

“Every Child and Family is Known”:

An Initiative to Transform Support for Children and Families in New York City’s Shelters

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A traditional Maasai greeting asks a critical question, “Are the children well?,” centering children’s importance to the health, well-being, and sustainability of the community. It is powerful when an entire community takes on the collective responsibility for ensuring the wellness of its children, particularly those who are furthest from opportunity.



In New York City, the number of unhoused children is staggering.
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During the 2023-24 school year, more than 146,000 students, representing one in eight students enrolled in the NYC public schools, experienced homelessness, and 60,000 students spent time in NYC shelters. This data provides evidence to answer the initial question: too many of the children are not well. It also leads to follow-up questions: What actions could be taken to change this? How can we ensure every child has a viable pathway to thrive instead of just survive?

A multi-agency coalition in NYC is working to do just that, bringing together historically siloed institutions and departments to pilot a transformative initiative, called “Every Child and Family is Known,” to create personalized systems of opportunity and support for children and families living in shelters in the Bronx. The strategy is supported by a growing evidence base showing improvements in academic outcomes, attendance, and other measures for similar interventions in other communities.

Context: Developing a Relationship-Based Response to Crisis

A year before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the moment of racial reckoning in the summer of 2020, a group of school principals in the NYC borough of the Bronx began meeting to discuss racial and economic disparities in their community. As global events began shaping local realities and educators gained a window into the homes and lives of their students through a Zoom screen, these discussions evolved to focus on the challenges the pandemic was creating for families in their community. The principals spoke about families not being able to bury their loved ones or being confined to small, overcrowded spaces that were not conducive to learning. Despite the significant challenges, children and families led with resilience and perseverance as they navigated their day to day and reimagined a new normal. This served as a foundation for positive interactions among children, families, and educators as conversations shifted to how schools were innovating to meet the moment and alleviate the challenges amidst the crisis.

NYC Director of Youth Development Joshua Laub, a former principal in the Bronx, noted that families desperate for solutions continued to come to school buildings for support even when classes were canceled. In response to the increased need for support, one principal organized a food pantry for his school community and approximately 2,000 people showed up. "The genesis of this project," Laub explained, "came out of this urgent need."

Laub, an action-oriented leader, began to ideate on the topics and innovations that the principals were sharing in their conversations. He developed a draft proposal for a multi-service collaborative to support children and families and shared it with others in positions with formal authority to make strategic implementation and resource allocation decisions to bring it to life. A few months later, NYC Public Schools Chancellor David Banks convened a meeting with the commissioners of various city agencies to consider what an interagency coalition servicing the city's most vulnerable residents might look like. This served as the foundation of a very fruitful and meaningful collaboration.



Caring Adults, along with Every Child and Family is Known Director Joshua Laub, host a Family Resource Fair at a local elementary school.

In the spring of 2022, NYC became one of 12 communities selected to be part of the inaugural cohort of [The EdRedesign Lab's Institute for Success Planning Community of Practice](#), based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The Community of Practice provided a framework for leveraging caring adult relationships to identify the needs and strengths of children and families and connect them with services and resources as part of a comprehensive plan for action. Through the Community of Practice, NYC received two years of monthly virtual learning sessions, ongoing coaching, data and implementation support, and technical assistance from EdRedesign leadership and peer mentorship from other communities to build, scale, and sustain their initiative.

NYC's initiative had broad, cross-agency support from NYC Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Anne Williams-Isom, Senior Advisor for the Deputy Mayor of Strategic Initiatives Marielys Divanne, Director of Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Jennifer Havens, Assistant Commissioner for Education Services at the NYC Administration for Children's Services Chris Tan, and other leaders committed to the effort.

A cross-sector team traveled to EdRedesign's Institute for Success Planning Summer Workshop in 2022. Attending the Summer Workshop helped the team develop a vision and blueprint to support their most vulnerable students: those living in shelters in the Bronx. Ongoing feedback from other communities throughout the Community

of Practice, and during coaching and technical assistance sessions, led to a broader and more refined understanding of the ecosystem that impacts children and families. This also led to an expansion of the team's focus to include families as well as children and the decision to base the initiative in schools. This is how the Every Child and Family is Known initiative began.

Also in the spring of 2022, NYC had relaunched its [Children's Cabinet](#) in order to drive coordination and efficiency across city departments, mobilize resources around the mayor's priorities for children, strengthen partnerships with the nonprofit and private sectors, and facilitate a holistic approach to serving children by aligning agency policies that affect children's health, safety, and well-being. Every Child and Family is Known is a project of the Children's Cabinet and highlights a unique interagency partnership between the Department of Homeless Services, the NYC Public Schools, and the Administration for Children's Services. The Children's Cabinet established collaborative working groups, one of which is now devoted entirely to the Every Child and Family is Known initiative. It is often said that "it takes a village to raise a child." The village began to coalesce to ensure both children and families were well during and after a time of crisis and unforeseen challenges.

The Children's Cabinet working group responsible for the Every Child and Family is Known effort applied for and received \$2 million from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which also helped them leverage an additional grant from the city for \$800,000 to launch the initiative.

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Intervention: Ensuring “Every Child and Family is Known”

Every Child and Family is Known seeks to support unhoused children living in city shelters and their families by connecting them to the supports, programs, opportunities, and interventions necessary to meet their needs. In a city often characterized as anonymous and impersonal, this effort prioritizes developing trusting relationships, pairing deep caring with meeting every child and family where they are and giving them what they need to succeed in school and life. As Laub described, “At the heart of this, one of the most important ingredients is love.”

Each child in the initiative is paired with a Caring Adult at their school site. These Caring Adults, who receive additional compensation for this work, can be teachers, secretaries, safety officers, or any adult in the school building who opts into serving in this role. They check in daily with students and weekly with their families and help make connections to supports and services. “Families are much more likely to access services if the Caring Adult demystifies the process and assists the family in understanding how available services may be helpful. That can go a long way towards the family feeling more comfortable about speaking with a service provider” according to Tan. Because one of the foundational components of the initiative is building transformative, nurturing relationships, each Caring Adult works with a maximum of just three children and their families at any one time.

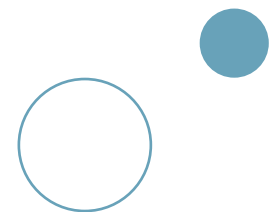
Caring Adults receive training and ongoing professional development in trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices based on actual stories written

by teens living in shelters. The initiative has created a comprehensive toolkit that includes roles and responsibilities, resources, and tools to guide Caring Adults in their work. The toolkit includes a “decision tree” that clarifies how to respond to urgent situations and who should take next steps for different types of needs. It also provides sample scripts for family check-ins that prioritize relationship building and an asset-based mindset by asking about positive experiences and goals along with needs for support and resources. A crisis social worker dedicated to the initiative is available for support after hours as a safety net for the Caring Adults to turn to in an emergency.

The relationship-building work of the Caring Adults can yield important insights. In one example, an eight-year-old boy was regularly acting out and getting into trouble at school. His Caring Adult sat down with him to talk about what made school so hard. The boy shared that he moved five times in the past 18 months, lost all his toys and clothes, and stopped trying to keep up in school. With this information, the school and community rallied to provide him with new belongings and more support, and the boy’s behavioral issues improved dramatically. In another example, a teenage girl’s habit of staying out overnight put the whole family in danger of losing their shelter placement due to the whole-family check-in rule, which requires every member of the family to be present in the shelter at a specified time. The principal convened an interagency team to develop a strategy to support the family and find solutions, which would not have happened in such a seamless and coordinated manner prior to Every Child and Family is Known.

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Chris Tan, Assistant Commissioner for Education Services, NYC Administration for Children’s Services





Caring Adults attend training hosted by Every Child and Family is Known.

Another key element of the initiative is the Every Child and Family is Known Family Portal, an adaptation of an existing NYC Department of Education data portal that enables parents, schools, and community partners to access timely, relevant information about programs and needs. Developed by local nonprofit New Visions for Public Schools, the Portal captures an inventory of students' needs and identifies what resources are available to meet those needs near the shelters in the program. The Family Portal has also been a gamechanger for family participation by giving parents and caregivers direct access to key information on phones, tablets, and other devices. The Family Portal allows parents and caregivers to connect with their children's Caring Adults, update their family records to ensure uninterrupted information, see their children's school, transportation, and attendance records, and find information about benefits and

services, including emergency or crisis services. New Visions for Public Schools continues to develop new functionality in the Family Portal based on stakeholder and agency feedback to make the information more actionable and accessible for families, school and shelter staff, and program partners.

The Family Portal has revolutionized the collection and use of data to capture the lived experiences of children and families living in shelters, illuminating a host of unmet needs and systemic challenges. According to Laub, "We're starting to lift that data up through the Family Portal, and we're going to be able to feed it to policymakers, district-level personnel, and mayoral personnel. We've never had data like that." This achievement was enabled by a landmark data-sharing agreement between the NYC Department of Education and the Department of Homeless Services that streamlines information in a secure, accessible manner.

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Accomplishments and Challenges

By the end of the 2023-2024 school year, program leaders reported that 730 students and their families were connected to 325 Caring Adults in 63 schools across the Bronx. In 2024-2025, the second year of implementation, the program has expanded to a total of 110 schools with 788 Caring Adults serving 1,915 students.

As of April 2024, students participating in Every Child and Family is Known had a three percent decrease in chronic absenteeism and a nearly two percent increase in year-to-date attendance, in contrast to a one percent increase in chronic absenteeism and slight decline in attendance for Department of Homeless Services students in schools in the Bronx not being served by the initiative. Ninety-two percent of Caring Adults surveyed by an external evaluator after the pilot year said that the initiative had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and relationships with adults at school. Families surveyed reported strong trusting relationships

with their Caring Adults, improved school connections, and support with material needs and public benefits.

One challenge the initiative faced early on was identifying the most effective strategy for communicating with the parents and caregivers of students living in shelters. The team realized that many of these adults were already overburdened with navigating the practical and emotional demands of housing insecurity. Since identifying this obstacle, the initiative has implemented a texting campaign that Laub says has led to a substantial increase in both the frequency and quality of these adult interactions.

Those working in participating agencies also see the impact of the initiative. Associate Commissioner for Special Initiatives at the NYC Department of Homeless Services Darma Diaz said, "During my career as a public servant, I have not seen this sort of collaborative interagency effort be so effective at this scale. It truly is groundbreaking, and I am honored to be a part of it."

2023-24 SCHOOL YEAR

Number of students connected to Caring Adults
730

Number of Caring Adults
325

Number of schools
63

2024-25 SCHOOL YEAR

Number of students connected to Caring Adults
1,915

Number of Caring Adults
788

Number of schools
110



Caring Adults attend training hosted by Every Child and Family is Known.

Key Takeaways

There are several important lessons other communities interested in implementing more relationship-based individualized systems of support for children and families can learn from NYC's transformative Every Child and Family is Known initiative:

Put caring at the center.

Joshua Laub and many other Every Child and Family is Known team members unabashedly identify love as central to the relationship-building that forms the foundation for the initiative. The most vulnerable children and families have already experienced the failures of multiple systems that do not make caring the core of their missions, and it is imperative to create new models that prioritize building trusting relationships.

It is possible to build partnerships across agencies even in deeply bureaucratic complex systems.

A city as large as NYC can be particularly complex, siloed, and resistant to change. By involving several departments in the Success Planning design and implementation process, Every Child and Family is Known became a cross-agency ecosystem of support for children and families living in city shelters that has led to improved data on student and family needs, more efficient and timely connections to services and resources, and broader systemic change. Agencies such as the Administration for Children's Services are also leveraging the systems, tools, and learnings from the initiative to enhance the provision of personalized and holistic supports not only for families in Every Child and Family is Known but also citywide.

Start small to develop, refine, and scale the model.

Leaders of Every Child and Family is Known recognized that by starting with a pilot in the Bronx and refining the program through feedback and iteration cycles, they would be able to create a more durable and effective program to scale to additional schools within the city.

Branding the initiative creates a morally ambitious narrative and call to action that helps create a shared vision, galvanize collective action, and sustain momentum.

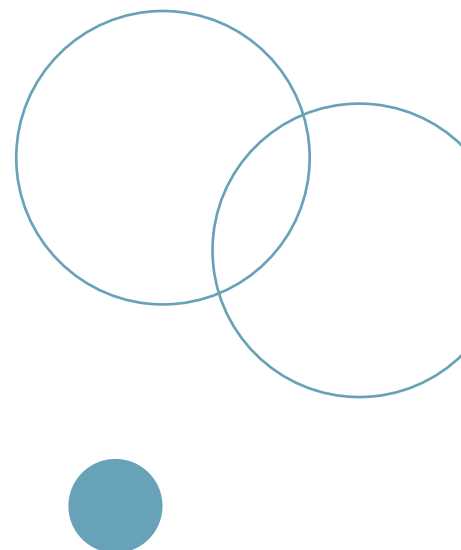
Naming the effort in a way that puts the humanity and individuality of the most vulnerable children and families at the center has been an important strategy for developing a more positive narrative, aligning people across agencies and roles, building public will and collective buy-in, and spurring efforts to make change. It also provides an opportunity for children, youth, and families to own and communicate the progress being made in their local communities through storytelling.

Connecting place-based cross-sector collaboration and personalized, relationship-based supports can maximize impact.

Embedding Every Child and Family is Known within NYC's Children's Cabinet enables strategic, system-wide alignment that accelerates progress. Cabinet engagement facilitates having multiple city agencies and community partners work together in new ways and elevates the initiative's stature.

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Darma Diaz, Associate Commissioner for Special Initiatives, NYC Department of Homeless Services



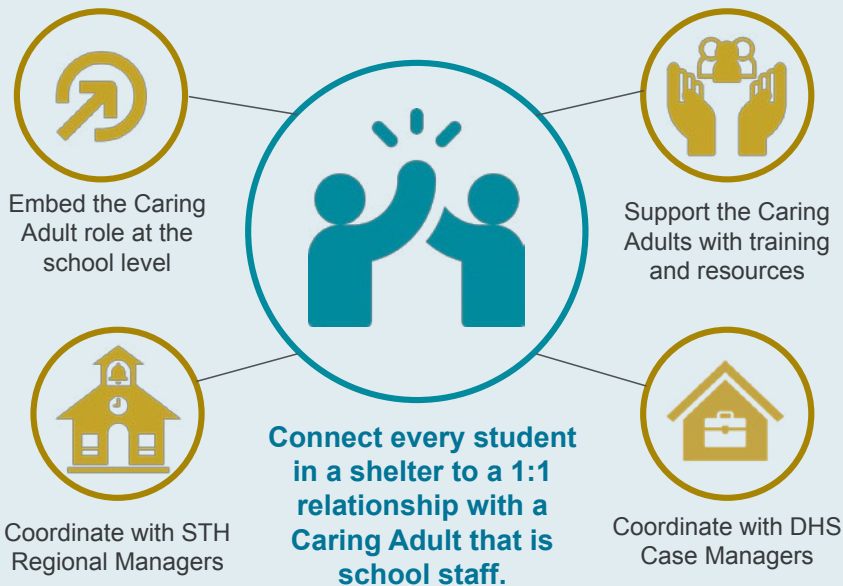
Conclusion

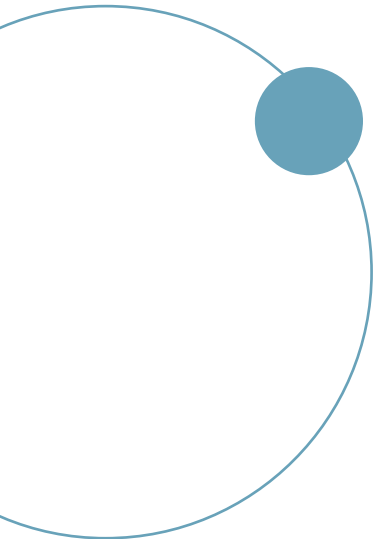
NYC is one example of a national movement to create new models of personalized, collaborative support that brings together the power of trusting relationships and cross-silo partnership. All the intentional moves the working group and leadership team made to reshape how NYC supports its most vulnerable children and families has led to powerful shifts in their experience. They serve as an example for other communities of what is possible. Every Child and Family is Known is working to ensure that the answer to the question, "Are the children well?," is emphatically, "Yes."



Every Child and Family is Known

Every Child and Family is Known (ECFIK) is a communication and coordination strategy that aims to have every child and their family living in shelter be part of an integrated and comprehensive support system that enables their educational success, nurtured and guided by one-on-one relationships with a caring adult.





"The implementation of EdRedesign's Success Planning strategy by communities across the country, including NYC, provides an opportunity for local leaders to center the voices and lived experiences of children, youth, and families in their strategic planning, resource allocation, and policy decisions as they work collaboratively to address systemic challenges like reducing chronic absenteeism, meeting the increased need for mental health services, and providing more equitable access and opportunity for basic needs, including housing. We are capturing and sharing the promising practices from NYC and other communities with the broader field as they continue to build, scale, and sustain their locally tailored initiatives that are realizing positive outcomes and moving the needle on many of these stubborn disparities."

Tauheedah Jackson, Deputy Director and Director of the Institute for Success Planning, EdRedesign

All photos are courtesy of Every Child and Family is Known.



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About The EdRedesign Lab

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, EdRedesign provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based partnership field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means initiatives. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of all children and youth, especially those affected by racism, poverty, and disinvestment.