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# CASE STUDY

IMPLEMENTING A  
COLLABORATIVE DISTRICT  
REVIEW

# COLONIAL TOWN

Colonial Town School District is located in a medium-sized city in New England. The district serves over 21,000 students, of whom 42% are identified as African American, 41% of whom are identified as Hispanic, 14% of whom are identified as White, and 2% of whom are identified as Asian American. In 2013, the district reported a 71.4% high school graduation rate, up significantly from 2009, in which only 58.1% of students graduated. The district attributes much of this success to a school change initiative that has focused on student engagement and teacher performance, including a teacher evaluation system that rewards teachers for high performance and provides support to teachers performing poorly in the classroom. In 1997 the district implemented a rich tapestry of early childhood education programs that serve approximately 1700 children each year; however, in recent years the district leadership wanted to revisit the question of consistency and quality across all their programs.

The early childhood education landscape in Colonial Town, and pre-K in particular, is complex. Pre-K in Colonial Town is delivered across multiple strands, including Head Start, traditional public schools, and magnet schools (which are public, but have specialized themes and visions for curriculum and instruction). Coincidentally, the Education Center's partnership with the district began just after the director of Early Childhood Education retired, and as the district was attempting to address inequities in early childhood education access and resourcing. The district was also ramping up to staff and launch a new early childhood education center to accommodate one quarter of all 3-4 year olds in the system, staffed only with certified early childhood teachers, in order to create a model program for implementing a new curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices.

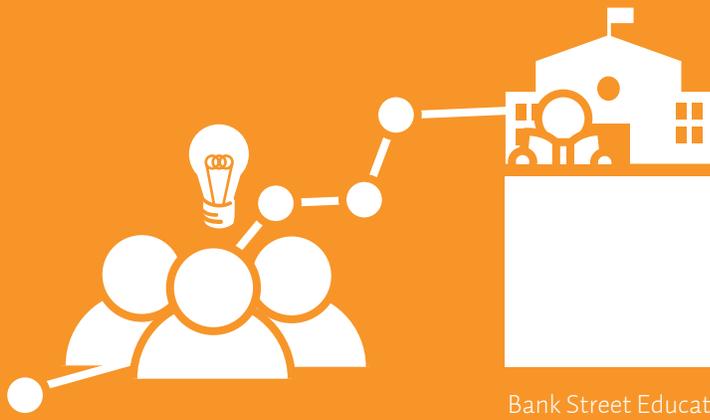
The Education Center partnered with Colonial Town to develop an inquiry process to learn more about the early childhood practices in the district. Leaders in Colonial Town were aware, given the variety of delivery models for pre-K, that they needed more information about what early childhood education practices looked like throughout the district. Together, the Education Center and district leaders designed a diagnostic review of their early childhood education programs, driven by the essential question:

*How do current resources, practices, and supports align to developmentally meaningful, play-based, trauma-informed approaches to learning?*

As part of that review, Bank Street staff were paired with district personnel to visit half the early childhood education classrooms in Colonial Town. We took low-inference notes on the activities in which children and teachers were engaged; interviewed central office staff, site leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and community members; and facilitated multiple reflective activities, such as group debriefs, post-visit reflection surveys, and group norming sessions. These activities, which took place over two days on the ground, were designed to collect a broad swath of information about early childhood practice in the district, and to enable the district leaders to make sense of the data they were collecting so they could plan the next phase of professional learning. The Education Center assisted them by sorting these data into themes, and connecting them back to the essential question that guided their work together.

One clear theme that emerged from the collaborative district-wide review was the wide variability of early childhood practices across the district. One school leader stated in an interview, “We use [Adopted Curriculum] as a resource, but we create our own curriculum. Some teachers are working on project-based learning. They use resources from everywhere, including [Adopted Curriculum].” This illustrated that while the district had adopted a curriculum for the pre-K program to use across the district, teachers and site leaders took that up in various ways, depending on their own vision for what quality instruction meant to them. Another example of uneven quality was raised by a community partner, who indicated, “A framework to think about the whole child and family is missing...knowing how to interact with families and communities effectively.” This enabled Colonial Town to see that while some pre-K classes or sites may be connecting to families and communities well, and grounding their approach in child development, practice varied across the district, and there wasn’t a shared understanding of how to intentionally leverage play and interact with families in ways that support all children.

Out of this collaborative inquiry into pre-K practices grew a



EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

## KEY IMPACT

Bank Street Education Center worked with Colonial Town schools to establish a new early childhood learning center, where the district's educators receive professional development in alignment with the program vision.

partnership between the Education Center and Colonial Town that led to continued professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators, and continued collaboration with district leadership to reflect upon and modify the district's approach to early childhood education. In response to the variability in early childhood practice detected, the Education Center made three recommendations that addressed the need for more engagement across the layers of the system to create shared understandings and practices: 1) deepening collaboration with stakeholders to develop a clearly articulated vision for early childhood practice across the district; 2) creating a plan for implementing a district-wide vision through pre-K curriculum and assessments, aligned to professional learning expectations and structures; and 3) strengthening relationships with families and existing community partners to embed best early childhood education practices and build capacity district-wide.

As a result, the Education Center helped the district form a vision committee, comprised of a diversity of constituents whose job it is to develop the district's belief statement for early childhood education across all program strands and develop a communications strategy for engaging families and community partners. Additionally, the Education Center is currently co-constructing a comprehensive professional learning map with the district to align educator supports to the vision, and bring coherence to

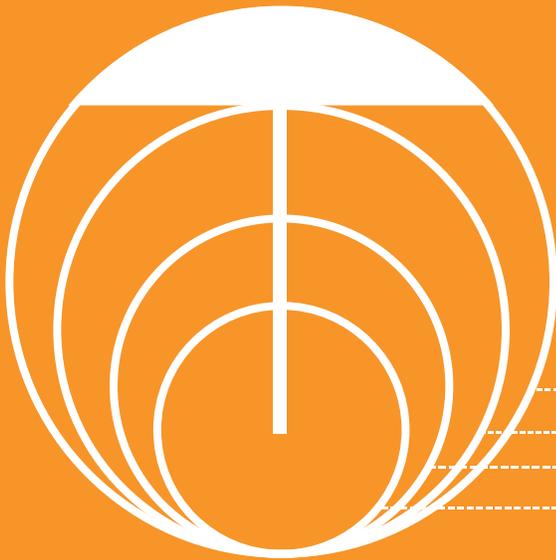
curriculum and professional learning supports across the delivery models. At the district's new early childhood education center, the Education Center provides monthly professional learning to over 125 early childhood teachers from programs across the district, including some Kindergarten teachers to begin building common understandings vertically in the system. The Education Center has also offered professional development sessions for instructional managers using the text *Coaching with Powerful Interactions* by Dombro, Jablon and Johnsen.

The work with Colonial Town is a testament to the Throughline's potential for district reform. By engaging stakeholders across the patchwork of early childhood programs and district leadership in the diagnostic review process, we were able to not only engage multiple layers of the system at once, but also able to forge a partnership that enabled the Education Center and the district to begin building lasting organizational supports to sustain district-wide change. Moving forward, we intend to build on the strengths of this approach and focus more tightly on **the school as the unit of change** in order to most effectively leverage district resources and connect the adult learning supports we provide to senior leadership with the everyday needs and experiences of students and teachers in classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This case study was supported by the Bank Street Learning Agenda, with generous funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It was authored by Jessica Charles, with Doug Knecht and Allison Milby contributing details of the partnership experiences.



# COLONIAL TOWN PARTNERSHIP

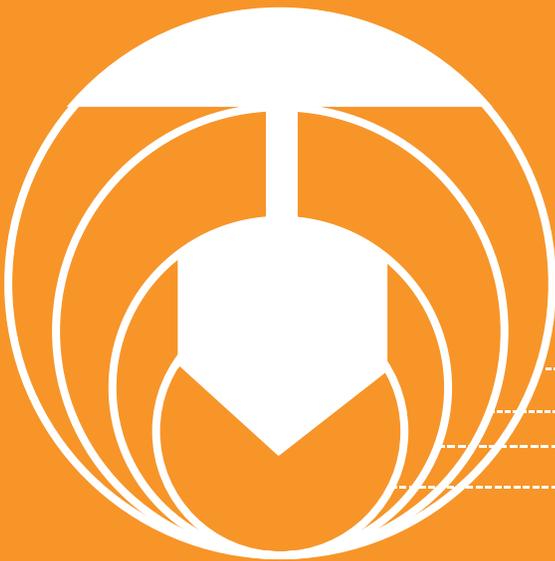


## YEAR 1

### DEPTH & BREADTH

The Education Center provided support to district leaders and included stakeholders across the system in a collaborative district-wide review process.

- DISTRICT LEADERS
- SCHOOL LEADERS
- TEACHER TEAMS
- TEACHERS



## YEAR 2

### DEPTH & BREADTH

The partnership expanded to include professional development for Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers and leaders as well as support for leadership strategy and capacity building.

- DISTRICT LEADERS
- SCHOOL LEADERS
- TEACHER TEAMS
- TEACHERS