunity to use materials and content that recruit interest. Choices of materials and/or media.	• Use of visual, graphic, video, text-based materials • Use of realia (objects or materials from everyday life), Legos, computer apps
Options to reflect on their learning.	• Station discussions • Exit ticket reflection (written or oral—pair share) • Self-assessment against an assignment checklist
Varied levels of teacher support to sustain effort and optimize challenging content knowledge.	• Teachers sit at two stations, while students work independently at other stations • Teachers make rounds to check in with students at stations to see if anyone needs support • Teachers pulling SWDs and MLLs into small-group instruction during “all block” skill reinforcement periods. • Students encouraged to request support from peers
Strategies to minimize threats and distractions in learning, and options to self-regulate time and actions.	• Timers • Options to put themselves in “Calm Corner,” walk around classroom or halls if needed, put head down after recess • Use of dividers to keep students focused when working individually

¹⁰ From *The Goal of UDL: Learner Agency* (CAST, 2024). <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/more/udl-goal/>

UDL Practice	Examples Observed at Capital City
Representation: <i>For resourceful, knowledgeable learners, present information and content in different ways.</i>	
Options for methods to acquire knowledge and skills that tap into diverse learning styles.	- Options for learning same content in different ways—text, video, audio - Paper instructions, online app instructions, and slides with instructions
Options for supplementary materials to complement texts or whole group instructional activities to assist with comprehension.	Differentiated readings
Opportunities to build background knowledge.	“Do now” activity—defining a key vocabulary word - Gallery walk discussion—invite students to activate their personal opinions about a set of quotations
Action and Expression: <i>For strategic, goal-directed learners, differentiate the ways that students can express what they know.</i>	
Options for communicating what they know.	- Different options for homework - Use of appropriate accommodations while still demanding cognitive complexity (e.g., instead of a literary essay, complete a graphic organizer; include two paragraphs instead of three; extended time)
Options to construct, compose and share their learning with peers, in small groups and/or with the whole class.	- Discussion encouraged with agree/disagree + explain questions - Various small-group activities, inquiry fieldwork conducted in small groups, stations, pair discussions, differentiated roles within teams
Options for physical action and response as a way to communicate their learning.	- In the Master Builders elective class, students are building, test-driving, observing, problem solving - In the Cooking elective class, students follow recipes to make food or snacks
Equitable access to various learning tools.	1:1 Chromebooks are available across all classes - All students to have access to word walls, dictionaries, manipulatives, headphones, desk dividers, cool-down corner
Opportunity to extend their knowledge beyond the scope of the initial lesson (action and expression).	In the Master Builders elective class, once the assigned design project using instructions is complete, students can take it apart and design and build their own devices without instructions

The use of UDL practices in inclusion classrooms has led students to feel that they have a great deal of choice in how they learn and demonstrate their mastery of learning. Two different 12th grade SWDs described the kinds of choices they had in their learning process and to demonstrate their learning:

Well, from my time at Capital City, a lot of the teachers want to see their students succeed, especially since I am one of the students who have an IEP. They set up my learning style and the way to help me grow and help me understand the material better. When they understand what's my learning style, then they give me the freedom of how to learn that subject in my own way.

In 11th and 12th grade, our whole class had a choice of what book we choose to read as our final book. But how I learn ... I can do things differently from other people. People want to write, I can type. If I want to write, I can write. If I want do a video, I can do a video.

English Language Development Practices

We also consistently observed ELD supports in both middle school and high school core classes and electives. For students identified as newcomer MLLs, we observed and teachers confirmed that those students were strategically paired or grouped with students with the same native language to encourage peer learning, allowing for translanguaging (using native languages strategically in the learning process). We also learned that several teachers in the classes we observed were bilingual in Spanish and could communicate with MLLs in Spanish, so that task directions and content instruction could be clarified. This encouragement for MLL students to use their native language in class creates an environment where students' cultural heritage and linguistic backgrounds are not treated as hindrances but as valued assets to build upon.

Students also had opportunities to use and produce language in learning activities through paired, small-group, and whole-class discussions in authentic contexts with a real purpose (e.g., expressing an opinion about a quote during a gallery walk, working on a station activity together, working collaboratively on teams). The 11th-grade Environmental Science general education teacher emphasized the importance of peer-to-peer learning in their class:

It's very common in this class for us to encourage kids to work together, because they're the experts in their own learning. And a peer-to-peer conversation is often the most powerful way that that learning can happen. So I would expect to see a lot of collaboration between young people.

We observed word walls,¹¹ preloading of vocabulary¹² (in both English and Spanish) used in the lessons, and use of other scaffolds such as sentence starters, graphic organizers, and guided note-taking sheets. One high school ELA teacher indicated that MLLs are allowed to use an English-to-Spanish dictionary and Google Translate on their laptops in class. However, a high school science teacher indicated that there was a tension in allowing students to rely solely on electronic translation tools to go back and forth between English and Spanish in that it prevented MLLs from practicing their English reading and writing skills. This teacher felt it was important to help students not to rely so much on these translation apps so that they could develop their English language skills before they left high school, while also honoring their high level of literacy in Spanish. The science teacher described how she manages this tension:

... [O]ne of the pressures that [a newcomer student] expressed to me is that she feels pressure around, she knows the ideas, her literacy level in Spanish is very high, but then feeling very self-conscious about not being able to express herself the way she wants to in English. And so both as her advisor and her teacher, I'm thinking about what are the ways in which we can help you develop that confidence, to be doing more of your written work in English, more of your spoken social interactions in English, while also honoring the power of home language and helping you grow. Being really explicit with her about that, those kind of dual goals.

In other cases, we saw evidence that teachers differentiated texts and assignments for MLLs (as well as SWDs). For example, for a poetry station, the 11th-grade ELA teacher shared varied poetry choices with students depending on their language proficiency, while still supporting their analysis of meaning, imagery, and tone created by the poet's language choices. MLLs also had the option to either complete

¹¹ A word wall is a visible display in a classroom where important vocabulary words from a unit of study are posted, allowing students to readily access and reference them while reading and writing, thus helping to build their vocabulary and comprehension of content.

¹² Preloading vocabulary in a lesson means to introduce and teach key words or phrases from a text before students read or engage with the material, essentially giving them a head start on understanding the content by familiarizing them with essential vocabulary beforehand.

a graphic organizer or produce one fewer paragraph in a fifth-grade literary analysis essay. The 11th-grade ELA teaching team described some of the ways they accommodate for MLLs and SWDs on assignments and learning activities:

All of our MLLs in that class and all of our MLLs this year are Spanish speakers. ... [O]nce we start reading *Fences* [the play], those students with IEPs and MLL all get something before every class period. They get a vocabulary sheet and a summary of the act or the scene that we're going to be reading before they read it so that they can engage. ... And a lot of times those include pictures too, just because it's hard for them to visualize what those things are. ... It's also like, if you have 10 questions, I'm going to choose for our two newcomers, I'll say, "I want you to hit these four," because two of the questions might be assessing the same learning target. ... I'll let them choose which of the two they do."

MLLs have embraced and internalized the flexibilities with language at their school. During a class meeting, during which a short animated video on autism was screened (for Autism Awareness Month), we observed students requesting subtitles in Spanish. The request was swiftly honored by the teachers, suggesting to us that this accommodation was a routine expectation.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) principles are centered around seeing, valuing, and building on the cultural and linguistic assets of culturally and linguistically diverse students, making meaningful curricular connections to students' cultures and lived experiences, and developing students' ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems that result in societal inequalities.¹³ While we did not apply a CRT framework to guide our observations during our classroom visits, looking across our data, we found a number of examples that suggest that Capital City staff were applying CRT principles in the way they planned their curricula, instruction, and other school events.

In our visit to the 11th-grade ELA class, we observed the launch lesson for a unit in which students were going to read and view a performance of *Fences*, a play by Black playwright August Wilson. During the launch lesson (an "anticipatory set"¹⁴), organized as a stations learning activity, students



Classroom Display: Black Authors

learned about Wilson's biography growing up in Pittsburgh, viewed a preview of the recent film version of *Fences*, viewed and made connections to a variety of physical fences or other types of barriers (e.g., the United States–Mexico border wall, prison walls/fences), and read recent border wall poems by high school students in Tucson, Arizona. Thus, within this one lesson, Black and Latine students in the class could learn about and make connections to the lives of people with similar ethnic/cultural or linguistic backgrounds. They also had the opportunity to apply a critical lens to thinking about the concept of fences and its relevance in their world.

We also visited a fifth-grade ELA class in which students were learning to write literary analysis essays on the novel *Esperanza Rising* (by Pam Muñoz Ryan), as part of the middle school's adopted EL Education curriculum for ELA. Latine students in the class (who comprised the majority of students in the class) might find cultural relevance in the re-

¹³ Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris and Alim, 2017

¹⁴ An anticipatory set is a short activity at the beginning of a lesson that prepares students for learning. Anticipatory sets are also known as hooks, bridges, attention grabbers, or set inductions.

lational dynamics and experiences depicted in the novel. The EL Education ELA curriculum purposefully incorporates elements of culturally responsive education design principles rooted in the scholarship of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995b) and the concept of “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” (Sims Bishop, 1990).¹⁵ In particular, the curriculum provides students with “mirrors” by including content and materials that reflect their experiences and also with “windows” that help them develop empathy for others and a broader understanding of the world (Sims Bishop, 1990).

The fifth-grade inclusion teacher of the ELA class we observed also mentioned that he had recently taught a lesson (not part of the EL ELA curriculum) on the importance of connecting what they are learning in ELA to the background historical context of the novel’s setting:

So this wasn’t even part of our curriculum, but last week we did the real story of Thanksgiving, and they had so many questions about history, and it was great, but it was like, man, y’all haven’t learned a lot of this stuff, or there’s no sense that you have a good understanding of things like this. So when we do *Esperanza Rising* one day, we do building background knowledge of Mexico at that time, but it’s a lot for those kids to kind of take in the time, the 1920s, first of all, and then the different country.

In an informal visit to a sixth-grade crew class (also called “advisory”), we observed the teacher leading a discussion about stereotypes following a viewing of an abbreviated version of Chimamanda Adichie’s (2009) [TEDTalk *The Danger of a Single Story*](#). The lesson was part of the SEL curriculum that had been developed by the school’s SEL specialist and coordinator of school culture. During the discussion, teachers elicited students’ voices in sharing their personal experiences with stereotypes. Many students added to the discussion with personal experiences of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based stereotyping. The students made connections to current ethno-religious conflicts in the world and applied a critical lens to discuss how patterns of social stereotyping can lead to oppression of individuals and groups.

During interviews of SWDs and student focus groups, we also heard from students about other culturally relevant elements of their school experiences: celebrations and festivals related to Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month (and other Latine holidays), a field trip to a local

historically Black university, and a robust athletic program and performing arts program that help students feel more engaged in their school experiences. School and classroom walls were also adorned with posters and art that reflect an attention to cultural relevance, for example: 1) photos of Black authors and their book jackets; 2) a “Periodic Table of Hip Hop” artists; 3) signage of words in American Sign Language, English, and Spanish.



Inclusive classroom signage in American Sign Language, English, and Spanish

These examples show how school staff make purposeful selections of topics of study and curricula as well as intentional design of the school and classroom learning environments in ways that allow students to see themselves (mirrors) and honor the diverse cultures of others (windows). The learning environment is inclusive along multiple dimensions.

¹⁵ EL Education (2024). Responsive Education. <https://eleducation.org/responsive-education/>

AUTHENTIC, COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT AND GRADING PRACTICES

In addition to the use of UDL, ELD, and CRT approaches to making content learning accessible for SWDs and MLLs, Capital City as a whole school uses authentic projects (“learning expeditions”) and competency-based learning and assessment systems. We describe below each of these practices and how they contribute to the school’s inclusive learning environment.

Authentic Intellectual Work

As noted in **Appendix A** of the **Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings** (a description of our methodology), we applied a checklist adapted from the Authentic Intellectual Work Institute as one lens to understand the intellectual

demands of the content learning that we observed in the classes we visited, in addition to the way teachers made content instruction more accessible for students. While we were able to visit only a sampling of core classes, we observed consistent use of cognitively complex and challenging assignments that asked students to do more than fill in correct answers, hunt and find information from texts, or regurgitate information. In a fifth-grade ELA class, students were writing literary analysis essays in which they had to make evidence-based claims about a character in a novel. They had to make a choice about which character they wanted to focus on, the events in the novel they wanted to highlight, and the examples that they would use to support their claims. They then had to organize their claims and evidence into a series of paragraphs. (See the inset box for additional examples of cognitively complex learning activities that we observed.)

Examples of Authentic Intellectual Work Observed During Classroom Visits

- In an 11th-grade ELA class, students were engaged in a stations activity in which they were engaging with various media (video, photos, text, poems) related to the text they were preparing to read. They had to make notes on a note-catcher document in response to analytic questions about the media they had viewed/read. Example questions include: 1. What is one thing you learned about the author of *Fences*? 2. Predict: How do you think who Wilson is (his identity, background, etc.) will influence the play? For the poetry station: 1. According to the author of this poem, is the fence/wall they write about a “good” or a “bad” fence? Explain how you know. 2. What is the purpose of the fence/wall in this poem? What does the fence/wall represent?
- In a high school environmental science class, students were practicing analyzing a dataset and creating graphs and bar charts to represent relationships in the data. This practice was done in preparation for analyzing their own data that the class had collected from an overnight fieldwork trip to an island where they had collected data on different habitats to understand the impact of climate change on the island.
- In a ninth-grade biology class, students had recently completed a research task in which they had to identify impacts of human activities on biodiversity and the factors that lead to population increase or decline. Using what they had learned through their research, students were creating public service announcement videos in teams during the class that we visited.
- In the middle school Master Builders elective class we visited, students worked individually or with partners to build robots from Lego kits, code the movements of those robots using the Scratch program, and test and redesign their robots. In a middle school cooking class elective, students learned how to use a recipe to bake pastries.

In these classes, students were applying analytic, synthetic, evaluative, critical, and design thinking, and they were asked to communicate their learning in various modalities aligned to disciplinary expectations—through formal essays, graphic organizers, data representations, videos, coding syntax, and concrete work products. While SWDs and MLLs were often offered accommodations and differentiated assignments, the type of thinking that they were asked to engage with was the same. Even in cases where they were given alternate assessments (e.g., an oral Q&A with the teacher, graphic organizers), SWDs were still able to demonstrate their attainment of the thinking skills. Many of the learning activities we observed also made connections to the real world to engage students (fences/walls in the real world, historical contexts in the setting of a novel/play, biodiversity in the natural world, impacts of climate change in their local natural environment).

Learning Expeditions

We were not surprised to observe cognitively complex types of learning activities at Capital City, as one of the hallmarks of expeditionary learning schools is that they are frequently engaged in projects or “learning expeditions” (real world-connected investigations). EL Education defines expeditions, which typically range from 6 to 12 weeks long, in this way:¹⁶

Learning expeditions are long-term, in-depth studies that make standards come alive for students. They involve students in original research, critical thinking, and problem solving, and they build character along with academic skills.

Learning expeditions are the signature EL Education curricular structure. They make standards come alive for students. These long-term, in-depth studies offer real-world connections that inspire students toward higher levels of academic achievement.

Capital City’s use of learning expeditions (sometimes called “project-based learning” in other schools) seems to be associated with somewhat high levels of student engagement in school and interest in their learning. On the district Panorama Student Survey, about 70% of middle school and high school students at Capital City reported that they found learning to be “somewhat interesting,” “quite interesting,” or “extremely interesting.” Nearly all (92%) of respondents who completed the Family Survey also reported that their children



Capital City High School students on a learning expedition at the beach

“enjoy somewhat,” “enjoy quite a lot,” or “enjoy a tremendous amount” attending Capital City. In the student survey, 88% of middle schoolers and 82% of high schoolers reported that they felt it was “somewhat important,” “quite important,” or “extremely important” for them to attend school every day. Last, 87% of middle schoolers and 85% of high schoolers reported that school would be “somewhat useful,” “quite useful,” or “extremely useful” to them in the future. See **Table 1 and Table 4 in Appendix A of this case study report** for more related data from the district Panorama Student Survey and the Family Survey, both administered during 2023–2024.

In addition to curriculum-embedded learning expeditions, Capital City eighth graders create a portfolio of their work over the course of their final year of middle school, which culminates in an oral presentation of their portfolios to a panel of educators and caregivers. Likewise, during their final year of high school, Capital City seniors complete their senior expedition—a year-long passion project that involves extensive research, a lengthy paper (approximately 20 pages), and a public presentation. All 11th-grade SWDs at Capital City take

¹⁶ <https://eleducation.org/core-practices/curriculum/designing-learning-expeditions/>

an Introduction to College Research class (taught by an ELA inclusion Teacher) in preparation for their senior expedition.

One senior (a Latine SWD who participated in our research) researched fat-phobia (weight-based discrimination) to understand its historical roots in the United States (intersecting with race- and gender-based beauty standards), the current cultural norms that perpetuate fat-phobia and their impact on people's lives, and policies and practices that could reduce weight-based discrimination. At the end of senior year, this student presented on the content of her senior expedition during a nearly hour-long presentation with Q&A in front of a panel of educators. She was able to explain each of her slides without reading off of them and answered questions about her research from the panel with a depth of understanding of someone who had spent quite some time researching and learning about her topic, including interviewing experts on the topic. The student also reflected on her 12 years of experience at Capital City and articulated how she had been challenged to learn to advocate for herself, to build confidence and become an independent person. She planned to attend a local four-year college, majoring in arts and media.

A second senior (a Black male SWD who also participated in our research) completed his senior expedition on the relationship between social media use and teens' mental health. His research included interviewing a journalist who had written a book on the topic and gathering evidence from multiple sources. He noted in his presentation at the end of senior year that reading was a significant challenge for him in the process of completing his research, but he learned that he could gather information by consulting different types of sources, some of which did not require reading. His presentation included data charts that connected the prevalence of smartphones,

daily usage of social media (addiction), and different types of effects on teens' mental health, with a differential impact based on gender as well as the age that smartphone use was initiated. During the presentation, the student asked everyone in the panel and audience (which included a few peers) to look at their smartphone screen time indicators and to become self-aware of their time on social media. This student reflected on the highlights and challenges he experienced, including the pandemic. His plans were to attend a four-year college, where he was signed to play on their basketball team.

In addition to senior expeditions, SWDs at Capital City High School also have access to work-based internships and a transition coordinator, who supports all SWDs in finding the right fit for them, whether it is attending college, joining the military, or finding a vocation that builds on their interests and skills. Another senior SWD whom we interviewed mentioned that he had been an intern for the school's IT office, which not only helped him to develop a supportive relationship with his mentor there, but confirmed his interest in pursuing a career in cybersecurity. He planned to attend a four-year college to study computer science.

Competency-Based (Standards-Based) Learning and Assessment

Competency-based learning and assessment, also known as standards-based grading, focuses on students demonstrating mastery of key concepts and skills rather than accumulating points through tests and assignments. Unlike traditional grading, it is personalized, allowing students to learn at their own pace and use various methods to show understanding. Mastery is assessed through multiple assignments and over time, including retakes and resubmissions with feedback.

The Aurora Institute's 2019 Definition of Competency-Based Education¹⁷

1. Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
6. Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

¹⁷ To learn about Competency-Based Education, see Levine and Patrick, 2019.

At Capital City, in addition to authentic learning opportunities such as expeditions and internships, competency-based learning and assessment practices are used school-wide by teaching staff. School leaders at Capital City call this practice “standards-based grading.” In addition to the district academic standards (Common Core State Standards), the middle school had adopted school-wide competencies that they called “habits of scholar-activists” (HOSAs) that are aligned to the school’s five community values—compassion, contribution, integrity, self-discipline, and courage.¹⁸ Examples of HOSA statements are: “I recognize problems in my class and community and work to understand them,” “I ask for and offer help when needed,” and “I honestly reflect on and take responsibility for how my actions affect others.” At least one HOSA statement is integrated into each lesson plan and is posted alongside academic learning goals as a skill that students should apply during learning activities for each lesson.

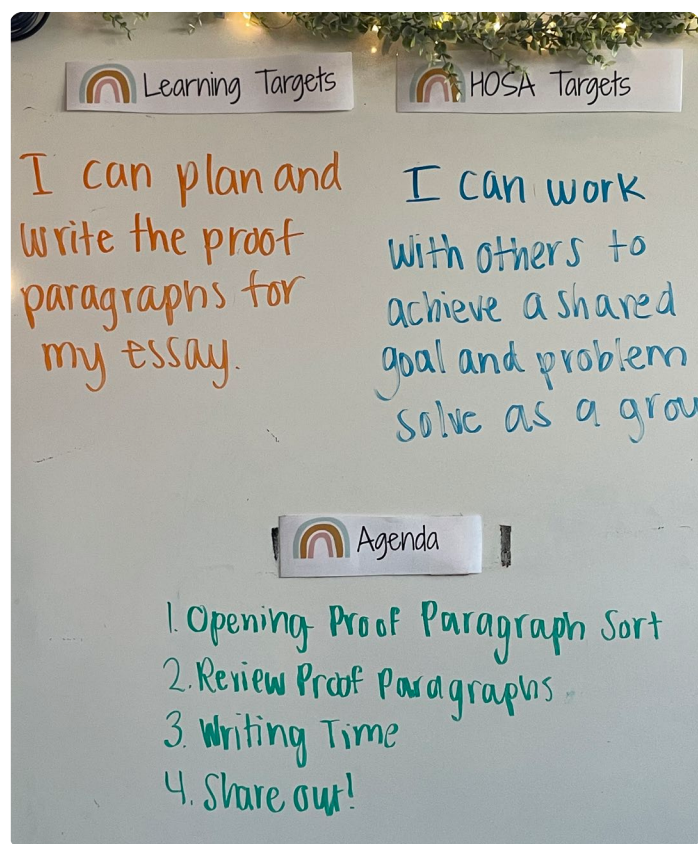
As an expeditionary learning school, Capital City teachers often assign extended assignments that are rubric scored, whereas traditional schools may more typically assess stu-

dents using on-demand tests and quizzes. Students receive feedback and multiple opportunities to revise and resubmit their work on their extended assignments and expeditions to demonstrate that they met the standards, and all students have extended time to complete work and make up for past missing work within a given grading period. (Students cannot make up for work from a prior grading period.)

During one classroom visit, a high school student asked his environmental science teacher, “Is this right?” (referring to his graph of a practice dataset). Instead of saying “yes” or “no,” the teacher said, “Let’s take it through the criteria”; the online assignment sheet had a built-in checklist of the criteria that students were to use to self-assess their work. This allows students to independently check their own work and for teachers to provide more analytic feedback. Attention to qualitative features of their work rather than correct/incorrect answers is another hallmark of Capital City’s approach to assessment.

Another high school student who participated in a focus group described one of the projects where his team demonstrated their learning through “spoken assessment”:

I think there’s a lot of different ways we show [what we learned]. I think a big way is spoken assessment. So presenting your findings in a slideshow or creating. ... So right now, I’m in Club Youth Justice. ... [Y]ou write a paper and you do your research project, and then at the end you work with a couple of other people and do a mini lesson about what you learned. And you have to do all the parts of the lesson. You’re getting the class ready, introducing them, giving background, and then have an activity. And then you have to assess them on what they learned. So that could look like an exit ticket. That could look like a discussion. And I think we have a lot of opportunities to show what we have learned in unconventional ways, which is really cool.



The learning targets, HOSA targets, and agenda for a fifth-grade humanities inclusion class

In order to implement this standards-based grading system logistically, teachers have adjusted their instruction and assessment practices to differentiate for students who learn and complete assignments at different paces. The stations/strategic grouping/workshop approach is one example of how teachers organize students for differentiated supports and time to finish. While more advanced students complete their work and move onto the next stage of their learning, SWDs, MLLs, and others who may need additional

¹⁸ Link to the full set of [Habits of Scholar-Activists](#)

.....
A student's laptop screen showing a graphing assignment sheet with built-in criteria for assessment (from a high school environmental science class)

TASK:
Insert a graph that displays the data on the left and answers the research question: **How do different sounds affect a dolphin's reaction time?**

Consider:

- What do you need to do to the data before it's ready to graph?
- Which variables do you need to include?
- What type of graph will best show the relationship between the

KEY:

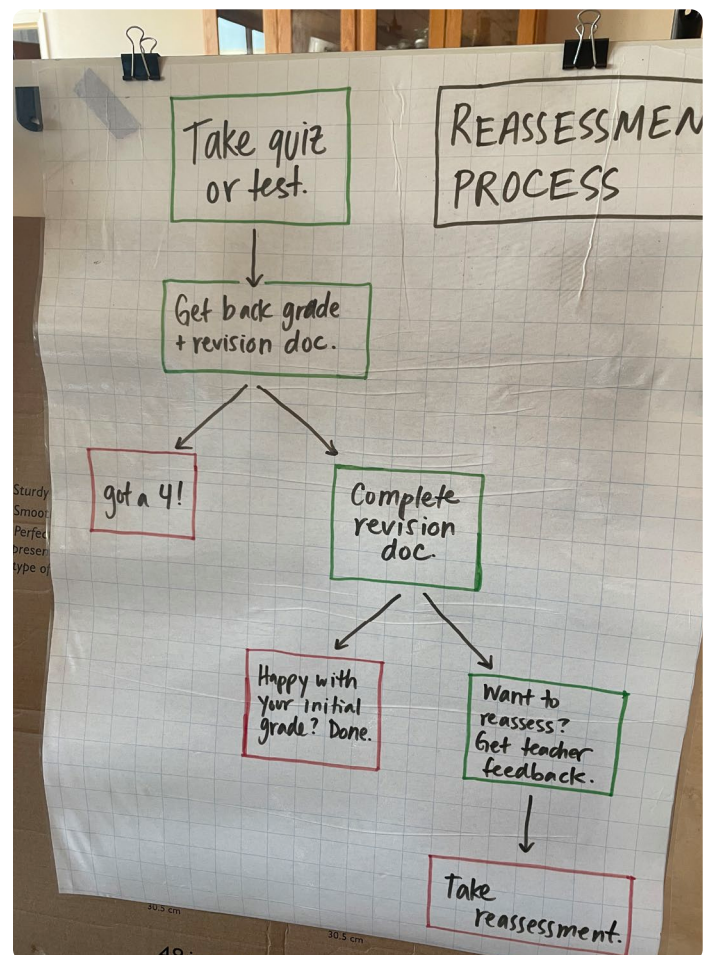
Full credit
Half credit
No Credit
YOUR SCORE:

Criteria for Excellent Graphs

- ☐ A title (which includes both the independent and dependent variable)
- ☐ Data from three or more trials
- ☐ Labels on x and y axes
- ☐ Units for all variables
- ☐ Appropriate scale/increment
- ☐ Appropriate graph type
- ☐ Key / color

time or instructional support continue working on their assignments until they have completed them. Students with learning differences particularly benefit from this “everyone finishes” culture and unlimited opportunities to make up work or revise scored work, as it allows them to learn and demonstrate learning targets at their own pace. In some cases, if a student does not have time to make up all of missing assignments within a quarter, the teachers will find alternate assignments that they can complete to demonstrate mastery of the standards. In this way, SWDs eventually can meet the learning standards for core academic courses and earn the course credits they need for graduation.

At Capital City, students self-assess, and their work is scored using a four-level rubric for all standards, with Level 2 being the “passing” score. Students who receive less than a Level 4 have the option to review feedback and revise their assignment or assessment and resubmit, though some may choose not to as long as they have received the passing score. This mastery-based approach to grading creates a culture in which students and staff measure their learning against a common standard, and in which their growth is individually tracked. This approach contrasts with traditional grading systems that are based on quiz or test scores, work completion, meeting behavioral norms, or other expectations extraneous to meeting the standards. Some of the students who are used to traditional grading systems may have difficulty accepting such a paradigm shift, and a few general education students who participated in a focus group felt it was unfair that



The “Reassessment Process” at Capital City High School

Learning Target	4	3	2	1
SCI.COMM.03 I can clearly and accurately present scientific findings in multiple formats. (discussion)	Student met the criteria for a 3 and... ☒ Four or more substantive contributions. ☐ Prompted another student to contribute at an appropriate time.	☐ Made two meaningful contributions. ☒ Spoke audibly in and professional tone and shifted body to make eye contact with classmates. ☒ Stayed on topic when speaking	☐ Made 1 meaningful contribution. ☐ Difficult to hear what the student says ☐ Stayed mostly on topic when speaking	☒ Did not contribute to discussion OR contribution is off topic. ☒ Behavior was unfocused or off-task. <i>phone out</i>
I can apply concept of sustainability	☒ Student accurately applies the concept of sustainability to real world contexts ☐ Student accurately applies the concept of the three pillars of sustainability with excellent reasoning	☒ Student accurately applies the concept of sustainability to real world contexts ☐ Student accurately applies the concept of the three pillars of sustainability	☐ Student applies the concept of sustainability, but with some flaws. ☒ Student shows that they partially understand the concept of the three pillars of sustainability	☐ Student does not apply the concept of sustainability to real world contexts ☐ Student does not show that they understand the concept of the three pillars of sustainability

Discussion Goal: Listen first and then when I have something to add to what the speaker was saying. I will say on what I had in mind.

Something I thought I could have done better was actually speak or at least type in the chat. Overall, I think the group did good. Ps: Look at the book

An example of a four-level high school science scoring rubric that has been used to provide feedback to a student, who reflects at the bottom of the sheet. Level 4 signifies exceeding the standard, Level 3 describes what it means to meet the standard, Level 2 is approaching the standard, and Level 1 is below the standard.

students are allowed to catch up and earn a passing score even if they did not turn in much work early in the quarter. In these students' eyes, grading is supposed to allow them to compare or distinguish their achievement from others, rather than be a reflection of an individual student's attainment of learning goals. Standards-based grading is not unique to Capital City, but it certainly remains a countercultural approach.

Students who participated in the middle school focus group also cited a weekly monitoring system that ensures that students and their caregivers are aware of their assignments and grades, so that they know when they have opportunities to improve their grades:

Every week they'll send us, we get a paper, and the paper is like, it'll give us a list of all of our missing work and stuff ... [a]nd then we have to get that signed by a parent. Or if we have below a [level] two in a class, which I'm pretty sure is failing, they'll send you the email that you have to get it up and they'll tell you to go to homework club for extra help. So it's like all the supports are right there.

Student Voice in Assessment: Student-Led Conferences and Celebrations of Learning

In addition to their senior presentations, students have an opportunity to reflect on their learning and progress orally during quarterly student-led conferences (four times a year), when the school invites all caregivers to meet with their child and advisor to review their progress. SWDs described how these student-led conferences gave them opportunities to set their own goals and work toward meeting them, and how the conferences empowered them to drive the conversation:

At each quarter we have to set certain goals for ourselves and then we also have to try and meet the goals. So each quarter you're working towards meeting those new goals and they kind of make it fun for you to do. It's not just meet the goals, do extra work, this, that. They make it fun, I guess, to make the goal. So it doesn't seem like a punishment. ... [W]e get to choose our goals based on what we think that we could work on or what we have the lowest grades in or something. (Eighth-Grade SWD)

So, my experience being part of the meetings are usually fine. Especially now, since I'm more of an adult, a lot of the teachers want me to run the meetings myself, but since I'm like, I get a bit nervous, so they can understand when I get really nervous, but usually the meetings are okay. *(12th-Grade SWD)*

It's fun. I got to say what I wanted to say. *(Fifth-Grade SWD)*

Students and their families also participate in “presentations of learning” or exhibition events when students share about a particular project, expedition, or field experience that they completed. This is one of the ways that the school uplifts and honors student voice as a central part of the learning process, developing in students a self-awareness and capacity for setting goals and monitoring their progress toward their goals. Student voice is also elicited in authentic assignments and learning activities that ask students to formulate their own perspectives on academic topics and issues relevant to their lives in the real world (e.g., the discussion of stereotypes during the sixth-grade crew class).

SWDs also described other contexts in which they are able to exercise their voice and choice in the course of regular instruction, and how their teachers respect their opinions. These occasions in which they are able to make choices might relate to using various tools to self-regulate (e.g., options to wear headphones; using a wiggly chair), different ways to present their learning, how much support they want to receive in their academic classes, or how they want to learn.

I wanted to do my DC history class without the foundations teacher to see how good I would do. I wanted to challenge myself so I didn't take DC history with foundations. Well, with that extra teacher [inclusion teacher in general education class], I just did it with only him, which was cool that they let me choose. ... *(12th-Grade SWD)*

I feel like all of my teachers respect my opinions because like, one—especially if I build a good student/teacher relationship with them, then they can understand . . . my viewpoint a little bit better so they can understand a lot of my decisions and my choices a lot of the time. ... *(12th-Grade SWD)*

One of the caregivers of a middle school SWD also expressed appreciation for the way the school takes a personalized, whole-child-centered approach to teaching and learning:

I'm not a proponent of schools teaching to test. ... She's [student] coming into her own and I think they're allowing her to do that. ... I like that they're looking at the individual student. And to me their focus is on that. Yes, they're teaching the ABCs, the 1, 2, 3, all the things that they're supposed to be learning, but they're doing it at a ... whole person perspective. And I'm appreciative of that. ... The larger majority [of teachers], from my perspective, allows you to come out of that box, because ... [e]verybody can't fit in the box. You've got to figure out different ways to how they tick and what will make them function in the direction that you're trying to get them into. But you're allowing them to do it their way, but still gaining the end result. So I like that.

Capital City staff have worked hard to create a learning environment where students' voices are elicited and heard and where their choices are honored. So it is not surprising that when asked about their areas of growth/strength, several of the SWDs that we interviewed cited their ability to advocate for themselves and to ask for support as a strength or area of growth:

We had a final paper in 11th grade, also 12th grade. Final paper score for 11th grade was 2.7 (out of four). My final paper for my 12th grade this year was a 3.3 or four, I don't remember exactly. ... I actually worked it and asked for help when I needed it, and used my one-on-one times with people that I needed. ... I've learned how to talk to people a lot and not be scared. *(12th-Grade SWD)*

I feel like the thing that sticks out to me for the most growth is my ability to ask for the things I need, because when I was younger, I always kept to myself. I never felt comfortable telling teachers what support, what tools do I need, but over time at Capital City, with more practice, I'm a little bit more comfortable asking my teachers when I need help and when I need support. *(12th-Grade SWD)*



Capital City Middle School students enjoy an outdoor fieldwork day

INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORTS

When SWDs, their families, and staff at Capital City were asked what makes their school unique, the most frequent answer had to do with the way the school is designed to support caring relationships with trusted adults and peers. These relationships seemed to drive SWDs' sense of belonging, social-emotional wellness, and motivation. We wanted to understand how the school intentionally designed its inclusive school culture and how it manages and supports positive behaviors in ways that support students' academic learning, social integration, and well being outcomes.

It's All About Relationships

A major part of what makes the learning environment at Capital City effective for students with learning differences

is an intentionally designed “family-like” culture. Almost every student whom we interviewed or who participated in a focus group shared the importance of this family-like culture and strength of their personal relationships with school staff and peers.

I've been at Capital City since first grade. ... I do feel like I belong at Capital City from the viewpoint of some friends and mostly my teachers, because they were able to accept me for who I am, even though I'm not usually a normal girl, or the “normal girls.” ... Capital City is a great school to go, especially for a student who has a disability. And for a person who wants to be in more of a diverse and welcoming community, Capital City's usually a good fit because Capital City treats everybody as more like a family than—Capital City's more like a family than a community. (12th-Grade SWD)

Caregivers of SWDs also emphasized the family-like culture that nurtured their students' sense of belonging at school:

I feel like it helped [my child] a lot with growth. He has grown a lot. ... In the beginning, used to just go in and sit down and be to himself. [Now] have seen him walk around like he owns the school. He used to sit down and don't say anything. But now everyone knows who [student] is. Feel like it's family oriented. ... Can't really tell you what teacher he attached himself to. [Teacher A] took [student] under her wing. Now that [Teacher B] is here, he says, "That's my second mom." Don't even know if she knows that. But I can say that he might have taken [Teacher B] under his wing without her even knowing.

Because the three schools together serve students from pre-K through 12th grade, students in the high school benefited socially from being part of the same school community for many years, and students in focus groups reported that even those who entered in middle school or in upper grades were welcomed and quickly integrated into the school, given its small cohort size. There are also extended new student orientations for new entrants into the schools, which are held over a two-to-four-week-long period each summer and support student acclimation to their new school and social integration for newcomers.

Every student we interviewed was able to identify one or more adults in their school (sometimes from their middle school if they were currently in the high school) with whom they had a personal relationship and to whom they could turn to for advice and support, whether that be personal or academic support. Students reported that they had opportunities to get to know their teachers outside of the regular classroom context (e.g., during advisory/crew; office hours; field trips, such as outdoor expeditions; and extracurricular activities).

Advisors (crew leaders) were most often cited by both students and their caregivers as a source of support, given their roles as the primary contact for families and the person in school most responsible for students' well being. Crew leaders stay with their advisory group for at least two years (9–10th grade and 11–12th grade at the high school), allowing more time for them to build relationships with their advisory students. Inclusion teachers, dedicated aides, coaches, internship mentors, school leaders, counselors and therapists, and other specific teachers were often named by students and caregivers as adults they could count on for personal or academic support and encouragement. One of the high school focus group participants reported:

Yeah, since I built good connections with teachers that I can trust, there's a few teachers I have at the moment helping me in a difficult time. Because right now I have a lot of home stuff going on right now. So I have some teachers right now who are supporting me through this time, and I had teachers in the past buy me birthday presents because I built such a good relationship with them as a student and a teacher.

The district Panorama Student Survey results for 2023–2024 (See **Table 1 in Appendix A of this case study report**) seem to affirm that most students in the middle and high school feel a sense of belonging (with 80% of middle schoolers and high schoolers selecting that they “belong somewhat,” “belong quite a bit,” or “completely belong” at their school. And 76–78% of students reported that they feel “somewhat connected,” “quite connected,” or “extremely connected” to the adults at school. About 80% of students also reported that they had a teacher or other adult at school that they could count on to help them. **Table 2 in Appendix A** suggests that SWDs have similar responses to their peers on questions of sense of belonging, self-assessment of SEL strengths such as perseverance, well being through supportive relationships, and valuing of school, though they had slightly lower self ratings of self-efficacy (statistically significant at the 0.01 level) and were slightly less likely than peers to report rigorous expectations from teachers (statistically significant at the 0.05 level). **Table 3 in Appendix A** shows similar results for MLLs, with slightly lower levels of self-efficacy and slightly lower likelihood to report rigorous expectations from teachers (both at 0.05 significance level). But the data also indicate that MLLs reported a higher sense of belonging than their peers (<0.001 significance).

The Family Survey results for 2023–2024 (see **Table 4 in Appendix A**) are consistent with the students' reports on sense of belonging, with 92% of respondents reporting that their students have a sense of “some belonging,” “quite a bit of belonging,” or “tremendous belonging.” 93% of respondents also responded that they were “somewhat satisfied,” “satisfied,” or “extremely satisfied” with the frequency and amount of communication from the school, and 82% were similarly satisfied with the communication from teachers. When asked about which issues were an obstacle for becoming involved with their child's school, 81% of respondents reported that communicating well with people from their culture was “not a problem at all,” 11% reported it to be a “small problem,” and close to 9% indicated it was a “medium,” “large,” or “very large problem.” Similarly, most did not identify unsureness of

how to communicate with the school, little information about involvement opportunities, an unwelcoming environment for parents, or lack of sense of belonging with the school community as barriers for becoming involved at school.¹⁹

Staffing and Programs for a Positive School Culture

The coordinator of school culture (sometimes called the “dean of students” in other schools) and an SEL specialist (a new role in 2023–2024) in each school lead the way in creating a positive school culture in which students feel they are respected and their voices heard, and have positive mentoring relationships with school staff. They also train teachers and provide supports for responding to student behaviors through a trauma-informed, restorative justice approach and provide an SEL curriculum for advisors to use in their advisory/crew classes, which meet four times a week. One of the SEL specialists highlighted the crew program as a key part of the Capital City program that makes the school different and contributes to a family-like culture:

Crew, if done right, is supposed to be your little family, your safe space at school. And so I think that if we’re able to be in crew and be crew, it is not just an advisory, it’s a feeling. It’s like, it’s supposed to be a vibe. You know what I mean? It is like healthy competition also, like, “Oh, my crew against your crew!” And so I think that if crew is done well, you’re able to really [focus] on finding out who kids are. It is a really good way to build relationships and also to build relationships with families, because you are the person that [is the] student’s main contact in the building. So it’s 10 or 12 kids or whatever you have. ... We’re just a lot more, I don’t know, family oriented. And we have. ... a progressive inclusive mindset. And for me as a [member of a marginalized group], it’s just important to be in a space where I feel safe and I can be authentically me. So students know how to be authentically them. (*SEL Specialist, Interview, April 2, 2024*)

The coordinator of school culture also works to build a positive student-centered culture by organizing school events (“unity” events) and overseeing student activities meant to infuse fun and build relationships—e.g., faculty–student basketball/soccer games, field trips, brotherhood and sisterhood groups/retreats, lunchtime themes (karaoke Wednesdays, line

dance Fridays)—and by engaging students as leaders with a stake in their own school culture. Shortly before our interview, the high school coordinator of culture had invited students to organize and lead an inquiry process to address cyberbullying and vandalism in the school building. By harnessing student voices and engaging them as leaders in their own school, he recognized the power of student voice in evoking broader student engagement and ownership. Some of the students who were invited to serve as leaders were not those who typically step up to leadership roles. This allowed those students to feel empowered and to gain new confidence in themselves. The coordinator of school culture described the interaction with students:

I had a debriefing for a few kids and I asked them, “What were your thoughts about being a leader put in that position?” This one young man said, “I was nervous and I was scared, but once I got going, I got comfortable. Mr. ____, can we do it again?” So to see him just glow like that and other young people glow, like, “Wow! We have to do more of this where it is student led, student voices,” and I believe—so I guess the big take[away] on that is helping kids not only develop their leadership skills, but find their voice.

¹⁹ The Family Survey had a relatively low response rate, however, representing only about 10 percent of students’ families, so we do not know how representative the respondent sample was. The data summaries provided did not disaggregate for families of SWDs, MLLs, or by race/ethnicity, so interpretation of these data is somewhat limited.

What is MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports)?

According to the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, at the American Institute for Research (AIR), a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a “proactive and preventative framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize student achievement and support students social, emotional, and behavior needs from a strengths-based perspective.”

The MTSS framework comprises four essential components:

- **Screening** is generally conducted three times a year to identify students who may be at risk for poor outcomes and need additional academic, social, emotional, or behavioral supports.
- **Multi-Level Prevention System** includes a continuum (Tiers 1, 2, 3) of integrated academic, social, emotional, and behavioral intervention supports that are evidence based and culturally/linguistically responsive.
- **Progress Monitoring** uses valid and reliable tools and processes to assess performance, quantify improvement or responsiveness to intervention and instruction, and evaluate the effectiveness of those supports.
- **Data-Based Decision Making** is the use of data to make decisions about instruction, movement within the multi-level prevention system, intensification, allocation of resources, and disability identification.

Excerpted from “Essential Components of MTSS” (AIR Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports, 2025)

The coordinator of school culture is also responsible for overseeing the Behavior Student Support Team (SST) as part of the school’s implementation of MTSS. (The broader MTSS system also includes an Academic SST and Attendance SST that are coordinated by different school leaders.) The data that are used to inform the Behavior SST’s cycles of intervention come primarily from the High Five app, which allows school staff to input and access students’ academic, attendance, and behavior data as well as engage in real-time communication with each other about specific students. (When meeting with students and their caregivers, attendance data and academic data [grades] are also included as sources of evidence to examine how they may be related to behavior data.)

Systematic Use of Data

The coordinator of school culture and SEL specialist monitor the High Five app throughout the school day, as they receive messages from classroom teachers and other staff if an immediate intervention is needed for specific students or, on the flip side, when there are positive developments that warrant special recognition. These staff may pull aside these students for an individual or group conference, to give students a way to reflect on what may be bothering them, give an encouraging pep talk, resolve conflicts through restorative circles, or provide praise when students have made progress. Behavior interventions for some students may include a tracker that

captures information on student behavior across their classes. To support positive behaviors, all students are part of a “paycheck” system that rewards students for positive behaviors that have been tracked on the High Five app. Every two weeks, students “cash in” their paychecks for rewards such as parties, field trips, or other off-campus events.

For any behavior cases involving SWDs, the coordinator of school culture and SEL specialist collaborate with the inclusion case manager for the student’s grade level, the director of student services, and the student’s caregivers to determine the intervention and monitor progress. Led by the coordinator of school culture, the Behavior SST regularly analyzes trends in behavior data from the High Five app, attendance and academic data, and anecdotal data from teachers to design interventions for specific students, groups of students, or for the school as a whole.

Restorative Justice Circles

All teaching staff in the school are trained on restorative justice approaches to determining consequences of behavioral infractions. However, it is often the coordinator of school culture and the SEL specialist who may conduct restorative justice circles, especially when there is an altercation between students or between students and staff. Together, these two staff members partner to gather statements from students and staff who witnessed the altercation, make decisions about the logical consequences, and figure out the

restorative intervention to put into place. One of the school leaders described this process:

So this can look like connecting with the students as a coordinator, school culture, or SEL specialist to determine what is most responsive to the student that is harmed. Right? Is it a mediation, is it a circle, is it a written apology? Is it those kinds of things? Is it community service? And then in collaboration with the coordinator of school culture, the SEL specialist can either lead or co-lead the restorative intervention with the coordinator of school culture. ... [T]he coordinator of school culture is ... also making sure that the restorative interventions are either communicated with the families or developed with the families as well.

As a result of school staffing dedicated to creating a positive school culture and supporting student well being, students with significant life challenges do not “fall through the cracks” at Capital City. A school leader recounted the story of a student and their family who were supported by the coordinator of school culture.

We had an eighth grader last year who had a very, very challenging life outside of our building and sometimes they were homeless. And to say the least, what the student and what the family were going through last year was very hard. And the student would also demonstrate a lot of behaviors that were trauma responses. And so the coordinator of school culture developed a really close relationship with the student and with the family by providing almost a daily contact with them and highlighting the positive things—like what’s really going well with the student, what supports that the school could provide. All of that to say that this is a student who I’ve worked with for years, and he has had a lot of personal struggles throughout the years, to where he was able to walk across the stage and receive a really high honor this year. And I know that he truly earned it. And I think that a really big part of that was the rapport that he and his family had with our coordinator of school culture.

In addition to the coordinator of school culture and SEL specialist, each school also has a counselor and contracts with a community-based mental health provider to provide professional therapists for students who need more specialized support. Several students participating in the focus groups cited that they valued the mental health services

provided at the school, though there had been some recent instability in the staffing of those services.

These relational, social-emotional, positive behavioral, and mental health supports for all students, and ongoing collaboration among staff and families, make it possible for the school to avert escalation of behaviors that result in suspensions. Expulsions are rare. Most importantly, this whole-child approach to student learning results in a tight-knit, family-like community where students report a sense of belonging and where they feel seen and heard.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT FOR ADULT LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Like many schools across the country, Capital City experiences staff turnover and occasionally is unable to fill some teaching positions. Most of the new teachers coming into Capital City have little experience with the co-teaching model or how to create a learning environment that is completely inclusive of students with learning differences. Many do not arrive at Capital City with knowledge of and experience with UDL, ELD, CRT practices, and other responsibilities such as facilitating crew/advisory and restorative justice circles. Following are ways that Capital City builds and maintains staff capacity to implement its fully inclusive model.

Protected Time for Adult Learning and Collaboration

The school is committed to supporting a collaborative culture in which all teachers share responsibility for the learning and well being of SWDs and MLLs. In order to prepare co-teaching teams to work well together and design instruction that provides access to the core curriculum (through the use of UDL practices, ELD practices, and CRT practices), the school provides two “blocks” (a block is one hour long) of non-instructional time per day. Typically, one of those blocks is used for individual planning and co-planning and the other is used for meetings with grade-level teams, IEP meetings, or meetings with caregivers. During the co-planning time, co-teachers have the opportunity to debrief lessons and plan for the next lessons.

Teachers also have weekly Wednesday morning “consults”—professional learning on four rotating topics (inclusion program; MTSS; school culture; and academics). They also have weekly professional development time on Wednesdays (which are early dismissal days). The content of the PD includes training on curriculum, instructional practices, and other whole child practices (SEL, school culture, co-teaching,

inclusion) that support the school's program. Each campus's instructional coach and principal determine the topics on a quarterly basis based on staff need.

In addition to internal job-embedded professional learning, all general education teachers are encouraged to receive special education certification through a partnership with the KIPP Special Education Fellowship. These job-embedded and external professional learning opportunities support a collaborative adult learning culture of mutual respect and equitable voice. They also equip teachers to design engaging and accessible learning activities that provide access to rigorous core content and skills, apply a competency-based approach to assessing student mastery, and create inclusive environments where all students feel known, cared for, and respected.

Family Partnerships

These adult partnerships and collaboration extend to students' families, who are invited to campus often for annual IEP meetings, quarterly student-led conferences, celebrations of learning, community celebrations, caregiver-education nights, and sports events. The school recently transitioned from an SST system to MTSS, which allows for more personalized intervention for all learners and collaboration among school staff and caregivers. Caregivers of SWDs that we interviewed reported that teachers and staff are accessible and that caregivers have a voice in their child's learning plans:

Family engagement is number one for me. ... There are many opportunities for parents to come into the building outside of parent-teacher conferences. ... You see what your child is working on. We have literacy night, we have math night. We have many opportunities to come. And even if you want to volunteer, this is like an open-door policy. You can come in and do a morning meeting and see what that looks like. So I feel like nothing is hidden. ... The main thing I really want to share about this school is that even when things get very busy ... there's always somebody that you can reach out to for support. And when I look at even the emails that I receive, "Let me know if you need support," that's what they all say. *(Caregiver of a SWD)*

I will say the math teachers, they call me all the time to tell me how [my child is] doing. Mr. [Teacher] will message me. So they're very communicative and they're very kind and they're probably burned out, but they don't seem as burned out as some teachers that we've previously been with [at a previous school]. ... Mostly his

crew leader [Teacher]. I mean, he's who we're in touch with most. To be honest with you, the first day we met Mr. [Teacher], there was something genuine that made me feel comfortable around him. Like no matter what, I feel like I would feel comfortable talking to him about anything. Any concerns I had. Yes. Ms. [Teacher]'s texted a lot and Ms. [Teacher] too. So I would feel comfortable chatting with them if I needed to. Yeah. There's so much communication compared to previously [at a previous school]. *(Caregiver of a SWD)*

CONCLUSION

Capital City Public Charter School has intentionally designed and sustained a learning environment that supports outstanding academic and well being outcomes for Black and Latine SWDs and MLLs. School leaders and staff have structured the learning of SWDs to support their access to "high inclusive" learning contexts (at least 80% of the school day spent in inclusive classrooms), while maintaining specialized supports for SWDs and MLLs during "all support block" periods in the middle school and "foundations" courses in the high school. This strategy exemplifies a balanced approach to providing access to core coursework while still addressing the need for personalized supports. In the middle school, all core and elective classes are inclusion classrooms, while at the high school, SWDs and MLLs are assigned strategically into certain sections of a course, and teaching staff are assigned so that those classes are co-taught by an inclusion teacher who can support co-planning and instruction of core course content. The school provides daily planning time for co-teachers, and engages teachers in regular professional learning opportunities about inclusive and asset-based, culturally responsive teaching strategies. We observed that these strategic staffing decisions, supports for teacher collaboration, and investments in professional learning have paid off through the ongoing use of research-based classroom practices such as UDL, ELD, and culturally responsive teaching strategies that support the learning of SWDs and MLLs. While these practices have not yet translated into higher test scores on state measures, the school is working toward greater instructional consistency through its adoption of common literacy and mathematics curricula in the middle school and through professional development on implementing those curricula. In the year we conducted our data collection, middle school teachers were transitioning into the use of the new EL curriculum for English language arts.



The school has also deliberately designed spaces and structures that strengthen staff-student and student-student relationships, as well as family involvement. Structures and programs such as low teacher-student ratios in most classes, the Crew program, school/class meetings, and family outreach efforts have resulted in building a strong “family-like” culture that students, their caregivers, and staff members cited as important to creating an environment where students feel known, cared for, and belong. Designated staff roles such as the coordinator of school culture and the new role of social-emotional learning specialist, the work of the behavior SST within the school’s MTSS program, regular communication among staff using the High-Five app, and the consistent application of restorative justice approaches to resolving conflicts have also supported a learning environment where students feel their voices are heard, that they are treated fairly, and that they are safe. Implementation of these systems and practices have resulted in reducing behavior incidents that call for suspension or use of other penalties that alienate students.

Last, we observed that the school consistently supported the engagement of SWDs and MLLs in and demonstration of rigorous content learning through its use of authentic “expeditions” (projects), competency/standards-based grading, and presentations of learning (e.g., student-led conferences and portfolio presentations). The types of thinking and doing expected of SWDs and MLLs were consistent with that expected of general education students, whether that was completing a literary analysis of a novel, analyzing poetry,

graphing data or conducting independent research for their senior expedition. However, teachers differentiated the supports they provided students to engage in and demonstrate their learning, with a variety of personalized pathways and modalities for taking in new knowledge and showing their learning. For example, 11th grade SWDs had a longer runway to prepare for their senior expeditions through a research class specially designed for them. A culture of “everyone finishes” is supported by teachers’ skillful differentiation so that SWDs have the time, feedback, and personalized supports they need to attain expected course competencies.

The inclusive learning environment we observed at Capital City would not be possible if not for the way the school’s leaders created the conditions for a collaborative culture, in which all teachers take responsibility for the learning of all students, including SWDs and MLLs. Perhaps because of its small size and independent governance as a charter school, Capital City was founded with the premise that all students are welcome in general education courses, that there is to be no tracking or segregation of students into different academic pathways. In order to make this possible, it was necessary for the special education department and general education staff to collaborate to ensure quality instruction for all students. This meant sharing and coordinating staff, time, and resources so that all students have access to the supports they need to be successful.

What would it take for a school that does not currently have a fully inclusive learning environment to become fully inclusive? Is it feasible? Moving toward more inclusive schools first requires that departmental leaders and school leaders commit to true collaboration with equity of voice and mutual respect for expertise. This reinforces findings from the Marshall Street 2024 publication, *Opening Doors to Collaboration*, which shares findings from a networked improvement community’s activities and illustrates several different types of educator collaboration that make a difference for SWDs. Supporting cross-departmental collaboration, specifically between general education and special education teachers, would be an important step toward shaping an inclusive school environment where school staff learn from each other, and build their own capacity to plan for inclusive instruction and assessment in ways that value and honor the diversity of their students.

APPENDIX A

CAPITAL CITY STUDENT SURVEY AND FAMILY SURVEY DATA

Table 1. District Panorama Student Survey for Middle and High School Grades (2023-2024)²⁰

	Total N	1	2	3	4	5
1. How well do people at your school understand you as a person?						
		<i>Do not understand at all</i>	<i>Understand a little</i>	<i>Somewhat understand</i>	<i>Understand quite a bit</i>	<i>Completely understand</i>
Grades 6-8	219	10 4.6%	30 13.7%	83 37.9%	70 32.0%	26 11.9%
Grades 9-12	261	13 5.0%	37 14.2%	97 37.2%	85 32.6%	29 11.1%
2. How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?						
		<i>Not at all connected</i>	<i>Slightly connected</i>	<i>Somewhat connected</i>	<i>Quite connected</i>	<i>Extremely connected</i>
Grades 6-8	219	11 5.0%	39 17.8%	85 38.8%	66 30.1%	18 8.2%
Grades 9-12	260	12 4.6%	50 19.2%	109 41.9%	74 28.5%	15 5.8%
3. How much do you matter to others at this school?						
		<i>Do not matter at all</i>	<i>Matter a little bit</i>	<i>Matter somewhat</i>	<i>Matter quite a lot</i>	<i>Matter a tremendous amount</i>
Grades 6-8	215	16 7.4%	36 16.7%	90 41.9%	54 25.1%	19 8.8%
Grades 9-12	258	19 7.4%	40 15.5%	104 40.3%	76 29.5%	19 7.4%
4. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?						
		<i>Do not belong at all</i>	<i>Belong a little bit</i>	<i>Belong somewhat</i>	<i>Belong quite a bit</i>	<i>Completely belong</i>
Grades 6-8	217	13 6.0%	30 13.8%	83 38.2%	61 28.1%	30 13.8%
Grades 9-12	258	21 8.1%	30 11.6%	105 40.7%	81 31.4%	21 8.1%
5. When you feel like giving up on a difficult task, how likely is it that your teachers will make you keep trying?						
		<i>Not at all likely</i>	<i>Slightly likely</i>	<i>Somewhat likely</i>	<i>Quite likely</i>	<i>Extremely likely</i>
Grades 6-8	217	5 2.3%	19 8.8%	60 27.6%	81 37.3%	52 24.0%
Grades 9-12	254	12 4.7%	18 7.1%	73 28.7%	100 39.4%	51 20.1%

²⁰ This table does not include all items in the district survey, which included 40 different questions. For the purpose of this case study, this table only includes items that are relevant to students' perceptions of their relationships, sense of belonging, and academic challenge. We excluded items that were primarily related to self-perceptions of their own attitudes toward schoolwork or social-emotional skills, as we chose to focus on items that relate to what the school does. In addition, this dataset did not include markers for students with disabilities or multilingual learners, or race/ethnicity, so were unable to disaggregate responses by subgroups. (Table 2 includes data disaggregated for SWDs and Table 3 includes data disaggregated for MLLs on the survey constructs, for which there was a separate dataset.) The response rate for this survey was 65 percent for middle school students and 74 percent for high school students in 2023–2024.

Total N		1	2	3	4	5
6. How much do your teachers encourage you to do your best?						
		Do not encourage me at all	Encourage me a little	Encourage me some	Encourage me quite a bit	Encourage me a tremendous amount
Grades 6-8	213	3	17	45	86	62
		1.4%	8.0%	21.1%	40.4%	29.1%
Grades 9-12	256	5	23	62	92	74
		2.0%	9.0%	24.2%	35.9%	28.9%
7. Overall, how high are your teachers' expectations of you?						
		Not high at all	Slightly high	Somewhat high	Quite high	Extremely high
Grades 6-8	218	4	22	67	90	15
		1.8%	10.1%	30.7%	41.3%	16.1%
Grades 9-12	255	8	14	91	103	39
		3.1%	5.5%	35.7%	40.4%	15.3%
8. Do you have a teacher or other adult from school who you can count on to help you, no matter what?						
		No	Yes			
Grades 6-8	216	45	171			
		20.8%	79.2%			
Grades 9-12	255	51	204			
		20.0%	80.0%			
9. Do you have a family member or other adult outside of school who you can count on to help you, no matter what?						
		No	Yes			
Grades 6-8	218	21	198			
		9.6%	90.4%			
Grades 9-12	254	24	230			
		9.4%	90.6%			
10. Do you have a friend from school who you can count on to help you, no matter what?						
		No	Yes			
Grades 6-8	220	31	189			
		14.1%	85.9%			
Grades 9-12	253	38	215			
		15.0%	85.0%			
11. How interesting do you find the things you learn in your classes?						
		Not at all interesting	Slightly interesting	Somewhat interesting	Quite interesting	Extremely interesting
Grades 6-8	218	23	43	91	48	13
		10.6%	19.7%	41.7%	22.0%	6.0%
Grades 9-12	256	19	53	116	57	11
		7.4%	20.7%	45.3%	22.3%	4.3%
12. How often do you use ideas from school in your daily life?						
		Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always
Grades 6-8	217	27	47	99	37	7
		12.4%	21.7%	45.6%	17.1%	3.2%
Grades 9-12	255	44	62	107	29	13
		17.3%	24.3%	42.0%	11.4%	5.1%

Total N		1	2	3	4	5
13. How often do you stay focused on the same goal for several months at a time?						
		<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Once in a while</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Almost always</i>
Grades 6-8	217	9 4.1%	39 17.9%	86 39.4%	65 29.8%	19 8.7%
Grades 9-12	256	18 7.0%	33 12.9%	95 37.1%	73 28.5%	37 14.5%
14. How important is it to you to do well in your classes?						
		<i>Not at all important</i>	<i>Slightly important</i>	<i>Somewhat important</i>	<i>Quite important</i>	<i>Extremely important</i>
Grades 6-8	219	3 1.4%	11 5.0%	39 17.8%	84 38.4%	82 37.4%
Grades 9-12	256	10 3.9%	11 4.3%	65 25.4%	82 32.0%	88 34.4%
15. How important is it for you to attend school every day?						
		<i>Not at all important</i>	<i>Slightly important</i>	<i>Somewhat important</i>	<i>Quite important</i>	<i>Extremely important</i>
Grades 6-8	219	3 1.4%	22 10.0%	58 26.5%	84 38.4%	52 23.7%
Grades 9-12	256	16 6.3%	30 11.8%	61 23.9%	99 38.8%	49 19.2%
16. How useful do you think school will be to you in the future?						
		<i>Not at all useful</i>	<i>Slightly useful</i>	<i>Somewhat useful</i>	<i>Quite useful</i>	<i>Extremely useful</i>
Grades 6-8	219	10 4.6%	19 8.7%	65 29.7%	83 37.9%	42 19.2%
Grades 9-12	255	12 4.7%	26 10.2%	74 29.0%	91 35.7%	52 20.4%

Table 2. District Panorama Student Survey Constructs (Students with Disabilities vs. Non-SWDs)

					95% Confidence Interval for Mean					
Survey Construct		N	Mean	Sig.	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
SEL Number of Strengths	non-SWDs	505	2.52		1.941	0.086	2.35	2.69	0	6
	SWDs	134	2.19		1.9	0.164	1.86	2.51	0	6
	Total	639	2.45		1.935	0.077	2.3	2.6	0	6
SEL Custom Value	non-SWDs	505	3.119		0.6191	0.0275	3.065	3.173	1	5
	SWDs	134	3.066		0.6225	0.0538	2.96	3.173	1	4.6
	Total	639	3.108		0.6197	0.0245	3.06	3.156	1	5
SEL Perseverance Value	non-SWDs	505	3.444		0.6657	0.0296	3.385	3.502	1	5
	SWDs	134	3.321		0.7507	0.0649	3.193	3.449	1.2	5
	Total	639	3.418		0.6857	0.0271	3.365	3.471	1	5
SEL Self-Efficacy Value	non-SWDs	503	3.193	**	0.7359	0.0328	3.129	3.258	1	5
	SWDs	134	2.974		0.7503	0.0648	2.846	3.102	1	5
	Total	637	3.147		0.7437	0.0295	3.089	3.205	1	5
SEL Sense of Belonging Value	non-SWDs	505	3.205		0.742	0.033	3.14	3.27	1	5
	SWDs	134	3.201		0.7658	0.0662	3.07	3.332	1	5
	Total	639	3.204		0.7464	0.0295	3.146	3.262	1	5
SEL Rigorous Expectations Value	non-SWDs	505	3.666	*	0.669	0.0298	3.607	3.724	1	5
	SWDs	134	3.525		0.6992	0.0604	3.405	3.644	1	5
	Total	639	3.636		0.6774	0.0268	3.583	3.689	1	5
SEL Valuing of School Value	non-SWDs	505	3.388		0.7234	0.0322	3.325	3.451	1	5
	SWDs	134	3.252		0.8102	0.07	3.114	3.391	1	5
	Total	639	3.36		0.7439	0.0294	3.302	3.417	1	5
Well Being Number of Strengths	non-SWDs	503	0.86		0.349	0.016	0.83	0.89	0	1
	SWDs	133	0.84		0.366	0.032	0.78	0.9	0	1
	Total	636	0.86		0.352	0.014	0.83	0.88	0	1
Well Being Supportive Relationships Value	non-SWDs	503	4.346		0.9103	0.0406	4.266	4.425	1	5
	SWDs	133	4.228		0.9179	0.0796	4.07	4.385	1	5
	Total	636	4.321		0.9124	0.0362	4.25	4.392	1	5

* Significant at the 0.05 level; ** Significant at the 0.01 level

Note: This table reports analyses of data that included disability status indicators. Rather than responses to individual questions to the Panorama Student Survey, these data reported the construct values (clusters of items). We did not have access to raw data that included disability status with individual responses to questions.

Table 3. District Panorama Student Survey Constructs (Multilingual Learners vs. non-MLLs)

		95% Confidence Interval for Mean								
Survey Construct		N	Mean	Sig.	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
SEL Number of Strengths	non-MLLs	441	2.42		1.897	0.09	2.24	2.6	0	6
	MLLs	198	2.51		2.022	0.144	2.23	2.79	0	6
	Total	639	2.45		1.935	0.077	2.3	2.6	0	6
SEL Custom Value	non-MLLs	441	3.1		0.6215	0.0296	3.041	3.158	1	5
	MLLs	198	3.126		0.6166	0.0438	3.04	3.213	1.6	5
	Total	639	3.108		0.6197	0.0245	3.06	3.156	1	5
SEL Perseverance Value	non-MLLs	441	3.414		0.6794	0.0324	3.35	3.477	1	5
	MLLs	198	3.427		0.701	0.0498	3.329	3.526	1.2	5
	Total	639	3.418		0.6857	0.0271	3.365	3.471	1	5
SEL Self-Efficacy Value	non-MLLs	441	3.188	*	0.7584	0.0361	3.117	3.259	1	5
	MLLs	196	3.054		0.7026	0.0502	2.955	3.153	1	5
	Total	637	3.147		0.7437	0.0295	3.089	3.205	1	5
SEL Sense of Belonging Value	non-MLLs	441	3.139	***	0.7592	0.0362	3.068	3.21	1	5
	MLLs	198	3.35		0.6973	0.0496	3.252	3.448	1.6	5
	Total	639	3.204		0.7464	0.0295	3.146	3.262	1	5
SEL Rigorous Expectations Value	non-MLLs	441	3.675	*	0.6702	0.0319	3.612	3.738	1	5
	MLLs	198	3.549		0.6868	0.0488	3.453	3.645	1.6	5
	Total	639	3.636		0.6774	0.0268	3.583	3.689	1	5
SEL Valuing of School Value	non-MLLs	441	3.334		0.7642	0.0364	3.263	3.406	1	5
	MLLs	198	3.416		0.6951	0.0494	3.318	3.513	1.4	5
	Total	639	3.36		0.7439	0.0294	3.302	3.417	1	5
Well Being Number of Strengths	non-MLLs	440	0.86		0.351	0.017	0.82	0.89	0	1
	MLLs	196	0.85		0.356	0.025	0.8	0.9	0	1
	Total	636	0.86		0.352	0.014	0.83	0.88	0	1
Well Being Supportive Relationships Value	non-MLLs	440	4.293		0.9362	0.0446	4.206	4.381	1	5
	MLLs	196	4.383		0.8557	0.0611	4.262	4.503	1.7	5
	Total	636	4.321		0.9124	0.0362	4.25	4.392	1	5

* Significant at the 0.05 level; ** Significant at the 0.01 level; *** Significant at the 0.001 level

Note: This table reports analyses of data that included a multilingual learner status indicator. Rather than responses to individual questions to the Panorama Student Survey, these data reported the construct values (clusters of items). We did not have access to raw data that included MLL status with individual responses to questions.

Table 4. Family Survey 2023–2024²¹

1. How satisfied are you with your choice of Capital City Public Charter School?						
	<i>Extremely Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Slightly Satisfied</i>	<i>Somewhat Satisfied</i>	<i>Quite Satisfied</i>	<i>Extremely Satisfied</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	10.1%	8.3%	25.7%	32.1%	23.9%	3.51
N	11	9	28	35	26	109
2. Would you recommend Capital City to other families?						
	<i>Definitely not</i>	<i>Probably not</i>	<i>Unsure/maybe</i>	<i>Probably yes</i>	<i>Definitely yes</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	1.8%	5.5%	17.4%	32.1%	43.1%	4.09
N	2	6	19	35	47	109
3. How well do you feel Capital City is preparing your child(ren) for their next academic year?						
	<i>Not at all well</i>	<i>Slightly well</i>	<i>Somewhat well</i>	<i>Quite well</i>	<i>Extremely well</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	6.0%	9.0%	30.0%	31.0%	24.0%	3.58
N	6	9	30	31	24	100
4. How much of a sense of belonging do your child(ren) have at Capital City?						
	<i>Not belonging at all</i>	<i>A little bit of belonging</i>	<i>Some belonging</i>	<i>Quite a bit of belonging</i>	<i>Tremendous belonging</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	1.0%	7.0%	22.0%	43.0%	27.0%	3.88
N	1	7	22	43	27	100
5. How does our overall approach to discipline work for your child(ren)?						
	<i>Not at all well</i>	<i>Slightly well</i>	<i>Somewhat well</i>	<i>Quite well</i>	<i>Extremely well</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	2.0%	11.2%	24.5%	45.9%	16.3%	3.63
N	2	11	24	45	16	98
6. To what extent do you think that children enjoy going to Capital City?						
	<i>Do not enjoy at all</i>	<i>Enjoy a little bit</i>	<i>Enjoy somewhat</i>	<i>Enjoy quite a lot</i>	<i>Enjoy a tremendous amount</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	1.0%	7.1%	27.6%	46.9%	17.4%	3.72
N	1	7	27	46	17	98
7. How much does Capital City value the diversity of children's backgrounds?						
	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little bit</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A tremendous amount</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	2.0%	4.1%	11.2%	44.9%	37.8%	4.12
N	2	4	11	44	37	98
8. Overall, how much respect do you think the teachers and staff at Capital City have for the students?						
	<i>Almost no respect</i>	<i>A little bit of respect</i>	<i>Some respect</i>	<i>Quite a bit of respect</i>	<i>A tremendous amount of respect</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	1.0%	4.1%	14.3%	41.8%	38.8%	4.13
N	1	4	14	41	38	98
9. To what extent do you know what your child(ren) are learning at school?						
	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little bit</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A tremendous amount</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	2.2%	23.3%	30.0%	33.3%	11.1%	3.28
N	2	21	27	30	10	90

²¹ The Family Survey items included in this table are excerpted from a more extensive set of Family Survey results, and include only items that are most directly relevant to this study. The response rate for this survey is fairly low (109 caregivers from grades pre-K3 to 12th grade responded to the survey), representing a little more than 10 percent of the student population. This table reorganizes information from a data summary that was not disaggregated for families of SWDs or MLLs, middle school, or high school students.

10. To what extent do you know how your child(ren) are doing academically in school?						
	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little bit</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A tremendous amount</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	3.3%	11.1%	26.7%	41.1%	17.8%	3.59
N	3	10	24	37	16	90
11. To what extent do you know how your child(ren) are doing socially at school?						
	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little bit</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A tremendous amount</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	0.0%	14.4%	35.6%	34.4%	15.6%	3.51
N	0	13	32	31	14	90
12. How satisfied are you with the frequency and amount of communication from your child(ren)'s teacher(s)?						
	<i>Extremely dissatisfied</i>	<i>Slightly dissatisfied</i>	<i>Somewhat satisfied</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Extremely satisfied</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	3.4%	14.8%	28.4%	31.8%	21.6%	3.53
N	3	13	25	28	19	88
13. How satisfied are you with the frequency and amount of communication from the school?						
	<i>Extremely dissatisfied</i>	<i>Slightly dissatisfied</i>	<i>Somewhat satisfied</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Extremely satisfied</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	1.2%	5.8%	14.9%	54.0%	24.1%	3.94
N	1	5	13	47	21	87
14. To what extent are teachers responsive to your questions and concerns?						
	<i>Not at all responsive</i>	<i>Slightly Responsive</i>	<i>Somewhat responsive</i>	<i>Quite responsive</i>	<i>Extremely responsive</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	0.0%	10.2%	13.6%	43.2%	33.0%	3.99
N	0	9	12	38	29	88
15. To what extent are administrators responsive to your questions and concerns?						
	<i>Not at all responsive</i>	<i>Slightly Responsive</i>	<i>Somewhat responsive</i>	<i>Quite responsive</i>	<i>Extremely responsive</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
%	2.3%	13.6%	15.9%	38.6%	29.6%	3.8
N	2	12	14	34	26	88
16. How big an issue are the following things for becoming involved with your child's school?						
	<i>Not a problem at all</i>	<i>Small problem</i>	<i>Medium problem</i>	<i>Large problem</i>	<i>Very large problem</i>	<i>Weighted Average</i>
a. School staff seem too busy	% 48.4%	23.7%	14.0%	10.8%	3.2%	4.03
	N 45	22	13	10	3	93
b. You feel unsure about how to communicate with the school	% 64.5%	14.0%	10.8%	6.5%	4.3%	4.28
	N 60	13	10	6	4	93
c. The school provides little information about involvement opportunities	% 68.82%	13.98%	10.75%	5.38%	1.08%	4.44
	N 64	13	10	5	1	93
d. The school is not welcoming to parents	% 76.6%	8.5%	8.5%	2.1%	4.3%	4.51
	N 72	8	8	2	4	94
e. The school does not communicate well with people from your culture	% 80.65%	10.75%	4.30%	0.00%	4.30%	4.63
	N 75	10	4	0	4	93
f. You do not feel a sense of belonging with your child's school community	% 72.0%	12.9%	6.5%	4.3%	4.3%	4.44
	N 67	12	6	4	4	93

APPENDIX B

OTHER RESOURCES

Figure 1. Collaborative Planning Template

Week of _____ Plans							
Date/Lesson	Targets & Standards	Formative Assessment	Lesson Agenda	Co-teaching Style	Specifically Designed Instruction by Student	UDL Principles (highlight)	Materials (Link!)
Monday DATE _____ 5A/B: (UNIT/LESSON) 5C/D: (UNIT/LESSON)	LT (standard):	☐ JR?	1.	Parallel -		Engage: -facilitate personal coping skills and strategies -develop self-assessment and reflection	
	HoSA:		2.	Parallel -		Represent: -activate or supply background knowledge -highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships -guide information processing and visualization -maximize transfer and generalization	
			3.	Parallel -			
			4.	Parallel -			
			5.	Parallel -			
			6.	Parallel -		Expression & Action: -enhance capacity for monitoring progress	
	LT (standard):	☐ JR?	1.	Parallel -		Engage: -facilitate personal coping skills and strategies -develop self-assessment and reflection	
	HoSA:		2.	Parallel -		Represent: -activate or supply background knowledge -highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships -guide information processing and visualization -maximize transfer and generalization	
			3.	Parallel -			
			4.	Parallel -			
			5.	Station -		Expression & Action:	

Note: The co-teaching column includes pull-down values for the six different types of co-teaching listed in the [Co-Teaching Quality Indicator Observation Form Guide](#)

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