



Springfield Renaissance School  
Springfield, Massachusetts

# Learning by Heart

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

CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE

WKCD 2014



# A System of Working Parts

SPRINGFIELD RENAISSANCE SCHOOL, SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

by Kathleen Cushman, What Kids Can Do

To start a school from the ground up resembles architecture in some ways. Imagining its future occupants, we make fundamental design choices based on dreams and ideals as much as practicalities. *This structure will gather people in. Through this conduit, energy will flow. An opening here will shed light all day long.* Somehow, between



PHOTO: JOE MIKOS

the vision and the constructed place, a system of working parts must come together. If its gears turn smoothly—withstanding the battering of everyday use while holding fast to its reason for being—everyone who enters the place can feel it.

Springfield Renaissance School began with its own idealistic vision: a magnet middle and high school that would bolster the uncertain futures of youth in this diverse and hard-pressed Massachusetts city. Though nearby colleges and universities abound, 78 percent of Springfield’s school-age children live in poverty, and manufacturing jobs have dried up. In this context, the school set an ambitious goal: 100 percent college acceptance.



PHOTO: JOE MIKOS

To inspire and support the work ahead, it chose Expeditionary Learning (EL), a longstanding national school network that offered a well-documented approach, a cadre of experienced coaches, and a focus on social and emotional development in the service of academic excellence.



At the time of our study in the spring of 2013, the students who entered in 2006 as Renaissance’s first sixth graders were approaching their high school graduation. In the first days of middle school, these young people had helped to define the community commitments that now infuse their school’s culture. But their safe journey would also depend on an interlocking support system that afforded structure and guidance, collaboration and autonomy, reflection and public

presentation. “A System of Working Parts” investigates and illustrates the design choices that enabled Springfield Renaissance School to help all students succeed on their path to adulthood, despite the obstacles they faced.

This is the second 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. Each study—each portrait—explores particularities in that school’s embrace of social-emotional learning. 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 always the students at the center.

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**Cover photograph:** Joe Mikos

**To cite:** Kathleen Cushman, “A System of Working Parts: Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, Massachusetts.” *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:**

East Side Community School, New York, NY; Oakland International High School, Oakland, CA; Quest Early College High School, Humble, TX; Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA

See [howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html](http://howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html)

# I. Introduction: Senior Decision Day

It was one of those days at Springfield Renaissance School when everyone was either crying or laughing. People were pouring through the halls, streaming into the big auditorium Renaissance shares with another district school housed in this sprawling 1990s brick building. It was May 16, the annual Senior Decision Day, and every single twelfth-grade student was about to stand up before this assembly to announce a postgraduate plan: to each other, to their fellow students in grades 6 through 12, and to the teachers and families whose beaming faces lit the darkened hall.

Seniors could wear whatever they liked on this day. But so many students in the audience wore brightly colored college sweatshirts that you wouldn't have known they were also in school uniform, a typical khaki-white-red-black combination that any student may vary by choosing apparel bearing a college's name. Some parents also had on college t-shirts, in a city where one out of five families—and 40 percent of children—live in poverty. This school has explicitly committed to change those numbers. Its expectation is “college acceptance for every graduate,” said principal Steven Mahoney, who founded Renaissance in 2006 as a district magnet school, part of the national Expeditionary Learning network of schools.

Springfield is a good place for optimists like Mahoney. Within fifteen miles of this high school lie 25 universities and colleges, and the city enjoys a position at the crossroads of New England, where the East-West Route 90 artery intersects the Connecticut River Valley. Despite a stagnant unemployment rate of over 10 percent, its high-tech, medical, and business communities make Springfield the economic center of Western Massachusetts. Though its reputation for crime rose dramatically in the past two decades, violence is now declining in a city made famous by its manufacture of guns. Fame and history generate pride in other areas as well: everyone knows that this is Hoop City, where basketball was invented.

For John, an eleventh grader in the audience on this Decision Day, basketball was everything. Everything else about school was difficult for him, he said. The English he spoke in Africa before his family immigrated here did him little good in fast-talking American classrooms and hallways. In the middle of grade 10, he had transferred here reluctantly from a much larger high school in the city. “My grades was terrible,” he confessed. In the rough world of a big school, only playing ball had kept him out of trouble. “If I don't play a sport,” John said, “I feel like I'm not part of the world.”

Steve Mahoney has three teen-age sons himself, and he knew how to use that kind of energy. The failing grades John arrived with would have to dramatically change before he could play on a Renaissance team, the principal told him. “It was harsh,” he said later. “He was very angry. He wanted to go back to his other school.” But John's father, who had enrolled the family's younger siblings at Renaissance, was adamant that his older son make the transfer. He feared the bad crowd that John might otherwise join, marked as a failure at his previous school.

Group after group were now coming up to the stage in turn, introduced by the teachers who had seen them through years of “crew,” an Expeditionary Learning advisory structure. Most of this senior class entered as sixth graders in 2006, when the school opened with two grades, sixth and ninth; after seven years immersed in this school's approach to learning, they were regarded by many as a proof point.

Emotions ran high as each student took the mic to share their plans: community college, technical colleges, state colleges and universities, the military, the Seven Sisters, the Ivy League. Almost everybody could say what



**Just Listen Video Clip**  
**John, Don't Give Up**  
**On It**



they wanted to study. Guidance counselor Deidre Cuffee-Gray reminded seniors emphatically that they would now need each other's continued support to get through college. "We all know the hard part is yet to come," she said. "Please rely on your crew—however it grows and changes with time—to tell you the truth and give you hope."

Watching in the audience, John was nodding his assent. He knew what it was like to be pulled up by the collar to hear "the reality of things." His Renaissance classmates and teachers—steeped in their community commitments and habits of work—had brought him into a posse and helped him find his path.

"I like when people push me forward," John said. "If they're pushing you, they want you to be a better person in the future. They don't want you to end up like these other people on the street or other kids selling drugs and all that. So they're pushing you to the education. And the work is hard. And they make you perseverance [*sic*] in the work."

One year after transferring to Renaissance, "I feel like I belong in this school," John said. "Everything is a lot different now. I understand everything. I feel like a teacher is always on my side, no matter what I do. My friends are always there when I need them. My principal, anything I need help on, I can go to him." And also, he concluded, "I play sports. So everybody kinda know me as the person who I am."

On this Decision Day, John had arrived at a clear sense that he would be among the seniors on the stage next year, announcing his college plans. On his crew's exploratory trip to colleges earlier in the year, he had set his sights on the University of Connecticut because of its top basketball team. He was working hard to raise his grades; if not accepted at UConn, he intended to build them up at a community college and apply again. He dearly hoped to play basketball in college, he said. But even if that didn't work out, he envisioned a career in sports training, or management, or media. "Something cool I could concern my life with," he said. His voice registered the confidence of someone who knew that he could learn.

## II. Structural Supports

The slogan "100 percent college acceptance" appears at Springfield Renaissance School everywhere you look. Even so, "you can paste anything you want on a wall," a senior named Jesse commented. "That doesn't mean that that's what your school follows. What's different at my school is that it's engrained in the curriculum."

To the outside observer certain commitments do seem engrained in the very structure of this school. To a large extent, that may have developed because from its start the new school embraced the design elements of the Expeditionary Learning network. The school's founding grew from a partnership between the Springfield Public School district and Expeditionary Learning schools, a network that in 2003 received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support the creation of twenty new secondary schools throughout the country. As it added grade after grade, a series of start-up grants gave founding principal Steve Mahoney a critical

**Curriculum and instruction focus on engaging students in challenges that matter to them and to their world.**

*"The idea is to put really important and difficult work together with great joy in doing it."*

— GREG FARRELL, founder and president emeritus, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound schools

advantage: experienced school designers and coaches from EL worked closely with his growing faculty on creating the curricular, instructional, and assessment practices that had proved most effective in the network's other schools.<sup>1</sup>

Renaissance has reached its adolescence now and relies solely on district funds, sharply cut back in the post-2008 economic slump. Almost two thirds of the school's roughly 650 students qualify for free or reduced lunch and the enrollment is remarkably diverse: 42 percent Hispanic, 25 percent White, 24 percent African American, one percent Asian, and 8 percent other. The school continues to draw both academic and institutional sustenance from the EL language, traditions, and rituals that have seeped into its collective consciousness. (Renaissance now hosts EL site seminars to explain them to others.) When adults and students describe its practices—even if they are complaining—one senses the same kind of allegiance that a family exerts.

As in a family, that commitment developed neither from the top down nor from the bottom up but in a continually shifting dynamic. To achieve a rich and meaningful academic path for every student—not just some—would require everyone involved to give it everything they had. Precisely to support that effort, Renaissance adopted the following structures and practices of Expeditionary Learning.

## A curriculum of connection

Such absorption and commitment could not happen without curriculum that mattered to students and to their world, school founders believed. “The idea is to put really important and difficult work together with

**Renaissance takes personal challenge seriously in both academic and developmental contexts. Students embrace the slogan “We are crew, not passengers.”**

*“I wanted to quit, and I didn’t. After that I got to see who I was as a real person. Now I really know what I can do and what I cannot do.” – LUIS, 16*

great joy in doing it,” according to Greg Farrell, who founded the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound schools network in 1990 and still serves as its president emeritus. To that end, EL schools infuse the curriculum with learning “expeditions”—serious inquiries into challenging cross-disciplinary issues, in which students address the authentic needs of an audience other than their teachers. For example, a grade 11 expedition titled “Power, Passion, Peril” explores nuclear technology and culminates in an extensive position paper.

Although EL's initial formal partnership with Outward Bound has since largely concluded, outdoor and wilderness expeditions also are a signature of many of its schools, including Renaissance. Every fall its ninth grade class (and some transfer sophomores) participate in a week-long Outward

Bound course, hiking in the mountains of Maine. “I’ve never done that my whole life,” said Luis, 16. “It was scary at first. I wanted to quit, and I didn’t. After that I got to see who was I as a real person. Now I really know what I can do and what I cannot do.”

## A grade 6–12 design

So that students would start early to shape the necessary habits for such challenging work, the school's planners designed it to include grades 6 through 12. Their mission would also gain cohesion and power, they believed, if students progressed as a cohort from middle through high school. Research has shown that the transition



## Just Listen Video Clips Structural Supports

Griffin, Expeditions Are Exciting

Adrianna, You Just Feel Older

Kenneth, My Crew Mom

Ajeya, Just Do What I Need to Do

Luis, The Learning of Teachers

Sasha, Rituals of Reflection



into a new school often creates a social and emotional unbalance that throws students’ academic trajectory off track,<sup>2</sup> and Renaissance students now agree that moving up to high school in a familiar environment helped stabilize their passage.

“I had seen some of the teachers, like in the hallways,” said Adrianna, 15, recalling the start of ninth grade. “So it was like, ‘Oh! Now you’re my teacher, so I’m gonna get to know you.’” In the adolescent jockeying for social position, observed Kenneth, 16, “You finally realize, ‘I’m gonna be with these people for five, six, seven more years. Let me try and get along with them.’” Looking back as a senior, Jesse agreed. “There are people who I’ll take a road trip to the beach with now [but] who I never would’ve spoken to in sixth or seventh grade,” he said. “And now we’ve seen each other grow. We have a much better understanding of each other. We’re not best friends, but we’ve reached adulthood together.”

### Advisement in ‘crew’

The student advisory structure of EL schools is called crew (after the saying, “We are crew, not passengers,” as Sasha, 16, explained). At Renaissance, the adult adviser stays with the same group of 12 to 15 students from grade 6 through 9; for the high school years, students join a new crew. Meeting daily during first period, crew is a credit-bearing class complete with learning targets and assessments; its curriculum combines social-emotional development with academic goal-setting, advisement, and support. College planning and career exploration take place in crew, as do community service and challenge activities such as the Outward Bound expedition.

Even though students may have their crew teacher for an academic course as well, “it’s a very different relationship,” Sasha said. “They get to know you in a different way than they do in the classroom.” Peer relationships also grow stronger, she added. “Being together for so long, the people really get to know each other and everyone kind of has each other’s backs.”

### Continuous formative assessments

All EL schools emphasize clear learning targets, routinely assessed in class for an ongoing picture of individual students’ development. At Renaissance, teachers assess not just subject-area knowledge and skills but also the student’s formation of five key habits of work. Students take these five academic behaviors seriously, they say, because they make up a significant part of the grade in every academic subject throughout their years at the school.

At 13, Ajeya described her initial response to a teacher with a clipboard taking notes on a particular habit each day. “I was like, aww, man! I’m gonna have to do this stuff,” she said. “And if I don’t, then that’s gonna be definitely off my grade.” With support from her adviser, “I realized, oh,

#### HABITS OF WORK

Teachers assess not just content and skills but also the student’s formation of five key habits of work:

- I come to class ready to learn
- I actively and respectfully participate in class
- I revise and assess my work
- I contribute to the success of group work
- I complete my daily homework.



it's not that hard," she said. "Just do what I need to do." Once in college, said Adrianna, 15, "you're not gonna have these constant reminders of, 'This is what you need to do in class.' So you might as well get into the habit now." By her senior year, Brandi reflected, "it has helped turn me into a better hard worker and a stronger student that is more self-disciplined."

Common protocols for self-assessment and for critique and revision are also in regular use by students and teachers alike. When Luis, at 16, chose a 40-hour internship with the principal as his required community service, he was amazed to witness teachers assessing each other's work as rigorously as that of students. "I got to see the way that they used to grade a unit plan," he said. "The way that they really talked about it and they presented their work. And then they would just check off if they met the target or if they didn't. They'll be judged the same way that I was judged in my writing."

## Rituals of reflection

At regular intervals—during each school year and across the years—students in all EL schools must review and reflect on their work and present it to others. At Renaissance, the most frequent of these events are student-

**Before advancing to grade 9 and grade 11, students present and defend a "Passage Portfolio."**

*"In sixth grade I didn't really catch up with the flock. But in seventh grade I did. Now I know who I am, I'm not scared to ask for help. – JANEЕ, GRADE 8*

led conferences, in which students review their progress with their parents or guardians and their teacher-adviser and set new goals. Held three times yearly from grades 6 through 12, these rituals instill the habits of reflection and planning early on. "At first it was a little unnerving, but I think as we started doing them a lot more, I feel more confident," said Sasha. "It really helps me to reflect even when we're not in the process of doing them."

That practice also prepares students for a higher-stakes rite of passage at the end of grades 8 and 10. In order to advance to the next academic tier, at those two points they must present and defend a more encompassing "Passage Portfolio" of their work before a panel of family members, community

guests, teachers, and students. As Arria Coburn helped her eighth-grade advisee, Janee, review the binder for her upcoming Passage Portfolio, the two of them talked about the metaphor Janee had chosen to describe her middle-school years. "I chose the bird, 'cause sometimes I can fly by myself, or I can be with the flock," the girl said. Early on, she had worried about exposing her struggles in math. "In sixth grade I didn't really catch up with the flock. But in seventh grade I did," she explained. "Now I know who I am, I'm not scared to ask for help."

## Exhibition of student work

Keeping student work before the public eye holds great importance in the Expeditionary Learning design. The halls of Renaissance bear witness to that with poster displays of what students produce, but the work also travels into the larger community. Case studies, projects, fieldwork, consultation with community experts, and service learning all generate public audiences and raise the stakes for the production and exhibition of high-quality work. For example, Springfield's facilities engineer, Joseph Forest, asked the ninth-grade environmental science class at Renaissance to collect data and make a recommendation for energy conservation in the city's school buildings. Students presented their "Greenprint" to the mayor, and by following their recommendations the city has since saved thousands of dollars in energy costs.



Academic press also shows up in Renaissance’s results from the rigorous and highly regarded Massachusetts state assessments (MCAS). For each cohort of students since the school’s founding, scores have consistently leaped ahead as students progressed through their years at the school. On the English Language Arts MCAS, for example, only 47 percent of 2013’s tenth graders had scored Proficient or Advanced in the year they entered Renaissance as sixth graders. However, they made steady and impressive gains throughout the years that followed. In seventh grade 63 percent of them scored Proficient or Advanced on the ELA test, and by eighth grade their scores had jumped another 16 points, to 79 percent. When these tenth graders took the test in spring 2013, fully 98 percent (the highest yet for the school) scored Proficient or Advanced. The comparable rate overall in Springfield Public Schools stood at 74 percent, and across Massachusetts 91 percent of tenth graders reached those levels.<sup>3</sup>

#### COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS

Three times yearly students lead a conference with their family and adviser to review their progress and set new goals. A touchstone for progress: seven character traits that the student body chose as their commitments to the community:

- Respect
- Courage
- Responsibility
- Friendship
- Cultural sensitivity
- Perseverance
- Self-discipline

### III. Values Made Visible

Just as young plants need good soil, sunlight, and water in order to climb a garden’s stakes, young humans need the right conditions in order to benefit from a school’s structural supports. “If they’re not happy, they won’t do great. If they’re happy, they will,” concluded Luis, 16, after his forty hours of shadowing Principal Mahoney. “You have to listen to them and know what’s going on.”

That listening began at the very start of Renaissance’s first year, when the school asked its initial group of sixth and ninth graders to put words to the leadership qualities they most wanted to see in themselves and others. “It wasn’t just teachers saying, ‘This is how it’s gonna be run,’” said Sasha. “It was students voicing their opinions and saying what they wanted in the school.” Those conversations yielded seven character traits—respect, courage, responsibility, friendship, cultural sensitivity, perseverance, and self-discipline—that youth and adults at Renaissance pledge their “community commitment” to develop.

“Those are the things that make the school,” said Jason, 14. “The commitments that we made to not down-grade people, but boost them up so they have the same opportunity that we have to learn. The responsibility part, the friendship part, the cultural sensitivity part, they all tie in together.”

By trusting students to speak for themselves about what mattered, Renaissance supported their creation of a shared history with values that they clearly feel they own. Displays in classrooms and hallways recognize and celebrate students who demonstrate various community commitments. One such poster, featuring a photo of a boy wearing a football jersey and a bashful grin, read

*“Ju’Wan has courage. ‘I try something new, even when I am afraid.’ This is the first year that Ju’Wan has played high school football.”*

Students use the character traits as reference points when assessing their own progress in family conferences and Passage Portfolios. On Decision Day, seven seniors punctuated the college-announcement ceremony with brief talks on how a particular commitment had shaped their journey to graduation.

## Building youth-adult relationships

The advisory structure called crew gives all Renaissance students an adult adviser who stays with the same group for several years. Students say that builds close bonds of trust both among peers and with the adviser. “My crew teacher is kinda like a second mom to me,” said Kenneth, a tenth grader who described his school days as filled with emotional ups and downs. “Having that one person that you know is always gonna be your friend is really good.” Ajeya, 13, agreed: “If you have any problems, you know you can go to that person and tell them and they’ll be there to listen to you.”

Not just their crew teachers but also regular academic teachers cared about their well-being, many students reported. That made a difference because “the academics and the emotions and the socialness, it really does all mesh together,” Kenneth said. “If you don’t feel happy, then you’re just gonna sit there and kind of give attitude to the teacher.”

“These teachers, they’re really invested in us,” said Adrianna, 15. “They take their time and you can tell that they care. They’re not just here for a job.” Ajeya declared that her teachers were “willing to make ways for you to do your best. If that means that if they need to come earlier in the morning to help you, they will do that. If they need to stay later after school hours, they will do that. You always have somebody that you can lean on.”

“Human beings want to be known,” Steve Mahoney declared. “They want to be seen.” (He studies a roster with photos as bathroom reading.) Luis, the young man who shadowed Mahoney, was struck by the fact that his principal knew every student by name. A principal must act like a sports coach, Luis decided: “You have to listen to all your players and know what’s going on. And if you see that they’re not having a good [day], ask ’em what is wrong. That helps you know how your players are gonna play out on the field.” At 16, he aspires to be a principal himself one day.

## Timely counseling and support

Despite building strong relationships in the service of learning, however, academic teachers at Renaissance do not have the time or training to serve as mental health counselors. Three full-time staff (two for social-emotional matters, one for college counseling) anchor the school guidance office, a spacious suite of rooms ideal for individual as well as small group sessions. They get valuable reinforcement from six to nine graduate

students in social work from Smith, Mt. Holyoke, University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and Springfield College, who serve as interns (most of them full time) for most of the school year.

That arrangement makes it possible for students to leave class temporarily to regain their emotional balance, with help from a counselor. Steven, 15, has seen his share of days when “I can’t even show my face in class,” he confided, because of “those things that pump you up and it gets you mad or it gets you down.” After even just a short time in the guidance office, he can return to class and “hop right in it,” he said.

Having a well-staffed guidance office reassures both teachers and students, as emotional issues can be addressed respectfully without



### Just Listen Video Clips Values Made Visible

Jason, To Boost Each Other Up

Ajeya, Push Through That Hard Stuff

Shauri, Building Confidence in Yourself

Luis, This Friendship Bond Thing



**Nearby universities send graduate students in teaching and social work to complete their internships at Renaissance, working closely with classroom teachers and guidance counselors.**

*“You always have somebody that you can lean on. There’s nowhere you just feel like, ‘I need help and I don’t know where to go.’”*

— AJEYA, 13

disrupting class. “It’s not that the whole class is stopping, just, and focusing on you,” said Jason, 14. “Because that sometimes can be overwhelming to you.”

Clearly the arrangement eases classroom management issues for teachers as well. Jessica Engebretson recalled a student in her seventh-grade science class for whom the school provided regular counseling in anger management. In time, she said, he could identify when he was getting upset and ask for space, going into the hallway or making a brief visit to the guidance office and coming back calmer. Ms. Engebretson, too, learned to recognize his signals and suggest a break. Over the year she saw his academic work improve, she said. Even better, “this understanding between us built a rapport that is still growing in his eighth-grade year.”

## **Behavioral norms and consequences**

“We sweat the small stuff,” principal Steve Mahoney said, describing his approach to the school’s norms of behavior. He likes the “broken window theory” regarding antisocial behavior, which holds that taking minor infractions seriously goes far toward establishing a culture of order and respect. “We commit to five or six things that we want every teacher to be solid on every day: uniform violations, cell phones and food in the classroom, little things that eat away at the consistency and the quality of the learning environment,” he said. “And we review that every year.”

For larger offenses, the school’s response combines a more therapeutic approach with clear consequences. “We try to make sure that the student thinks through, talks through what happened and why it happened and understands its impact on other people, whether it’s the family, the classroom, the teacher, or themselves,” said Mahoney. “And then there’s a consequence.”

Although Mahoney has never expelled a student, “I don’t have any qualms about making the individual pay so that the group can benefit,” he said. Detentions are routinely handled at lunch or after school. For in-school suspensions, however, students go to the school’s “Reconstruction Center” (known as RC) to reflect on their transgression. They write apologies to their families and those harmed, as well as an essay based on their community commitments. Graver offenses sometimes receive out-of-school suspensions, which involve both making restitution and keeping up with schoolwork. “Every time we do a suspension, there’s two audiences: the kid, and then all the other kids and the rest of the community,” Mahoney said. “They need to know.”

According to students, the message comes through loud and clear. “You never see fights in this school,” said Steven, 16. Shauri can still recall at 15 her first disciplinary incident in middle school, after she slapped a boy with a piece of gimp. At that age, “you didn’t really know how to control your anger,” she explained. “You just thought, ‘I’ma just do it and get away with it.’” When the assistant principal took her to RC, Shauri had to write an apology letter to the boy and another to her mother. “You didn’t get away with it,” she said. “They made sure your parents saw. You got a phone call home, a letter home that day.” Ever since, she said, “I’m like, ‘I’m never doing this again.’”

## New school transitions

Though its grade 6–12 design fosters a close-knit student body, Renaissance sees its share of newcomers who arrive mid-journey and sometimes mid-year. “I didn’t really know where I fitted in,” said Ajeya, 13, recalling her arrival during the previous year. “It was a really big challenge, ’cause, you know, you leave friends and you want, you have to transition.”

But the school’s structures have the effect of building relationships among its very diverse students, observed Jason, who recalled himself as a “very closed-minded” new ninth grader. “They don’t force you to be with different people, but they kind of push you towards going with people that you don’t really know,” he said. Building trust with adults and peers at a recent leadership retreat “made it very more, I think, easy to talk and to say what I feel.”

## Family matters at school

Family members are highly visible members of the Renaissance community. “They always bring family in,” said Ajeya, describing a recent Exhibition Night and potluck family dinner. “I guess other parents talk to each other when we have these kind of things, and they get to know your families. . . . They want your family to come in and see, ‘Oh, this is what my child is doing,’ or ‘This is what her peers are doing.’”

**Students take the lead in conferences with family and teacher-advisers, reviewing progress and setting new goals.**

*“At first it was a little unnerving, but [now] I feel more confident. It really helps me to reflect, even when we’re not in the process of doing them.” – SASHA, 16*

Nowhere is this more evident than in the family conferences everyone calls “student-leds.” For several days in late fall, winter, and spring, in virtually every nook and corner of the school one sees small groups of chairs where students are presenting their progress to parents or guardians, in the company of their crew teacher.

Students must take the lead throughout the conference, working with their families and crew teacher to set or keep SMART goals (so called because they are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely). Because crew keeps students with the same adviser for several years, these occasions develop into ongoing conversations that foster trust and understanding across generations and roles.

Ajeya struggles with procrastination, for example, but she has come to see her mother as a model of perseverance (one of the school’s community commitments). “She’s determined to finish her stuff,” Ajeya said. “She doesn’t let things go in her way. So when I look up to her, like, ‘Oh, I wanna be my mom,’ I wanna be able to push through that hard stuff.”

As Renaissance teachers come to know families better, they find new ways to support students through hard times. In twelfth grade, Brandi looked back on two key periods when her teachers served as an emotional as well as academic lifeline. The first came just before her transition to ninth grade, when a beloved grandfather died. “My mind wasn’t there, and I was just wasn’t in the right place,” she said. “I remember them really being there for me. And it was hard, but they did help me get through it.” When, in eleventh grade, Brandi’s entire college savings had to go toward the care of her ailing grandmother, the school guidance office went all out to send scholarship opportunities her way. “Even though me and my family have been through so much, they see the potential in me,” she said, her eyes shining. “I didn’t think I was gonna be able to really financially make the task of going to college, but now they’ve helped make that possible.”



## Service to the community

Exceptionally diverse in its demographics as well as its business and cultural institutions, the Springfield area affords many opportunities for the community service that Renaissance considers fundamental to adolescent education. “As I’m leaving, I really want people to be reminded of what we were founded on,” said Maya, a

**Students play a major part in school governance, and many extend those skills in service to the community.**

*“From the time that we were 12 years old, we were taken really seriously. [Now] I do a lot of work outside of the school, but it all started within the school.”*

– JESSE, 18

senior who was one of the school’s founding sixth graders in 2006. Although the school earned a reputation for service at its start, she remarked, its push to become “academically notable” later overshadowed that priority. All students, however, must complete 40 hours of service before graduation. For Maya’s legacy project, with the school’s National Honor Society chapter she organized a community run to raise money for local charities. “I just want to leave a mark somehow,” she said, “and to get our students out into the community.”

Throughout middle school, Shauri belonged to a girls service-learning group called “Ladies of Elegance,” which focused on building confidence, poise, and self-respect in early adolescence. Reluctant at first, she found herself coming out of her shell as the girls interacted with other young people in the community. “I actually did a room over, at a teen shelter for young ladies who have babies,” she said. “And it really helped out with not only myself, but with others.”

Such community connections stoke the fires of learning and can lead to serious thoughts about future careers. Ever since middle school Jesse has participated in school governance, and in eleventh grade he found an internship with a local political organization. By senior year, he had worked on campaigns for city council and state Senate. “I’ve really started building a political career in Springfield already,” he said. “But I was able to really learn all these skills in a more small community that really took me seriously ’cause I was a student at the school.”

## IV. Developing Agency

Approaching the end of his tenth-grade year, Kenneth spoke willingly about the social challenges of adolescence. “Everyone has their secrets,” he said, his eyes humorous behind black-framed glasses in an ample face. “You can’t just express it out there, because you might cause some drama. Then people start spreading rumors and that just adds even more stress.” Recalling his experience in sixth and seventh grades, he said, “I would be the last one to be picked for a group.”

Since then, he said, things have changed. “All of us have really learned to mingle and really interact with each other. Like learned what not to say, what to say, how to not push the buttons, how to not pull strings, really tell if someone’s annoyed or not.” At 16, “there are times when I do feel like an outsider,” Kenneth said. “But then something else happens and I feel in again.”

Such a shift had recently happened, as Kenneth assembled the Passage Portfolio that would demonstrate his readiness for the last two years of high school. As part of its requirements, he explained, “I had to do a physical challenge, and I’m not really that athletic.” But he had always loved to dance. So, just for fun, Kenneth tried out for cheerleading. He made the team, the first male ever to do so.

In another school, he would have been discouraged from taking that risk, Kenneth believes. “People would’ve probably started talking like, you know, crap about me . . . saying, ‘Oh, you can’t do that.’ Like, ‘You’re fat,’ or something.” But finally he had found a team sport that he could envision continuing for years to come. He had already started to choreograph the cheerleading routines, and was imagining studying business management in college and eventually opening his own dance studio. For these positive developments Kenneth credited “this environment, this atmosphere” at Renaissance. “You really feel that you can be successful in anything,” he said.

## A path of development and discovery

As its student achievement profile confirms, Springfield Renaissance School largely functions as a well-oiled system of working parts. Its structures follow the EL pattern, we have seen: a 6–12 grade span, a curriculum of connection, advisement in “crew,” continuous formative assessments, schoolwide rituals of reflection, and the exhibition of student work before authentic audiences. Its other practices also give evidence of its core values: building strong youth-adult relationships, providing timely counseling, setting clear behavioral norms



### Just Listen Video Clips Developing Agency

Adrianna, *Something That I Never Did Before*

Kenneth, *The First Male Cheerleader*

Sasha, *The Chance to Choose and to Stretch*

Steven, *Writing About Who I Am*

Jesse, *Building a Political Career*

Brandi, *I Saw That I Changed*



and consequences, bringing families into the school in important ways, and supporting student service to the community. Despite the familiar challenges of a district school—budget cuts, teacher time, and the like—the gears seem to be turning in this school’s system. With a very diverse enrollment, Renaissance has thus far steadily met its paramount goal: that every student gain acceptance to college.

When students here talk about their school experiences, however, they reveal more (and subtler) effects of those “working parts.” Their words evoke a sense of safety and belonging. They speak of breaking down stereotypes and exploring new identities. They seem to value what they are learning, which moves them beyond compliance and toward risk and reach. They tell of failing at hard things and then of trying again. They speak reflectively of their struggles but also express confidence that success lies within their grasp.

Somewhere in the journey from sixth grade to high school graduation, students here are taking ownership of their learning. In a developmental process that research calls crucial to their later lives, they are learning to find their own voice, consider their own values, make their own choices, chart their own course.<sup>4</sup> Student after student contributed to that picture of how social and emotional factors supported their academic success, and glimpses of classroom practice at Renaissance bore their stories out.

## A sense of belonging

“I’m not from what you would call maybe the best neighborhood,” Jason said at 14, adding that he often chooses to stick around at the end of the day rather than get on the bus home. The mutual trust built up in his crew advisory group gave him a safe base of belonging from which he soon began to branch out. “There’s people here that they’re easy to talk to,” he said. “It’s not like a setting where you have to limit yourself.” Though he recognized the differences among his peers, Jason did not see exclusion as an issue. “We all try to be friends, even if something’s not working out that good,” he said. “You’re not gonna love everybody, but the, just,

respect that we have for each other—not to disrespect each other—it really helps everybody be comfortable with saying what they feel.”

Luis, 16, recalled what it was like for him as a new sixth grader and an English language learner. In his previous school, he had adopted a “protective mode,” and when he arrived at Renaissance, “I did not even know how to introduce myself.” Using team-building games and other activities, he said, his new school taught him “how

**Students speak of their sense of safety and belonging in the school, a key foundation for learning.**

*“In the other school, I was more in a protective mode. Here, each day that you come there’s something you do that makes you a part of this school. You feel like you’re at home more.” – LUIS, 16*

to do this friendship bond thing.” Now Luis makes a point of talking to new students and helping them out. “Here is more of a safe environment, and you feel like you’re at home more,” he said. “I can walk around and it don’t matter who’s around me . . . if I turn around, I know who’s that person.”

Working on the yearbook in ninth grade made Adrianna feel connected to teachers and students throughout the school. “People say, ‘Oh, that’s a nerdy thing to do,’ but I love it,” she said, explaining in animated detail why “it’s a good thing to be part of.” As she and a friend worked on their section, they gathered evidence of student and teacher life both in and out of school: sports, field trips, baby pictures, traditions, the multivarious elements that created community from a very diverse group. “Getting to see their pictures and their stories make it into the yearbook, that’s a really big thing,” Adrianna declared. “And the yearbook, it just brings everyone together. It symbolizes the school as one.”

Describing their interdependency in such ways, these young people reveal the crucial sense of belonging that a large body of research establishes as a key social and emotional foundation for learning.<sup>5</sup> The attachments they describe are fertilizing the soil for their developing sense of identity, competence, autonomy, and agency.<sup>6</sup>

## Finding a voice

Bridget Camara teaches the drama course that all Renaissance students take for a semester in grades 9, 10, and 12. (Eleventh graders must take a semester of health instead.) Its chief point, she said, is not to learn to act but rather “to find your voice.” Starting with scenes from their own lives, Ms. Camara aims to help even the most introverted of youth “at least get up there and say something,” she said. For the extroverts, “it’s about trying to learn to listen to other people and try to have some self-control,” she noted. “But then also [to] have the discipline to make your performance for an audience, not just for your own benefit.”

Steven wished he had even more opportunities for creative expression in his tenth-grade academic classes. Still, he had recently brought his passion for hip hop into an English class writing assignment called “I Am.” It took him five hours to write those one hundred lines, he said. “There’s a lot of things that people don’t know about me from school—even though they have been with me since sixth grade—that I’d like them to finally realize who I really am. So I took the time to, you know, make a big plot. Like, “This is who I am. This is what I want people to know about me.”

Griffin, an eighth grader, had also started to experiment with possible selves. “Some students feel very comfortable talking about their real self,” he said. “But students like me, I put on a very different mask when I’m at school.” Though others may consider him happy and outgoing, he declared, “I’m not like that, other places. I’m very quiet. I’m reserved, and I don’t, I don’t like to stand out.” In Griffin’s view, his school “gives you a place to not be something you’re not, but to be something better than you are . . . without being fake,

essentially.” During a “Spirit Week” the previous year, he tried dressing for school completely in orange. “I won Spirit King that week,” he said with satisfaction. “If I hadn’t felt so comfortable with the people I was around to show my real self, maybe I wouldn’t have done that.”

## Pushing past fear

Many other students spoke of pivotal school experiences that supported their search for identity. To a striking extent, these situations had also persuaded them that their own effort, not talent, was increasing their ability and competence.

**Many students describe pivotal school experiences that persuaded them that effort, not talent, was increasing their ability and competence.**

*“It’s hard for me to get up on stage and talk to 100 students, because it’s something I never did before. But I need to make sure this goes well with my crew. I need to work hard on it.” – ADRIANNA, 15*

By the end of tenth grade, for example, Luis saw himself as someone who could “take on challenges that not everyone will take.” He said, “Courage means to confront your fears . . . [to] still keep it going even though it’s hard. And that’s what I’m basically known for here at my school.” Despite his apprehension about sports, Luis had tried out for the swim team to fulfill the physical challenge requirement for his Passage Portfolio. Success at that gave him the confidence to try baseball later in the year. “I can look at myself in the mirror now,” he said with satisfaction, “and definitely say who am I as a person.”

When her crew advisory planned a class meeting for the whole ninth grade, Adrianna also felt her courage tested. “It’s hard for me to get up on stage and talk to a group of 100 students, because it’s something that I never did before,” she said. But she felt that “I need to take part in this. I need to make sure this goes well with my crew. I was kind of like one of the main people planning. . . . I need to work hard on it.”

As she approached high school graduation, Brandi too reflected on her development from a hesitant sixth grader into a leader. “Going through seventh and eighth grade, I was still trying to come out of my shyness,” she said. Then the school’s annual Outward Bound wilderness expedition for rising ninth graders challenged her to try a different role (“like leading my group through the forest at one o’clock in the morning, just to get to our next campsite”). Brandi considers that experience “one of the hardest times in my life. I cried, like, every day.” Still, she believes that it also made her stronger. “I kinda call my transformation from sixth to twelfth grade like a butterfly kind of like coming out of its cocoon,” she said. “Like getting ready to fly and going on to college and having to spread my wings there.”

## Reaching toward success

The Renaissance structures and practices described earlier provide a rich environment for such reflective self-awareness. Advancing from the middle grades through high school, students have steady support in coping with their emotions and regulating their actions. They gain ever more practice in monitoring their own learning processes: setting individual goals,

**Students get continual practice in planning and monitoring their learning processes.**

*“They never let us just jump into work. We take the engineering design process, and apply it in all of our classes now: finding out the question, finding out possible solutions, doing the possible solutions, picking out the best one. And then redoing the process again until you find the best answer.” – GRIFFIN, 14*



evaluating their own progress, posing problems and designing ways to solve them. They exert more autonomy, making choices for themselves about what to reach for next. As they grow to believe that success is possible and within their control, they are developing the sense of agency that leads to a productive and satisfying life.

In eighth grade, Ajeya aspired to be a coroner like those she saw on “L.A. Law.” She pushed herself to do better in science classes, where she had often struggled. “I feel like I’m getting better as I study more and I do more work or I ask peers for help,” she said. “I wanna push myself to be better.” In a seventh-grade crew session on looking ahead to college, she discovered that New York University offered “a really big forensic science major, where coroners would come in, too.” Now she has put NYU on her dream list of colleges, and is also researching other institutions with forensics programs.

“We do put a lot of emphasis on planning here,” her classmate Griffin commented. His teachers “never let us just jump into work,” he said. “It’s always, ‘You need to plan out what steps you’re going to do. Make sure you have what you need to do to fill out those steps. And then complete the steps.’” After his science class studied the engineering design process, teachers of other subjects also adopted it—“because it fits!” Griffin explained. “Finding out the question, finding out possible solutions, doing the possible solutions, picking out the best one. And then redoing the process again to find the best answer until you find the best answer.”

“Success is within me,” Kenneth declared after he spoke with his teachers about the possibility of taking honors and Advanced Placement classes the following year. Though once he had thought that impossible, now he realized that stretching toward difficult work “really does affect me later on in life,” he said. “I may have a goal to get an A in biology, but that A can get me into honors chemistry” and on to AP psychology or physics. The chance to reach higher has boosted his self-esteem, helping him “keep going in school [and] not give up just because of one bad grade,” he concluded. “I really wanna go and like reach that extra step.”

## Placing value on learning

Having some choice about what and how they learned mattered a lot to these adolescent students. Much of their Renaissance curriculum follows the traditional subject area progression, and budgetary constraints also limit the range of courses the school can offer. However, from its start teachers here have created other ways

**The element of choice heightens students’ sense of initiative and agency. Just before winter and summer vacations, all regular classes halt for a week of intensive electives, focused on athletics and the arts.**

*“It was really interesting to kind of get out of my comfort zone and try something new that was really fun with a group of students who I never really talked to before.”*

— SASHA, 16

to build choice into student learning. As Kenneth suggested, they “expect the unexpected,” looking for and using the positive things that energize students. Even students that “look like they’re the bad kids . . . always getting in trouble,” he said, can be “really, truly passionate people. You just need to find that trigger that turns on that passion so that they can really show it off in class.”

Just before winter and summer vacations, regular Renaissance classes come to a halt to make room for a week of over three dozen intensive elective courses—largely in athletics and the arts—that build on the particular interests of staff, students, or outside experts. (Among recent offerings: Scrapbooking, Civil Rights Poetry Slam, Drawing like the Great Masters, and Survival: Who Lives? Who Dies?) The intensives, said Principal Mahoney, turn a week that is “too often wasted watching videos and just hanging out” into valuable experiential learning instead.

Sasha, an eleventh grader who took the opportunity to learn to flip a kayak in the school's swimming pool, said she relished the chance "to kind of get out of my comfort zone and try something new that was really fun with a group of students who I never really talked to before." Another student started his own soccer intensive, planning and executing the entire week with a teacher as sponsor.

Steven got hooked on music production in an intensive called Hip Hop Around the World, which culminated in a CD and a performance for the school. He took the course for two years before it ended, then joined a community program founded by the two artists who had taught it. Writing and producing his own music gives him more satisfaction than anything he has ever done, he said. "Last week I finished this song and I got my parents and my family members together in the living room and said, 'How does this sound?' You know, got feedback on it, and I took a time to like sit there and . . . look around. It puts a smile on my face . . . you got your family around and you have what you love doing most."

Some intensive courses take up issues that have social and emotional import. For example, in her senior year, Maya, one of the school's founding sixth graders, created an intensive in which students revisited the school's community commitments. In another mini-course, Ajeya and a group of eighth-grade classmates looked into the issue of bullying. "We wanted to see where is this bullying happening, where is it coming from, and how we can stop it," she said. "One way was creating social networks about bullying. . . . If you do say something to someone, make it in a positive way."

Many students also cited the cross-disciplinary expeditions of the EL model as a high point of the Renaissance curriculum, which helped them "understand and become engaged in topics that they don't necessarily like," as Jesse put it. "Maybe I really enjoy history, but I don't really like science," he said as an example. But in an eleventh-grade expedition, he and his classmates read a first-hand account of Hiroshima in English class, studied the dangers and benefits of nuclear materials in chemistry class, and at the same analyzed how nuclear power has shaped history in recent decades. Field trips enlivened the expedition even further, he said, giving students "a little break from the traditional academics in the traditional classroom."

## **Growing into something bigger**

In their descriptions of school, all these students offer important evidence that social and emotional learning both informs and supports their academic learning at Springfield Renaissance School. Not just the design of the school but the everyday decisions and actions of its staff situate students at the center, and in doing so they illustrate the theory of action that underlies our series of case studies:

When students feel a sense of belonging in a school and its classrooms, when they believe that their efforts will increase their ability and competence, when they believe success is possible and within their control, and when they value what they are learning, then they are much more likely to persist at academic tasks despite setbacks and to demonstrate the kinds of social, emotional, and academic behaviors that lead to a productive and satisfying life.

In May of his ninth-grade year, Griffin could have been speaking for many of his schoolmates as he reflected that his confidence, determination, and perseverance had all increased during his time at Renaissance. "It's you talking, and you need to get comfortable with that," he declared. "And I feel like [here] is where I learned it from. It allows you to grow into something bigger than yourself."

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> From 2005 to 2008, the initial grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation made possible the design and launch stages of Springfield Renaissance, including substantial professional development for its early cohorts of teachers. More funding came in 2008–2008 from a federal magnet school grant. As the school built its reputation, it won a 2010 Catalyst for Change award and grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, followed by a \$50,000 Commonwealth Innovation School grant in 2011 from the Massachusetts Department of Education. No grant money came with the school’s designation as a Magnet School of Excellence in 2011 and 2013, by Magnet Schools of America. As of the end of the 2011–12 school year, Renaissance was working within its regular school budget.

<sup>2</sup> See Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C. et al. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents’ experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, 48(2), 90–101.

<sup>3</sup> Grade 8 MCAS math and science assessments do not align with the school’s curriculum (or with most middle school math curriculum in the state, Mahoney says). In science, for example, the grade 8 MCAS focuses on technology and engineering when students have just spent three years studying physical science, life science, and earth science. In a jagged progression that mirrors a statewide trend, sixth and seventh grade scores have typically dropped, sometimes sharply, but by grade 10 they have risen sharply. From grade 8 to grade 10, Mahoney explained, “the math and science tests most definitely align more directly to our curriculum.”

<sup>4</sup> See Halpern, R., Heckman P., & R. Larson (2013). Realizing the potential of learning in middle adolescence. Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary see Osterman, K. F., (2000). Students’ need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323–367.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Deci, E., Vallerand, R., Pelletier, L., & Ryan, R. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, 26, 325–346.

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