



# Cahn

**DISTINGUISHED  
PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

**Commit to what you promise!**

*How amplifying voice, increasing engagement and exemplifying your core values can reinvest your community in delivering on the promises made to students, families and staff.*

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## ABSTRACT

Just five years ago, in September 2019, Bridge Preparatory Charter School (“Bridge Prep”) became the first public school in New York State designed specifically with a mission of serving students with dyslexia and other language based learning differences. Our historic authorization by the New York State Board of Regents represented a major victory for so many students and families in New York City and across the state, who had been advocating for years for a public school to open and be designed to meet the needs of this group of students who remain at great risk of academic failure.

To date, our journey to date has been filled with many ups and downs, victories and setbacks, and reflection, which is critical for all schools (especially new ones)- all of which have taught us valuable lessons. At the start of this Fellowship (during our fourth year of Operation), we identified school culture as an area we wanted to focus on- an area that may have been taken for granted during the excitement and craziness of our first few years. Our project shows how reinvesting our staff and engaging our students in ways that are aligned to our core values and beliefs helps us get closer to delivering on the promise that our school, and its mission offers to thousands of at-risk students in NYC .

## INTRODUCTION

**Leading a school is hard work.** Leading a new, specialized charter school that you and members of the community designed over several years added several layers to the immense difficulty of school leadership. In our critical first few years of operation, my team and I have faced many of the challenges and growing pains seen at most new schools. Specifically, we had to be sure to establish critical bedrock pieces needed to ensure both success and sustainability:

a strong organizational culture, visible, reliable community presence and clearly understood, shared vision for success.

For a uniquely positioned specialized school like ours, which in our first 5 years of operation has found us constantly under observation, focus and often times “in the spotlight”- these foundational focus areas were coupled with high expectations and immense urgency to deliver academic outcomes and a refined model earlier than many deemed to be feasible, and the need to adapt to incredible challenges including, but not limited to:

- The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced our school to close just 6 months after opening and to redesign and reimagine our school experience;
- A difficult facilities and space management agreement with the New York City Department of Education;
- The continuous need to “define and explain” the specific needs of our unique student body and how these needs impact academic performance to our authorizer the New York State Education Department given New York State’s rigorous Charter School oversight plane and performance framework; and
- Being able to strategically plan for the sustainability and strategic advancement of our organization and organization’s most critical stakeholders- our students and staff.

Our Cahn project focused on organizational culture and climate. Specifically, how could we re-invest and re-engage our students and staff to bring us back to delivering on our shared mission and vision. As we will describe more fully below, we selected this project after multiple observations in our hallways and classrooms and thoughtful, meaningful reflections with teachers, leadership team members and students about their Bridge Prep experience. Our

project remains “in progress” as we know successful implementation will not happen overnight. It entails continuous experimentation, discussions, reflections and reviews. However, since our project began, we are seeing continuous improvements across the school community, which we look forward to explaining further in later sections of this report.

As we shared earlier, Bridge Prep is a public charter school authorized by the New York State Board of Regents, located on Staten Island, in New York City. Bridge Prep is the first public school in New York State, and one of only a few nationwide, designed specifically with a mission of serving students with dyslexia and other language based learning differences and opened in September 2019. Bridge Prep is one of the most diverse schools in New York State, serving 245 students from every zip code across Staten Island, as well as several from Brooklyn, with a majority of students entering multiple grade levels below in reading lacking basic foundational reading skills. As of September 30, 2023, the demographics of our students are as follows:

- Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP)-**66%**
- Economically Disadvantaged-**72%**
- Black- **37%**
- White-**33%**
- Hispanic-**26%**
- Asian-**4%**

Our academic program and school design promotes literacy equity for all students with a specially designed, innovative learning environment. The research is clear that explicit and structured language instruction is valuable for all students, but is critical for students with language-based learning differences (such as dyslexia), those who struggle with literacy acquisition, and English language learners.

Since opening, Bridge Prep has been highlighted in many news articles and press events, as demonstrated by the following notable mentions:

- At the May 2023 meeting of the NYC Panel for Education Policy, NYC Schools Chancellor David Banks described his visit to Bridge Prep, stating: “What I saw there was absolutely amazing - just an amazing body of work, and I’m thrilled to see how the school has continued to grow and is meeting the needs of...kids and...families. It’s an amazing place and if anyone has not had the chance to visit, I would encourage you to do so.”
- New York State Education Commissioner Dr. Betty Rosa, who also visited Bridge Prep with Regent Christine Cea, recognized Bridge Prep on Dyslexia Awareness Day in 2023, highlighting the critical engagement being done around the foundations for literacy development that our school provides, the leadership from the school leader, and the school’s willingness to engage with her and take her feedback around strategic growth in considering expansion to early childhood grades.

Bridge Prep has also been highlighted and featured in many publications during our first charter term, including but not limited to: the *Staten Island Advance*, the *New York Times*, *Education Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *NY1*, *Fox News*, the *New York Post*, and CBS News.

Admissions to Bridge Prep are run by an Admissions Lottery in accordance with New York State Education Law, with special preference granted to students with dyslexia or other language based learning differences. In 2022-23, 67% of our students were identified as students with disabilities (SWD), 40 percentage points higher than the enrollment of SWD in Community School District 31, where Bridge Prep is located and significantly higher than New York City and New York State averages. The majority of these SWD are classified with a speech or language impairment (SLI), learning disability (LD), or other health impairment (OHI), classifications that are associated with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences.

To meet the needs of our population, our approach to teaching and learning is rooted in the Science of Reading (SOR), an evidence-based and comprehensive understanding of how individuals acquire reading skills. It draws from extensive research in cognitive science, psychology, linguistics, and education to inform effective literacy instruction. The key components of the SOR encompass phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies. Research highlights that reading is not an innate skill but rather a learned process that requires explicit and systematic instruction. This research emphasizes the importance of teaching students foundational literacy skills in a direct and explicit way. The SOR serves as the bedrock for effective literacy instruction, and structured literacy aligns with its evidence-based practices. By integrating these approaches, Bridge Prep creates inclusive and supportive learning environments where students, regardless of their learning profiles, can develop strong literacy skills. The combination of explicit teaching, ongoing assessment, and individualized support empowers all students to achieve their full potential in reading and equips them with a crucial skill that will serve as a foundation for lifelong learning and success.

Each day at Bridge Prep all students have three periods of our Structured Literacy Block made up of 1 period ELA, 1 period especially designed Orton-Gillingham (OG) instruction and 1 period of Structured Reading. Writing is a critical component of Structured Literacy and is crucial to the academic achievement for all of our students. While elements of writing are taught within the classes in the Structured Literacy Block, it is not taught in isolation and writing activities, prompts and practice are done across subject areas.

At Bridge Prep, OG is uniquely taught as both a separate class, where students are grouped based on their ability level, and infused into the core curriculum. Each student at Bridge Prep receives a one-hour (60-minute) class period each day of OG instruction, which equates to a total of 300 minutes per week of direct OG instruction per student. Students are grouped in OG classes based on their reading readiness, determined by a Reading Readiness Assessment (RRA) developed in conjunction with our OG coach, a fellow from the Academy of Orton Gillingham Practitioners, that focuses on literacy acquisition and foundational reading skills development. Each trimester, students are re-assessed to determine growth and monitor progress. Students move throughout groups fluidly based upon classroom and individual assessments. Bridge Prep also administers the NWEA MAP assessment 3 times per year, in math and reading, and uses data from these assessments for both teacher and school use (to plan effective instruction) as well as for state reporting to show student growth and progress.

Average class sizes at Bridge Prep remain smaller than those at other elementary schools in our district. The structure of our neurodiverse integrated classrooms allows various members of our instructional team— teachers, service providers, and social workers—to work in each content period with groups of students and directly collaborate to use their specific areas of expertise. This means that each class is staffed by multiple instructional team members at a given time, resulting in a teacher-student ratio that is significantly lower than traditional elementary schools.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the primary goals that all schools have is to make their school a space where students could come everyday to feel happy, safe and welcome. When we founded our school,

we acknowledged that the experiences that most of our students will have had in school prior to coming to Bridge Prep will be (and are) very different from these very basic school culture expectations. Our students, and most of the time their families, come to us broken, disengaged, lacking trust in the educational system and very down on their belief in themselves. Simply put, school has not ever been their happy place. When we founded Bridge Prep, we acknowledged that in order to create a place where students could not just feel happy but also begin experiencing academic success, it was going to take an every day, every person, community wide effort. I, along with other members of my founding team, believed that the first step to achieving this was identifying what we wanted our students to feel and embody when they were at Bridge Prep and when they left Bridge Prep for middle school. Our school mascot is the Lightning. We identified three core values that we wanted students to embody, that also are embodied by lightning. We want our students to be: Bold, Bright and Unique. These core values are a key visual across our school community and appear in every hallway, classroom and on all of our marketing materials. Our students, staff and families can readily recite these terms and easily identify them as our school's core values and key characteristics that we want students to embody.

When we first opened, our first cohort of students (86 total) and staff would begin everyday by saying aloud "I am Bold. I am Bright. I am Unique" before the start of their first period, as a reminder of these core values and that they existed inside each of them. Our first 6 months of our first year started strong and it was evident that something truly special was happening in each of our classrooms, and with each of our students. There was an incredible buzz around the school building each day, our student attendance was operating at over 94%



each day and our teachers were coming to work and leaving work with smiles. The buy-in from the entire team in our work and shared mission was clearly seen by students, families and from my leadership team and I.

Six months later, the COVID-19 pandemic forced Bridge Prep, like all other schools across New York City (and the country) to switch to remote learning- a major challenge for everyone. For our community- this was an incredible gutpunch, as our students were just getting into their groove and learning to love school again. Our team was determined to not let this get in the way of the work that we were doing. Our leadership team worked diligently to find ways to keep the momentum going and brought the idea of providing students with live teaching instruction, while students remained home. Our team bought in and everyday for the remainder of the school year (through June) teachers were in our building, in empty classrooms teaching to their smart boards with students on Zoom using special technology that enabled them to simulate the school experience for students while they remained home. While many schools, both district and charter, saw a loss in the number of students enrolled and teachers employed at the end of that school year, we saw something different- 96% of students and 94% of teachers returned for the following school year. Our students were making videos, writing letters and communicating with our team letting them know how much they could not wait to be back in school together. Our staff found ways to plan together, spend time together, and be available for each other and for our students and families. Our community weathered the storm and it felt to many that our school culture was clearly established- this was a place that people wanted to be!

Fast forward three years to the start of our Cahn journey. Our entire school community had grown- our student body was now 240 students, our staff doubled in size, we expanded our school space to be split within two separate school buildings on our campus and we had reached our final approved grade span (1-5) with our first graduating class set to head to middle school at the end of the year. During the period since opening, we spent our time trying to prioritize so many different competing needs and understanding the academic needs of our student population, we had begun a school-wide focus on improving student academic performance and refining our curriculum. As we engaged in our pre-planning for the 2022-2023 school year, which our Leadership Team does each summer, we reflected on what we thought was going well, and what we noticed that needed to be improved/built upon. Aside from some of the technical fixes and “low hanging fruit” that was easily identifiable, our team started to point out some behaviors from students and teachers that raised some flags

**From Students:**

- A slowing of academic progress/growth made across grade level, in ELA and math.
- An Increase in behavioral incidents across grade level, and across infraction level( tiered out in our Code of Conduct), including from students who traditionally had no previous behavioral incidents.
- A drop in student daily attendance rates across grades, with specific classes showing a more noticeable attendance decline.

**From Staff:**

- A decrease in staff attendance at external school events.
- A noticeable decline in the quality of and effort put into submitted lesson plans.

- A change in body language, energy and an increased amount of “grumbling”.

**From both Students and Staff:**

- Issues with daily dress code/presentation issues(students out of uniform, teachers dressing less professionally than normal and outside the expectations outlined in our staff handbook)
- Less smiles everyday. If students and staff were happy or experiencing joy during the school day, you could no longer tell by simply looking at them.
- Increased frequency of students and staff starting sentences with:
  - *“Remember when we used to....”*
  - *“It was better when...”*
  - *“Those were the good days!”*
  - *“In my old school we used to...”*

It was clear to the team that we needed to work on elements that we pride ourselves on as a school community and that had brought us so much success in our first few years. What was not immediately clear was whether we had an issue(s) with culture, climate, or both. This was made much more clear to us as we began our data dive/project and went through the Fellowship. We especially learned and got support from the presentation by Dr. Brian Perkins at our June study summit, where he provided us with ways to differentiate between culture and climate, and how they often impact each other and from Dr. Ellie- Drago Severson’s session on Teams at our April study summit.

## METHODS

We decided that in order to diagnose the severity and specificity of the problem, there were certain key factors we wanted to “test” and understand from our students and staff. These were:

- **Engagement** – the degree to which teachers foster in students a love of learning and a desire to succeed.
- **Academic Rigor** – the degree to which students feel they are challenged by their coursework and teachers and which teachers feel they are challenging and pushing their students toward academic success.
- **Relevance** – *the degree to which the connections are made between student learning and life inside and outside the classroom.*
- **Culture** – *the degree to which classrooms are developed and run premised on respect, motivation, and organization.*
- **Relationships** – *the degree to which student success and teacher growth is supported through positive interpersonal interactions.*
- **Safety** – *one’s level of perceived safety while on campus, in the community and at home + drivers of conflict at school and responses to bullying and harassment.*
- **Motivation** – *students’ and staff members’ relationship with and sense of ownership over their learning/work experience.*

We used various methods to obtain an understanding of these key factors including:

- **Student surveys**, given by Cheryl and I to students in grades 2-5 with questions specifically tailored for each of these key factors.

- **Teacher Focus Groups**, with small informal groups of staff members, led by me as the school leader outside of the school building.
- **Classroom Observations + debriefs** focused on specific elements of each domain from the Danielson Framework For Teaching.
- **Hallway Observations**, with specific data collected to the amount of time and frequency spent outside the classroom by students.
- **Personal interactions with families**
- **Behavioral Incident Reporting**(by student and classroom)

Through each of these methods, we were able to learn from and about our students and staff experiences both in the classroom and in the school building. It was clear to us that students and staff wanted to be both seen and heard, and by providing opportunities for this to happen authentically and in a way that respected vulnerability and remained focused on our purpose, we were able to understand what we were working with and ways to improve what needed to be improved.

### **What we found(students)**

Student Survey data showed us:

- **95%** of students replied that they felt their teachers cared about them.
- **35%** of students felt that their teachers did not know much or care about their lives outside of school.
- **65%** of students replied that their teachers pushed them to keep trying when the work got hard.
- **42%** of students replied that their work did make or require them to really think.

- **96%** of students replied that they feel safe at school.
- **55%** of students replied that they did not know if their teacher was proud of them.
- **90%** of students felt that they have been growing academically since they came to Bridge Prep.
- **30%** of students indicated that they had felt disengaged in class “a few times” so far this year.

Our “hall duty” observation time showed us that at multiple times during a single period (45 minutes) we had a number of students leaving multiple classrooms for various reasons (including some who left their classroom multiple times).

#### **What we found(adults)**

Based on feedback obtained from teachers during our focus groups, the themes that stood out were:

- Teachers felt they were getting “enough” professional learning but expressed that they wanted professional learning to be more targeted to drive their growth in areas of strength.
- Many teachers felt that they had opportunities to provide feedback and express concerns, but others felt like they wanted more “face time” with administrators (they wanted to be both “seen and heard”)
- All teachers indicated/ responded positively when talking about their students, including many who demonstrated that they “loved their kids” and that they believed our school was improving their educational outlook.

- Some new members of staff felt that they were not as welcomed by other staff members as they would have wanted in their first year, but that they loved the work that they do.
- When teachers were asked to talk about an example of where they saw rigorous instruction in our building, few teachers gave examples of their own teaching, instead pointing to examples of either their colleagues, partners, or model instruction provided by our coaches.
- Most teachers did not have issues with being asked to stay longer during the week for professional learning.

Observations in specific classrooms helped us identify specific domains from the Danielson Framework where improvement/additional support was needed for specific teachers, aligned with our problem of practice. These domains were:

- Domain 1(Planning and Preparation)
  - 1b- Demonstrating Knowledge of Students
  - 1c-Setting Instructional Outcomes
- Domain 2(The Classroom Environment)
  - 2a-Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport
  - 2b-Establishing a Culture of Learning
  - 2d-Managing Student Behavior
  - 2e-Organizing Physical Space
- Domain 3(Instruction)
  - 3a- Communicating with Students

- 3b-Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques
- 3c-Engaging Students in Learning
- Domain 4(Professional Responsibilities)
  - 4d-Participating in Professional Community
  - 4e-Growing and Developing Professionally.

What this all told us, was that we did not have a culture problem, but rather needed to refocus, refresh and reinvest members of the school community in what we were all about (our core beliefs) and remind everyone of our shared understanding, mission and vision. Everyone could identify our core values or being Bold, Bright and Unique and that they were important, but some of our staff seemed to be unable to identify what the embodiment of these values looked like in our students.

After identifying our students and staff, including members of our leadership team, as our key stakeholders, we built our Theory of Action plan to begin addressing the problem of practice by developing a formula for students, staff and the school community overall to experience sustained success and “refresh our vibe” to bring back those “Year 1” feelings. This formula, which applies to both students and staff, was presented to our staff formally in a full team meeting, and was reinforced this summer in our professional learning institute is:

***Increased Voice and Engagement + Focus on Core Values = Increased Achievement and Investment.***

During the Fellowship(and still to date), we focused on what actions, modifications and forward planning would be needed to support an increase in student and teacher voice and



engagement, as well as identifying an instructional focus area and mindset shift needed for each.

### **Student Voice and Student Engagement**

- Launching of a new partnership with Pathways Travel, an organization that will provide week long Experiential Learning Camps for every student in Spring 2024.
- A full launch and expansion of our new Lightning Athletics Program, with multiple sports offered, and all students having access to each sport.
- The development of Student Media Clubs (*WBPC*, *The Bolt*), through partnerships with Community Media of Staten Island, The Staten Island Advance, and Wagner College.
- Funding of a new Middle School Mentorship Program for alumni.
- **Mindset Refresh:** Growth is a Goal. Proficiency is **the** goal.
- **Instructional Focus Area:** Designing lesson plans that promote inquiry and meaningful, student- led discussion.

### **Teacher Voice and Engagement**

- Launch of a new school wide teams structure, with 5 teams developed that represent critical elements of the school community that impact our growth, development and culture. Each team has a team leader who will lead the team and assure the team is working together on their goals during the year and a member of the Cabinet who will serve as the point person for the team leader in helping shape the alignment of goals and organizational priorities .
- An expansion of the School Leadership Cabinet, new staff leadership opportunities and

the addition of new staff roles

- Expanded, refined Professional Learning offerings (pre-service + during the year)
- A one of a kind unique advanced certification pathway for teachers (Structured Literacy Practicum Center)
- Launch of a new teacher intervisitation system and protocols where teachers can ask for support & observations from their peers and their peers can sign up to observe their peers in an area of strength (**#observeme**)
- **Mindset Refresh:** “I love you and care about you, which is why I am pushing you to do more (loving with rigor).”
- **Instructional Focus Area:** Enhancement of pedagogical skill through vulnerability and professional inquiry (Danielson 4d and 4e)

### Focus on Core Values

- Restructuring of our Daily Morning Meeting period, to be more structured and rooted in The Leader in Me, our school wide leadership program + launch of *The Leader In Me, Live*- a new school developed curriculum that uses a school wide text to teach a character trait/theme aligned to one of the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People each month.
- New formats for student and staff celebrations (Habit Hooray!)
- A relaunch of our Daily Pledge (a refreshed, built up version of our Year 1 Pledge)
- Specially designed and targeted mission aligned professional learning, based on feedback from teachers and staff.
- **Mindset Refresh:** *What does it mean to be Bold, Bright, and Unique ?*

- **Instructional Focus Area:** Balancing differentiation and rigor

## RESULTS

Since we began this journey, we have had the opportunity to reflect as a community in a way we have not in our past 5 years. As a result of our work in the Fellowship to date, there is a new energy and excitement in the building and it is clear that the “good vibes” are back. This past summer, we had a fantastic professional learning institute where teachers were driving much of the agenda, and were eager to begin many of the new initiatives. We have also seen an increase in the number of and requests for teacher led work and initiatives with a shared focus has been placed on community building and the re-establishment/ refinement of rituals. This year, we had our highest staff retention(return) rate in our history at 96% and brought on many new staff members to fill the new roles we created.

From a student perspective (since April 2023) we have seen a significant decrease in student behavioral incidents coupled with significant increases in attendance and academic growth, on both the NYS ELA and math assessment and our NWEA MAP Assessments. While at this time NYS student testing data is not publicly released, we are anticipating significant growth in our proficiency data in both math and ELA across demographic subgroups. In the 2023-2024 school year, we saw continued increase in demand for seats, and admitted our largest cohort of new students while still maintaining a waitlist of over 100 students across grades 1-5.

## REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS

### **Fellow Reflection**

I entered the Cahn Fellowship during just my fifth year as a school leader and so as may be expected, I was overwhelmed by all of the experience and talent of my peers, who have been doing the work of school leadership, at such a high level, for so long. At the time of my acceptance into the Fellowship, I was a bit down on myself and was experiencing some difficulties with members of my Leadership team, as well as having some frustrations with members of my Board of Trustees. Given the structure of our school, more specifically as a charter school leader, I had been feeling like a hybrid principal/district leader, that I could never really fully commit to doing either effectively. My board had been pushing me to focus much of my time “outside the building” on external organizational growth, which had resulted in me ceding much of my in house management to the two directors below me (equivalent of APs in traditional public schools). With my title being Executive Director, there was often confusion over “who is the principal” from folks in and out of the building.

After returning back to “normal” school post COVID, I have frequently found myself questioning how long I was going to be able to last doing this work as a school leader(sustainability) and if I was actually good at the work I was doing (job performance).

I can say, with more gratitude than can be explained in this narrative, that the Cahn Fellowship has reset my vision of school leadership, of my school and of my place as leader of my school. The Fellowship pushed me to realize that there can be no organizational growth without an effective “in house” leadership model, which starts with a clear understanding and ownership of leadership at the school, with me as the school leader.

I have seen an incredible transformation in my ability to prioritize, communicate with others, trust those around me(especially those on my team), and also be able to find the space

for myself and my family in this role, much of which I attribute to the program. The presentations at our April study summit from Dr. Ellie Drago-Severson on how to strengthen and build effective teams, and from Dr. Barbara McKeon on the importance of self care and wellness in this work, brought about the “aha” moments I had been missing in my first five years as a school leader.

I also feel that my school and my team is a better place since I became a part of the Cahn Fellows program. I admit, I enter leadership programs and professional learning seminars with a hefty amount of skepticism because I often find that I leave the program/experience without real ways to be a better leader or practices to put in place “the next day” at school. Interestingly enough, this is what I loved most about the Cahn Fellowship. I did not leave our study summits and run back to school with a toolkit of strategies to “try out”, but rather I left with important mindsets that have helped me make actual change in my building. Each time I met with my peers at the Cahn Fellowship, I left with a belief and understanding that:

1. I am a strong, effective and competent school leader.
2. That my school is a better place because I lead it.
3. My school is a good school, and a place that is supporting students and families in critical ways.
4. That there are things that need to improve at my school, that these changes are fixable, and that I am able to lead that change.

Throughout this Fellowship I have seen an incredible growth in the leadership capacity of my incredible ally-Ms. Otterbeck(Cheryl). Since joining our team as part of the founding staff, she has always put the team and our kids before all others. Something I consistently asked her

before and during this Fellowship was- “How are you prioritizing you, so that you can continue to prioritize everyone else?” The Fellowship has enabled Cheryl to begin focusing on her own well being and identifying her own strengths, while not relying on others or experiences to tell them to her. This has allowed her, and her role to develop and really bring out her strengths. She is communicating better, and more authentically with teachers and is now beginning to form her own leadership identity- something I am truly proud of!

### **Ally Reflection**

I was truly honored by Mr. Castanza's invitation to embark on the Cahn Fellowship journey with him. This experience has turned out to be an extraordinary opportunity for both personal and professional development. I have gained invaluable insights not only from the Cahn Leadership team and each presenter but also from the Fellows and Allies. The Cahn Fellowship has significantly contributed to my skill development, equipping me with the tools necessary for my role as the Dean of Specialized Instruction.

As Dean of Specialized Instruction, a crucial aspect of my responsibilities involves engaging with parents and teachers to discuss a child's Individualized Education Plan and optimal teaching strategies in the classroom. Among the various sessions I've attended, those centered on communication and feedback have had a profound influence on my role. Given my relatively recent transition into a leadership position, I've been actively working on enhancing my communication skills to become a more effective communicator.

Conducting classroom observations has required me to give feedback on classroom practices and differentiation strategies for our special education students. This is a new responsibility for me, and it has consistently made me feel uneasy. Fortunately, Dr. Ellie

Drago-Severson's seminars have equipped me with the necessary tools to initiate meaningful feedback discussions with my colleagues. Her interactive workshop provided valuable guidance on how to navigate challenging conversations and approach them with confidence.

Collaborating with the Fellows and Allies and discovering that some share similar concerns and anxieties was undeniably reassuring.

During our project, I've noticed a significant improvement in my communication skills with both teachers and students. Conducting interviews with students and teachers had a profound effect. It enabled us to address our problem of practice and initiate changes aimed at enhancing the student experience while providing valuable insights to teachers regarding student sentiments about their school experience. As a result of improved communication, students became more engaged, and teachers became more deeply involved in the process.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank and acknowledge all of those who supported us through this amazing experience, especially our amazing Bridge Prep students; our colleagues on the Bridge Prep staff; our incredible peers in the Cahn Fellows program, who provided us with such inspiration, advice and hope for what is possible; the Cahn Fellows staff, for including us in the program and for their incredible guidance in navigating the Fellowship and the difficult world of school leadership; and last but certainly not least, our families for allowing us to do this Fellowship along with the work of being school leaders, we are so thankful for your love!