PURSUING EQUITY FOR BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

CROSSTOWN HIGH:
BUILDING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

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In 2023, Envision Learning Partners (ELP) and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) embarked on a research study to identify and learn from schools that demonstrated positive outcomes for Black and Latine students with learning differences (including students with disabilities and multilingual learners). After a review of data from secondary schools across the country, the study team identified two schools for a more in-depth study, which was conducted during the 2023–2024 school year. This case study shares inclusive structures and practices from one of the identified schools, Crosstown High (Memphis, TN). Permission to identify the school's name was granted by the school's Board of Directors. Image releases for the photos included in the report were granted by students, families, and staff members.

September 2025

SPR

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ABOUT ENVISION EDUCATION

Founded in 2002, **Envision Education** is a nonprofit charter management organization that administers four public charter schools in California (San Francisco, Oakland, and Hayward), and provides professional learning services through its consulting division, Envision Learning Partners. Envision Education was approached by the Oak Foundation to conduct this study based on its schools' track record of successful outcomes for its Black and Latine students with learning differences.

Envision Education's mission is to transform the lives of students—especially those who will be first in their families to attend college—by preparing them for success in college, career, and life.

Envision Learning Partners is a nationwide consultancy amplifying best practices of Envision Schools. With expertise in driving transformational student outcomes through high-quality performance-based assessment, ELP partners with a nationwide portfolio of school and systems leaders to drive impact at scale.

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PURSUING EQUITY FOR BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

CROSSTOWN HIGH:
BUILDING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

As ethnic and racial diversity of students in the United States has increased, the challenge of ensuring that students of color with disabilities have an equitable education has emerged as a pressing challenge in U.S. public schools. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of students receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has risen from 13% in 2012-13 to 15% in 2022–2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Of the students receiving special education services across the country, 17% are Black and 14% are Hispanic/Latine[1] (2023). Black and Latine students with disabilities (SWDs) are more likely to experience multi-marginalization of race and ability in public schools, as reflected in lower average graduation rates (Rhodes, 2021). Black and Latine SWDs lag in academic achievement in reading and math (Wei et al., 2013) and are disproportionately disciplined out of school with suspensions and expulsions (U.S. General Accountability Office, 2018). Latine SWDs who are also multilingual learners (MLLs) face even greater challenges, as many schools may not correctly identify these students for the special education services they need (Carnock & Silva, 2019) or provide sufficient specialized instruction for language development (Park & Thomas, 2012). These populations continue to warrant increased attention from policymakers, educators, and researchers.

The student subgroups that are the focus of this research include Black, Latine, and multilingual learners with mild to moderate learning disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities and language-based disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia), neurological differences (e.g., attention deficit, sensory processing disorders, executive function challenges), and emotional disturbance. We recognize that this list excludes students with significant cognitive and health impairments—specifically those who benefit

1 While many of our sources use "Hispanic" to identify students with origins in Latin American countries, we have opted to use the gender-neutral term Latine, since Hispanic focuses on native language.

more from specialized instruction in personalized settings. Because the inclusive setting of the learning systems we are studying in this project are general education classrooms, the study focuses on SWDs whose disabilities allow them to receive instruction alongside general education peers.[2]

We chose to prioritize these subgroups (including MLLs) because they have been historically marginalized in K–12 public schools and excluded from mainstream educational opportunities. Despite federal court rulings and education laws that prohibit race-based segregation (Brown v. Board of Education) and disability-based segregation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), Black and Latine students continue to be segregated at the neighborhood, school, or classroom level, and SWDs are often segregated in self-contained classrooms or through tracking of students into courses with lower expectations of rigor (Oakes et al., 2004; Maldonado et al., 2018). In particular, data analyses have shown that Black students are disproportionately assigned to special education services and self-contained classrooms, leading to ongoing disparities in their access to core academic learning opportunities, and compounding the effects of broader school segregation by income and racial/ethnic background (White et al., 2019; Cosier et al., 2020). While the federal definition of "high inclusive environments" is 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2018), in 2022–2023, only 62% of Black SWDs and 66% of Latine SWDs—compared with 70% of white SWDs—were taught in "high inclusive environments" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

About the *Pursuing Equity for Black and Latine Students with Learning Differences* Study

The research question guiding our study was,

> ***"What structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices create the conditions for Black and Latine students with learning differences to accelerate their learning and thrive in secondary schools?"***

We searched for public and public charter middle and high schools across the United States that had a strong reputation and track record of supporting the well being and academic success of Black and Latine SWDs (including MLLs). We initially identified four schools that agreed to participate in phase one of the study, which included school leader and staff interviews and document/data review. From these four schools, we narrowed our sample to two case study schools that had the right demographic composition (at least 50% Black and Latine students and at least 10% SWDs) and that had relatively stable school leadership and staffing to support continuity of the school's program for SWDs.

We conducted case study data collection at these two secondary schools in order to more deeply understand the way inclusive school learning structures, systems of support, school cultures, and instructional practices interact to create learning environments that are associated with positive outcomes for Black, Latine, and multilingual SWDs.

Data collection at each school occurred during the 2023–2024 academic year and included interviews with school leaders, school staff, seven to eight Black and Latine SWDs and their caregivers, focus groups with at least two groups of six to ten students at different grade levels, and observations of classes, public exhibition nights, professional development/staff meetings, and students' presentations of learning. We also included existing survey data from surveys administered by the school and student outcomes data from school report cards, as well as other documents (e.g., program descriptions, accreditation documents, websites). We inductively analyzed qualitative data using both a grounded analysis approach (coding based on emerging themes) and a deductive approach (informed by our theoretical framework).

(See Appendix A of the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings for a full description of our research study methodology, and Appendix B of the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings for a review of literature on inclusive school structures and practices.)

2 In addition, we recognize that the disabilities listed above are quite different from each other, and thus, students will have a range of different learning needs. We do not purport that students with all different types of disabilities will benefit equally from specific interventions. We recognize that even among those who are able to learn alongside general education peers, there is wide variation in learning needs. For this reason, we acknowledge the limitations of this research project's findings and that individual learning needs call for more individualized solutions.

Students in a classroom at Crosstown High. Students are sitting at desks with iPads.

CROSSTOWN HIGH:
BUILDING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

Crosstown is a small charter high school in Memphis, Tennessee. Black and Latine SWDs who attend Crosstown graduated at higher rates and were more college ready than demographically similar students attending other high schools in Memphis in 2023–2024. Drawing on observations conducted in the 2023–2024 school year and interviews with caregivers, students, teachers, and school staff, this case study describes the inclusive classroom structures, classroom practices, assessment strategies, and systems of support that contributed to positive outcomes for Crosstown SWDs (see **Appendix A of the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings** for data sources).

The framework in **Figure 1** and the paragraphs below summarize inclusive practices at Crosstown High and serve as a roadmap for the topics explored in this case study.[3]

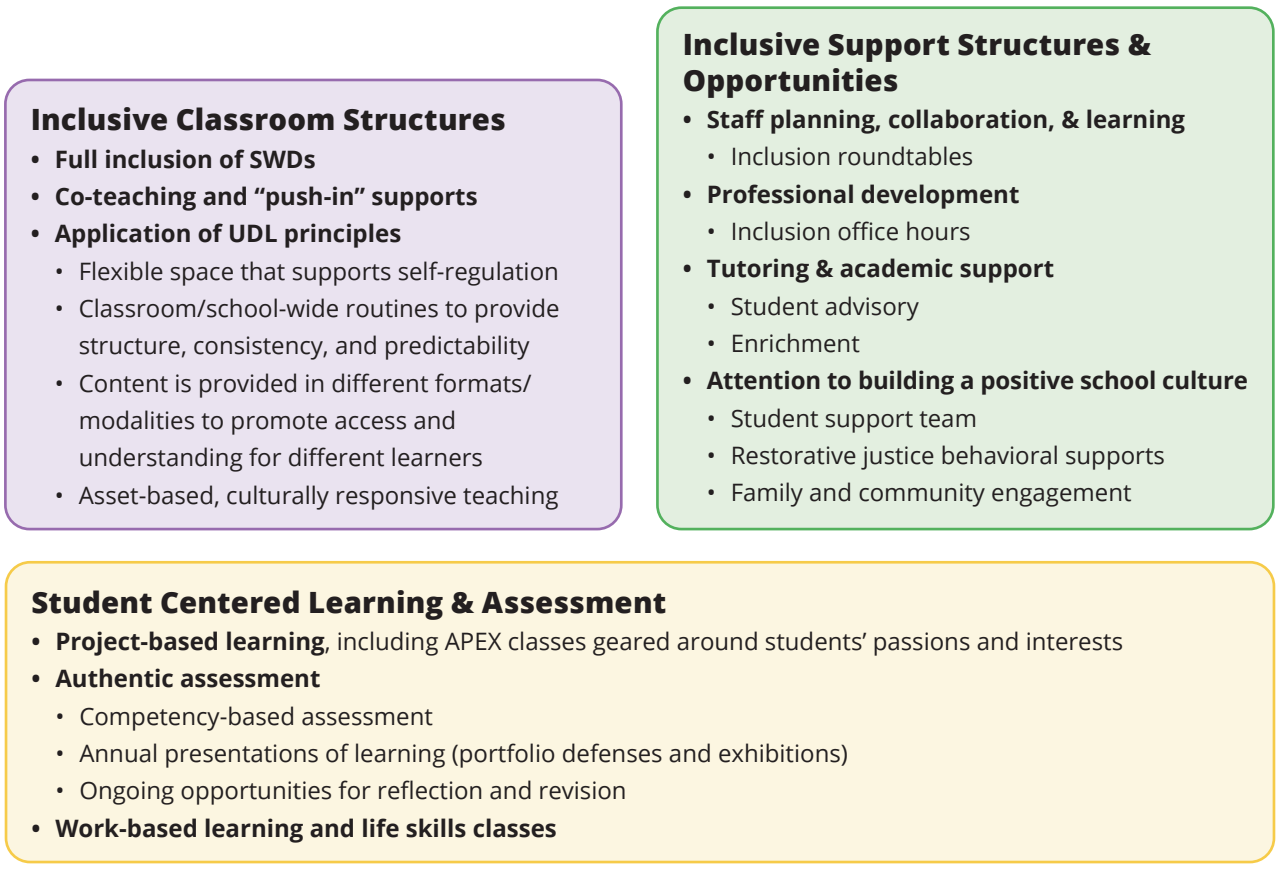
- **Inclusive Classroom Structures.** Crosstown uses a full inclusion model that integrates SWDs into all general education classes. To support student success, Crosstown has general education teachers and inclusion specialists co-teach math, English, and Advanced Placement U.S. History. Inclusion specialists also provide "push-in" support in other classes as needed. Crosstown teachers use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in their classrooms. In particular,

3 The framework in Figure 1 informs but does not directly correspond to the project's *Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences* framework found in the Executive Summary/Synthesis of Findings.

(UDL) principles in their classrooms. In particular, Crosstown offers flexible physical spaces that allow students to self-regulate; supports classroom and school-wide routines that provide structure, consistency, and predictability; provides content in a variety of different modalities to broaden access and understanding; and uses asset-based culturally responsive pedagogy and approaches.

- **Inclusive Support Structures and Opportunities.** Crosstown has found it challenging to provide teachers and inclusion specialists with dedicated co-planning time; thus, co-planning occurs in person and virtually before, during, and after class. Staff also find support through "inclusion roundtables" where inclusion specialists and general education teachers meet by grade level to discuss how to support specific students. Teachers at Crosstown also receive annual and quarterly professional development opportunities from Facing History and Ourselves. Crosstown provides additional academic support to students through opportunities such as "inclusion office hours," where inclusion specialists provide one-on-one support for students after school, during enrichment period, and during advisory. Additionally, Crosstown is committed to using a restorative justice approach and to consistently engaging families. Although these practices are supported by all school staff, they are primarily driven and sustained by the inclusion specialists and student support team (SST), a team of four to five staff who are responsible for student safety, discipline, and mediation of conflicts.
- **Student-Centered Learning and Assessment.** Crosstown is a project-based-learning school that values student-directed learning. In addition to class-based projects, Crosstown offers student-identified electives (APEX classes), where students pursue their passions in long-term projects. They use competency-based assessments, have students at each grade level do annual presentations of learning in front of teachers and family members, have exhibitions of learning two times a year that are open to community members, and provide work-based learning and life skills classes specifically geared toward SWDs.

Figure 1. **Overview of Practices That Support Success of Black and Latine Students With Learning Differences at Crosstown High**



CROSSTOWN HIGH'S HISTORY AND SCHOOL MODEL

Crosstown High is a small charter school located in Crosstown Concourse, a mixed-use building in Memphis, TN. Its key pillars are that it is project based, competency based, relationship driven, and diverse by design.

Crosstown High is a small charter school located on the fourth and fifth floor of Crosstown Concourse, a large mixed-use building that has a café, stores, a medical clinic, apartments, and an art museum.[4] These diverse organizations and businesses provide students with opportunities to interact with a variety of professionals and community partners. Furthermore, an architectural firm designed the layout of the school with its specific school model in mind. Almost all the classrooms have large glass windows or floor-to-ceiling glass walls to provide visibility into classrooms, and many classrooms also have "garage doors" that teachers can use to quickly break classrooms into multiple smaller working spaces. In addition to desks and tables, classrooms include couches and beanbags for students to work at. Technology is integrated into classrooms, and there is also a large computer and programming room, a robotics lab, a professional recording studio, a "makers space," and well-equipped science labs. The hallways at Crosstown are lined with student work, and there are multiple large, colorful, student-developed murals, including one that illustrates the school's competencies and another that presents the Crosstown values. The hallways also include many small alcoves and seating spaces for individual or group work.

There are four key pillars that guide Crosstown's educational model. First, Crosstown is a project-based learning school; project-based learning aims to engage learners in real-world challenges connected to their passions. Second, teachers use competency-based assessments so that students have multiple ways to demonstrate their learning. Third, Crosstown is relationship driven, using advisory, restorative practices, and social relationships to help students feel safe and supported. Lastly, Crosstown is diverse by design, through the active recruitment of students from each area of the city. These pillars are essential aspects of the school's approach to supporting SWDs, as they reflect a commitment on the part of school leaders, teachers, and support staff to tailor the curriculum to the unique strengths of students rather than having students conform to a set structure.

In addition to its central pillars, Crosstown adopts full inclusion for students with disabilities (SWDs) and multilingual learners (MLLs) with the support of a dedicated inclusion team. In the 2023–2024 school year, Crosstown's inclusion team was comprised of four inclusion specialists,

Crosstown Mission & Core Values

ADVANCING EQUITY

We believe learning leads to freedom. So we:

- Seek equity and justice in and beyond the classroom.
- Empower students and teachers to use their voices for change.
- Share what we are learning with other educators.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

We believe that learning happens best in an inclusive and joyful community, and so we:

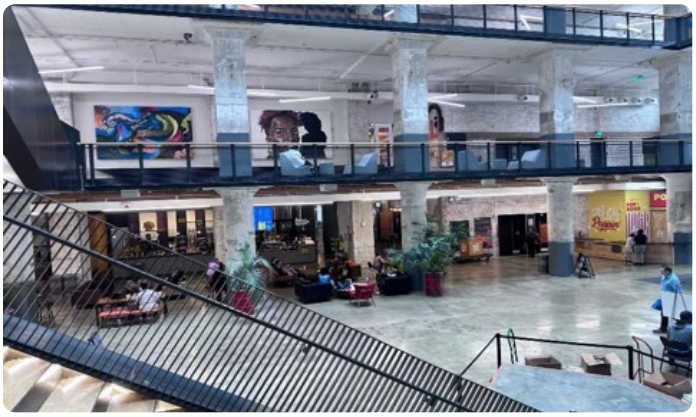
- Work to create a space that reflects the diversity of our city.
- Affirm the unique identity of each learner.
- Create opportunities for connection, having fun together, and restoring relationships when they are harmed.

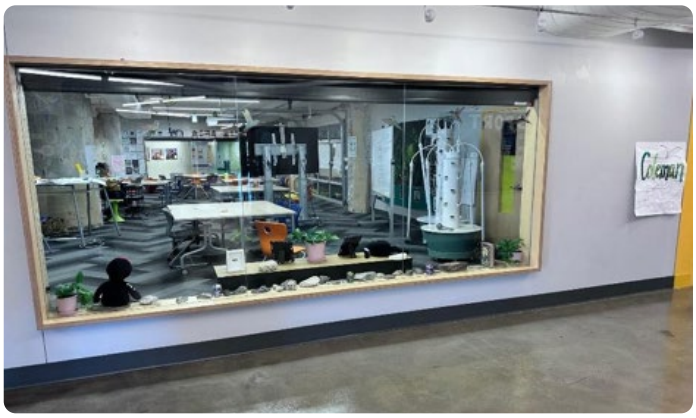
DOING MEANINGFUL WORK

We believe that learning can solve problems in this uncertain world, and that the community is a natural landscape for authentic learning experiences, and so we:

- Learn through projects that address a real challenge or issue, draw on different areas of learning, and allow us to explore our interests and passions.
- Center students through personalized learning experiences that develop the competencies we believe are necessary to thrive both now and in the future.
- Engage with our community and industry partners whenever possible.

4 The building where Crosstown is located was built as a Sears Roebuck & Co. catalog and distribution plant in 1927. It was abandoned in 1993 and sat vacant for over twenty years. Starting in 2009, planning began to refurbish and renovate the building to become a center for the arts and community groups. It opened in 2017.





Pictures of Crosstown Concourse, students in the school's library, and a hallway view into a classroom

who were certified special education teachers, and two instructional assistants. Two inclusion specialists were also certified to teach MLLs, one to serve gifted students, and two to provide work-based learning. To ensure that SWDs receive the support they need, inclusion specialists and general education teachers team teach or co-teach select required courses, such as English, math, and Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH).[5] Inclusion specialists also provide case management for SWDs, teach electives (such as work-based learning), and support all general education teachers with Individualized Education Program (IEP)–related modifications. As discussed further in the Inclusive Support Structures and Opportunities section on page 23, the inclusion team also provides weekly "inclusion office hours" to provide support for SWDs and convene a quarterly "inclusion roundtable" to discuss the needs of specific students with general education teachers. The core inclusion team is supported by the SST,[6] a full-time school counselor who has training in social work, a full-time college and career counselor, and speech and occupational therapy specialists who come to the school once a week to meet with select students.

In keeping with Crosstown's diverse-by-design pillar, multiple staff and students identified the diversity of Crosstown's student body as one of its biggest strengths. Although students are selected to attend through a lottery, Crosstown actively recruits students in every zip code in Memphis to ensure racial and socioeconomic diversity by examining application data and specifically marketing to neighborhoods that are underrepresented. Of the 500 students who attended Crosstown in 2023–2024, 52.6% identified as Black, 12% Latine, 30.7% White, and 3.8% multiracial; 13% are SWDs and 1% are MLLs. A little over half (53%) come from economically disadvantaged families. According to staff, families of SWDs seek out Crosstown because they perceive it to be uniquely supportive of this population.

The students who were interviewed repeatedly pointed to the value of diversity in their educational experience. They said that it helped them find their "people," promoted a feeling of belonging, and motivated them to work harder. A student in our 9th–10th-grade focus group said, "I feel like because of the whole diverse-by-design of the school, you're bound to find your group." A SWD said, "I feel like it's a unique thing that we all come from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, and different types of people with different walks of life."

Student focus group participants also spoke about how the diversity they were exposed to at Crosstown helped to expand their understanding of different life experiences and to disrupt stereotypes. The following is a quote from the 11th–12th-grade focus group, whom we asked to talk more about how the diversity of the school influences them:

5 All students at Crosstown are required to take AP U.S. History to fulfill their U.S. History requirement.

6 There are 4.5 full time employees on the SST. One inclusion specialist dedicated half of her time to the inclusion team and half of her time to restorative justice. For more in-depth discussion of the SST, see the Positive Climate and Culture section on page 27 of this report.

Development and Design of Crosstown High

In 2015, a group of over 70 community members volunteered to design an application to the XQ Institute's competition for rethinking high schools; as part of that process, they incorporated feedback from hundreds of caregivers and students about what they want in a high school. Crosstown was selected as one of 19 XQ Super Schools in 2017 but was not selected as a finalist. The design process gathered so much enthusiasm, however, that the design group continued to develop the charter for the school. They laid out their design phase in another XQ application, which subsequently provided funding for the school, and they also acquired funding from other foundations and businesses. Crosstown's planning year was 2018–2019, and they launched with their first ninth-grade class in 2019. Crosstown's per pupil expenditures for 2023–2024 was $17,114, compared with an average of $15,795 for Memphis-Shelby County Schools.[7]

> I think it makes you open-minded. Like if you do go to an all-Black school or like White schools, you're in a certain mindset. … Like, stereotypes work. But here it's not like that. There's always different people, and we do a lot of group work too, so you are kind of motivated to talk to all different kinds of people.

The focus on diversity and on creating a dynamic community of learners contributes to the inclusive culture of Crosstown. Crosstown has an explicit value of bringing diverse voices, perspectives, and identities together, which is reinforced through student collaboration in classrooms.

SCHOOL OUTCOMES

Graduation and Postsecondary Readiness

Black and Latine SWDs who attend Crosstown High graduated at a higher rate and were more college ready (as evidenced by ACT scores) than demographically similar students attending other high schools in Memphis.

Crosstown seeks to "be a community of confident thinkers and compassionate contributors who create more equitable spaces wherever [they] go."[8] Crosstown staff prioritize student engagement and the development of social–emotional learning outcomes, seeking to meet students where they are and set challenging yet attainable goals with them. As exemplified in the following quote, SWDs who were interviewed for this case study said that Crosstown's approach supported them and helped to prepare them for the future.

> … by offering you certain things, whether it be choosing your career path or just meet[ing] people that help when you're down. I feel like having those things in place to support me in those … ways, I feel like I'm going to be prepared for the real world when it comes to being able to express my opinion, whether it be publicly or being able to work with others or just being open to interpretation.

Additionally, comparing measurable outcomes between Crosstown and similar schools in the Memphis area suggests that the school's approach has helped students, especially Black and Latine SWDs, thrive as learners.

Students at Crosstown participate in the PSAT, SAT, and ACT,[9] providing them with multiple postsecondary options. While Crosstown's SAT and PSAT scores show that students, including those classified as MLLs and SWDs, have improved between the 2021–2022 and the 2022–2023 school years, the rate of SAT and PSAT test-taking in the state is low, and there is not a good comparison group for these tests. The ACT is the test that is broadly administered in Tennes-

7 Tennessee Department of Education (2024a). Data downloads and requests. Finance, 2023-24 Per Pupil Expenditures. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/data/per-pupil-expenditures-fy24-updated-2025-02-13.xlsx

8 https://www.crosstownhigh.org/

9 Many high schools in the southern United States prioritize the ACT over the SAT. Only 4% of students in Tennessee take the SAT (https://www.ontocollege.com/average-sat-score-2023/). Regional preference for high school testing is related to the number of tests colleges receive in that area; in Tennessee, colleges receive more ACT tests. States where most students take a specific test tend to have lower average scores for that test than states where fewer students take the test. Because most students take the ACT in Tennessee, the state scores are comparatively lower than the scores in other states where fewer students take the ACT. By offering and encouraging students to participate in the SAT as well as the ACT, Crosstown is expanding the postsecondary options for their students.

see and thus provides insight into how Crosstown students perform academically compared to other students in the Memphis area. We summarize below the 2022–2023 ACT results that appear in **Table 1** and **Table 2**.

- Overall, 35.8% of Crosstown students scored a 21 or higher on the ACT in 2022–2023 compared to 15.8% from all Memphis schools.
- The proportion of Crosstown students classified as Black/Hispanic/Native American by the Tennessee Department of Education who scored a 21 or higher on the ACT was about twice that of their Memphis-wide counterparts (24% compared to 12.7% respectively).
- At Crosstown, 16.7% of SWDs scored a 21 or higher on the ACT compared to 2.2% of SWDs in Memphis.
- Overall, Crosstown students, particularly Black/Hispanic/Native American students and SWDs, fared better on the ACT across subjects than their Memphis peers.

Student engagement, as measured by attendance, is a critical element in how Crosstown measures success. Interviews with staff revealed that attendance is an area they hope to continue to improve. Even so, with an overall attendance rate of 93% in 2022–2023, the vast majority of students were regularly attending school. As presented in **Table 3**, students with disabilities (93.8%) had the highest attendance rate in 2022–2023 when compared to the general student body at Crosstown (93%) and students classified as MLLs (80.6%). Notably, data from 2022–2023 showed that the upper grades (11th and 12th grade) had the lowest attendance rate. In addition to promising attendance outcomes, suspension was low and falling at Crosstown (**Table 4**).[10] One student in our 9th–10th-grade focus group shared,

> And this school changed me because I used to not care about a lot of stuff. My behavior was off. And I don't know how this school changed me, it just … I changed a lot. My behavior is good. I don't get in trouble as much. I don't know how, though. It just, I don't know. I think it's the people. I just don't get in trouble out here. I don't know. I changed a lot.

Thus, Crosstown's many efforts to create a supportive environment[11] are seemingly yielding results.

Lastly, Crosstown's overall graduation rate of 93.9% is over 10 percentage points higher than that of the average Memphis high school (81.5%). This is also true for SWDs, students from families that are economically disadvantaged, Black students, and Latine students (**Table 5**). SWDs at Crosstown had a graduation rate of 94.7% in 2023, which greatly surpassed the Memphis graduation rate of 78.2%. Similarly, the graduation rate for Black (96.9%) and Latine (92.7%) students at Crosstown was greater than that of Black (83.7%) and Latine (72.7%) students Memphis-wide. Notably, Latine students, who compose 12% of the student body, have a graduation rate a remarkable 20% higher than Memphis Latine students.

Crosstown does not track data on their graduates' college-going rate. Although the banners of colleges where students have been accepted are displayed prominently at Crosstown every spring, Crosstown staff did not subscribe to the idea that a four-year college route is the only route or the best route for all students. Conversations with students and staff revealed many different routes the class of 2024 plans to take. For instance, one student with an IEP shared that they plan to go into the Navy, while another said they were going to college to study mechanical engineering. In a school that "aim[s] to rethink the traditional American high school experience," it is not surprising that graduating students seek out varied paths.

Although the outcomes for Black students, Latine students, and SWDs at Crosstown are promising and often better than those of their Memphis peers, these differences in achievement may be due to self-selection bias, given that all families need to apply to be admitted. Less is known about the relatively small MLL population at Crosstown (1% of the student body was classified as MLLs according to Crosstown in 2022–2023—though it has been growing). At the time of the research visit, the school was still developing a strategy on how best to serve these students. We share more information on some of the early efforts Crosstown has made to attend to the needs of this population in the Inclusive Support Structures and Opportunities section of this report (page 23).

10 We did not have comparable city-wide data on attendance or suspensions.

11 The case study will explore many of the features of Crosstown's approach that might be contributing to attendance and discipline outcomes, including their focus on inclusive classrooms and restorative justice.

Table 1: School Year 2022–2023 Average ACT Score for Crosstown High Students by Student Classification

	Average Composite Score			Percent Scoring 21 or Higher			Percent Scoring Below 19		
	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff
All Students	19.1	16.4	2.7	35.8	15.8	20.0	50.0	75.2	-25.2
Black/Hispanic/Native American	17.3	15.9	1.4	24.0	12.7	11.3	65.3	78.4	-13.1
Economically Disadvantaged	17.7	15.2	2.5	23.7	8.2	15.5	65.8	84.9	-19.1
MLL	*	13.7	-	*	2.1	-	*	94.8	-
SWD	15.6	13.4	2.2	16.7	2.2	14.5	83.3	96.6	-13.3

** Population falls below data sharing threshold.* *Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2024b*

Table 2: School Year 2022–2023 Average ACT Score by Subject for Crosstown High Students by Student Classification

	Average English Score			Average Math Score			Average Reading Score			Average Science Score		
	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff	Crosstown (n=106)	Memphis (n=6032)	Diff
All Students	18.3	15.2	3.1	17.5	16.2	1.3	20.9	16.8	4.1	19.1	16.6	2.5
Black/Hispanic/ Native American	16.2	14.7	1.5	16.4	15.8	0.6	18.7	16.2	2.5	17.4	16.2	1.2
Economically Disadvantaged	16.3	13.8	2.5	16.9	15.4	1.5	18.7	15.4	3.3	18.1	15.6	2.5
MLL	*	11.6	-	*	14.7	-	*	13.3	-	*	14.7	-
SWD	13.4	11.4	2.0	15.5	14.3	1.2	16.7	13.3	3.4	16.1	13.9	2.2

** Population falls below data sharing threshold.* *Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2024b*

Attendance and Disciplinary Actions

Table 3: Average Attendance Rate for Crosstown High Students by Student Classification[12]

Student Classification	2022-2023
All	93.0%
SWD	93.8%
MLL	80.6%

Source: Crosstown High provided data (not publicly available)

Table 4: Average Suspension Rate for Crosstown High Students by Student Classification[13]

Student Classification	2022-2023 School Year	2021-2022 School Year
All	6.1%	5.0%
SWD	7.3%	7.1%

Source: Crosstown High provided data (not publicly available)

Table 5: Average Graduation Rate for Crosstown High Versus Memphis Students by Student Classification in School Year 2022–2023

Student Classification	Crosstown High (n=107)	Memphis Schools (n=6172)
All	93.9%	81.5%
SWD	94.7%	78.2%
Economically Disadvantaged	95.1%	79.7%
Black or African American	96.9%	83.7%
Latine	92.3%	72.7%
MLL	*	56.9%

** Population falls below data sharing threshold.*
Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2024c

12 Attendance data is from Crosstown High. The Tennessee Department of Education did not have attendance data for Crosstown High, and we chose not to compare data from different data sources.

13 Suspension data is from Crosstown High. The Tennessee Department of Education did not have attendance data for Crosstown High in 2022–2023, and we chose not to compare data from different data sources.

INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM STRUCTURES

Crosstown High employs a full inclusion model that utilizes co-teaching, push-in support, and application of UDL principles to create supportive learning environments for students.

One of the driving forces behind Crosstown's positive outcomes for Black and Latine SWDs is their commitment to a full inclusion model, where all students have opportunities to learn challenging content and to pursue their interests. Although there are several classes, such as life skills and work-based learning, that enroll only SWDs, most classes at Crosstown are fully integrated. Teachers also make an effort within classrooms, through seat and team assignments, to integrate SWDs and MLLs fully through heterogeneous grouping. A school leader described, "It's not like all the kids with disabilities are [seated together]. We have some kids who have a really good understanding who would help explain to the person next to them. So we have them seated [so that they can learn from one another]."

The quality and cohesiveness of Crosstown's inclusion team is essential to its approach to supporting inclusive classrooms. The inclusion team works closely with one another, general education teachers, and SWDs. They have a dedicated caseload of students, but assignments also shift when students show that they have a particular affinity with a given staff member. Inclusion specialists tend to focus on specific content areas, such as English or math, so that they have enough content expertise to serve as co-teachers. As we describe further in the Inclusive Support Structures and Opportunities section (see page 23), inclusion specialists also facilitate a quarterly inclusion roundtable with general education teachers, consult regularly with general education teachers, and hold weekly inclusion office hours after school.

The inclusion specialists and instructional assistants build relationships with students in and outside of the classroom that help students feel supported. The following excerpt from an interview with an SWD is illustrative of the feedback that students shared:

> **Interviewer:** Can you tell me just a little bit more about the most important things about this school that have helped you?
>
> **SWD:** They always want to know how you are feeling. Does this class bother you? Do you need help with this? Do you need help with that? They pretty much offered some assistance so you can achieve greater things.
>
> **Interviewer:** Okay, I see. Do you have an example of when that happened?
>
> **SWD:** Wait, yeah, I think it was Monday. I kind of broke down a little bit, but I did have a staff member, … she offered to talk to me about what was going on and offered to help me in the best way she can. So pretty much there are some teachers and staff in the school that actually care about you.

Crosstown supports inclusive classrooms through a co-teaching/team teaching model and integration of UDL principles. This section delves into each of these building blocks in more detail.

Co-Teaching/Team Teaching

Crosstown uses a co-teaching (which they call "team teaching") approach—where a general education teacher is paired with an inclusion specialist—in math, English, and APUSH. During observations of classrooms and interviews with teaching teams, it was clear that general education teachers and inclusion specialists worked closely together to meet the needs of students.[14] Although the general education teacher is primarily responsible for determining the content of assignments, they collaborate closely with the inclusion specialists on how to present material and structure lessons in a way that will support the engagement and understanding of diverse learners. A general education teacher said,

> We co-teach this class, but I'm the content. And then [the inclusion specialist] does a lot of our scaffold boards and scaffolding. … She's the one that makes it possible to do this [class]. We would not be able to, that would not be feasible [without her].

Inclusion specialists and general education teachers bounce ideas off one another for how to strategically group students and what types of prompts or materials are needed to scaffold the lesson for different types of learners. Because of the project-based nature of the work at Crosstown, teachers spend little time doing direct instruction. When

14 For more information on different types of co-teaching approaches, see Friend (2008) or Murawski & Bernhardt (2015).

they do provide short periods of direct instruction, however, it is mostly led by the general education teacher. After these short periods of direct instruction, students generally work in small groups or independently on their projects, with the general education teacher and the inclusion specialist walking around the classroom to check in with students on progress and answer questions. In some cases, however, the inclusion specialist provides direct instruction. For instance, a math class working on completing-the-square equations briefly split into two classrooms (using the garage door), with the general education teacher providing instruction to a more advanced group of students and the instructional specialist providing instruction to students who needed more support with foundational skills before they could solve the completing-the-square equations.

An important aspect of Crosstown's team teaching model is that the general education teachers do not abdicate their responsibility for supporting SWDs, and the inclusion specialist is also there to support all students. Teaching teams said that many students in their classes do not know which students the inclusion specialist is in the class to support. A general education teacher said, "I think sometimes people forget when it's a co-teaching structure like this that both of us are responsible for offering scaffolding or accommodations." The team teaching approach makes all students feel more supported and avoids singling out or stigmatizing SWDs.

The degree to which the inclusion specialist focuses mostly on specific students, however, does vary by class and teaching team. One inclusion specialist, for instance, said that although she strives to provide support to the whole class, she is "a little biased" toward supporting SWDs. She said,

> I am a little biased towards my kids because they need more support. They need more time with me. And even when I would walk away, they'd be like, "Wait, [name of staff member], come back, we still need you." So they know I'm here for them, them specifically.

SWDs understand that the inclusion specialist is in the class to support them, and spoke about the value of that support within the classroom:

> I feel like [the inclusion specialist is] supporting me in academics. I feel like it's a crucial thing because a lot of assignments and math in particular are hard to me, and [the inclusion specialist] is always there to try to push me and try to get me back on task. Because a lot of times my mind would drift to doing something else or just doing other things, and she tries to make sure I'm having a good understanding of what the topic for today is and stuff like that.

The team teaching model is also beneficial in classrooms comprised entirely of SWDs. For instance, in the work-based learning class (a class designed specifically for SWDs), two inclusion specialists work together to teach and support students in the classroom.[15] A teacher for the class said that although Crosstown prioritizes inclusion, "The best thing about having a class that is all SWDs is we can go at our own pace … and we're not leaving anyone behind." She went on to say, "Of course, we want to have our students integrated into regular education classes, but sometimes it's really good to have that special attention."

Classroom at Crosstown with co-teachers

Integration of Inclusive UDL Practices

Another core building block that Crosstown uses to support inclusive classrooms is the way that they integrate UDL principles. UDL principles provide a framework for teachers to design and deliver instruction to meet the needs of all learners.[16] Principles of UDL are reflected in different sections of this case study, but the paragraphs that follow illustrate the UDL features that are most prominent in Crosstown's classrooms: space and self-regulation; classroom routines; different modalities of learning; and culturally responsive practices.

15 Although the work-based learning is designed for SWDs, it is not a required course.

16 For more information on UDL principles, see CAST (2018).

Space and Self-Regulation

As we describe in the Crosstown High's History and School Model section (page 7), the physical layout of the space at Crosstown makes it unique. In many classes, students have a variety of places within the classroom where they can sit, including couches and beanbags. One SWD spoke about the influence of "comfortability" and collaboration on students' ability to self-regulate:

> I feel safe because it doesn't feel like a class. You sit in a [typical] school, and the desk is only at the front, and it's just a whiteboard or a chalkboard. … It makes it uneasy. But in Crosstown, they have comfortable chairs, comfortable this, and they have a whole … thing of comfortability. And also, we do activities that … brings the students together. And we can do projects based on whoever is in the class. And I feel like that's a good thing.

Students at Crosstown also have "freedom of movement." Students are sometimes assigned to groups; teachers try to ensure that SWDs are integrated throughout the classroom, but students also can stand and move to another table or work alone if they wish. Students can move around the school relatively freely, though at the time of the research visit, staff reported that Crosstown was trying to institute tighter policies around providing students with hallway passes to reduce the prevalence of some students habitually roaming the halls.

Order and relative quiet are other aspects of the spaces at Crosstown. Some classrooms have soft music playing (either jazz or student-developed playlists) and dimmed lights at the beginning of class. Inclusion office hours after school also included soft music, incense burning, dim lighting, and snacks and water on a table for students to grab as they settled in to work with one of the inclusion specialists.

Routines

Every classroom we observed had routines that students followed when they entered the classroom. In the 12th-grade English class, students began class by responding to posted questions silently in their journal before moving on to silent reading. In work-based learning, students entered class, opened the journal that contained their work, and responded to a "warm-up question." One instructor describing their routines said,

> I think as a school, those little routines are really important because that's kind of a hallmark of making a classroom accessible and equitable. Every child can learn a routine no matter their abilities. And even though every day we're doing different things in class, … just keeping the first 10 minutes of class the same kind of brings the energy down. They walk in, they're confident, they know exactly what to do, and then even though we have changes, they can kind of fall back on that routine in the beginning and the end of the class are always exactly the same. And so I think that helps them feel a little bit of confidence to try new things in the middle of class.

In addition to these types of classroom routines, teachers and inclusion specialists are intentional about creating a standard structure for Canvas (the web-based platform students use to access and complete assignments) so that there is predictability for students navigating the system. A school leader said, "Those little things just make it a lot easier for kids." Similarly, a relatively large proportion of teachers break their long block periods into smaller work periods and use visual timers to let students know how much time they have left within a certain section of the class. One teacher described that timers are helpful for many students because they know what to expect and how long they are being asked to focus before they take a break. The timers can make other students anxious, however, so they try to make them as inconspicuous as possible so students can "tune them out" if they are not helpful.

Different Modalities for Learning

In keeping with UDL best practices, teachers at Crosstown present content in a variety of formats and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways. For instance, teachers for 12th-grade English provided lesson directions and content on the classroom whiteboard, on the projection screen in the classroom, in Canvas, and in Google Docs. Students had access to both physical and digital copies of poems as well as videos of poets reading their poems. In math, teachers provided students with content both on paper and digitally, recordings of the teacher solving example problems, and supplementary materials, such as Kahn Academy videos. The following are quotes from two SWDs who spoke to the value of having these types of choices in the classroom:

> They do help you a lot. They give you examples … and they show you a lot of different ways to learn it easier. To be honest, that helped me grow academically.

> In certain assignments like projects and just in assignments in general, you could do a video format, you could do an audio format, you could draw a picture, you could make a 3D model. You could do all types of things.

Technology is a key tool that enables students to access content in different formats and supplementary materials. Crosstown provides every student with an iPad for working on assignments and submitting work. Students also have access to other technologies, such as headphones for audiobooks, so that they can absorb content using an alternative modality (aural instead of visual learning, for instance). Teachers use technology to modify content and provide accommodations for SWDs and to allow students to go through lessons at their own pace (for instance, using video-recorded lessons that students can pause).

In one classroom, the math teacher recorded lessons in advance so that students could watch them on their iPads at their own pace to ensure understanding. The math teacher also used a program called Desmos,[17] which allowed her to alter the difficulty of questions for students based on their level of mastery. Through Desmos, the math teacher and inclusion specialist personalized learning by creating custom activities tailored to individual students' needs. Desmos provides tools for adapting activities, adding scaffolding, or extending challenges based on students' abilities. When asked about it, the inclusion specialist said,

> In this class, there are some students with disabilities who can do some of the applying problems, like the higher-level problems. We know pretty well which students we are just trying to get to a developing level, who we [are] trying to just write something down on the paper and try. The way that Crosstown has Desmos set up, it's nice, because students who are moving quicker can get to the more complex problems and the ones who we can see still need some more practice with just "how are we going to set up this problem," the basic procedural part, they can get that practice, too.

In another classroom, the English teacher and inclusion specialist shared online documents with SWDs so that they could provide assistance and scaffolding to them from anywhere in the classroom and in a way that does not single them out. For instance, the inclusion specialist provided certain students working on a poetry analysis essay with "sentence starters" so that they had a launch pad for starting their essays, and then circulated around the classroom to provide support to all students, along with those who had received the sentence starters. The inclusion specialist said,

> If I'm making a document and giving it to specific students, I'll have them make a copy. … They share it with me so that I can hop on at any time and see what they're working and give them sentence starters, even if I'm across the room and not having to get right there or comment on what they're doing. And that kind keeps it discreet too, that it's not like "[the inclusion specialist is] only working with [name of an SWD] today."

Although teachers spoke about the ways that technology can be used to support learning, they also said that students needed to be monitored to ensure that they are using their time effectively. One teacher said, "They use their iPads a lot, and we try to be clear about, 'This is iPad time, and this is not iPad time.' We can keep a check on them being productive, because iPad time can kind of bleed into the times when we want them to be engaged without technology."

Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an approach to teaching and learning that supports student learning and success by seeing students' cultures, languages, and lived experiences as assets for learning. In a culturally responsive classroom, students' cultural strengths are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote academic and whole-child learning.[18] Culturally responsive teaching practices are woven into Crosstown's approach, and we discuss them in other sections of the case study (see section on Inclusive Classroom Structures on page 13). These practices include the promotion of students' ownership of their own learning, a value of interdependence and collaboration, inclusion of multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and student-centered learning experiences. In addition to these practices, Crosstown staff affirmed and placed value on the language and experiences

17 Desmos Studio is a public benefit corporation that provides a free suite of math tools that help people represent their ideas mathematically. They prioritize equity and accessibility. See https://www.desmos.com/ to learn more.

18 National Equity Project, 2025; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Paris and Alim, 2017

that students brought with them to the classroom and provided different options for students to communicate their understanding of class content.

One example of this was in the APUSH class, where students were working in groups on a project investigating different causes of or contributing factors to the Civil War. A group of Black students were trying to find the right academic language to describe the ways that a political abolitionist was viewed by his contemporaries. One SWD described the abolitionist as being perceived as a "menace to society," telling the inclusion specialist that he "wanted to say it in my own words" but that he would give it to a peer so that she could "sophisticate it" by using more academic language. The inclusion specialist encouraged him to use his own language. In the post-observation interview, she said,

> I was just telling him, as long as what your words look like explain the event, you can use whatever words, especially if you're trying to make it make sense to your peers. Use the words that you know, and that counts. You don't have to "sophisticate it" for it to be quality work.

The inclusion specialist also spoke about the importance of creating a safe community of learners for Black and Latine SWDs, particularly in APUSH, where some of the content may be triggering. She said, "This is a safe space. There are events that may trigger … because that's just history." She said that to promote safety, the general education teacher tells the class, "If this is too heavy, you can take a break," or, "If you feel like you don't want to hear about this right now, that is fine." In addition, during the warm-up transition time at the beginning of class, APUSH students can confidentially respond to a series of questions through their iPads to privately share their needs and readiness to learn with their teachers.

Acquiring Real-World Skills Through Work-Based Learning

In 2023–2024, Crosstown launched a work-based learning (WBL) class, which focused on preparing SWDs for the job market. After receiving training on workplace etiquette, job skills, and resume development, the students worked at a restaurant in the concourse where Crosstown is located. The class was taught by two inclusion specialists and followed a curriculum created by the lead teacher. In reflecting on the class, teachers said that pacing and relationships were key features in student success. For instance, having a classroom entirely of SWDs allowed the class to go at a more comfortable pace and for the teachers to break down tasks and instructions for students in a way that they might not get from a worksite manager. The WBL classroom had a ratio of approximately two teachers to ten students, which provided students with more individual support when needed. Teachers encouraged student relationships via station and group work. In one class we observed, the teacher explained,

> I assigned them in their groups, and I did that based upon who they work well with, who gets along well. And I also wanted to make sure that there was a leader or a person that would kind of take charge in each group. … I just don't want anyone to feel like they're left out. So, everybody was in a group with someone that they knew or worked well with and someone that could also be the leader of that group.

Because the class included only SWDs, the WBL classroom operated in unique ways. According to staff, the extra support, particularly around pacing and relationships, helped students practice social and leadership skills in a way that transferred to other classes and prepared them for life after Crosstown. In 2024–2025, the WBL class continued, though the worksite changed.

AUTHENTIC STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Crosstown prioritizes student-centered learning and assessment through practices such as project-based learning, competency-based assessment, student reflection and revision policies, and presentations of learning.

In addition to inclusion practices, Black and Latine SWDs benefit from Crosstown's focus on individualized learning and centering student voice. Teachers have the flexibility to meet students where they are because of Crosstown's embrace of project-based learning, competency-based assessment,[19] value for revision and redemption, and demonstrations of learning. These student-centered practices serve as a mechanism through which Black and Latine SWDs can explore their passions and build academic and social confidence.

Project-Based Learning and Student Choice

Caregivers and students pointed to the project-based learning focus of Crosstown as an example of the choices students have regarding what they study and how they demonstrate what they've learned. For instance, a participant in the 11th–12th-grade focus group recalled, "I remember, my first day here, they made it clear to us that we did have a voice and that if we needed anything that we could tell them about it." One of the most prominent examples of student voice are the APEX elective classes developed in response to student interests, which one student described as a "club during school." APEX projects can be pitched by students, staff, and community partners, but are mostly developed in response to an annual student interest survey. Students choose the topic for the quarter and, although a teacher will help facilitate the learning, students have more control of the direction of the course than they would in other classes. Although some APEXes were grouped by grade (e.g., a freshman seminar), APEXes are generally spaces for students to engage with classmates they may not interact with in more traditional classes. As one student in the 11th–12th-grade focus group described,

> You're constantly surrounded with different people. With APEX and enrichment, you're meeting different people from different backgrounds, so you're not always with the same group of people. So, it just helps you get out of your comfort zone and branch out.

The elective and APEX topics vary greatly—some topics, for example, were entrepreneurship, cosmetology, and podcasting—reflecting the diverse interests of students. As another student explained, having options helps students find belonging: "I've heard from new students that we have a lot more elective classes and clubs of that sort. So you're bound to find your niche." Many students opted for APEXes directly connected to their career aspirations, such as entrepreneurship and robotics. In this way, APEX classes provide all students with a chance to explore their interests and prepare for life outside of Crosstown.[20]

Students in classrooms working on projects

19 To learn about Competency-Based Education, see Levine and Patrick, 2019.

20 In 2024, APEX experiences fell into eight categories: (1) community (building community in school and beyond); (2) problem solving (solving problems for ourselves and others); (3) leadership (opportunities to build skills or practice leading others); (4) entrepreneurship (pathways for turning your ideas into profit); (5) next steps (preparing for life beyond high school); (6) deep dives (in-depth learning and thinking on specialty topics); (7) arts and creating (creating visual or interactive experiences); and (8) wellness (experiences in physical and mental health). Students can choose a quarterly, semester, or yearlong APEX.

While the project-based learning environment and APEX classes provide all students with opportunities to explore their passions, they can be particularly significant for students who learn differently. For example, one of the students interviewed for the study, a 10th-grade student interested in art, spoke about his involvement in an entrepreneurial club where he designs and sells sweatshirts and key chains to other students. We observed that his math teachers made him a central focus of the multi-week quarterly class project ("Parabolas for Profit"). During the math class observation, he circulated from table to table to serve as an information source for his classmates as they calculated the right price point for his sweatshirts. One research team member overheard students in class saying that they were proud of him for the fine work he had done on the sweatshirts. In a more traditional educational environment, this student, who finds math challenging, might not have had the opportunity to be recognized by his classmates for his unique skills.

Competency-Based Assessments

Crosstown's approach to measuring and demonstrating learning is foundational to its approach for creating an inclusive environment for SWDs. Crosstown requires students to demonstrate how they have met learning goals in authentic ways (e.g., through projects and presentations) and to articulate how they have developed transferable skills, such as the ability to read critically or think quantitatively (see text box for Crosstown competencies). This approach is useful for SWDs because it provides them with multiple ways to show what they have learned and provides space for students to master competencies in their own sometimes nonlinear way, which in turn helps to build their confidence and identities as learners. One school leader said,

> I would say the goal for the [SWDs] would be just to feel positive about their learning. … Crosstown is project based and competency based, so the focus is on the completion and the different steps throughout processes, even if they aren't linear. And majority of the times with the [SWDs], they aren't linear. So, I would say my goal is just for the students to feel confident in their learning and we see the light bulbs, and when we see the light bulbs, there's automatically progress.

Crosstown has 12 overarching competencies that they want students to develop (see text box). These competencies define the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that a well-rounded high school graduate needs to succeed. The competencies are measured on a four-point scale: emerging (level 1), developing (level 2), established or proficient (level 3), and applying (level 4). Crosstown has a rubric that breaks down core attributes of each competency and what constitutes achievement at each point in the scale.[21]

Crosstown Competencies

Crosstown has adopted the XQ Competencies-Learners for Life (XQ Institute, 2024).

SELF-AWARENESS

Wellness
Understand my physical and emotional health

Recognizing Conflict
Cope constructively with conflict

Understanding Self
Know my strengths and areas for growth

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Receiving Feedback
Seek and act on feedback from others

Pursuing Goals
Set goals and work to achieve them

Self-Regulation
Manage emotions and behavior

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Self Motivation
Nurture a sense of purpose

Wayfinding
Navigate my learning path

Self-Advocacy
Seek out the support I need

21 An example of a rubric for "lead inquiry" is on page 7 of the 2018–2019 Crosstown High Competencies Practitioner Guide.

As articulated in their practitioner guidebook, Crosstown's teachers use both competency and state standards to determine the content and structure of assessments.[22] Competencies are designed to be student-facing, whereas state standards are used by the school's instructors to guide course content and define necessary skill components (e.g., "plan and carry out an investigation"). The guidebook stresses that the rubrics and scale are designed overall to help support learning and that they need to be adapted to individual students, based on their needs. The guidebook describes, for instance, that "for a non-verbal learner, performance level indicators that describe students[']' ability to 'talk about' or 'explain' their thinking, an accommodation should be made so the non-verbal learner is able to 'explain' her or his thinking through non-verbal communication, such as through gestures, written word, use of manipulatives, or other means" (2018, p. 13).

Creating assessments tied to competencies and state standards, while also providing accommodations for each student's needs, is difficult and requires ongoing, real-time adjustments. A Crosstown general education teacher described how it has taken time for the math team to establish what the competency scale looks like in practice in a way that maintains the rigor and intent of the grade-level standards. She said,

> What [the specialist] and I were trying to decide yesterday is just what's the most basic level of understanding that they need in order to be successful? … I have three categories: It's like, what is the standard asking? What would mastery be? What's deeper than that? What would be an applying level and how I can push some kids deeper? And then down from that, what is the most basic level of understanding that they could show to pass this class? And I feel like those three categories have helped the whole math team reframe just what that is, especially that bottom level.

Staff said that the math team aims to challenge students without pushing them so far that they become frustrated and disconnect from the class, saying, "I think it is really based on the individual and [seeing] exactly where they are at." The strong relationships that they have with students help them to understand what the best approach is for a student on a given day. Describing one student who was behind on the completion of a project, the teacher said, "I know it's going to take him longer. … We're going to give him that space and time to do it."

Crosstown Grading Rubric

10% of the grade is **student reflection** on **performance tasks**.

10% is **individual and group reflection** on the **application of skills** as demonstrated through daily classroom collaboration and project work.

50% of the grade is **formative** (quizzes, text annotations, rough drafts).

20% is **summative assessments** (debate, essay, speech, unit test, presentation, paper).

10% is **final product**, which is finishing and presenting to an audience (sharing with community partner, selection for portfolio, reflection.)

Student Reflection, Feedback, and Opportunities for Revision

As demonstrated in Crosstown's competencies (see text box on page 19) and grading rubric (see text box above), individual and group reflection are integral to assessment. In classes we observed, students were provided options to reflect on their learning through journaling, verbal responses to teachers circulating and asking reflection-focused questions, and in peer discussions. As discussed further in the next section on Exhibitions and Presentations of Learning (page 21), reflection is a core part of students' annual presentations of learning, when students reflect on their most significant learnings over the course of their high school career. A school leader indicated that this aspect of Crosstown's assessment approach is the most essential piece for SWDs because it helps them recognize how to approach solving problems and to generalize that realization to other types of schoolwork:

> The most successful [assessment strategies for SWDs] are the different levels of reflection because the students throughout different steps of the project, there's

22 Crosstown High Competencies Practitioner Guide.

always a point of reflection of, "What did I do that went well? What did I do that did not go well?" And I think those are most successful because it's that metacognition, the thinking about the thinking process, thinking about why we're doing this, thinking about how to apply this to the other parts of school and the other subjects. So, the reflection is the, I would say, most successful.

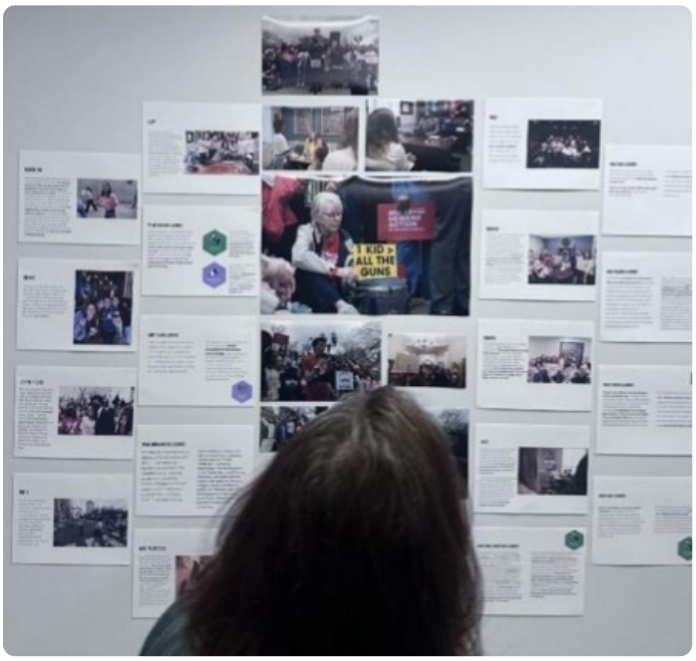
Students also have access to a variety of feedback so they can monitor their progress toward mastery of the competencies. In addition to self-assessment, students receive feedback from teachers, peers, family members, and community partners. Once provided with feedback, students have multiple opportunities to revise and resubmit their work. Students are allowed to submit and resubmit summative and final products until grades are due. For formative assessments, late work is accepted up to one week after the due date and resubmission is due one week after teacher feedback. Although students repeatedly raised this aspect of Crosstown's approach as evidence that Crosstown's grading is "fair," several teachers said that SWDs do not always take advantage of the opportunities to revise their work.

Exhibitions and Presentations of Learning

As illustrated in Crosstown's grading rubric (see text box on page 20), all classes require that students complete and present a final product of some kind. Students are often given multiple options as to the form of the product. One SWD said, "In every project that we do, we have the opportunity to express our creative mind. So, we can write songs, do poetry, write an essay, do slides." Students develop a portfolio of these products over the course of high school and then share examples of their portfolio work with their families and the broader school community in biannual exhibitions of learning and an end-of-year presentation of learning.

The two annual exhibitions of learning (Backstage Pass and Yeti-Con) are open to family and community members. These events occur in the evening (5–7 p.m.) at the end of the fall and winter quarter, respectively. Attendees walk from classroom to classroom to review displayed student work and observe student performances. At one of these events, we observed a student fashion show where students modeled the clothes they designed, a demonstration of American Sign Language (ASL) by students learning ASL, and musical performances. The event also had a marketplace where students sold their artwork and hand-made jewelry. Members of the entrepreneurship club shared their products, which included key chains and sweatshirts. We also viewed exhibits from numerous class-based student projects such as student-designed greenhouses, student zines, photographs of student murals in the community, and photos of students in the activism club visiting the statehouse to advocate for gun control.

Every Crosstown student also participates in an end-of-year presentation of learning. These are opportunities for students to examine and reflect on their growth over the year in relation to academic goals, which they support using evidence from their portfolio. During presentations of learning, students present for approximately 30 minutes to a panel of one or more teachers, an inclusion specialist (for SWDs), a peer, a caregiver, and sometimes multiple other family members.



Examples of student work shared at the Yeti-Con Exhibition.

Left: Photos from activism class focused on gun reform, where students lobbied representatives at the state house.

Right: A student's music album, including student feedback. Visitors scan the QR code to hear music.

We observed presentations of learning for the SWDs whom we interviewed for this research. The presentations of learning are formal presentations, in PowerPoint format, where students share their goals for the year and artifacts that illustrate the work that they have completed in each year of their high school career (one presenter said that they were encouraged to present 6–10 artifacts; this may vary by grade level).

Presentations of learning follow a general format, wherein students introduce themselves, talk about each artifact as it relates to what they learned in high school, share their strengths, and describe their longer-term goals. Students then answer questions from their panel, such as, "How has this prepared you for your future goals?" and "How did you choose your artifacts?" These questions often come from teachers and family members. The presentation of learning concludes with feedback from panel members, which ranges from concrete recommendations to improve the presentation to emotional and heartfelt reflections on the student's achievements. (See detailed examples of presentations of learning in the text box below.)

Observations of 2024 Presentations of Learning

Observations of presentations of learning by three SWDs whom we interviewed (along with their caregivers) are presented below.

A Black male who was completing 10th grade shared that his goals for the year were to improve his grades and focus on his entrepreneurial project of creating his own clothing brand. He presented his grades, an artifact from his APUSH class showing differences between the U.S. and Italian governments, an artifact from his biology class (a farming video game that included a focus on economics and environment), and photos of students modeling his clothing brand. For his clothing brand, he talked about the research that went into deciding what clothes to design, expressed appreciation for the peers who supported his brand, and discussed the challenge of setting a price for his sweatshirts and of finding out what others want out of a clothing brand. He said his future goal is to take the fashion design APEX in his junior year.

A Black male who was completing 11th grade shared a biology project from freshman year, an artifact showing his pen-pal discussions with a partner in Mexico in Spanish, artifacts from creative writing (including poems and storybook profile of an activist), and an artifact from his ASL class. When sharing the ASL artifact, he said that he chose it as an artifact because "it gave me a newfound respect for the hard-of-hearing or deaf community." He then said, "Me learning about ASL and Spanish helps to build community, and I believe a lot of this has made me a better person." In the Q&A section, when asked what connected his career goals (baseball player, preacher, astronomer), he said, "I don't want to work an average 9–5 job or to be a garbage man, I want to support others to do their best. When they go through hard challenges, I want to help them out." After the Q&A round, the student's mother provided feedback, saying she thought that he had done a wonderful job, while also saying that she liked the parts of his presentation where he sounded more natural and went "off script" compared to when he just read through his notes. One of the other panelists really stressed that he could see the hard work that went into the presentation. Finally, a teacher noted that he could see how much the student shows care for others and suggested that he volunteer during his senior year at a local nonprofit as a "conversation partner" to further develop his Spanish and ASL skills.

A Black male completing 9th grade presented artifacts from freshman year and spoke about his progress before attendees were allowed to ask questions and provide feedback. The presentation of learning was attended by two inclusion specialists, a school counselor, and three teachers. During the feedback-session portion of the presentation of learning, the school staff praised the student's "light," "positivity," "resilience," and "warmth," tying these attributes to the Crosstown competencies "build community" and "engage as a citizen." With tears in their eyes, each staff member communicated to the student the impact that his positive attitude made on staff and his peers over the course of the school year and told him that his ability to connect with others is special.

Students shared that the project-based learning experiences at Crosstown, the exhibitions of learning, and the presentations of learning helped them build confidence, time-management skills, public-speaking skills, and the ability to work with and get along with others. For example, one student with learning differences said, "I feel like from freshmen year to now my social skills have skyrocketed. I wasn't talkative. But working in different groups is helping me, and working with different people. Sense of belonging. You can make friends easily."[23]

INCLUSIVE SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Crosstown's whole-school commitment to inclusive support structures and opportunities is sustained by the SST and inclusion specialists.

Crosstown utilizes several approaches to support SWDs, most of which also benefit students without disabilities and contribute to a positive school culture and learning environment. Crosstown staff work together to accommodate and challenge SWDs. The school-wide commitment to inclusive support structures and opportunities is best categorized as four strategies: 1) develop and empower staff through planning, collaboration, and professional learning opportunities; 2) prioritize relationships with families; 3) provide multiple avenues toward success via tutoring and additional academic support; and 4) sustain a positive school climate and culture particularly through restorative justice practices. Notably, while the whole school embraces these strategies, Crosstown does have specific groups of staff, such as the SST and inclusion specialists, that are dedicated to implementing these four strategies.

Staff Planning, Collaboration, and Learning

Inclusive support structures and opportunities for SWDs are made possible at Crosstown through inclusion roundtables, staff planning and collaboration, and formal professional learning opportunities. Inclusion roundtables are quarterly grade-level meetings where inclusion specialists and general education teachers collaborate to generate ideas for how to support students who are experiencing behavioral or academic challenges. The 30-minute meetings each focus on two students and follow a set structure that includes the identification of student strengths, growth areas, and tactics to try in order to successfully support them. To ensure that all staff can participate, the lead inclusion specialist surveys teachers before the meeting and a summary of the meeting is accessible to all teachers afterward. The open sharing of information and collaboration that occurs through the inclusion roundtables shows up in the classrooms, where teachers implement the discussed approaches with the goal of supporting the students to succeed.

Given that the inclusion roundtable aims to facilitate conversation about specific students who may benefit from additional help, it is attended by a mix of inclusion specialists and general education teachers who have worked with the student of interest. The collaborative space starts by creating a shared understanding of the student. Teachers share experiences with the student (e.g., "I have seen [student] succeed in asking for help," "They do best when they have a specific seat," "They have strong self-awareness," etc.). The teacher input inspires discussion for actionable steps (what the inclusion specialists call the "let's try"). Then the information, summarized on a slide deck, is shared with all relevant teachers. Specifically, the discussion includes the following topics: information on the student's strengths, "good to know" (i.e., contextual knowledge related to a student's learning or relationships), areas of concern, "what we've tried," "student says," and "let's try." By the end of the discussion, staff agree on some accommodations and/or problem-solving strategies to use in an effort to better support the student.

While inclusion roundtables provide a dedicated time for collaboration, most staff planning and collaboration occurs organically, with staff sharing ideas and student updates with their colleagues. For instance, it is common for one teacher to send a Slack message to another letting them know a student is having a rough day and providing suggestions. Although our initial conversations with school leaders indicated that teachers have scheduled time set aside for shared planning, several teachers and inclusion specialists said that this does not occur in practice because of competing time commitments. The interviewed staff said that they find time for co-planning during class time when students are working on projects or rely on less formal methods before or after class (i.e., email, Slack, and/or overlapping free time). As one teacher described,

> I think a lot of our time together is because on Tuesday and Thursdays we do fourth period and sixth period

23 Student quote captured in notes, not in a transcript.

> together back to back. And then it's lunch. We don't have a shared planning time. But between those two classes, whenever, if there's a moment where students are working and don't need [support], we're able to quickly check in on what's working. And then having lunch right after helps [provide] that buffer to be able to go over things. I mean, a combined planning time would be great [but we don't have it].

Respondents said that these informal interactions provide the minimum time needed for them to implement effective team teaching in inclusive classrooms (see more on the practice in the section Inclusive Classroom Structures on page 13). It is important to note, however, that the lack of formal co-planning time means that collaboration is heavily reliant on teachers sacrificing their free time or multitasking during class time, and this approach may be difficult to sustain or scale over time.

Crosstown staff develop their own skill and knowledge to support their inclusive structures through various professional learning opportunities. Generally, professional learning opportunities during 2023–2024 occurred through Crosstown's partnership with Facing History and Ourselves, an inclusion-focused professional development at the start of the year, an opportunity for teachers to take a sabbatical, and conferences. As the main mechanism for external professional learning, staff engage with Facing History and Ourselves—an organization whose mission is to "use lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to racism, antisemitism, and other forms of bigotry and hate." Staff meet with the organization three times a year and have access to virtual resources year-round. One school leader said that the trainings have helped them to guide students through text that is particularly triggering.

Across all the different opportunities to develop professionally, leaders encourage staff to share their learning with their colleagues. Slack is often the method of choice for sharing resources, but monthly staff meetings can also provide additional professional development, such as emotional resilience training. Inclusion-specific professional learning during 2023–2024 focused on three areas determined at the beginning of the year. As explained by one school leader,

> At the beginning of the year, we have an inclusion PD. … We have a different focus every year. So this year, our inclusion team and ESL team focus was about collaboration, scaffolding, and helping students grow in independence.

Having an established focus at the start of the year empowered staff to share resources during the year and celebrate progress. Professional learning also included restorative justice trainings led by the SST. An SST staff person provided one example:

> I thought one of the beneficial things we did in our last professional development, our PD, was we had an education piece on building that courage that [a fellow SST member] was talking about. Maybe you have a young White teacher wanting to address something with a young Latinx or young African American kid, and doesn't have the courage to go and address the issue. I thought what's beneficial was the educational transition piece that we had, where we … put scenarios on the board, and then get some feedback from teachers as a whole, and not singling that teacher out to say, "Hey, what would you do in this situation?" But to see some responses from other teachers, and then giving them an opportunity to see how we will work through this scenario based on the dynamics of the situation, of who's involved. So I thought that was really beneficial, having that educational piece, because as adults, we're still learning. We don't know every approach.

Crosstown staff are open to trying new techniques to support their students. Leaders also provide staff with the opportunity to pursue their own professional development and share back the knowledge they have accumulated.

As demonstrated in their approach to professional learning, Crosstown has established a culture that recognizes their staff as experts in their areas and gives them autonomy to support students. For instance, APEX and WBL classrooms are just a couple of examples in which teachers design the course curriculum to meet standards and student goals. In the case of WBL, without relying on an established curriculum, the teacher (an inclusion specialist) collaborated with staff and the community to create a course that addressed individual student goals and helped to address the anxiety some students had about life after graduating.

General education classrooms also allow teachers to utilize their own network to design their project-based learning assignments. One teacher's civic engagement assignment tasked students with conducting research on gun violence in the Memphis area with the help of local experts and survivors who were part of the teacher's network. As illustrated by this example, staff are not restricted to a standardized curriculum and are encouraged to rely on their

A Crosstown teacher gives a lesson on annotation

expertise to help all students meet standards and individual goals. The autonomy staff have to plan, collaborate, and learn inspires a culture that recognizes and supports the high self-efficacy of Crosstown's teachers.

Family Engagement

One of the most critical components of the inclusive support structures and opportunities for Black and Latine SWDs is the relationships staff form with caregivers. These relationships are not just evident in the context of routine IEP meetings; Crosstown's staff work as partners with families to understand students' goals and help create an environment that supports students. Crosstown establishes a relationship with families of SWDs before the student even starts classes and continues to nurture the relationship through ongoing communication. By the time of the IEP meeting, several interactions have likely already occurred to help staff and families partner to best serve students.

As an initial step, Crosstown introduces incoming families to staff and the school as early as April or May for incoming freshmen who already have a diagnosis. While Crosstown cannot provide structured services until the student is enrolled, initial conversations and tours can help staff be proactive to ensure students get the support needed and feel comfortable in the space. A school leader described,

> We do conversations with the parent and the student. We do tours where they can just be in the space. I review any psychological testing, whatever that they can bring in. And then we can't really start anything official until they're enrolled in the school. So [other next steps] depend on the student. Some students it's more urgent and we have to be setting up a meeting the first week of school. If it doesn't feel [as urgent], we give kids about a month to get acclimated, because we want to not make academic decisions based on [behaviors associated with their] transition [into] the space. So we'll let teachers know these are accommodations that the student had in the past so that the kids are being supported right off the bat and the teachers are aware of what their diagnosis is. Just when we're sharing IEPs at a glance and having those conversations at the beginning of the year, we're also giving teachers information about incoming students who aren't identified yet.

The early interaction thoughtfully engages multiple relevant parties to ensure students are met with supports. Over time, as teachers and inclusion specialists get to know students and caregivers, they are able to adjust instructional supports. Open communication between staff and families helps ensure students are comfortable and equipped for success.

Crosstown staff make themselves available to caregivers through ParentSquare[24] (a family communication app), email, phone, and in person. One caregiver elaborated,

> They got the parent app where you could reach out to any of the staff that you need to. … I can always call the front desk; they give me the email or they'll send a group email out to who I'm trying to reach. I never have had a problem with reaching anybody.

Conversations with caregivers include both the personal (e.g., a death in the family) to academic-specific concerns (e.g., a grade dropping in a class), but they consistently are for the intention of partnering to help the student succeed. For example, a teacher alerting a caregiver that their student is struggling in math means the caregiver can provide permission for the student to participate in inclusion office hours after school. The staff can also check in on a student's well being if the caregiver shared that the student is having a rough day. The active communication between the families and staff increases their collective ability to support students.

Caregivers who speak a language other than English also use the ParentSquare app to reach out to teachers or receive information. While they are able to engage with the app thanks to the translation feature, both MLL caregivers and Crosstown staff agree that they would like to engage more in the future. One school leader shared,

24 ParentSquare is an app through which schools can send mass notifications, classroom communications, updates on school services, and links to the school website. https://www.parentsquare.com/

> We have been using ParentSquare. That's our parent communication platform, which also allows our English language learners, their parents to choose what language they receive that communication in. So that's helpful. … [What we learned from] some of our ESL kids' parents is that they do not necessarily use their email much. They're not checking that very often. And so we have also considered potentially using WhatsApp to create a group. Just because we're trying to figure out, "Okay, if our current methods are not reaching these parents, what else do we need to be trying?" Our next iteration will be potentially next year. We're going to get some parent feedback.

ParentSquare has been a helpful tool to communicate, but one caregiver shared that there are still limitations created by the language barrier to being able to participate in events or engaging deeply with teachers or the community. Recognizing the challenge, Crosstown has begun to think of new approaches for how to improve communication with the families of MLLs, including hiring more multilingual staff and ensuring that translation is available at family events.

Crosstown also engages caregivers through IEP meetings, a requirement in all U.S. public schools. Interviewed Crosstown caregivers said they feel supported during IEP meetings and that they have an opportunity to receive data, hear about their students' performance from the perspective of the inclusion specialists, and share their goals for their students. One caregiver shared their experience with the meetings:

> Oh, [IEP meetings have] been great. [The inclusion specialist], she explains everything. She has all her paperwork in line, she lays everything out, she tells me everything before it happens. As it happens, … they take down the minutes. Everything seems to be laid out very well and I haven't had a bad experience yet. And they seem to listen, and they do ask me for my suggestions or my take on goals that I have for [my student], and so far, they've all been met, so I haven't had any problems.

Tutoring and Additional Academic Support

Crosstown's inclusive supports are especially focused on academics. Students receive extra support to achieve academically through inclusion office hours, enrichment, and advisory. Inclusion office hours are weekly voluntary opportunities outside of school hours for SWDs to receive additional support individually or in small groups. The office hours give students a chance to redo work, complete assignments, get their questions answered, and reflect on learning. One school leader explained that office hours are often about identifying when students are falling behind and motivating students to complete their work:

> We have tutoring specifically for our students with disabilities and English language learners once a week after school. Our students who come to that really stay on top of their work, because our main thing that we're doing during that period of time is looking at Canvas and seeing what hasn't been turned in. Because what we see is that most of our students, if they turn in the work, they're going to be passing at least, if they can get it submitted. But the issue is a lack of work submission.

Staff reported that the number of students who attend office hours varies from three to ten and is often higher as students reach the end of the quarter. One student in the 11th–12th-grade focus group said,

> I should go [to office hours] more often, but I only go if I really need it. Recently I just went to the math office hours to retake my skills. They give us multiple times to retake or redo work until you feel like you did it good enough. So yeah, office hours is just basically tutoring outside of school.

In some cases, a teacher may send a note home alerting the family of a missing assignment and encouraging attendance. At office hours, inclusion specialists provide one-on-one or small-group support, and general education teachers sometimes also attend to provide support. For instance, during our observation of inclusion office hours, the chemistry teacher was providing tutoring for two students. To encourage student attendance at office hours, inclusion specialists create a fun and relaxed atmosphere by providing snacks, playing soft music, burning incense, and dimming the lights.

In addition to office hours, all students (not just SWDs) have two designated one-hour morning periods each week, called "enrichment period," to receive additional support or catch up on assignments. One student summarized that enrichment is "basically just extra help if you have a test that day and you need to refresh your mind on something." Students explained the difference between the two days as "the fun stuff" and "the academics." While the "fun" day could be used for a myriad of activities, including bird watching and tap dancing, that students sign up for at the beginning of the quarter, the "academic" day is a period to meet with teachers,

receive additional help, and redo assignments. Enrichment is potentially more accessible than inclusion office hours because it is offered during the regular school day and provides more leverage for teachers or inclusion specialists to encourage attendance. One inclusion specialist said that SWDs sometimes need to be tracked down to make up their missing work, saying, "Sometimes we have to make them. We're putting it in their schedule. 'You have to come to me during enrichment time, and we're going to look at Canvas, and you're going to redo this test.'"

Finally, advisory is an example of how Crosstown uses the relationship-driven pillar to support students academically. In practice, advisory meets for short periods of time in the morning (30 minutes on Monday and Wednesday and 15 minutes on Friday), during which students interact with their advisor and other advisees. According to the Crosstown website, the time is dedicated to "socio-emotional development, community building, joy, and college and career preparation." The expectation is that advisors have helped to create a safe, team-building, and reflective space where students can express themselves, ask for help, seek guidance, and be held accountable academically. Students described advisory as the morning "starter class," "home room," "morning announcements," "time to relax", and a "career course." Generally, students were appreciative of having the time to ease into their day.

Positive Climate and Culture

Many of Crosstown's approaches contribute to a positive climate and culture, but the role of restorative justice is particularly impactful in creating an inclusive culture for all students.

When visiting Crosstown, we noticed the positive and respectful school culture, evident in the interactions we observed between students and teachers, as well students' interactions with one another. Students, caregivers, and teachers repeatedly spoke about aspects of Crosstown's school culture, emphasizing an atmosphere that promotes belonging and mutual care. For instance, one SWD said, "I feel like everyone cares. ... We are like a big family. A big family in one school. ... The teachers like you, the coaches like you. SST like you. ... I feel like I belong here because everyone likes me." This was also evident in survey data; 74% of the student respondents reported feeling at least somewhat connected to someone on staff (results were similar for SWDs and Black students).[25] A caregiver spoke about how important a positive and inclusive climate was for her child who has a learning difference, because he had been bullied in middle school. She said, "I really didn't want to send him to a school [nearer to where we live] because it's just rough. ... He had problems at [his previous school]. And since he's been at Crosstown, he hasn't had those problems as to where kids are bullying him and talking about him or anything of that nature."

Much of what has been discussed in previous sections contributes to Crosstown's climate, such as student-centered educational approaches, centering of student voice, and caregiver engagement. This section describes Crosstown's SST and their restorative justice approach, a feature of the school that was raised repeatedly by students as being key to creating a positive and inclusive culture. As described by a member of the SST team, although a focus on restorative justice helps all students, it is particularly important for SWDs:

Students transitioning between classes and gathered at a café in Crosstown Concourse

25 School climate survey results are presented in the **Appendix**. As illustrated in that Appendix, the number of Latine and MLL students was not high enough to disaggregate data for these groups.

> I think there's definitely an overlap between students who have low attendance, students who have some kind of specialized education program like 504s and IEPs, and students who have behavior issues at school. And we definitely look at attendance data. I think what happens, what spurs a lot of behavioral problems in the classroom is lack of confidence, like a student feeling stupid, student feeling like they're behind their peers, because they care so much about what their peers think, and the thing that directly affects them being behind in class is missing class time.

Restorative Justice Team and Approach

When asked whom they would go to if they had a problem, many Crosstown students said they would go to the SST, the team of staff who are responsible for restorative justice. In the 11th–12th-grade focus group, one student described SST as "lawyers for students," illustrating that students saw the SST members as being advocates for them. The following are some examples of student responses to the question, "How do adults at your school help you feel safe and supported when you're at school?":

> I don't know how to explain it, but it's SST, a student support team. So, the staff members bring us together. Yeah, it's a symbol of family at the school. (SWD)

> There's SST. I don't know if other schools have that, but I feel it's called student support team, I think it's called. And I think it's just the teachers or the people that are the SST team. They're just really, really good, and they've helped me out a lot with, I would always get in trouble 10th grade, and they were always there for me. I've had personal issues and they've always been there. If I am having a problem with the teacher, they're always like, "Yo, try talking to them like this, try doing this." And I don't know if other schools have them or not, but I feel like here they're really good. (Student in 11th–12th-grade focus group)

> I think opening up more, that's what they helped me do. Yeah, the SST people, they help me open up more, because usually I just hold stuff in, and now I feel comfortable talking to people about it. So, I won't feel judged. (Student in 9th–10th-grade focus group)

The SST at Crosstown uses a restorative justice approach to establish and maintain a positive school culture. An SST member said, "If there was some kind of harm between student to student, or student with teacher, we work to make sure that they understand and repair whatever harm that there was, so that there's a good relationship going forward." Another SST member went on to say that "we know that teenagers make bad decisions, ... but we think all of those moments are teachable. ... We want students to learn from mistakes that they have made and make things right." Although the team has offices on two floors of the school, which students can visit at any time, they spend most of their time circulating in the hallways and having informal check-ins with students during transition times (before school, after school, during lunch, or when students are changing classes). Students can also send emails to individual SST members or to the overall team, and if they want to share something anonymously (such as a bullying incident), they can do that by scanning a QR code.

Members of the SST said that it is important to build positive relationships with students prior to students being engaged in a conflict, so that staff can understand the context of conflicts. An SST member said,

> Fortunately, we have the time to really build relationships with students, and I think that's what's amazing about our role is we have the time to have those conversations, really get to know students outside of academics. And kids go through a lot. They go through a lot at home. High school is not friendly to every kid, and that's a really great strength of our team, that we're able to figure out how to help a particular student thrive. And that's one of the most rewarding parts of our job.

While the students see the SST members as being their advocates, teachers view them as a "band of heroes," and SST members also see their role as "making sure that teachers feel supported." In addition to in-person conversations, teachers share information about individual students with the SST via email and in a Slack channel. For instance, in one class we observed, there was a student who had his head down on his desk and was not engaging. At different points during work time, the general education teacher and inclusion specialist sat near him and gently sought to engage him in conversation. They also, however, sent a note via the Slack channel suggesting that someone from the SST check in with him to see if he needed more support. As evident in this example, Crosstown staff assume that the student has a reason for being disconnected or appearing depressed. In the words of one staff member, they "assume that the student has a reason or there's something behind the behavior."

When harm occurs between students or between students and school staff, the SST works with students to address harm in a way that is restorative. They often sit with the student as they write out an apology, so that they can help the student to craft their apology in a way that it can be received and interpreted positively by the person who has been harmed. They also hold restorative circles with students who are having conflict with one another and engage caregivers. Over time, this process strengthens the overall culture and promotes trust with students who are finding it difficult to adjust. A member of the SST said,

> Now, it takes opportunities, and it takes time, and it takes conversations, and small-group circles, and conferencing with parents, and bringing in teachers to get the overall perspective on a specific student. It takes time. This change that we're trying to create, it is not happening overnight. And what we're seeing is that we've got to constantly address a specific student until they kind of realize that, "Hey, we are here to actually support you, and support your growth here, and not prevent you from growing. All right? We want you to enjoy our space, but we want you to do it in the realm that we're trying to create, the atmosphere that we're trying to create here."

SST members described that with certain students, they need to be creative in their approaches. For instance, for one student who commonly roamed the hallways during class, staff instituted a rule that he gets one bathroom pass per day, so that multiple teachers can no longer provide him with passes. They described, "We've seen a great difference from him being in the hall in the past eight weeks" since they started that approach.

Interestingly, Crosstown did not use an established framework to promote a positive climate, such as Multi-Tiered System of Support or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support.[26] Although the features of a Multi-Tiered System of Support approach appeared to be in place at Crosstown, SST members and other school staff did not identify with it or its classification of students into Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. They did, however, say that they work most closely with approximately 15 students who need the highest level of support. For those students whom they work with most intensively, many of whom are SWDs, SST members make an extra effort to say hello to them in the halls, check in with them regularly between classes, get to know their families, and work in a coordinated way with teachers, inclusion specialists, and the school counseling team to ensure they are getting the support that they need. For instance, SST staff said that they created an individual Slack channel amongst school staff about a specific student who needed a lot of support, because they received so many Slack channel messages about him. Having a designated channel to handle teacher and staff communications about the one student helps the SST make sure that "we don't over respond and make the situation worse, escalate things." They also make sure that the SST member with the closest relationship reaches out to the student, as they have found that to be the most productive way to address the students' needs.

CONCLUSION

This case study highlights Crosstown's approach to creating an inclusive learning environment for Black and Latine SWDs. Crosstown's commitment to full inclusion, team teaching, and implementing UDL principles helps support diverse learners to do their best and provides them with meaningful opportunities to learn from their peers. Project-based learning, coupled with authentic assessments, provides students with choices over how they demonstrate what they have learned, and provides SWDs with frequent opportunities to develop and showcase their leadership, talents, and interests. Finally, all Crosstown staff, led by the SST and inclusion specialists, support a myriad of inclusive structures and opportunities such as inclusion roundtables, office hours, and restorative justice support for the benefit of the whole school community. Crosstown serves as a strong example of how a school can support SWDs by implementing features that benefit all students. As a small, well-resourced charter school, the circumstances of Crosstown are unique. Nevertheless, many of their practices corresponding to inclusive classrooms, inclusive support structures and opportunities, and student-centered learning and assessments have the potential to be replicated in different environments.

26 Multi-tiered Support System (MTSS) is an evidence-based holistic approach for supporting personalized and student-centered learning, including differentiating and tailoring behavioral or academic support for students to support their success (see MTSS at AIR Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports, 2025). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another evidence-based tiered framework for supporting students behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health (see Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, 2025).

APPENDIX

SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY RESULTS

Crosstown High shared results from their school climate survey, which they called the "Virtual Survey." The survey includes student responses to questions about how connected they feel to adults and their sense of belonging. There are limitations to the data they shared, because nearly 14% (13.9%) of respondents selected "other" or provided "multiple responses" due to the way the scale was constructed. For instance, for the "connected to adults" questions, some students selected "I feel somewhat connected" or "I do not feel connected" and then also selected "I wish I were better connected." The results for MLLs also cannot be shared due to the low number of responses (six respondents).

Despite the high proportion of multiple responses, the data indicates a high level of connection and belonging that is relatively consistent across demographic groups. Overall, 74% of students reported feeling somewhat connected or connected to someone on staff, including 72.6% of SWDs and 73.7% of Black students. Connection to staff members was somewhat lower (66.7%) for Latine students. Connection to adults also increases over time, with higher percentages of students in 11th–12th grade reporting connections to adults, compared to 9th–10th grade. Similarly, 81.5% of all students indicated that they have a place at Crosstown or somewhat have a place at Crosstown, including 75.4% of SWDs and 76.9% of Black students.

Table 1: Connected to Adults

	I do not feel connected to anyone on staff	I wish I were better connected to someone on staff	I feel somewhat connected to the staff	I feel connected to 1+ staff member at Crosstown	"Other" or clicked multiple responses
All Responses (n=439)	30 (6.8%)	23 (5.2%)	109 (24.8%)	216 (49.2%)	61 (13.9%)
SWD (n=51)	4 (7.8%)	6 (11.8%)	11 (21.6%)	26 (51.0%)	4 (7.8%)
Black (n=221)	14 (6.3%)	13 (5.9%)	63 (28.5%)	100 (45.2%)	31 (14%)
White (n=163)	13 (7.9%)	6 (3.7%)	31 (19.0%)	92 (56.4%)	21 (12.9%)
Latine (n=39)	3 (7.7%)	4 (10.3%)	9 (23.1%)	17 (43.6%)	6 (15.4%)
Mixed Race (n=11)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (36.4%)	5 (45.5%)	2 (18.2%)
Asian (n=5)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
9th grade (n=122)	11 (9%)	14 (11.5%)	34 (27.9%)	41 (33.6%)	21 (17.2 %)
10th grade (n=115)	9 (7.8%)	4 (3.5%)	40 (34.8%)	49 (42.6%)	13 (11.3%)
11th grade (n=112)	9 (8%)	4 (3.6%)	18 (16.1%)	69 (61.6%)	12 (10.7%)
12th grade (n=90)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	17 (18.9%)	57 (63.3%)	14 (15.6%)

Table 2: Belonging/Perception That There Is a Place for Them at Crosstown

	I do not feel like I have a place at Crosstown	I wish I felt like I belonged more at Crosstown	I feel like I somewhat have a place at Crosstown	I feel like I have a place at Crosstown	"Other" or clicked multiple responses
All Responses (n=439)	10 (2.3%)	26 (5.9%)	148 (33.7%)	210 (47.8%)	45 (10.3%)
SWD (n=51)	1 (2%)	8 (15.7%)	15 (29.4%)	23 (45.1%)	4 (7.8%)
Black (n=221)	6 (2.7%)	19 (8.6%)	74 (33.5%)	96 (43.4%)	26 (11.8%)
White (n=163)	4 (2.5%)	4 (2.5%)	54 (33.1%)	85 (52%)	16 (9.8%)
Hispanic (n=39)	0 (0%)	3 (7.7%)	16 (41%)	18 (46%)	2 (5.1%)
Mixed Race (n=11)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (27.3%)	8 (72.7%)	0 (0%)
Asian (n=5)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)
9th grade (n=122)	2 (1.6%)	7 (5.7%)	45 (36.9%)	55 (45%)	13 (10.7%)
10th grade (n=115)	4 (3.5%)	6 (5.2%)	39 (33.9%)	53 (46.1%)	13 (11.3%)
11th grade (n=112)	3 (2.7%)	8 (7.1%)	34 (30.4%)	58 (51.8%)	9 (8%)
12th grade (n=90)	1 (1.1%)	5 (5.6%)	30 (33%)	44 (48.9%)	10 (11.1%)

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