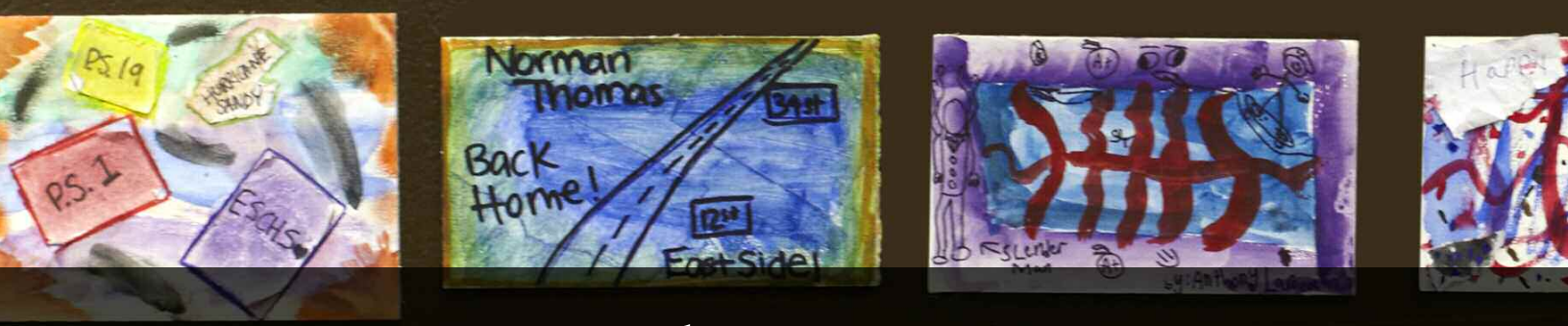




East Side Community School
New York, NY



Learning by Heart

*Five American High Schools Where
Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*

CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE

WKCD 2014



Developing Agency from Community

EAST SIDE COMMUNITY SCHOOL, NEW YORK, NY

by Kathleen Cushman, What Kids Can Do, Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

The story of East Side Community School has a distinctively generational context, spanning four decades of New York City educational change. Its forebears came from a movement of small new alternative high schools in the city during the 1970s and early 1980s, which had roots in the Civil Rights movement and support from local anti-poverty nonprofits. As those schools rethought the purpose, structure, and practice of secondary education from the perspective of equity, a national conversation urging high school reform also built momentum, fueled by a series of high-profile reports.¹

In East Harlem in 1984, Deborah Meier founded a small public high school whose low-income Black and Latino students demonstrated through their accomplishments the power of combining academic, social, and emotional supports in a democratic learning community. It served as inspiration to like-minded educators, and in New York City (despite a revolving-door series of school chancellors) a second wave of new small schools began to rise. In 1992, after long experience at Central Park East Secondary School, Jill Herman opened East Side Community School. It was one of 60 more begun that year; the city's Board of Education was developing a national reputation for its "go small" strategy.

Two decades later, public education in New York City has undergone wrenching swings of the pendulum in its governance, leadership, structure, and approach to school improvement. Even so, twelve years of mayoral control of the district brought yet a third wave of small public high schools of choice and considerable research on their performance. In the aggregate, the data show their marked positive effects on the graduation rates of low-income students of color, special education students, and English language learners. And the 25 most effective of these 136 schools, East Side Community School among them, attribute their success to their combination of academic rigor and personal relationships with students.²

Above all, East Side is cherished for its bedrock commitment to community. In the tradition of John Dewey, East Side regards community as the prime mover of education in a democracy, and builds the habits of citizenship on mutually respectful relationships between family, staff, students, and community. It has kept its eyes on the core values it prizes: knowing all its diverse students well, and developing their agency equally in the social, emotional, and academic spheres.



ANDREW BEARDSWORTH



ANDREW BEARDSWORTH



ANDREW REED WELLEN

The school has a key partner in the nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves, whose curriculum challenges learners to wrestle with ethical dilemmas in history and their own lives, to reflect on choices made and roads not taken, and to choose to participate in positive ways in the future. The behavioral norms of East Side adults and youth reflect those same values, with an emphasis on restoring harm done to others in the community. A portfolio assessment system brings the same community accountability to students' public demonstration of their academic achievement. And in every possible way, the school integrates the vibrant resources of the city's five boroughs into its programs and sends students into the city to learn from their community.

"Developing Agency from Community" presents a snapshot of East Side Community School in May of 2013, 21 years after the school began. The climate of the district has changed dramatically, and the city's Lower East Side as well. But the student profile here is as diverse as ever (57 percent Hispanic, 23 percent Black, 10 percent White, 8 percent Asian, 2 percent Pacific Islander, and 26 percent special education) and the staff remains exceptionally stable. As for graduates, the senior class inscription outside the school office reflects the effects they feel from their high school education: "You can take us out of East Side, but you can't take East Side out of us."

This is the fourth of five WKCD case studies produced by WKCD's research arm, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice, that documents the transformative power of social and emotional learning and its connections to deeper learning in a diverse collection of U.S. secondary schools. The series, *Learning by Heart*, was produced by WKCD for the NoVo Foundation and is aimed at the broadest audience possible: policymakers, practitioners, parents, media, and, as always, students.

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Cover photograph: Andrew Beardsworth

To cite: Kathleen Cushman, “Developing Agency from Community, East Side Community School, New York, NY.” *Learning by Heart: Five American High Schools Where Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*. Providence, Rhode Island: What Kids Can Do, 2013.

Other schools in the Learning by Heart series:

Fenger High School, Chicago, IL; Oakland International High School, Oakland, CA; Quest Early College High School, Humble, TX; Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA

See howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html

I. Introduction: Displacement and Return

School had only been in session for eleven days on the bright September morning in 2012 when Mark Federman, the principal of East Side Community School, got the call from a New York City Department of Education official: Get everyone out of your building, and get them out fast.

An alert custodian had noticed that the brick facade of the 90-year-old five-story school building in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood was pulling away from its steel structure and threatening collapse. Without a moment to prepare, Mr. Federman and his staff had to evacuate their 650 students in grades 6 through 12, sending them to makeshift shared quarters in widely separated neighborhoods.

One year later, that difficult five-month exile had become the stuff of legend in this close-knit school community, which reflects the diverse population of its historically immigrant neighborhood.

The high school served its displacement time in “a school of permanent metal detectors,” recalled Joanna Dolgin, who teaches eleventh-grade English. Walking into its windowless spaces, “the students had to take off their belts, their shoes, their hair pins, just to come to school. They had to pay a dollar to store their cell phones in a truck. The security guards often were angry with them for not being fast enough.”

Students sharply felt the contrast with East Side, where “every casual hallway interaction reminds our kids that they're part of a community, surrounded by adults who support and care about them,” Ms. Dolgin said. Even the relocated teachers felt isolated and unmoored, she added: “It really reminded me that even the work I do in my classroom is possible because of this larger community that we've created.”

When the scattered groups finally returned to their building, everyone seemed to second that emotion. “You can take us out of East Side,” reads the message stenciled by the graduating class of 2013 on the wall outside the school's main office, “but you can't take East Side out of us.”

Typically of the school, its community came together to reflect on and express their experiences. In a series of art workshops, 800 of its members—students, teachers, administrators, parents, counselors, paraprofessionals, custodians, kitchen workers, security officers—each contributed a piece to a mosaic of work that filled the school's large gallery. Dark images of prison bars yielded to colors of warmth and light, and certain words and phrases recurred like a refrain: “Home.” “Love.” “We matter here.”

“This is where it all comes together,” said Leigh Klonsky, who conceived and facilitated the project with her fellow art teacher, Desiree Borrero. “It affirms everybody's role here as part of our community.”

Above all, this oft-told tale of displacement and return evokes the unwavering foundation of committed community that East Side laid at its 1992 beginning and on which it has since built steadily. Held together by the mortar of mutual respect, the community culture in “this crumbling building”—as one veteran teacher laughingly concluded—“exudes love and care and academic excellence and creativity. It's really hard to be in this space and not get caught up in the fervor of positivity.”

II. A Learning Identity, a Learner’s Agency

Why do more girls apply to college than boys? Should the school cafeteria supply flavored milk despite the empty calories it hold? Does telling someone to “man up” constitute offensive stereotyping? Can the arts be used to oppress, not just to express? Can a military campaign justify violence against civilians?

From their first day at East Side, students learn to have hard conversations about issues that have no easy answers. Starting with matters that directly connect to their lives, they examine the effects of personal choices in both the private and the public sphere: the flavored milk, the college gender gap, the military use of drones.

The school’s longstanding partnership with the nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves has helped teachers here to scaffold those skills of inquiry. The Facing History framework, rooted in historical instances of inequity and injustice, focuses on the very questions of belonging, identity, and agency that research suggests most affect the academic engagement and the social and emotional resiliency of adolescent learners.³



Audio
Undermining stereotypes through study (1:41)



Introduced first in high school social studies courses at East Side, the approach now resonates throughout the school, as teachers and students engage with academic work and with each other. Danny Lora, who teaches history to ninth graders, started the year with a unit about identity and culture. “Students themselves spoke about moments when they were labeled, moments when they felt like outcasts, when they felt like they didn’t belong,” he said. “And then it came full circle to the history that we’re studying.”

The confidence and agency of young people also grows as they take an active part in the world of scholarship. Across the curriculum, they get continual practice in “how to talk to each other, how to listen, how to be respectful, how to draw on their own lives and analyze the world around them,” said longtime teacher Joanna Dolgin. Yet rather than “just sit here and talk about feelings,” she emphasized, students must support their positions, both in speaking and in writing. “They need to read complex and difficult texts and make sense of them and not give up.”

“It all connects to belonging—here, and in the world, period,” said a student named Morufat. In spring of her senior year, she was reflecting on how East Side had “opened my eyes to a lot of things: stereotypes that go around, and things in the world that I would’ve never learned”:

What it means to be you. Like some people might see you and think, “Oh, you’re this and that.” And you’re like, “No. Actually I’m this and that.” But they’re like, “But you don’t look like that.” You’re like, “But it’s what I want to identify myself with. Therefore I am it.”

The Facing History framework also fosters the understanding that different choices can result in different outcomes. As students like Morufat think and talk about inclusion and exclusion, obedience and resistance, they often recognize similar patterns in their own lives and choose to act in new ways.

“We’re all capable of prejudging somebody based on their skin color, their gender, whatever,” said Keturah, a twelfth grader who described her younger self as “the class clown always getting kicked out of class for making some joke.” Her tenth-grade Facing History class made her rethink her biases and also her behavior, she reflected. “You really get to see how society does have an effect on you.”

“There’s this long-term ripple effect that happens with students, I think,” said Yolanda Betances, who teaches that class. “It’s a sense of building community, working as a community, helping students to consider topics from other people’s perspectives, even in advisory. It’s about values, it’s about character-developing, it’s about them thinking about how they make decisions, not only in the now but later on in life.”

Inquiry as the lever

The adolescent years are ideal for students to train their minds on matters with social resonance, research has found. As they explore new perspectives, analyze evidence, and come to their own decisions, adolescent learners are developing not just academic skills but also a sense of who they are and who they want to become—the hard work of identity formation that infuses teenage development.⁴

When young people start to make personal choices based on such inquiry as well, they are building the sense of agency so crucial to an adolescent’s development. In Facing History’s terms, they begin to act as “upstanders” rather than “bystanders”—shaping their own lives and affecting the lives of others. As a student named Joselyn put it, “Everything that we learn here at East Side eventually comes to help us out in the future of ourselves and in the future generations that look up to us.”

By senior year, for example, Keturah was applying her insights about prejudice in a research paper on the sociology of education that would be part of her graduation portfolio. The U.S. education system, she argued, generally “limits the access to opportunity and emulates a criminal and prisoner atmosphere” for



Audio Slideshow
Opening Hearts,
Changing Minds
(2:47)



poor and minority students. She portrayed her own school, in contrast, as “a place of opportunity” that supports students in developing both identity and agency as they discuss “issues that have affected the world such as slavery, civil rights, [and] apartheid as well as issues that are currently affecting the world such as abortion, gun control, and women’s rights.”

A classmate, Najakene, called on postcolonial theory in writing a paper that analyzed identity, subjectivity, and power in casual language usage. “Throughout the day I listen to people of color call each other ‘my n***a,’” she wrote. “This N word seems to be passed around a lot with no emotion,” she continued, conjecturing that it conveyed the speaker’s attitude, “No, you don’t have power to put us down.” But because the term’s original intention was “to downgrade people like myself,” Najakene concluded, “the way to resist oppression is to stop using the word.”

Considerable scaffolding throughout the high school years goes into the scholarship that students display in such work. With her eleventh graders, for example, Joanna Dolgin uses texts like the graphic novel *Persepolis* to explore the power of societal norms. In one assignment “we had to break a norm,” a student named Edwin said. “You know how on public transportation, if it’s empty you don’t sit next to somebody? Well, I tried to sit next to somebody, and you could definitely tell that they were frustrated. But we also looked at why people *don’t* get frustrated if the bus is packed and you sit next to them.”

As students grow more aware of how social norms work, they also develop a sense of agency in choosing whether to uphold or ignore them. “I realized that I actually go along with social norms sometimes, even though I don’t notice it,” Ashley said. (She gave “Don’t snitch” as an example.) But even norms that are common elsewhere frequently shift at East Side. “It’s the norm *not* to cheat,” Ashley noted. “Because the school expects better from its students.”

Around the lab stations in Joseph Vincente’s chemistry class, tenth graders clustered to test the quality of water from the nearby East River. After they grasped the concepts underlying treatment of contaminated water, “we’ll look at things from an environmental, economic, social equity standpoint,” their teacher explained. “The water treatment plant on 14th Street, how is that different and similar to this? How would you do it in a poorer community that doesn’t have access to clean water already?” To demonstrate their learning, students would create short video public service announcements on different water quality issues and present them to East Side sixth graders. If someday students could “go to the voting booth and make smart decisions, based on science,” Vincente said, his class would have met its key goal.

A culture of reading

East Side’s community-wide commitment to building a culture of reading provides the rock-solid foundation on which such ambitious work takes place. It began in the early 2000s, principal Mark Federman recalled,⁵ when he recognized that “most students would not—and many could not—read the texts in front of them.” Students clearly viewed reading as a chore, not as a pleasure or even a resource.

Mr. Federman and his faculty set out to transform that attitude using three key strategies:

1. They would give all students easy access to books they wanted to, and could, read.
2. They would ensure uninterrupted, uncompromised time to read those books independently and at home.
3. They would coach and model how to choose books, plan for reading, and practice the habits powerful readers use when they interact with text.

Ten years later, East Side Community School has the lively and inviting aspect of a small-town book fair. Not just the well-stocked school library but every English language arts classroom bursts with books at every reading level, in milk crates labeled “Teen Fiction” or “Horror” or “Sports.” Placards on classroom doors advertise what the teacher inside is reading for pleasure, and teachers have funds to replenish their classroom libraries with books they think would appeal to particular students. Nothing empowers a young reader more, Mr. Federman believes, than having an adult walk up with a book and say, “I saw this book, thought of you, and bought it for my library so you could read it.” Kids stop by Mr. Federman’s office to browse his own handpicked library of 2,000 titles and they vie to participate in his Principal’s Book Club discussions (complete with pizza).

The freedom to choose what they read builds both value and confidence for students like Christian, who said he previously had “viewed reading as a punishment.” When teachers assigned more difficult texts, he said, “because I’ve read all these other books, I think in my mind that I’m capable of finishing this book.” Even his very reluctant peers eventually got on board, he observed. “There’s so many different people in the school reading, and everybody’s pressuring them, ‘Oh read this book, read this book, this is interesting, read that.’”

The East Side schedule sets aside 20 to 30 minutes for uninterrupted, non-negotiable independent reading by students and teachers at the beginning of all English classes—sufficient quiet time, as Mr. Federman said, “to fall in love with reading and get lost in books.” Another hour of nightly independent reading is also expected (and documented). Teachers have regular reading conferences with individual students, helping them make independent reading choices that not only suit their interests but also their needs. And students maintain a “goal list” of books they want to read, in order of increasing difficulty. Because they are stretching for something they desire, Mr. Federman says, they are much more likely to reach it.

The robust community of reading that now permeates East Side’s school culture was built on a fundamentally social and emotional platform. Its teachers developed their strategies together as a community of practice, sharing their own reading experiences as well as their ideas for helping students read better. They had the time and support to do so, including funds for books, an expert literacy coach, and professional development opportunities. The change itself was non-negotiable—East Side students were going to become independent readers—but teachers made it happen together in their own chosen, individual, negotiated ways, just as their students would later begin to do. And the academic results were dramatic: standardized reading assessments showed students’ skills leaping ahead at a rate two to three times that of their peers nationwide.⁶



Audio Slideshow
Building a Schoolwide
Culture of Reading
(4:04)



Equally important, Mr. Federman noted, independent reading provides support to adolescents who might otherwise struggle in isolation with social and emotional issues such as homophobia, bullying, sexual relationships, or abuse. The many excellent young-adult books on such difficult topics make it far easier to open thoughtful youth-adult conversations on such topics—“bibliotherapy,” as he calls it.

“Instead of a punishment, now I view it as an escape in a way,” Christian affirmed. “If anything is going wrong, if I have any problems, if I feel down, if I pick up a book and I start to read, those minutes are a whole ‘nother world. It helps me cope with the things that I’m coping with.”

Social and emotional connections

Teachers also attune their curriculum planning to the ongoing social and emotional development of their students. For example, when Kathleen Schechter’s eighth graders acted out “Twelve Angry Men” in class, they enjoyed comparing the personalities of different jurors to those of their classmates. “It reminds me of fights with my friends, when we’re trying to decide something,” said Angelina.

In fact, Ms. Schechter had chosen the play with the goal of opening minds. “A lot of these students are young men and women of color,” she noted. “Not only are people going to stereotype them, but they stereotype one another.” Taken up earlier in the year, she said, the same literary text might have daunted her students with its sophisticated themes and vocabulary. “But by the spring they’re more like high school students, more aware of what’s going on in their neighborhoods and the world around them. I like them to know their rights.”

When students have trouble engaging with an academic challenge, said Yolanda Betances, it’s even more important to check in with what’s going on with them. “They love doing stuff where it’s more active and expressive, maybe even creative,” she noted. But when distractions sap a student’s ability to focus on a difficult text, “we’re

gonna notice you for sure.” She will sit with the student for whatever time it takes (“Can you read that over again? What do you think that says?”) in order to “really check if they understood what they just read.”



Audio
Coaching the Struggling Student (1:28)



“Basically, they’re treating us like family to them, like you wanna be treated,” said a student named Johnnie. “I don’t feel like I’m lower than the adults, I feel like I’m treated the same way as they are.” That sense of belonging has affected his willingness to engage in academic work even when it takes a lot of effort. “You’re showing that you wanna be on that team,” he said. “You wanna help everybody else succeed, and you wanna succeed with them.”

Keturah had always found science difficult, but in senior year the desire to work alongside her peers won out over her reluctance. “I’ve learned the discipline from . . . this girl right here,” she said, pointing to her best friend, Morufat. “And when I became friends with her, all my other friends pushed me to be more.”

Visibly, the constancy of teacher support empowers and amplifies this dynamic among East Side Community’s youth. “We never quit on a student,” Jen McLaughlin declared:

That is unshakable, and inarguably a benefit to everyone in this community. Even the kids that aren’t struggling and love being here and everything’s going great for them, they see. They notice what happens with their classmates who maybe don’t have things as easily as they do. And they all pull together and they all help each other. They all wanna cross the finish line together. And it’s amazing. It’s extraordinary what happens.

Taking creative expression seriously

Although young people experience continual pressure to think, speak, and write well, “it’s very hard and different to think and express yourself visually,” said Leigh Klonsky, who teaches digital arts and media. Moreover, she emphasized, “Understanding your world in a visual way completely affects your feeling of self-worth and confidence as a whole person.”

For both these reasons, East Side regards creative expression as part of its core curriculum, with two full-time visual art teachers and a number of part-time instructors in dance, music, and other arts. By enlisting teaching artists from the community, the East Side schedule manages to offer elective choices including not just visual arts and media but also dance, cooking, creative writing, beat making and beat rhyming, rock band, choir, and chess.

Many students described the expressive arts as the space where they felt most free to be themselves. In the school auditorium, a student dancer took a moment to tell why she chose to fulfill her physical education credit through dance. “Dancing is making a story with your body, expressing yourself in different ways,” she said. “You can’t do that in all your classes.”

Art teacher and coordinator Desiree Borrero agreed that “the arts give an emotional outlet to kids.” Although students do write in their daily art journals, they mainly focus on practicing artistic techniques and expression. “Things come up visually that verbally you’re not able to communicate,” Ms. Borrero said, “and so they have not been noticed in other classes.” One young painter in emotional distress “was only coming into school to



Audio
Art Opens Minds to Possibilities (2:05)



make sure he got to art class,” she recalled. That same young man now attends a highly regarded New York City college of art, on full scholarship.

In numerous ways, making art also supports social development. Alex, a ninth-grade boy, described honing his collaborative skills in his class in rock music. “We work together as a team. When we do things, we have to have a close bond with each other—eye contact, communication—so that we won’t mess up. When we do the songs, we kind of hop it up so that everyone can be in tune with us as well, and we all help each other with that.”

Building intellectual concepts and academic habits

Whatever the domain in which East Side students are working, they must practice developing their own ideas, considering those of others, and revising their thinking with the benefit of critique. “We want them to see that their efforts are increasing their intellectual ability and competence,” said Ben Wides, who teaches history to twelfth graders. “So we’re very deliberate about teaching skills that will help students work more independently.”

For written work, students in every grade must read, annotate, pull out evidence that supports different views, and consider alternative arguments. “They start to anticipate that,” Mr. Wides noted. “And I think it does increase their confidence. They have a sense that, you know, ‘I’m learning to do pretty sophisticated stuff.’”

Intellectual concepts as well as academic habits spiral through the curriculum, teachers noted. For example, after Mr. Wides introduces American exceptionalism, “it starts coming up over and over again,” he said. By the second semester, students notice the concept when they come across examples of it outside of school. One student recently approached Mr. Wides to propose a research paper linking American exceptionalism with public opinion during the Vietnam War. “When I see them take a concept into another area like that, I make a big deal about it,” the teacher said with satisfaction. “Like, ‘Yeah! You got it!’”

No matter what the subject, coaching the skills of respectful argument has top priority in East Side classrooms. “You have to be confident that you won’t be criticized for your opinion,” said Shaquana, crediting her literature teacher, Kim Kelly, for creating “a safe place” for disagreement. “She doesn’t allow people to call people’s ideas stupid or completely disregard your opinion.” On the other side, listening to critique without getting defensive also takes practice, she noted. “You have to understand that it’s your opinion that they’re attacking, not you.”



Audio Slideshow
Making Argument Safe (2:05)



“But we’ve also learned how to defend,” her classmate Gabriela put in. “Because it’s not enough to just state your opinion—we also have to provide evidence. Where do you see that happening? At what point in the book did your opinion change and make you stand on where you stand right now?” That habit of mind serves her well, she added. “You move what you learn from this class to other classes.”

Statements like this make clear that what they are learning at school actually matters to Gabriela and her peers. Repeatedly East Side students spoke of their feeling of belonging and of their belief that success was within their control. To hear them talk, intellectual and personal agency both arise from their experience at East Side Community, as the quest for personal identity moves them closer to an academic identity

III. Broadening Horizons Outside of Class

Every Tuesday after school, science teacher Erica Ring meets with her Environmental Committee, a rotating group of some 20 East Side students in grades 6 through 12 who work on the school's recycling and energy reduction efforts and also manage a large garden on school grounds. On one early spring day, a cluster of youth was planning what species to plant in order to draw hummingbirds to the garden.

"I love these weeks," Ms. Ring said, "because these are the times when I say the least. The students have totally taken over." The project not only builds students' organizational skills, she noted, but also requires enough physical effort to warrant a P.E. credit. "I've never seen them work as hard," she noted. "Turning a load of compost takes about 45 minutes of full-out sweat."

Ms. Ring looks continually for grants that can keep students gardening during the summer months. "It takes so long to establish a garden, but every time we leave it takes ten steps back," she said. She envisions the garden developing into a year-round service project, complete with interns, a gardening class, and the opportunity for students to earn certificates as "junior master gardeners."

Whenever adults at East Side Community School talk about students, they sound such notes of commitment and aspiration. Like parents who seek every advantage for their children, they are always looking to create substantive and lasting learning from what most excites their young. Since all academic tasks at East Side are based on the school's essential habits of mind—viewpoint, evidence, relevance, and connection—personalizing the curriculum does not risk watering it down.

In practice, that means that East Side adults go all out to know what makes students tick—even those who appear alienated from academic pursuits. "Why do I need to learn how to figure out the area below a parabola?" said a twelfth grader called L.J., who plans a career in music and had assembled a small music studio at home. "I could work all night on a song, but I can't do that with schoolwork." Yet when his precalculus class learned about sine waves, L.J.'s music experiences helped him understand its relevance immediately. And he was using his technical knowledge to assist other students in a beat-rhyming class led by a teacher he admired. "We talk about life, philosophy, and stuff," he said. "So I come to the class, show support, talk about things."

The push and the balance

Extracurricular activities are as important as classes here—for balance, for academic enrichment, and because they give students chances to develop their identities and relationships. A group of girls and two women teachers began a lunch club called Sisterhood to explore the pressures of being female in a culture filled with stereotypes. Over salad and soup one day, they first analyzed a series of highly sexualized media advertisements, then moved on to a lively discussion of the merits of East Side's dress code.

Jen McLaughlin worried aloud about an English language learner who was driving himself hard academically while avoiding clubs or other activities. "I want to try and find something for him to do in the school to get him more hooked in to the school community," she said. "I want him to feel like he really fits and belongs here, too."

Students, too, see their horizons widen with such support. Morufat, who worked relentlessly for high grades, said that her ninth-grade English teacher, Dipa Shah, first encouraged her to create a healthier balance by

joining student government. “I’m not an athlete, I’m not a dancer,” she said, but she found that group exciting and by senior year served as its president. “Outside of school work, you have something else to look towards,” she said with satisfaction.



Audio
The Push
and the Balance
(1:28)



When Julie was in seventh grade at East Side, a teacher recommended a math enrichment activity after school. Now a senior, she plans to study electrical engineering in college. “I could have gone another path,” she said. “But the teachers here actually help you and are involved in your life as well. I was supported throughout all my years here, and I decided to keep moving forward and pursue my goals.”

A sixth grader named Kai had recently learned chess, offered here as both an elective and a club. “I feel so free when I’m playing chess,” she said, across the table from her chess partner in a small room filled with other pairs intent on their play. “Because nobody can tell me where to move or what to do. And I get better by doing tactics. It just makes me feel good. It’s what I’m good at.”

East Side adults continually scan the landscape for the enrichment opportunities that more privileged students often take for granted. Leigh Klonsky has helped many of her art students enroll in outside classes at New York University and the Fashion Institute of Technology. With her colleague Desiree Borrero, she also helps organize annual group trips abroad for students who otherwise might never leave the city.

Ms. Borrero recalled a girl who—after hundreds of hours spent preparing for their first trip to Europe—decided to back out. “They had done 180 hours of service, including fundraising. They took after-school art courses and language classes. We even went out and tried different foods that they’d be eating,” she said. “Most of the kids had never left New York City, ever. And I think she started getting scared.” A few weeks later, looking out over the hills of Assisi, that same student told her, “This is why you didn’t let me quit.” In four years of college, the teacher added with pride, “she has now gone to three different countries, and helped build communities as well. She wrote me, ‘When this all started, I never knew that traveling would be part of my life like this.’”

Stretch builds confidence

Every day in advisory, students and advisers comb through a bulletin from the counseling office that lists new opportunities. “Our responsibility is to help make sure that they’re doing something productive over the summer, and that they’re involved in afterschool activities that match their passions and their needs,” said Carla Gonzalez, the assistant principal for middle school.

“Whatever it takes,” agreed the high school assistant principal, Tom Mullen. “When you know students well, you can start tailoring programs that will meet their needs and tap their interests.” Wherever he goes and whomever he meets, Mr. Mullen keeps a sharp eye out for potential community partners and patches together funding to bring them in to East Side. The many thriving student activities that have resulted include a skateboarding program, several bands that practice in the school basement, a choir, two hip hop groups, a dance group, a weekend photography program, a bicycling group that takes on a 100-kilometer challenge, and a rock-climbing and mentorship program at a Brooklyn gym.

“It’s never just the kid you think it’s gonna be for,” he mused. “But if you provide things for kids who wanna be a little different, it helps other kids try to be different. Before you know it, others are saying ‘Hey, I’d like to try that.’ And then it takes off from there. Things like rock climbing, bike riding—you don’t have to be a traditional athlete; anyone can do it once you start. And you can get into some really good shape.”



Audio Slideshow
Finding the Future
(3:35)



Even better, a contagious confidence develops when young people stretch for something they once regarded as beyond their reach, said Mr. Mullen:

All these different programs, the reason why you do them is because you think you’re worth something. Why get out there and ride a metric century on your bike if you’re not worth anything? Why get up there and write your own rhymes if you’re not worth something? Once the students try these things and they experiment with different art forms and athletic interests and things that they never thought they would do—and they do them—they feel good about themselves. They realize, “You know what? I can do things.” That leads to confidence in the classroom. And it pays off.

IV. Creating Accountability Through Community

At least once a week, every East Side grade-level teaching team sits down with the principal or an assistant principal for a full period of “kid talk.” That regular meeting serves not just “to make sure no kids fall through the cracks,” said English teacher Joanna Dolgin, “but even more to make sure that all kids are getting exactly what they need.”

In the fall, for example, her grade 12 team spent a lot of time thinking about “kids who were doing fine but could be doing better,” Ms. Dolgin said. “Who is maybe slacking? What could we do to get them excited? What push do they need?” By spring, the team was keeping a close eye on seniors who still needed to revise their all-important performance based assessment tasks to meet school standards. Whatever the plan to engage an adolescent in a challenge, it emphasizes the positive: a private student-teacher conversation to plan next steps, a call to parents from the principal reporting how much better things are going.

This community accountability for the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing of youth pervades the East Side culture. The principal’s “less is more” decision to prioritize small class size instead of a wider curriculum has allowed teachers to know students better, observed history teacher Yolanda Betances. In what she called their “make-or-break year” academically, her tenth graders were often distracted by social matters. Individual attention was “key to making them feel a sense of belonging and also feel connected to the class and the content,” she said. “Here we’re gonna notice you for sure.”

East Side’s membership in the New York Performance Standards Consortium shows its community accountability on an even larger scale. Since 1997, a waiver from the New York Department of Education has granted some 28 Consortium schools the right to substitute demanding performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs) for all but one of the exams required by the state’s Board of Regents for high school graduation. (Students must still take the English Language Arts exam.) Created by teachers and rooted in project-based curriculum, these tasks include an analytic essay, a social studies research paper, a science experiment, and an applied mathematics problem (all with both written and oral components). Research data on Consortium schools

consistently show that their primarily low-income and minority students thrive under the system, with far better outcomes in graduation rates and far fewer disciplinary issues than their peers from other New York City public schools. In college acceptance and persistence as well, they outstrip national averages.⁷

Forming the ties that bind

“For me, it’s those small things, either us opening up to the teachers or the teachers opening up to us, that really make a huge difference,” remarked a student named Bryan. “Like calling a teacher by their first name. I think we form more of a stronger bond that way. And they’re willing to talk about their lives and open up to students.”

Whether the subject is relationships or planning for college, the advisory group takes the lead in building that kind of trust during a student’s years at East Side. Meeting briefly each morning and twice weekly for a longer period, each group of twelve to fifteen students stays with an adult adviser for a year, then reconfigures.



The Roles and Responsibilities of Advisers at East Side (PDF)



Advisers have considerable leeway, but all follow a common framework emphasizing development in five areas: work habits, mutual respect, health and healthy relationships, the college path, and connections between advisers and their advisees. In addition, the adviser acts as point person for communicating with family, monitoring attendance and academic performance and progress. The adviser’s role explicitly includes connecting students with extracurricular opportunities and helping them make a productive plan for the summer.

Teachers on a grade-level team often plan together for advisory curriculum and activities. “We look at the calendar for the year, and decide on core things that we as a team are going to do,” said Ms. Betances, whose tenth graders were about to use advisory time to collect samples from city waterways for use in their chemistry portfolio project. Eighth-grade advisers collaborate to develop positive work habits in a series of targeted workshops such as “What’s Happening with Your Book Bag?” (on staying organized).

Starting as early as sixth grade, East Side advisories visit college campuses to increase awareness of what opportunities lie ahead. Research shows that students talk and listen more to their teachers about post-secondary planning than they do to counseling staff,⁸ and advisers keep up that conversation from middle through high school. A key partnership with College Bound Initiative (CBI) provides a full-time college counselor in the school, supports college trips, and helps with every aspect of the college process. And College Access: Research and Action (CARA NYC) provides support via an inquiry-based multi-year curriculum that helps students map the college landscape.



Audio Adviser As Coach (1:41)



The most important role of adviser, said teacher Jen McLaughlin, involves “a way of being”: support and advocacy from an adult who keeps a close eye on the “temperature” of advisees as well as their interests, needs, and growing ability to plan and regulate their own lives. “It’s a way of really walking through the entire educational and socio-emotional experience with every child,” she reflected. “So I plan lessons and we do activities, but I’m the first person they see every morning [and] that bond is really created. We’re like a tight little family—and that’s not unique to my advisory.”

Amber Joseph, a learning specialist who supports English and social studies classes, started her eighth-grade advisees' year with a project exploring their own identities. As they looked ahead to the high school transition, it helped allay their anxiety about what peers thought of them, she said:

They made two boxes: what you think about yourself, and what you think other people think about you. When we discussed it, they realized that a lot of what they think about themselves is totally different than what other kids think about them. And it's actually positive. Like kids were writing, "I think other people think I'm shy" or "Other people think I don't have a lot to say." And other students were like, "What?! You talk all the time!" So it's just for them to think about perception. And a good exercise, too, for teachers—'cause we do that with them, too.



Healthy Relationships Advisory Unit (PDF)



In the spring, as many in her group were dealing with their first relationships, Ms. Joseph asked them to brainstorm what makes a relationship “good” or “healthy.” Again she did the exercise along with them, sharing some of her own expectations and boundaries regarding her mother, her best friend, and her roommate. “Why might you have different expectations depending on the people?” she asked her students. “Are there any expectations that all your relationships have in common?”

The adviser takes a lead role in drawing families into their children’s lives at school.

Five times yearly parents and guardians join in a three-way conference with student and adviser to review progress and revisit goals. Advisers use email and text messaging to keep families in the loop about out-of-school opportunities as well. “There’s always someone who’s willing to speak with my parents in Spanish and take their time to explain things,” said Bryan, in twelfth grade. That sends a huge message to my parents.” Josh, who divides his home life between parents, said simply, “This is somewhere that my family feels comfortable . . . a really nice environment that you always wanna come back to.”

In all five strands of the advisory curriculum, “the kids know that there’s somewhere for them to be able to express their feelings,” said middle school Assistant Principal Carla Gonzalez.

We’re teaching them how to advocate for themselves, not only in healthy relationships but also in their work habits. We’re letting them know that they have a voice within the community—that if you speak up, somebody will help you, advocate for you. It really makes a difference in how they’re carrying themselves throughout life in our school—in terms of self-esteem, respect for themselves, and knowing what’s something that they have a right to.

Diffusing tensions through “100 percent respect”

The mutual understanding developed in advisory provides the bedrock for the overarching East Side behavior norm known as “100 percent respect.” In some schools that might merely be a slogan, but here it guides an active commitment to trust, openness, and mutual support among youth and adults in the common enterprise of learning. Its resonance with the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum helps ground the norm in a larger narrative of injustice and inequity. And its use of “restorative practices” (such as public apologies for harm done to others) lends structure to enacting fairness and justice in a wide range of behavioral situations.

The positive emphasis of “100 percent respect” sets a tone that students particularly appreciate. Bryan pointed to the open-campus lunch policy as an example. “There’re so many distractions out there!” he exclaimed. “I can go bowling, go to the pier, do anything pretty much during lunch.” Yet “since the school has built such a stable environment,” he said, “we trust ourselves to come back to school. We’re willing to do whatever it is that we have to do.”

The same could be said of the school’s chief Dean of Students, Luis Rosado, a big man who projects a calm assurance that young people matter here. He is part of a robust team: as well as a school psychologist, at both the middle and high school level East Side has an assistant dean, a guidance counselor, and a social worker, along with graduate interns in social work from a nearby university who volunteer several days a week.

For all that, “the teachers are definitely our first line,” Mr. Rosado said. “They don’t just say, ‘This is a problem kid. I want him out.’ They will work with the student. They’ll usually identify things before it blows up, and that’s important.” In formal and informal ways, he added, “we try to give the students the opportunity to speak.”

A lot of these kids, they have emotional concerns that would stop them from coming to school if they didn’t have that opportunity to vent. It’s important that they know they can rely on everyone they see. So any educator in the building has multiple hats that we fit—nurse, counselor, teacher, mentor, coach. Whatever the kid needs, we try to provide it to them.

“We’re huge on being preventive,” agreed Chris Osorio, assistant dean for the middle school as well as its basketball coach. “We tell the kids it’s a lot easier to sit down and speak one-on-one than it is to try to confront a teacher in front of a classroom. That’s never gonna work for you—and the same way with us.”

Joe Hill, assistant dean for the high school, has spent more than a decade at East Side and now also serves as assistant to the principal. “See, when you say ‘trouble,’ it could be both positive and negative, in a good way or a bad way,” he said, with a laugh. Behavior incidents provide “a good teaching moment, for the child and yourself,” he explained. “Let them know that you can grow from this. You can learn from this. Reflect on it and, you know, if it happens again, we’ll ante up a little bit. But mistakes are gonna be made as you grow.”



Audio Slideshow
Fairness and Respect
(4:14)



For Diamond, who had experienced her fair share of conflict with peers, that attitude has a calming effect. “Since I came here, I get in less trouble,” she said. “Most teachers treat us like their own children. They’re coming from their heart saying how they feel and what they want you to do to be a better person.”

In fact, that East Side vision of its very diverse community practicing “100 percent respect” resonates deeply with the principles of Facing History and Ourselves, in the classroom and beyond. Matthew Guldin, the former dean of students who initiated the campaign in 2005, saw it as a fundamental shift in school culture that would take root over years of concentrated effort. In a democratic process, groups of teachers, staff, and students first identified behaviors that signaled the respect they hoped to receive. Then they agreed on routines and activities—such as mediation and the public apology—by which anyone at the school would acknowledge harm done to others and make appropriate amends, without humiliation.⁹

“When the teachers do it, it’s simple and it’s easy,” Mr. Rosado explained, and students learn by example:

If it ends up being their turn, they know not to make a big deal out of it. The teacher would say, you know, “I made a mistake ’cause I threatened everybody with detention when it was only a few people who were out of line.” And the kids’ll be like, “Oh.” And then the teacher’ll move on: “My mistake. I apologize. I shouldn’t have spoken that way.” . . . It’s important for them to see that.

If a student has great anxiety about speaking in front of others, a letter of apology and a private conversation may suffice. But over time, students learn to express their regret publicly to the group, Mr. Osorio said:

And it’s something sincere and genuine like, “I was completely wrong on Monday when I walked in 20 minutes late. It was inappropriate of me. I shouldn’t have done that. And then when I came in, I definitely disrupted the lesson. Interrupted your education. I let you guys down. I let the teachers down. And I understand what I did and I’m gonna do my best to correct it.” Something to that effect, where they take ownership over it.

Many East Side high school students have come up through its middle school, and over the years they absorb the attitude that “we’re in this together,” Mr. Rosado said. “We’re family—not just the language of it, but the actual meaning of it. You know that people are gonna be fair with you, people will actually treat you with respect.” Students realize that it’s not a one-way street, he added; they are “expected to accept responsibility, but the people in the building model it, and it’s important.”

Making learning public

Not just in behavior norms but also in the academic realm, accountability at East Side marries with a deep sense of community. At the end of every semester, when students in most New York City high schools are taking the state Regents exams, their East Side peers instead present and defend their work at “roundtables” for teachers and outside evaluators. In his welcome memo to guests, principal Mark Federman describes the high stakes involved:

We, meaning the students, staff and school as a whole, will put it all out there for each other, our families, our friends, our colleagues and our community to see: the good, the bad, and everything else. This is not an easy thing to do. Our students’ work and our own work is not always as pretty as we want it to be. And no matter how hard they have worked and we have worked, we are never quite satisfied. However, we offer it to the public because it is to the public that we and our students are ultimately accountable.

The regularity of these twice-yearly roundtable rituals—six in each core subject by the time they reach senior year—means that East Side students get continual practice in oral and written reflection on their own work and in answering questions about the work from the larger community. For presentations by ninth through eleventh graders, each visitor sits with two students in a room where simultaneous roundtables are taking place. The culminating performance-based assessments of senior year, however, follow the model of a dissertation defense: a private session with two or three adults who have prior access to the work and enter into deeper discussion and feedback.¹⁰

A few weeks before presenting at her roundtable to fulfill the graduation requirement in science, an eleventh grader named Tanazia was in Erica Ring’s classroom, intently charting the growth of plants nourished by

three different mixes of plant compost. “I’m trying to see which helps my plants grow faster,” she said. “This one is thermophilic, a really hot-temperature compost we made in large batches of greens and browns, such as carrots and broccoli. For mesophilic, we put the same thing, but in small batches, and we kept adding small amounts of greens every other week.” Aside from its demonstrating her scientific proficiency, Tanazia saw her project as contributing to the community. “Turning food waste into healthy soil for plants creates less waste in cities,” she said. “You could even do this on your windowsill at home.”



Audio
Showing What
You’ve Learned
(2:15)



“In some ways it’s kinda stressful,” Josh reflected:

Because you have different classes and you have different deadlines, and you’ve gotta meet those deadlines. And it’s a lot of work as far as preparation for the presentation. But once you get up there and you’re doing your thing, it’s like you’re the teacher and they’re the students. It’s that whole transition, you feel good about yourself afterwards. And then when they write that ‘excellent’ or that ‘pass’ on your profile, it’s like an overwhelming feeling of greatness in you.

“I cannot possibly explain how enjoyable and impressive it was to listen to the students,” wrote guest evaluator Steven Lazar, a National Board Certified social studies and English teacher with long experience in New York City public high schools, who brought his teaching colleagues to a day of roundtables in 2011:

Particularly in the senior class, the standards for students were higher than any school I have ever encountered. Students were not only doing high-level college literary analysis, but they displayed an amount of reflection, self-awareness, and thoughtfulness that most adults do not have. . . . We saw the value of having students formally reflect on their learning. We saw how much more impressive students’ understanding and complexity of thought is when they have the opportunity to go in-depth over a smaller amount of skills and content, rather than emphasizing a limited understanding of a breadth of content. And we saw that students are capable of much, much more than what is tested on the state’s exams.¹¹

In large part, teacher Ben Wides suggested, such academic depth results from the social and emotional supports that surround students from the time they enter East Side. As teachers show that they care about the wellbeing of their charges, they are also “letting kids know that we’re taking them seriously intellectually,” he said: “giving them rich and challenging questions to think about” and taking an interest in their ideas.

Those ideas often approach serious scholarship, said Mr. Wides, by the time seniors arrive in his class and choose a topic for the major history research paper they must defend for the graduation portfolio. Sometimes they pick an issue of personal interest, but he feels even greater satisfaction when he sees students “learning for learning’s sake—looking at a real question, engaging in intellectual inquiry on a topic that does not relate personally to them. That’s the essence. And the fact that they’re constructing it for themselves, I think, is really powerful.”

“Having their voice heard, being able to speak their mind,” said tenth-grade history teacher Yolanda Betances, “that becomes part of the culture in all of their classes, I think.” In the process, she added, “they also have a sense of developing and growing as young people—of how to interact with not only fellow students but people visiting the school. They’re part of a community.”

Endnotes

¹ Among the most influential of these were the United States Department of Education's 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983); Ernest L. Boyer's report for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *High school: A report on secondary education in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); Theodore R.Sizer's *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); Powell, A. G., Farrar, E., Cohen, D. K., *The shopping mall high school: Winners and losers in the educational marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); and Hampel, R. L., *The last little citadel: American high schools since 1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

² Full details appear in Howard S. Bloom and Rebecca Unterman, Sustained progress: New findings about the effectiveness and operation of small public high schools of choice in New York City (MRDC, August 2013). East Side Community's middle and high schools have consistently received grades of A on the New York Department of Education's school report cards.

³ Farrington, C. A., et al. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: *The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at University of Chicago.

⁴ See, for example, Oran, G. (2009), Culturally responsive pedagogy. Education.com; Jackson, A.W. & Davis, G. (2000). Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century. Carnegie Corporation of New York; Phinney, J. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity development in minority group adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 9, 1–2, 34–49.

⁵ Booth, D. W., & Rowsell, J. (2007). *The literacy principal: Leading, supporting and assessing reading and writing initiatives*. 2nd edition. Markham, Ont.: Pembroke Publishers.

⁶ Francois, C. Getting at the core of literacy improvement: A case study of an urban secondary school. *Education and Urban Society* 2012 (doi: 10.1177/0013124512458116) and Francois, C., Reading in the crawl space: A study of an urban school's literacy-focused community of practice. *Teachers College Record*, Volume 115, Number 5, 2013, pp. 1-35, www.tcrecord.org, ID: 16966.

⁷ According to data presented in Education for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium (2012, http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf), New York Performance Assessment Consortium classrooms significantly outperform those in other New York City public schools while serving a similar population, They

have nearly identical shares of blacks, Latinos, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Consortium schools follow the same admissions process as other non-exam New York City high schools, and their students enter with lower ELA and math average scores than citywide averages. Twenty-two schools are now petitioning to be added to the Consortium.

However, the Consortium dropout rate is half that of NYC public schools. Graduation rates for all categories of students are higher than for the rest of the city, while graduation rates for ELLs and students with disabilities are nearly double. On other indicators, Consortium students have fewer discipline issues. Suspensions are 5 percent, compared to 11 percent for NYC high schools and 12 percent for city charter schools. Consortium classrooms also have much greater teacher stability than the average school in the city. Turnover rates are 15 percent for Consortium schools, 25 percent for charters, and a staggering 58 percent for NYC high schools overall.

In 2011, 86 percent of African American and 90 percent of Latino male graduates of Consortium schools were accepted to college. National averages are only 37 percent and 43 percent, respectively. Ninety-three percent of Consortium graduates remain enrolled in four-year colleges after the first two years, compared with an average of 81 percent nationally. Yet Consortium students are far more likely to be low-income than the U.S. average. These data provide strong evidence of the predictive validity of the schools' graduation assessments.

⁸ Roderick, M. R. et al. (2008). *From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at University of Chicago.

⁹ Details of developing the "100 percent respect" campaign at ESCS appear in Guldin, M., Please respect me! *Principal Leadership*, Volume 9, Number 5, January 2009, pp. 24–27; and at <http://www.100respect.com>.

¹⁰ All tasks and defenses completed for the PBAT graduation requirement in member schools of the New York Performance Standards Consortium are evaluated using common scoring guides ("rubrics") developed and revised as needed by Consortium teachers to allow accurate evaluations of student work across schools. Samples of the work are independently rescored in a "moderation" process to evaluate both reliability of scoring and the challenge level of teacher assignments. For a comprehensive discussion of math portfolio assessments at East Side Community School, with examples of assessed student work, see <https://sites.google.com/a/eschs.net/www/mathportfolios@eastside>

¹¹ Steven Lazar, Authentic accountability: Roundtable portfolio presentations. New York: Gotham News, January 28, 2011. <http://gothamschools.org/2011/01/28/authentic-accountability-roundtable-portfolio-presentations/>

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Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

Tel 401.247.7665 | Fax 401.245.6428 | info@wkcd.org

PO Box 603252, Providence, RI 02806

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