

CASE STUDY: Bank Street Education Center

This case explores Bank Street Education Center’s (Education Center) approach to facilitating stakeholder participation in their partnership with Yonkers Public Schools (YPS). Using their system-change model, the [Throughline of Learning](#), the Education Center hub team has helped the district lay the groundwork for a sustainable participatory infrastructure that invites stakeholders at each layer of the YPS ecosystem to contribute to strategy and practice.

BANK STREET EDUCATION CENTER

The [Bank Street Education Center](#) (Education Center) is a division of the [Bank Street College of Education](#) that partners with schools and districts to disrupt inequity through system-level change. By helping design better educational experiences for both children and adults in deep collaboration with program partners — from teachers and families to policymakers and higher education leaders — the Education Center creates customized approaches to support that engender strengths-based, learner-centered, and equitable educational practices.

Since 2016, the Education Center and Yonkers have engaged in an evolving partnership, most recently focused on the facilitation of a networked improvement community, the YPS Network for School Improvement (YPS NSI). The primary aim of YPS NSI is to increase the percentage of Black and Latinx students and/or students experiencing poverty who are on-track for success in high school and college by the end of 8th grade. As an entrypoint to that broad objective, the network has narrowed its focus to math instruction, using continuous improvement (CI) practices and targeted professional development at all layers of the district system to drive toward a shared vision of equitable math pedagogy. The Education Center piloted the YPS NSI work in 2018 with 10 schools, and by 2020, had scaled its membership to include all 23 middle grade schools in the district.

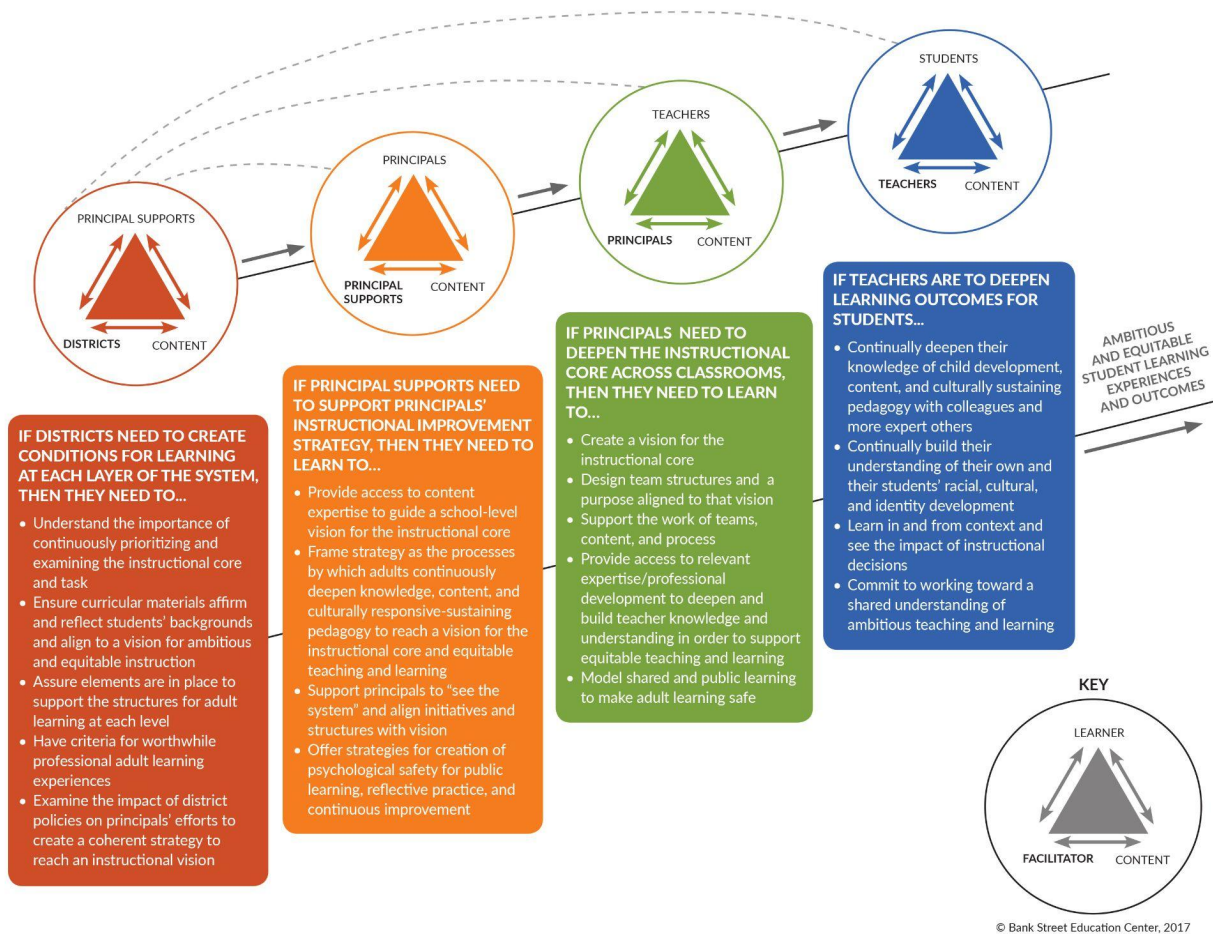
YONKERS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Yonkers Public Schools (YPS), located just north of New York City, is the 4th largest school district in New York. The district serves over 27,000 students, 75 percent of whom qualify as economically disadvantaged. 60 percent of Yonkers students identify as Hispanic, 16 percent as African American/Black, and 24 percent as White or Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian or multi-racial. 13 percent of Yonkers students identify as multilingual.

Stakeholder Participation & the Throughline of Learning

The Education Center’s approach to stakeholder participation in YPS is rooted in the [Throughline of Learning](#) (the Throughline), a model that articulates the adult learning system that underlies system-level improvements in instructional practice. The Throughline frames improvement as a “coordinated opportunity for adult learning,” extending the concept of the instructional core beyond the classroom and embedding it in each layer of the district ecosystem. Teachers, school leaders, principal supervisors, and district staff each hone in on a unique set of learning tasks (see Figure 1), which, when executed in concert, support collective progress toward a shared vision of effective, equitable instruction.

FIGURE 1. The Throughline Model: Learning at Every Layer of the System



Particularly in its approach to stakeholder participation, the Throughline represents a major shift from traditional methods of instructional change management. Rather than understanding teachers’ classroom practice as the sole source of inequitable student outcomes — and therefore, an isolated problem that can be “fixed” through top-down directives and one-off professional development opportunities — the Throughline positions reciprocal, ongoing participation in learning by stakeholders at each layer of a system as a foundational input to stronger and more equitable instructional strategy and practice at scale. In the model, the relationships between learners across the system are critical: if teachers are to improve their classroom practice, there must be aligned opportunities for school and district leaders to learn in tandem with them, provide support, and adapt system-wide strategy responsively.

Throughline Stakeholder Participation in YPS NSI

In partnership with YPS district staff, the Education Center has applied the Throughline model to the YPS NSI, designing interconnected learning opportunities for stakeholders at each layer of the district system. While these learning activities naturally overlap, the Throughline in Yonkers may be loosely described as three strands of learning and improvement work situated across three stakeholder groups: school teams, school leaders, and district leaders.

SCHOOL TEAM

At the site level, cross-functional teams use CI practices to collaboratively unpack the root causes of inequitable math outcomes, create a shared theory of improvement, and test instructional interventions through data-driven inquiry cycles. The Education Center hub team scaffolds this work by training participants on both CI methodology and effective pedagogical practices, organizing and facilitating network activity, and providing bespoke coaching and tools to teams as they build their capacity to engage with CI routines and grapple with implementation challenges.

Certainly having our principals and our administrators be present at the professional development as members of the team is one of the most important pieces for creating the conditions [for improvement work]. Because that allows folks to believe that they can give an opinion. And their opinion will be heard...they know that they have a space where they can voice that.

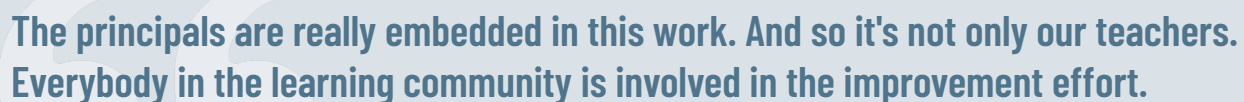
Dr. Chris Macaluso
Former Assistant Superintendent

The Education Center's core equity principles are threaded through each element of this work. Hub staff consistently prepare participants to shift power from the inside out by reflecting on their own positionality to systemic inequities and using data to consistently re-center improvement efforts on the students most marginalized by classroom practice.

Critically, the Education Center team has designed network structures that encourage collaboration and shared learning within and between teams and schools, helping participants begin to work across lines of difference. Each of the network's site-based teams includes a school leader and cross-section of middle grades staff who support students in mathematics (e.g., math teachers, specialized teachers, TAs). This composition has helped embed cross-functional participation into site-based instructional strategy development by eroding traditional school silos and hierarchies. These teams have prompted more integrated system analysis, accelerated problem-solving, and offered novel vertical teaming opportunities that strengthen the Throughline by building internal coherence across grade levels. These benefits are echoed in the collaborative structures that link school teams across the NSI (e.g., monthly cohort-based learning sessions), which help expedite progress by facilitating cross-district system analysis and information sharing.

SCHOOL LEADER

The second Throughline learning strand is situated at the school leadership level, where principals, supported by Education Center coaches, leverage their participation on school teams to better understand and build the conditions necessary for productive improvement work at their sites. The close relationships Education Center coaches foster with and between principals allow them to collaboratively grapple with common challenges related to condition-setting and other aspects of improvement. Because principals are embedded in school team inquiry work, they have the opportunity to experience firsthand how school structures and policies can promote — or impede — the psychological safety that enables productive public learning. And as school leaders build their improvement muscles, they are increasingly prepared to customize the network’s CI methodology to their school context, and, in some cases, begin embedding it into the school’s broader routines. Together, these efforts reposition principals as learning-leaders, rather than compliance-driven supervisors.



The principals are really embedded in this work. And so it's not only our teachers. Everybody in the learning community is involved in the improvement effort.

Dr. Edwin Quezada
YPS Superintendent

DISTRICT CENTRAL OFFICE

Finally, a district-level learning strand prompts district leaders to interrogate and address system-level barriers to instructional improvement via two complementary streams of activity. In the first, Education Center coaches support principal supervisors in articulating and pursuing the conditions necessary to support schools and principals in improvement work, mirroring the effort that school leaders take up in their Throughline learning strand.

The second stream includes a core team of influential district staff (i.e., the Assistant Superintendent/Executive Director of Professional Development, Executive Director of Continuous Improvement). These district staff collaborate with the Education Center hub on YPS NSI math work, helping set the strategic vision for the network, attending convenings and events, and interfacing directly with participants to troubleshoot emergent challenges. In partnership with Education Center staff, these district leaders bridge network learning to the broader central office team by communicating insights and data, as well as facilitating improvement work to shift district policy and culture so that it better supports school-level improvement activities.

The decision to integrate district staff into the hub team has been the Education Center’s key lever for capacity development and system-level transformation. Designing a network where district participation is embedded in the network’s design and decision-making structures has allowed the Education Center to ensure that network strategy is responsive to district needs and culture, model an improvement-conducive management style, influence central office mindsets and behaviors, and, over time, build trust and gain entrée into the district’s broader strategic planning conversations.

Our strategy has been to capacity build through side-by-side coaching and explicit learning moments.

And so there isn't learning that the district isn't a part of and providing feedback on. They are previewing all of the content.

They're giving us input around how it lands with the district context.

We hear that feedback, we incorporate feedback. And so the side-by-side approach is really supportive because the district knows they have a voice in the work.

— **Tracy Fray-Oliver**

Vice President, Bank Street Education Center



Hear more about how Tracy and the Bank Street Education Center approach systemic change on the [High Tech High Unboxed podcast!](#)

Why has the Throughline Stakeholder Approach worked?

While the work of transforming the YPS approach to learning and improvement is ongoing, the application of the Throughline stakeholder participation strategy has laid the groundwork for enduring system-level changes. By all accounts, the effort has already seen success in Yonkers, motivating shifts in mindset and behavior at all levels of the system, increased coherence in district activities, the development and refinement of sustainable team-based learning structures, and more productive learning relationships between district staff, school leaders, and faculty.

This progress is rooted in several strategic leadership moves. **The Education Center hub team:**

– IDENTIFIED THE RIGHT PARTNER

From the start, the Education Center team understood that sustainable system-level shifts in practice would require a long-term, intensive commitment from their district partner. In YPS, the Education Center found an ideal match — a district with: (a) a commitment to learning and transparency, (b) an interest in integrating continuous improvement principles into practice at all layers of the system, and (c) several influential stakeholders — including the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent/Executive Director of Professional Development— who were ready to champion the effort.

– DIVERSIFIES PARTICIPATION MODALITIES

Unlike traditional, top-down change models, the Throughline requires stakeholders at each layer of the YPS system to drive learning and improvement within their own domain of influence: school teams on classroom-level improvement, principals on condition-setting for site-based improvement, and district leaders on system-level condition setting and spread. This approach has necessitated that Education Center leaders be strategic, designing participation structures that allow stakeholders to toggle between leadership on the improvement initiatives they're most proximate to and consultation and collaboration on those they're further from. The Education Center hub has helped district leaders make sense of how and when stakeholders should be engaged, planning backwards from equity at scale to set a strategy that leverages each group when, where, and how their participation will make the most impact.

– LEADS HUMBLY BY HONORING DISTRICT CONTEXT

In their partnership with YPS, the Education Center team consistently positions themselves not as removed experts with all the answers, but instead as active collaborators, ready to learn and improve alongside district and school-level partners. To support this work, the Education Center has invested in cultivating a nuanced understanding of YPS district context and history. This has allowed hub leaders to tailor each element of network strategy to meet district and school staff “where they are,” amplifying system strengths (e.g., leveraging existing infrastructure to support collaborative adult learning and data-driven routines) while steadily advocating for improvements in practice (e.g., increased integration of teacher voice in decision-making structures).

Education Center coaches eschew passing judgment on extant district structures, policies, and leadership behaviors. Instead, they seek to understand by reflecting back the district's approach and asking targeted questions, in the process modeling effective learning-leadership behaviors they hope to seed in the district. Tools like the Education Center's [District-wide Instructional Initiative Framework](#) help make this improvement work feel concrete and actionable.

This relationship-oriented approach has helped the network leaders navigate the challenges inevitable to such an ambitious effort. Sustainable, systems-level change is not a short-term project, especially in a school system, like Yonkers, with a historically accountability- and compliance-oriented culture. Over time, the Education Center’s responsive approach to network design and coaching has helped earn the trust of school and district staff, some of whom were initially reluctant to engage in collaborative public learning. This trust has helped catalyze buy-in to the project, with school and district staff seeing real value in the work and advocating to sustain and scale it, even through challenging upheavals like the COVID-19 pandemic.

— ARCHITECTS STRUCTURES THAT ENABLE CO-PRODUCTION OF STRATEGY

Structurally, the Education Center has also supported YPS in adjusting staffing models to invite ground-level perspective into district strategy spaces. The network itself is designed to ensure that ground-level stakeholders, like teachers, have a real voice in the development of instructional strategy and practice.

But the Education Center partnership and formal network structure aren’t designed to exist in perpetuity, so Education Center leaders have been strategic about building sustainable structures to ensure broad stakeholder participation in improvement continues to be a touchstone of YPS strategy. The Education Center was instrumental in the district’s efforts to refine the School Support System (“SSS”), an innovative teaming structure that acts as an [andon cord](#) — a formal structure that allows anyone in the system to flag challenges and opportunities for improvement — pairing senior district staff with a group of schools so that school leaders know who to turn to with requests for learning support. Further, as the YPS NSI work has gained momentum and expanded in scope and scale, the Education Center has helped reshape the key central office roles that support the network’s improvement efforts, going so far as to financially sponsor and help onboard a district-level staff member dedicated to ongoing improvement. These changes have ensured that the district can sustain and expand the shifts in stakeholder participation motivated by the Throughline network efforts beyond the term and boundaries of the partnership.

I think our role and responsibility is often to hold up the mirror to the work – again without judgment – but more with the intent of helping [stakeholders] see what’s often hard to see when you’re swimming in the water.

— Tracy Fray-Oliver
Vice President, Bank Street Education Center



Looking Ahead

The Education Center team has mapped out a number of strategic goals for the Yonkers YPS NSI Throughline effort moving forward.

INCREASING CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE THROUGHLINE

While there is ample evidence that Throughline principles and mindsets have taken root in pockets across the district, there is still work to be done to ensure that improvement behaviors are showing up consistently from “school to school and teacher to teacher.” Similarly, though district leaders have grown tremendously in their connection to and application of the values underlying the Throughline work, a next step will be using those principles to tackle more deeply entrenched barriers to improvement — like the remnants of compliance- and accountability-driven practices in district policies and staff behaviors. Over the coming years, the Education Center team plans to experiment with interventions designed to support the district’s development in both regards.

AMPLIFYING STUDENT AND PARENT VOICE

Both the Education Center and the district have aspirations to develop more meaningful opportunities for students and parents to influence decision-making within and beyond the NSI. In the 2020-21 school year, YPS NSI school teams experimented with interventions that amplified student agency in the classroom, and in future iterations of the work, the hub hopes to find ways to extend that work to incorporate student voice into the decision-making process of the network itself. This same spirit extends to the improvement work the NSI has sparked in the broader district: central office staff have begun experimenting with structures to incorporate parent advisory group members on their ELA curriculum committee. Centering students’ and families’ experiences will be a key lever in tackling the disproportionality of Black, Latinx, and/or students experiencing poverty who are on-track for success in high school mathematics and beyond.

BUILDING THE LEADERSHIP CAPACITY OF SCHOOL TEAMS

The Education Center has invested heavily in relationship- and capacity-building work at the district level. Moving forward, they plan to extend their work to develop structures and routines that build capacity for teacher leadership and agency in decision- making spaces. Ultimately, the Education Center’s goal is to build teacher capacity such that faculty leaders are both more independently driving improvement efforts at their schools and contributing to decision-making at the district level. Over time, this site-based capacity building work will help build a sustainable leadership pipeline of talent across the system.

