



A Renewal School is Reborn:

The Story of P.S. 154 Elementary in the South Bronx

BY Greg Anrig, Senior Fellow in the Office of the First Deputy Mayor of New York

In May of 2012, at the tail end of a tumultuous school year at P.S. 154 Jonathan D. Hyatt, fifth grade teacher Alison Coviello took over as principal. Just six months later, Coviello received a call from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) conveying that her school would likely be closed. She was upset but not shocked. As a teacher at the high-poverty school in the South Bronx since 2002, Coviello witnessed what had long been a struggling but relatively orderly school deteriorate after a sequence of leadership changes.

By the time she took over, children were running through the halls throughout the school day. Food

was splattered over the stairwells, floors, and walls. Fights in bathrooms and fires in trash cans were regular occurrences. A visitor walking through the school would hear teachers screaming at kids behind closed doors. An anonymous faculty blogger criticized school administrators on a public website.

Morale was abysmal. Test scores dropped from mediocre to rock bottom, with just 2 percent of the children scoring at a proficient level on state tests. Coviello says, "It was really chaotic. For the kids, the culture was just to show up and play around – not to learn. The teachers were beaten down and negative. It had become a vicious cycle."

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In the waning months of the Bloomberg administration, the DOE decided that instead of closing P.S. 154, it would send a strong message by opening the South Bronx Classical Charter School II on the upper floor of the same building in the fall of 2013. The threat that the charter school would eventually take over the whole building was clear. “Everything we heard from the DOE back then was negative,” Coviello says

Today, a visitor to P.S. 154 would have a hard time imagining that it had so recently been dysfunctional. One of the first cohort of schools selected for the Renewal School Program launched by Mayor Bill de Blasio and Chancellor Carmen Fariña in 2014, P.S. 154 looks and feels like a thriving elementary school. In each classroom, students actively engage with their work while respectfully interacting with their teachers and each other. From Kindergarten through the top fifth grade level, the culture is upbeat and supportive, but also focused on learning in every minute of class time. When students dressed in their maroon or white shirts and gray pants and skirts move from one room to another, they line up with their classmates escorted by their teacher. There are no more “runners.” The hallways are spotless and each brightly lit room is filled with colorful educational materials.



Test scores have been rapidly rising, with every reason to expect those positive trends to continue. For example, the school’s share of students performing at the proficiency standard on the state test of English Language Arts climbed from 4.9% to 26.6%; among third graders, the proficiency rate increased from 8.6% to 35.5% while the share scoring at the lowest level fell by half, from 53.1% to 25.8%. Because research shows how critical it is for students to learn how to read by the third grade, the DOE and P.S. 154 have focused on early literacy as a priority, with a clear goal of all students able to read on grade level by the end of second grade. Those results indicate that this school is clearly on the right track.



The results in math have been impressive as well, with the share of the school’s students performing at a proficient level multiplying from 2.9% to 24.9%, while the portion scoring at the lowest level declined from 68.0% to 40.1%. There is obviously much room for further improvement, but the evidence is clear that the school has come a long way in a short period of time.

The progress at P.S. 154 demonstrates that even deeply troubled high poverty schools can be transformed to significantly improve student outcomes and sustain a culture of continuous improvement. That work is without question

enormously difficult and requires skillful, energetic leadership within schools combined with support from the DOE and the district to drive positive change grounded in the best available research. The Framework for Great Schools that the DOE has emphasized as a set of guideposts for strengthening all New York City schools is a useful prism for analyzing how the improvements at P.S. 154 evolved, because the particular strategies that Coviello and her support network pursued closely followed that Framework. To help New York City’s educators fully benefit from learning about the experience at P.S. 154, this case study is organized around the central elements of that Framework: effective school leadership; a supportive environment; collaborative teachers; rigorous instruction; strong family-community ties; and trust.

Effective School Leadership

Located in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx alongside the Major Deegan Expressway, whose traffic provides constantly loud background noise throughout the school day, P.S. 154 Jonathan D. Hyatt in 2015 enrolled 371 students in grades K through 5, 60% of whom were Hispanic, 36% Black and 2% White. With a large majority of those students residing in nearby housing projects and homeless shelters, the school’s “economic need index” was 91% -- much higher than the citywide average of 66%.¹ About 24% of the students have disabilities.

¹ The economic need index is an average of the “economic need values” for all the children in a school. If a student is eligible for city Human Resources Administration programs, or living in temporary housing, his or her economic need value is 1.0. Otherwise, the student’s economic need value is based on the



Coviello, who has an undergraduate degree from Columbia and both a master’s and doctorate from Teachers College at the same university, came to P.S. 154 as a fourth grade teacher in 2002 after spending three years teaching at a school in Bronx District 9. She had earned a license as an administrator years ago but let it expire because she felt she lacked experience. More recently, she enrolled in one of the city’s leadership programs to get her license again. Still, when she finally became principal at the end of the school year in May 2012, with only a week’s notice, she felt overwhelmed. “Stepping into the role of principal in the middle of the school year was shocking despite the time I had spent working with the school’s administrative team and thinking about the role of a school leader. That whole first couple of months at the end of the school year was a complete blur.”

Over the summer, she regrouped and set priorities for the coming year. “I have this very vivid memory of thinking this is my school and I need to take care of it.

percentage of families with school-age children in the student’s census tract whose income is below the poverty level. So a child living in a census tract with a poverty rate of 60% would have an economic need value of 0.6.

So if I saw even one orange peel on the floor I would never walk by it without picking it up as I used to. And I knew that I needed to get everyone else in the school to feel the same way.”

What Coviello recognized from the start was the fundamental need to transform the school’s culture.

“It’s hard when kids have been running around for three years, but we needed to put simple systems and structures into place. Kids like routines, just as adults generally do, so we needed to create processes that would convey a sense of order to everyone.”

Examples of the kinds of systems Coviello put into place:

- Creating just one entry way into the school and having the children wait at supervised cafeteria tables before teachers escort them to their classrooms at the start of school.
- A “responders on duty” system, where the two assistant principals, two guidance counselors, and the school psychologist rotated hourly shifts in which they would be on call to provide help if a teacher had a child who was putting himself or others in danger. “That first year I felt like we were 911. It was ridiculous. *But*, it brought to teachers the sense that they could get help and to the kids that they can’t just do what they want,” Coviello says.
- A genuine “safe room.” We created a space where kids who are in crisis can come and calm down and transition to a place where they can return to class.

- Other minor processes: “How do we bring our kids to specialty class, what’s the expectation for when they’re picked up, what stairwells do we take to lunch? It sounds like really basic stuff, but it wasn’t in place before.”

In addition to implementing those new practices, Coviello’s other main focus her first year was to set clear, much higher expectations for teachers. Because she was familiar with the professional strengths and weaknesses of her colleagues from her years as a teacher there, she was able to quickly identify problematic faculty members. “There was definitely a cohort that was really entrenched and unwilling to improve their instruction and how they treated the children and families that we were serving.”

As difficult as those first months of her tenure were, Coviello’s determination to transform the school’s culture signaled to everyone else in the building that she had a clear vision for moving forward. That clarity of purpose eventually became embraced by the faculty who remained. Christine Gabbard, a fifth grade math teacher who was one of Coviello’s first hires, says, **“The number one reason why our school has transformed is strong leadership from our principal, who works 24 hours a day, seven days a week to make sure we all know what to do.”**

Supportive Environment

Two initiatives were essential to building P.S. 154’s sense of community and support systems. One was an approach to classroom management called Responsive Classroom, and the other was the DOE’s Renewal School program.

Responsive Classroom. At the end of Coviello's first school year as principal, in June of 2013, she brought in consultants with the Northeast Foundation for Children to lead a four-day institute on Responsive Classroom. Although participation was not required, 30 staff members stayed for the institute after the school year had ended while being compensated at the city training rate per session. To Coviello, who has continued with the same institute every year since, Responsive Classroom is the central reason why the school's culture has fundamentally transformed for the better.



As she describes the program: "It's all about mindset and values and how we treat children – what we believe about the children and families we serve. It views social and emotional learning to be as important an academic learning. It emphasizes that children need to have opportunities to learn how to self-regulate. We're not holding carrots in front of them, but instead we create opportunities for them to have choices to decide how to handle challenges. If a child does something inappropriate, what makes sense to solve the issue? What is the best way for that child to make someone he hurt feel better? What does he think should be a logical consequence for his actions?"

Another central element of the Responsive Classroom approach is to help build community in the school. Coviello says, **"When we do morning meetings in every single classroom, the purpose is to build inclusiveness and allow kids to wash away anything difficult that might have happened at home or outside the school. We stand and we greet each other and we shake hands and look each other in the eye. We also give kids an opportunity to share and ask questions of each other. It's supposed to be fun while bringing people together."**

Because all but the newest teachers at P.S. 154 have attended at least one Responsive Classroom institute, an observer attending classes at any grade level will hear similar succinct, calmly delivered language spoken by everyone in the classroom – students as well as teachers. When teachers want to restore quiet, they will gently strike a chime and then raise their hand. And then the room becomes quiet. If a child doesn't follow directions or acts improperly, he or she will be quietly motioned by a teacher toward a "Take a Break" chair toward the back of the room. One to three minutes later, the child will be silently directed to return to the classroom activity.

"The whole approach is meant to be very intentional, proactive, and preventative," Coviello says. "Of course, at times we need to be reactive because we're not living in a utopia here. But the Responsive Classroom has been core to our change. Already by October after the first year of the institute, the kids were literally saying that school is different this year."

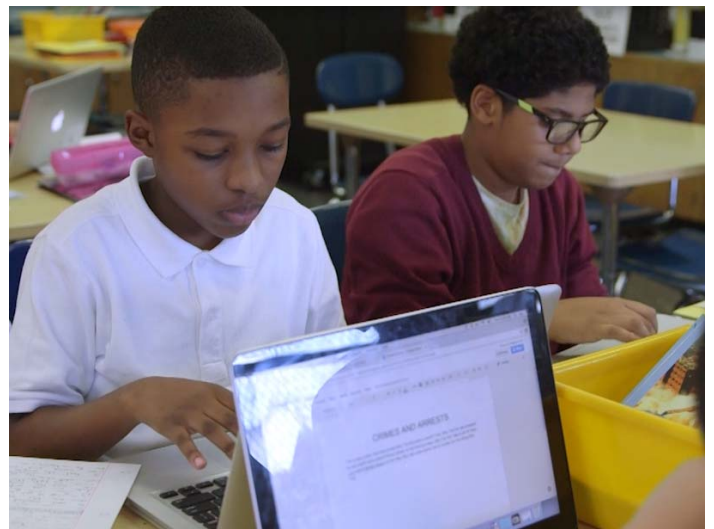
Kendra Brown, the visual arts teacher at P.S. 154 who also serves as the United Federation of Teachers

chapter leader, adds that the children often emulate the same Responsive Classroom language used by the teachers. “When kids come into my class, I see them supporting each other when they have discussions. They will say, ‘I disagree with that, I think this because...’ And with every single teacher using the same signals and chimes and all of it, it helps everyone to be on the same page.”

The Renewal School Program. In the first year of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration in 2014, he and his Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña announced the creation of the “Renewal Schools” program, which would provide additional support from the city to help struggling schools. Key elements of the program include 1) transformation into a “community school,” in which a local community service provider partners to provide personnel and services to the school; 2) additional resources to help enhance the professional development of teachers and administrators; 3) an extra hour of learning time each day; and 4) an assessment of how the school is performing with respect to each element of the Framework for Great Schools to identify key areas for additional resources. P.S. 154 was one of the 94 schools included in the program.

Laura Kotch, who was part of the DOE’s Renewal School team, visited P.S. 154 to evaluate how it was doing. Coviello had been apprehensive about her visit but ended up relieved and optimistic. “Laura said, ‘I can’t believe this is even a Renewal School,’ because she saw that we were in a place where things were decent. Our test scores certainly weren’t showing any improvement yet, but the culture was

better. She came with this positive attitude that we had never seen from the DOE before.”



Kotch now recalls, “I was just blown away by all the wonderful things that she had already put in place. And I realized that she had a tremendous amount to offer the rest of the Renewal Schools in terms of 1) evidence that change was possible and exciting and 2) that their schools could look like her school with the right kinds of decisions. Maybe the scores weren’t where she wanted them to be but they would come, because it was clear to me that they were on the move. A lot of the other Renewal Schools had chosen curriculum that was not rigorous and had not invested in professional development or encouraged intervention practices.”

Coviello adds: “The whole point of [the Renewal School Program] is to really support schools. Laura came here and walked around with me and pointed out positive things that she saw. And I can tell you before that day – in all the years I had been here as a teacher as well – we had not heard one positive thing from outsiders. So it was like, ‘Wait, someone

thinks we're doing well?' So just in terms of the attitude transformation, that was *huge* for us."

Perhaps the most significant benefit of the Renewal School program for P.S. 154 has been the "community school" program. As part of that effort, the DOE directly provides for health services. For example, **last year all 391 of P.S. 154's students received vision testing and 57 of them ended up with glasses they didn't have previously; this fall, 100 students received eye glasses for the first time. The school also now has a full-time asthma case manager, and dental checkups are provided in the auditorium twice a year, with full cleanings, sealants, and any other work done that doesn't require surgery. The school also now has a full-time mental health clinic as part of the community school element of the Renewal School Program, after having it for two days a week last year.**

P.S. 154's lead community-based organization partner is the YMCA, with City Year also providing services to the school. Each K-2 classroom has one young adult from the Y assisting teachers, while City Year serves the third through fifth grade classrooms. Coviello says, "We train them as teaching assistants to do either guided reading or high word frequency work. We believe strongly that every adult is a resource and we need to use them in the best possible way."

The school's approach to the expanded-day feature of the Renewal School Program has been to emphasize rich extracurricular experiences, which include involving artists from the Harlem School for the Arts who teach African drumming, dance, and

voice. Some of the school's own teachers also lead theater projects, including a musical performed each year. There's also a garden and chicken club responsible for maintaining the chicken coop alongside the school. "We're trying to give them really meaningful extracurricular activities that our children typically don't have the opportunity to do," Coviello says.

Collaborative Teachers

Throughout Coviello's decade as a teacher at P.S. 154 before becoming principal, she and her colleagues did not collaborate in a meaningful way. "We were all in our own classrooms and no one was talking with each other," she says. "We were so used to being told how bad we were by outsiders that everyone was afraid of the shadow walking down the hall. No one wanted to go into anyone's classroom, give feedback, or open their classroom, because we were scared."

Deeply aware of those fears, Coviello recognized that she had to take small steps to move her faculty toward the collaborative culture that research shows to be essential to effective schools. She says: "At first we just kind of sat together and talked. And even that was scary for people. Then we started to go into classrooms and try and give feedback to one another. But I can remember people sitting there not knowing what to say."

By the spring of her second year as principal, Coviello felt they were ready to begin collaborative walks together. "First, three teachers join me and my assistant principal in my office and we talk about one

of our school-wide focus questions, what we might see, what questions we might ask the children, and what we might ask the teacher afterward. The whole school knows we are going to do the walk through beforehand and knows what question we will be concentrating on. Then we randomly choose from a bucket the three classrooms we will go to so it doesn't seem like we are targeting anyone. We go in and observe for like seven minutes, then go out in the hallway and debrief with low inference – what did you see?'

"After we go into all three classrooms, we come back together and try to solidify highlights for each teacher and a possible next step for him or her. We don't even call it a next step – an idea they might want to try. Then we bring everyone together – the people whose classrooms we visited – and we have a conversation about what we saw. And it's really, really positive because teachers are thrilled to go into someone's classroom and see what's happening, and we see all these great things and then we're sharing that with them. So they feel like, wow, I'm actually doing something well.

"When we first started that, **people were scared out of their minds to walk into someone else's classroom. They did not want to go. I'll never forget the following year, eventually there was a collaborative walk where the teachers were now well ahead of me and went right into the classroom by themselves. That's how you know things are shifting.**"

Another important transformation Coviello instituted was to departmentalize the third, fourth, and fifth grades. Under departmentalization, each teacher in

a grade focuses on a particular subject area rather than teaching all subjects to the same students; at P.S. 154, each grade level has two literacy classes – one fiction and one non-fiction – along with a math class. Both literacy classes integrate social studies and some science. The same groups of children stay together as they move from one class to another. In the past, teachers in those grades were each responsible for covering all subjects. "The departmentalized structure, if you want to do it well, requires collaborating a lot more with each other. It's done a lot for us, I think, and the teachers love it because they can hone in on one content area."



Yoli-Ann Barrett, a fifth grade non-fiction teacher who has been at P.S. 154 for 13 years, affirms that she prefers the departmentalized approach. "We used to have much more freedom to choose when to teach what, with a lot more flexibility on what to spend more time on and what less. But I feel that shortchanged the kids a lot. They didn't always get all the math or the reading or writing that they needed. With this departmentalization model, they're getting the full dose. The best of all of us, every day."

José Fernandez, Barrett's fifth-grade colleague teaching fiction who has been at P.S. 154 for 15 years,

agrees. “Departmentalization also provides the benefit of teaching the same lesson to three different groups each day. So in one day I feel like I’ve grown three years with applying a particular strategy. I have a chance to do it not just three different times according to the way I originally planned it, but also adjusting and differentiating it for three different groups of learners. So the amount of growth I’ve experienced in teaching literature is just exponential compared to the past. And when something works for one group and not the other, you have to figure out why. I also feel so much more knowledgeable about the content that I’m teaching as a result of departmentalization.”

Christine Gabbard, the third member of the fifth-grade team who focuses on math, added: “I know that if something works for me, I’ll let Jose and Yoli know. Recently Jose sent me his charts that the kids use to analyze their reading skills, and it inspired me to come up with something similar for math. If I ever have a question about how to best get a math concept across to the kids, I know I can go to Yoli to see what she thinks. It’s a really nice way to work and enormously benefits our kids.”

Rigorous Instruction



Three major changes to pedagogy at P.S. 154 include emphasizing an active role for children in the learning process, more focused and purposeful instruction, and close attentiveness to data. All of those transformations are a direct outgrowth of Renewal School professional development supports that include teacher participation in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Program at Columbia University and the DataWise inquiry approach led by Ana Crisostomo, Director of School Renewal for District 7.

Throughout P.S. 154, class time is structured so that students are actively engaged in the learning process – given frequent opportunities to respond to questions and interact with each other – while developing the analytical skills central to demanding new state standards. Consistent with the DOE’s emphasis on developing literacy, the majority of the school day is devoted to reading and writing. Younger students who are identified as struggling receive additional individualized support in Reading Recovery sessions supported by the Renewal Schools program.

Michelle Cota, who has been at P.S. 154 for 19 years and was a second-grade teacher before becoming a Reading Recovery teacher three years ago, describes how much more focused the school has become on making sure that all of its students are able to read: “Previously there wasn’t any intervention for students who were struggling. They didn’t have a place. Now, in addition to one-on-one interventions, we also work with second graders in groups of three.

“Third grade is when you go from learning to read to reading to learn. If they haven’t become readers at

that time, statistically they may end up becoming functionally illiterate. I've seen a big difference between just the second and third grade with struggling readers. By the third grade, they have picked up so many bad habits that it's hard to get in there as effectively, and the intervention doesn't work the same. Just that one year gets a lot harder. So it's really the K[indergarten], first, and second grades where you want to get them to build those skills, because in the third grade it's really hard to fix the bad habits."

First grade teacher Allison Reynolds sees a lot of evidence that their efforts have been paying off. She says, **"I've been hearing our upper grade teachers telling us that the kids are coming to them more prepared. And I think that's why we're seeing a shift in our scores going up, because we have gotten better in the lower grades at laying a foundation.** It takes a while because they don't start taking the state tests for a few years after we work with them. But now with pre-K and our stronger Kindergarten support, I have two students right now in first grade who are reading at four levels above expectations."

Diobel Zaputa, another first grade teacher, adds: "We now have a lot of kids reading half way into the second grade level by the time they leave us in first grade. Wow, that's a huge difference!"

In addition to the emphasis on reading, reinforced by the 20 development sessions with Teachers College supported by the Renewal School program, strengthening instruction in other subjects is also top priority at P.S. 154. For example, professional development in math instruction provided through

the Metamorphosis program – supported in part through Renewal School resources – transformed how that subject is taught. Fifth grade math teacher Christine Gabbard says, "Metamorphosis completely changed my style of teaching. Now I'll pose a question or idea and have the kids come up with their thoughts, and then have the other kids analyze their thinking. So rather than give them problems, and saying, 'do this, do that,' we'll focus on what the kids have created and then analyze their work together. So the kids direct the discussion and use mistakes as a launching pad for understanding how to get better answers. Very often they have great ideas and can direct the discussion very well. So my job is to ask good questions and to choose the best examples for the kids to analyze. Three years ago we had just 3 percent of [our fifth graders] passing the state math exams and last year we had 31 percent. That's partly a result of getting the kids excited and engaged, and not having to just listen to me."

Similarly, second grade teacher Janelle Adams, now in her third year at the school, adds, "In college, they said teaching is about tell, tell, tell, and then the students do. But now my work is much more about questioning and thinking – it's not that I want a yes or no answer but let's analyze and really think about why something is the way it is. In my class we're always challenging and asking if you agree or disagree with something, looking for proof and discussing evidence. We all have different ideas, [and] we need to encourage them to be comfortable voicing them out loud."

Unlike in the past, all P.S. 154 teachers now work closely together to analyze data about the progress

of their students, both to identify challenges that individual students may be facing and class-wide gaps in performance that may require instructional adjustments. Renewal School Director Ana Crisostomo, who was trained in the DataWise analytical inquiry approach at Harvard University, meets every Monday with teams of the schools' teachers to develop their abilities to understand and respond to data. She says, "One of the challenges that I have been able to help with using the DataWise framework is to identify when the numbers indicate that a teacher may need to make an adjustment to see better student results. So we will do inter-visitations to help that teacher see other approaches in a way that isn't threatening. One of the great things for me this year is to see how the teachers themselves are now leading the analytical processes and responses without me or the administrators having to do that for them."

José Fernandez says, "When we look at data, we look at what skills does this child have and what skills does he need, as opposed to, oh my goodness, he's below reading level. **We focus in on what skills does this child need to get to the next level and figure out strategies for accomplishing that, then we communicate how to present those strategies to the child so everyone is on the same page. Often in the past, we almost covertly looked at it as a negative thing if a child was performing below reading level without any clear plan of positively responding. The rich discussions among the groups is evidence of the work they are doing to become more and more effective in the classroom.**"

Strong Family-Community Ties

Like most other schools serving predominantly low socioeconomic families, P.S. 154 has long had difficulty engaging all parents in coming to the school or responding to communications from teachers. In some cases, mothers, fathers, and guardians simply lack flexibility in their job arrangements. Language and cultural barriers can also play a role. But because research clearly demonstrates that students are more likely to do better when schools are able to build strong communication links with parents, Coviello and her faculty have worked hard to adjust their practices in order to enhance those connections.



For example, Coviello instituted monthly "principal's breakfast" for parents, which are structured as workshops. "We now get 20 to 40 people coming to those, which is a lot more than it used to be. We still have a long way to go, though. Parents have often said visibility and being somewhere other than my office is important, so I'm out there every morning and afternoon, and know pretty much every parent. Our guidance counselors are also great at learning

about the particular circumstances our kids are facing at home, which can be quite difficult and painful.”

One innovation launched this school year is a mobile, web-based platform called SchoolCNXT, which enables school personnel to communicate with parents by texting as well as e-mail. P.S. 154 gained access to the service by agreeing to be part of a study sponsored by the DOE and Brown University.

“We’re excited about it because we think it will help us reach much higher numbers of parents,” Coviello says. “Not everyone is on email or knows how to use their computers, but everyone knows how to use their phones.”

Another new effort scheduled to begin this winter will be English as a Second Language classes for parents. That initiative will be paid for by a grant from the community School office and will be led by P.S. 154’s new community school director.

Coviello also revamped parent-teacher conferences for second through fifth grades so that students – consistent with their newly active role in their learning – lead the discussion. They draw from notes prepared in advance with teachers, highlighting their areas of growth while volunteering what they need to focus on improving. Coviello says, “That approach shifts the whole paradigm. **In the old model where teachers would list difficulties that students were having, it put parents in the position of having to get mad at the child to seem like they were doing what they’re supposed to do. Having kids themselves say what they are doing well and what they need to work on eliminates that whole dynamic.**”

In addition, at the beginning of the school year, P.S. 154 convenes an open house so that parents can get to know the teachers, learn about the plan for the year and exchange contact information. Jose Fernandez, the fifth grade teacher who has taught at the school for 15 years, says: “In years past, we wouldn’t know parents’ faces and they wouldn’t know ours until November, when parent-teacher conferences happened.”

Still, Coviello believes she and the school have the potential to do far more to further strengthen bonds with the community. “Someone might sit here and say we have great parental engagement because of the monthly breakfasts, and yeah, it’s great, but it’s not close to what I understand [to be] how we can be a true community school that serves as a resource for those parents – helping them to address their own challenges and connecting them with supports available in the community. So we are going to work on that.”

Trust

High degrees of trust in a school community are integral to student growth, and it’s clear from conversations with P.S. 154’s administrators, faculty, parents, and students that mutual respect has become pervasive in a building that not very long ago experienced toxic levels of distrust. As a new teacher at P.S. 154, Claire Hollocou offers perspective on the issue of trust and support. Hollocou is a fifth-grade special education teacher whose previous jobs included working at a Success Academy charter school. She says, “Like Success, this school is a very data-driven, high intensity environment – more so

than other schools I had offers from. In both schools, teachers feel it is incredibly important to be able to get their kids to a place where they are able to go to middle school and be successful. In both places, every single minute of the lesson is maximized.

“But I find that this is a much more nurturing environment. The Responsive Classroom approach is a way to use empathy and support while also staying consistent and having precise rules. It enables kids to feel like they aren’t being targeted. If a child does something that’s outside the rules, the ‘natural consequences’ response make it clear to the child why that response is happening. So if they break a pencil, they have to pick up the pieces and sharpen a few other pencils rather than staying for detention. It just feels more reasonable to the kids and they feel like you’re on their side.”

Victoria Wailes is a mother of two children now at P.S. 154 who previously sent her four older children to the same school. She says, **“It’s totally different. My kids study a lot more now. They actually *want* to come to school. I used to have to force them. Every day my son gets dressed before I do. He is always waiting for me to get ready. I tell him he’s got plenty of time, but he wants to get going to school.”**

Beyond Renewal

The Renewal Schools program sets a wide range of benchmarks for participating schools to attain to demonstrate that they are making progress. P.S. 154 met every single one of its benchmarks a year ahead of schedule and now only needs to show additional improvements of 1 percentage point in the 2016-17 school year to be deemed ready to leave the

program. Entering into what is likely to be 154’s final year as a Renewal School, Coviello and her team welcomed a new Assistant Principal and Community School Director, which both required a significant amount of her time to help them become comfortable in their new environment. Ana Crisostomo, the Director of School Renewal, says that process has gone smoothly: “The new leaders have already adapted and become nicely integrated into the school’s culture.”

Jessica Cruz, who had been Coviello’s AP since she became principal, is now the principal at PS/IS 178 Holliswood in Queens District 26. In her first few months on the new job, Cruz says she has tried to follow Coviello’s example as she seeks to build trust with the faculty and other stakeholders. Cruz says, “Alison is a phenomenal leader because she is a learner herself. She rolls up her sleeves and digs into content with teachers, showing that she is part of their team and focused on improving student learning. I have seen how her approach really works and am doing my best to lead my school in similar ways.”

The lessons learned from the successes of P.S. 154 are also disseminating more broadly through the School Renewal Office’s efforts to organize “showcase” opportunities for other administrators and teachers to visit the school. Those day-long events are prepared by 154’s teachers and demonstrate for others how comfortable the faculty is with opening their classrooms and sharing ideas about their practice.

While Coviello is gratified that P.S. 154 has become a model school, she also is cognizant that her teachers could become overwhelmed if she asks too much of

them. She says, "My big reflection over the summer was that I can't put too much pressure on my teachers – that has to stay within me. So my personal motto this year is the line from the song from the musical Hamilton: 'Talk Less, Smile More.'"