EmpowerK12



DC BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOLS REPORT

2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bold Performance Schools are the DC schools that are boldly supporting priority students — economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English learners, and students of color — to reach academic success.

DC's 2025 Bold Performance Schools demonstrate how collaborative, data-driven school cultures with high expectations for adults and students lead to remarkable academic recovery and sustained excellence. Five years after the pandemic disrupted learning nationwide, these schools have not only recovered — they soared past pre-pandemic achievement levels in 2025, demonstrating what is possible when schools implement evidence-based practices with fidelity and heart.

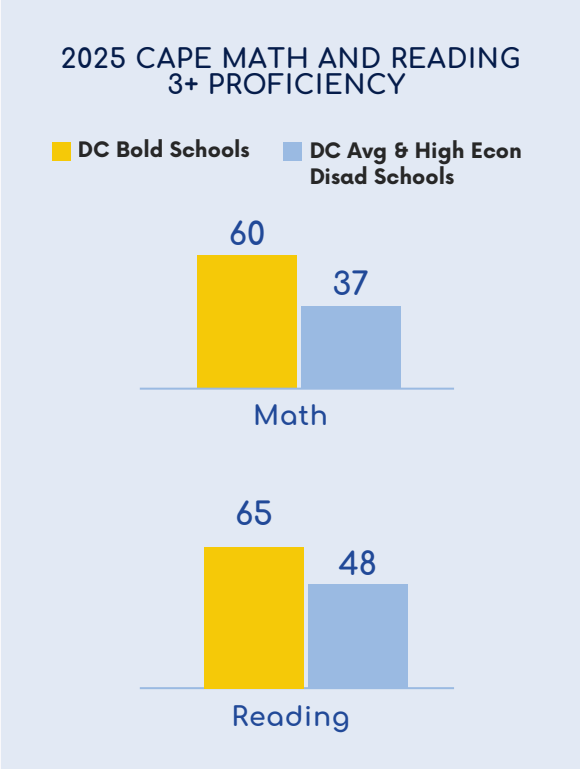


THE 2025 BOLD PERFORMANCE STORY RECOVERY + EXCELLENCE

This year's Bold Performance Schools serve students across elementary, middle, and high school grades in both DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC charter schools. They have math and reading proficiency rates at least 10 percent higher than similar schools, and all serve student populations where economically disadvantaged students, whose families receive SNAP or TANF benefits, make up at least 30% of enrollment.

Since 2022, the 2025 Bold Performance Schools have improved career-ready proficiency rates, the percent of students at levels 3-5 on the CAPE assessment, by an average of 22 percent for all students and 23 percent for economically disadvantaged students. By comparison, the state average improved 6 percent for all students and 7 percent for economically disadvantaged students, including a historic single-year statewide gain of 4 percent. If Bold schools maintain their current trajectory of improvement, economically disadvantaged students at these schools will outperform the state average for students who are not economically disadvantaged within three years — a truly historic outcome.

In 2025, Bold Performance Schools achieved composite math and reading career-ready proficiency rates of 60% in math and 65% in reading — compared to just 37% and 48%, respectively, for other DC schools serving average and high percentages of economically disadvantaged students. **This 23-point gap in math and 17-point gap in reading represents substantially different educational experiences and outcomes for students.**



WHAT MAKES THESE SCHOOLS BOLD?

Through in-depth interviews with instructional leadership teams and analysis of other key performance metrics across Bold Performance Schools, the following five strategies distinguish these high-achieving schools:

Data-Driven Continuous Improvement

Daily quantitative and qualitative data dipsticks refine instructional strategies, weekly data meetings in teams, backwards mapping from goals, and using data for growth rather than fault-finding.

Intentional Teacher Support and Professional Development

Protected coaching time, collaborative planning, and support that builds educator capacity around conceptual understanding of the content and maximizing every instructional minute.

Building Strong Community and Relationships

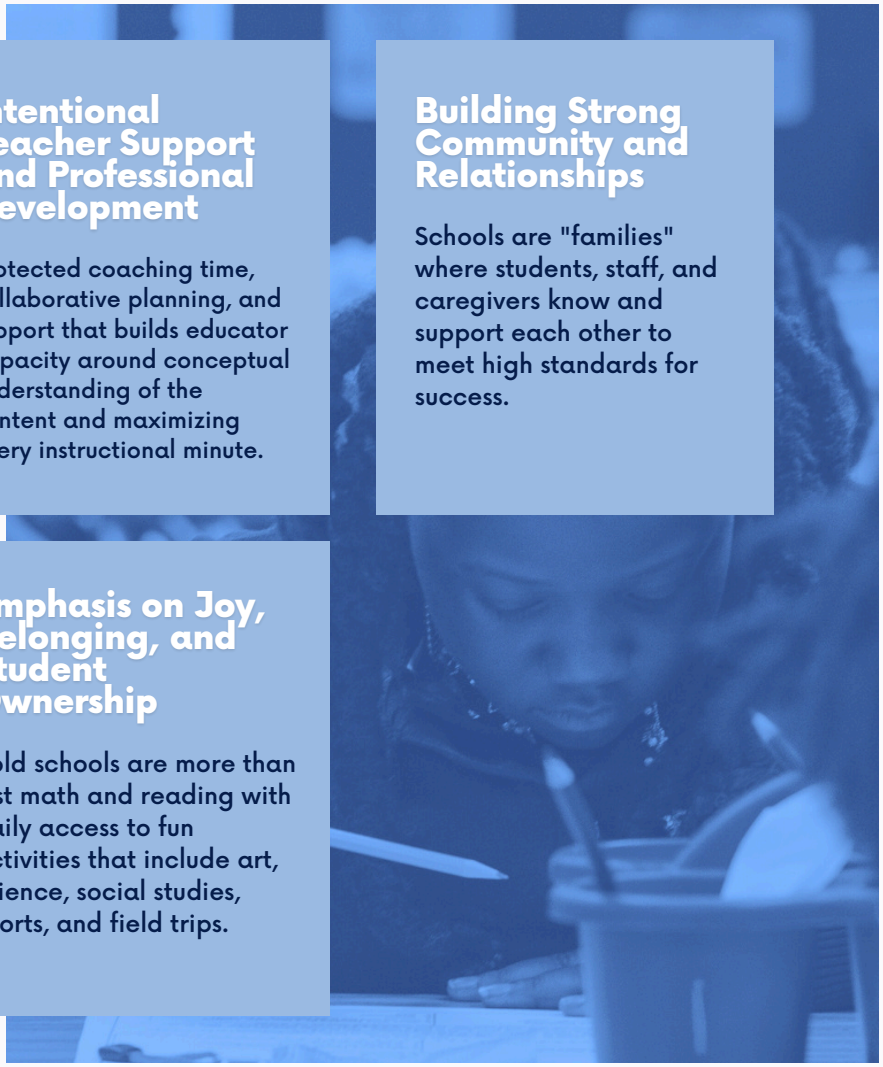
Schools are "families" where students, staff, and caregivers know and support each other to meet high standards for success.

Targeted Interventions and Small Group Instruction

Educators provide students who need more attempts with grade level content and predecessor skills the opportunities that meet them where they are to accelerate their learning.

Emphasis on Joy, Belonging, and Student Ownership

Bold schools are more than just math and reading with daily access to fun activities that include art, science, social studies, sports, and field trips.



These strategies are grounded in research on the science of learning that indicate the power of blending formative assessment, instructional coaching, positive relationships, and joyful learning environments to produce substantial gains in student achievement.

By adopting the 2025 Bold Performance Schools' best and promising practices with sustained investment and commitment to continuous improvement, DC can become the first major jurisdiction in American history where low-income Black and Brown students consistently score at or above the national average. The question of whether this goal is possible has been answered by the Bold schools. It is probable when we scale what works.

2025 BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOLS

This year's Bold Performance Schools represent a diverse cross-section of DC's educational landscape, including both DCPS and charter schools serving students from pre-K through 12th grade. The schools identified include:

Barnard Elementary
Burroughs Elementary
Center City Congress Heights Elementary-Middle
DC Prep Benning Elementary
Digital Pioneers Academy High
Early Childhood Academy Elementary
Friendship Armstrong Middle
Friendship Blow Pierce Middle
Friendship Chamberlain Elementary
Friendship Southeast Middle
Garrison Elementary
Moten Elementary
Noyes Elementary
Patterson Elementary
Washington Global Middle
Whittier Elementary

Collectively, these schools educate 3,800 DC students, with a significant proportion whose families receive SNAP or TANF benefits. Their achievement demonstrates that when schools implement the right practices with consistency and care, all students can achieve at high levels.



BOLDEST SCHOOL

Friendship Chamberlain Elementary

for having the highest proficiency rates above expectations in the city



ENDURING EXCELLENCE

Whittier Elementary

for consistently meeting Bold Performance standards across multiple years



MOST INSPIRING

Barnard Elementary

for their performance and perseverance given the challenges their community faced last year

DEMOGRAPHICS SERVED BY BOLD SCHOOLS COMPARED WITH OTHER SCHOOLS

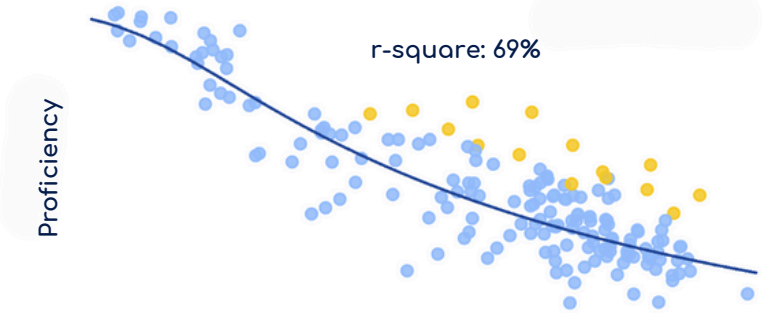
	Students of Color	Economically Disadvantaged	Students with Disabilities	English Learners
Bold Schools	95%	62%	20%	8%
Bold Schools- Eligible (>30% at-risk)	97%	64%	21%	12%
All Other Schools (<30% at-risk)	75%	15%	12%	11%

2025 BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOLS

HOW WE IDENTIFY BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOLS

In DC and across the country, there is a powerful and persistent correlation between the number of students from priority populations a school serves and its math and reading proficiency rates. Priority populations include economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English learners, and students of color. The larger the priority population at a school, typically, the lower the school's state assessment proficiency rates. This correlation is strong enough that if you know how many priority students a school serves, you can predict its proficiency rates with unsettling accuracy, usually within a couple of percent.

2025 CAPE MATH AND READING PROFICIENCY VS. TESTED STUDENT POPULATION

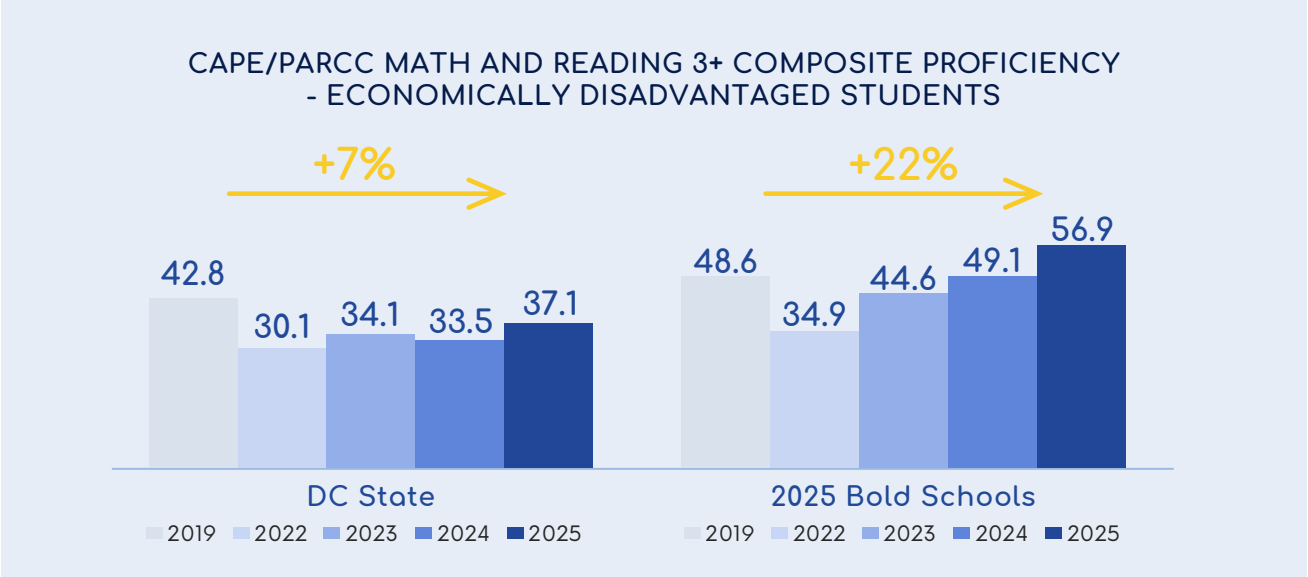


These schools demonstrate student proficiency rates significantly higher than schools serving similar populations — in many cases, exceeding even pre-pandemic achievement expectations. To identify these schools, EK12 utilizes mathematical methods to understand how variables, such as grade levels tested and priority student group population size, interact with student performance to generate reliable predictions for math and reading proficiency rates a school should expect. At the high school level, given the sorting inherent in our city's high school enrollment model, we implement a second model that focuses on the performance of 10th graders, controlling for the prior year 9th grade performance in addition to demographic variables.

After running the models to predict each school's expected proficiency rates in math and reading, we calculate a school-level Percent Proficient Above Expectations (PPAE) value — the difference between actual and expected performance. As with all predictions, there is some uncertainty in the calculation, so we only select schools with a PPAE that exceeds the absolute error in measurement for the Bold Performance designation, more than 10 percent above expected. See appendix tables for a summary of the covariates in our composite models, their weights, and the performance of the PPAE models based on the absolute prediction measurement error.

A REMARKABLE RECOVERY AND SUSTAINED GROWTH STORY

The achievement trajectory of 2025 Bold Performance Schools tells a story that few would have predicted when students returned to in-person learning in Fall 2021. Not only have these schools recovered from pandemic-era learning loss — many exceed their pre-pandemic performance by substantial margins.

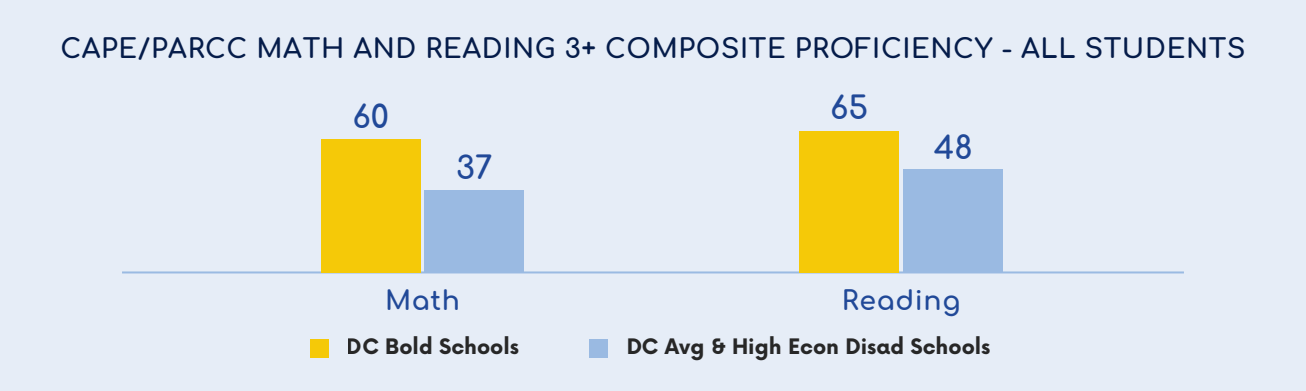


From 2019 pre-pandemic to 2025 today, Bold Performance Schools have improved composite math and reading proficiency for economically disadvantaged students from 49% to 57%, gaining 8 percentage points. By contrast, the statewide averages for similar students, while improving (DC was the most improved state in both math and reading achievement from 2022 to 2024), are down from 43% to 37%, a gap of 6 points from pre-pandemic performance.[1]



If Bold schools maintain their current rate of improvement, their economically disadvantaged students will outperform the state average for non-economically disadvantaged students within three years. Their impact on student growth since the pandemic shows that students at Bold Performance Schools out-achieve those at schools serving similar demographics by more than 15 percent on average.

[1] Education Recovery Scorecard (2025). Updated academic recovery rates for states and districts using 2024 state test results, developed by leading researchers from Harvard, Stanford, and Dartmouth. https://educationrecoveryscorecard.org/



These are not small differences. The 23-point proficiency gap in math means that a student attending a Bold school is nearly twice as likely to demonstrate grade-level math skills compared to a similar student attending a non-Bold school. This represents fundamentally different educational experiences and life opportunities.

Based on results from a landmark Urban Institute study released last year that demonstrates the impact of reading and math gains in middle school on earnings by age thirty[2]and the Bold schools' average effect size of 0.93 standard deviations on student achievement in math and reading, **students at the Bold Performance Schools are on pace to earn an additional $870 million in lifetime earnings compared to students at non-Bold Performance Schools.**

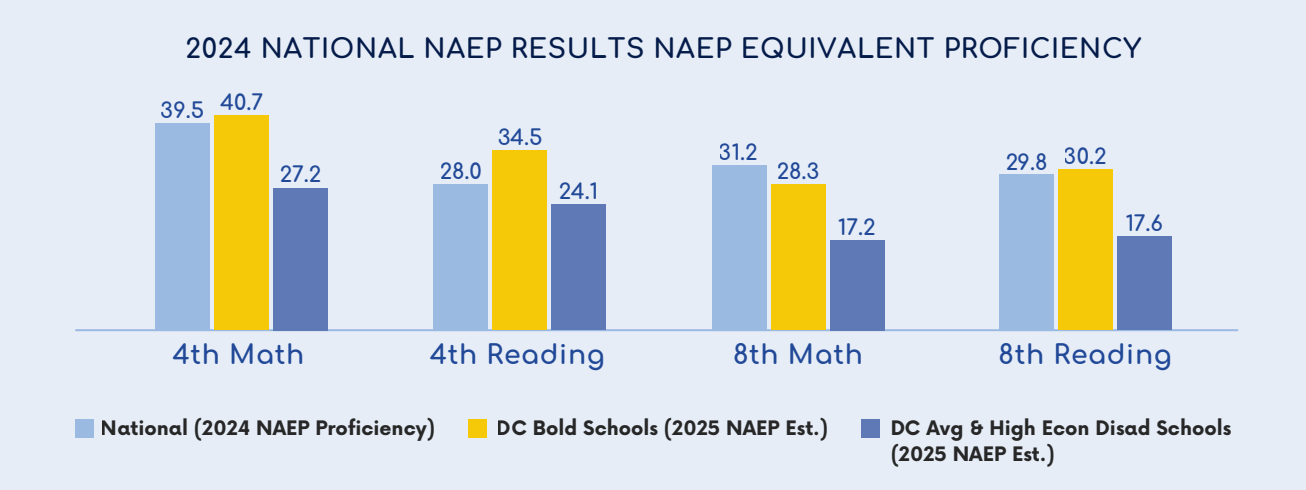
APPROACHING NATIONAL PARITY: A HISTORIC ACHIEVEMENT

Perhaps the most significant finding in our analysis of this year's assessment data is that students at Bold Performance Schools are approaching, and in some cases exceeding, national achievement averages while serving significantly more priority students than the average school nationwide. At Bold Performance Schools, 62% of students live in households that receive SNAP or TANF benefits, compared to 28% of students nationally.[3] Using data from the Nation's Report Card, or NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), and a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study on the alignment of NAEP and the PARCC/CAPE test as a benchmark[4], we can estimate how student performance at 2025 Bold schools likely compared with their national peers.

[2] Werner, K., Acs, G., & Blagg, K. (2024). Comparing the Long-Term Impacts of Different Child Well-Being Improvements. Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Comparing_the_Long-Term_Impacts_of_Different_Child_Well-Being_Improvements.pdf

[3] Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L., & Reed-Jones, M. (2025). Food insecurity rates. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved from https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance

[4] Shuang Ji, C., Shen-Wei Yee, D., & Rahman, T. (2021). Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2021036.pdf



Looking at economically disadvantaged student performance at a couple of the Bold schools compared with national averages on the 2024 4th and 8th grade NAEP tests:

4th grade economically disadvantaged students at Barnard and Burroughs Elementary Schools likely outperformed the national average in math and reading combined

8th grade economically disadvantaged students at Center City Congress Heights, Friendship Armstrong, and Friendship Blow Pierce Middle Schools likely outperformed the national average in math and reading combined

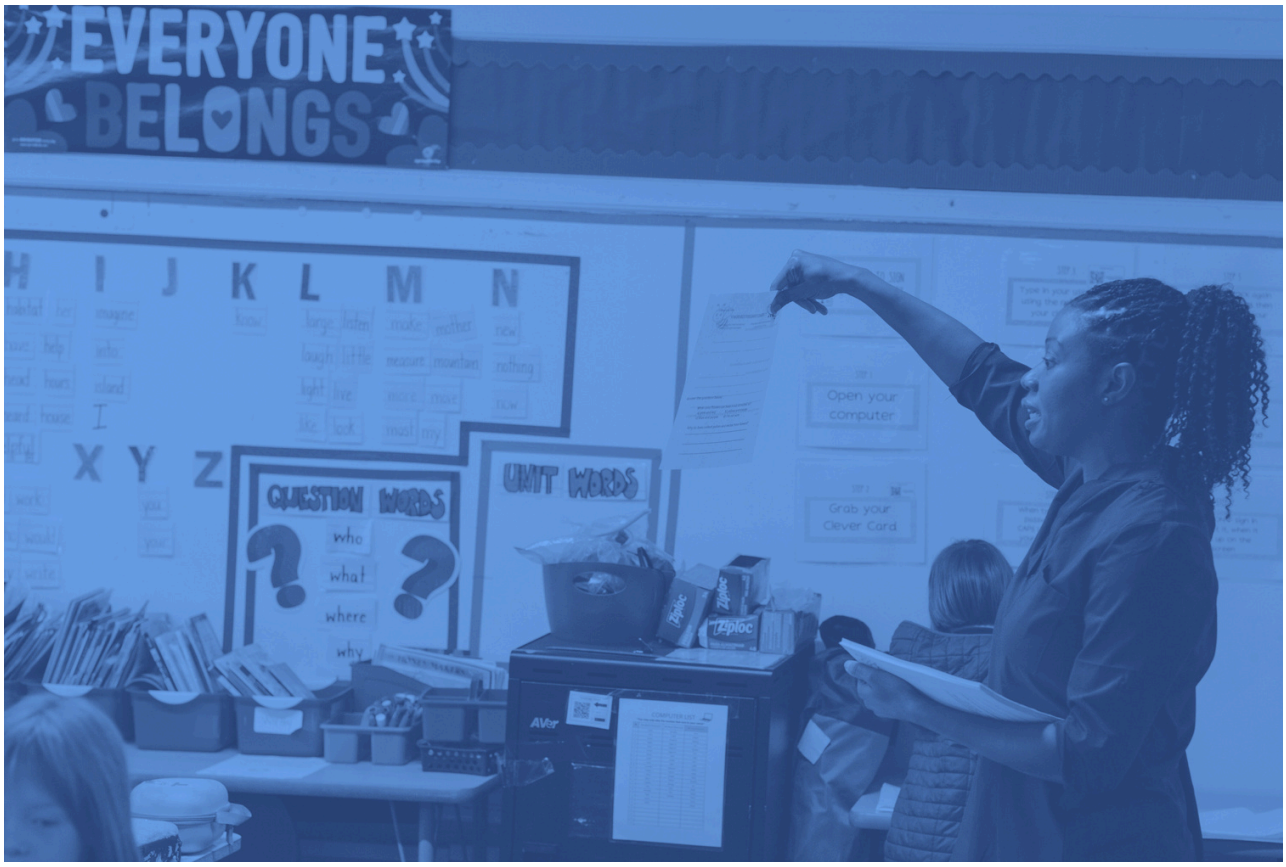
Historically, schools serving high percentages of students from low-income families have consistently underperformed national averages by 20-30 percent. The fact that DC Bold Performance Schools are on pace to close gaps in just a couple of years and a few have eliminated these gaps entirely provides a roadmap for how all schools can address differences in student performance associated with the socioeconomic status of their families.



WHAT MAKES BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOLS SPECIAL?

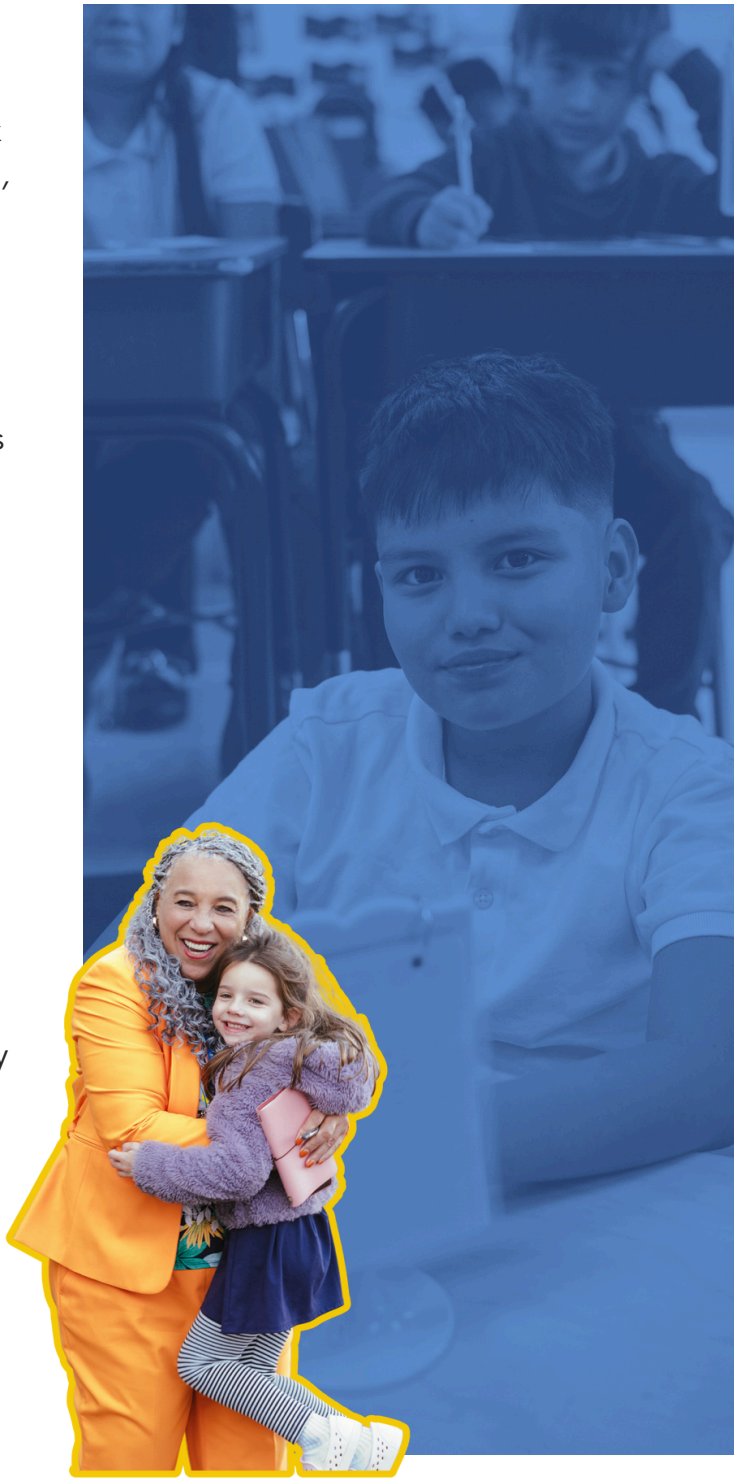
The findings in this section emerge from in-depth conversations with leadership teams at 2025 Bold Performance Schools and an analysis of school data for the 2024-25 school year published by OSSE as of September 1, 2025.

We asked leaders to reflect on what they believe makes their schools successful, which practices they prioritize, and how they build cultures where students and adults thrive. From these conversations, five themes emerged — well-implemented strategies that distinguish Bold Performance Schools from their peers. Their approaches are grounded in education research demonstrating what works to improve student learning.



THE FOUNDATION: EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Before diving into specific strategies, it is worth noting what underlies the Bold school success: exceptional school leadership. While we did not explicitly ask about leadership in our interview protocol, educators at Bold schools consistently described their principals as smart, fun, and caring individuals who enable great teaching.



Bold school leaders tend to be delegators with a "trust but verify" philosophy. Rather than micromanaging daily operations, they build strong teams and empower them to solve problems independently. These leaders create environments where asking for help is viewed as a sign of strength, not weakness. They seek collaborative input on creative solutions, seek to maximize the efficient and effective use of time throughout their buildings, and maintain a relentless focus on student learning.

Research on school leadership consistently shows that principal quality is second only to teacher quality in influencing student outcomes.[5] Effective principals create the conditions for great teaching — they buffer teachers from distractions, provide instructional support, and cultivate positive school cultures. From our interviews and experience, Bold school leaders do exactly this.

[5] Branch, G.F., Hanushek, E.A, & Rivkin, S.G. (2012). Estimating the Effect of Leaders on Public Sector Productivity: The Case of School Principals. National Bureau for Economic Research. Retrieved from https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w17803/w17803.pdf

STRATEGY 1

DATA-DRIVEN CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Bold Performance School leaders use data systematically for improvement rather than accountability. They backward map from end-of-year goals, monitor progress frequently, and make real-time adjustments. For teachers and students at Bold schools, data is a tool for growth.

HOW THIS LOOK IN PRACTICE

Walk into a Bold school on any given week, and you will likely find instructional leadership teams and teachers deep in conversation about student data. "We are heavily into weekly data meetings, weekly planning meetings," as one leader explains, describing their commitment to the kind of structured data analysis they learned through Leverage Leadership training. At data working sessions, teams dig into what students know based on interim assessments and students' daily work like exit tickets. They identify misconceptions and what shifts and interventions are required to ensure all students achieve end-of-year proficiency.

How frequently do they think about student progress based on data? Here is what one Bold middle school leader said: "We are data-driven, looking at it daily. Teachers use data to challenge their and our thinking, pushing ideas forward for us on ways to build their capacity." The daily rhythm creates a sense of urgency not anxiety, a productive pressure to ensure every day of instruction counts. When coaches review the data with teachers each morning, they are not looking for mistakes to criticize. They look for opportunities to support, extend, and accelerate student learning.



Rather than waiting for quarterly interim assessments or end-of-year tests, Bold schools adopt frequent, low-stakes checks for understanding that allow teachers to identify student misconceptions and adjust instruction before students fall too far behind. Students complete exit tickets at the end of each lesson, and teachers often review them during lunch to plan targeted small groups for the afternoon, tutoring, or tomorrow morning's lesson. "It's not about the big tests. It's how students perform in the moment and make sure to address any misconceptions as they happen."

At several Bold school interviews, we learned that teachers are frequent partners in identifying their own professional growth areas to help students succeed. One example shared with us: a 4th grade math teacher noticed that her students consistently struggled with multi-step word problems and requested coaching around questioning techniques that scaffold student thinking, setting a goal for the next classroom observation two weeks later. This idea of "data partnership" also extends to students owning their data, even in lower elementary school grades. At multiple schools, educators described how students track their own progress, set personal goals, and celebrate growth along the way. The goal is for students to be active participants who understand where they are, where they want to go, and what they need to accomplish with support to get there.

The culture around data at Bold schools can be summed up in one phrase that reflects the words several school leaders shared during our interviews: "we celebrate failure." They celebrate the willingness of students and teachers to try hard things, analyze what worked and what did not, and turn that information into action that improves outcomes.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THEIR APPROACH

The data practices at Bold schools align closely with research on formative assessment and continuous improvement. John Hattie's extensive meta-analysis of over 800 studies found that formative evaluation has an effect size of 0.90 on student achievement, making it one of the most powerful influences on learning.[6] More recent research from the Data Quality Campaign (2021) emphasizes that data is most effective when it's timely, actionable, and used to support rather than punish.[7] The practice of having students track their own data is supported by research on metacognition and self-regulated learning, which explain 19% of the variation in students' language and math achievement.[8]

[6] Hattie, J. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. Routledge. Retrieved from https://www.routledge.com/Visible-Learning-A-Synthesis-of-Over-800-Meta-Analyses-Relating-to-Achievement/Hattie/p/book/9780415476188

[7] Data Quality Campaign (2021). Show Me the Data 2021. Retrieved from https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/show-me-the-data-2021/

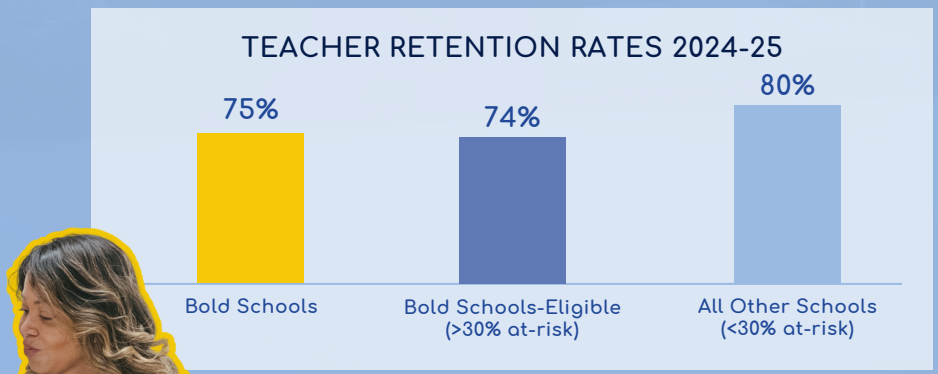
[8] Dignath, C., & Buttner, G. (2008). Components of Fostering Self-Regulated Learning among Students. A Meta-Analysis on Intervention Studies at Primary and Secondary School Level. Metacognition and Learning, 3, 231-264. Retrieved from https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2132963

STRATEGY 2

INTENTIONAL TEACHER SUPPORT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bold schools invest heavily in building teacher capacity through structured coaching, collaborative planning time, and job-embedded professional development. They protect instructional time by removing operational burdens from coaches and teachers, allowing them to focus exclusively on improving teaching and learning.

While teachers and coaches who participated in our interviews in preparation for this report felt supported by the leadership in their development, the overall teacher retention at Bold Performance Schools last year was not statistically different from other non-Bold schools serving larger populations of economically disadvantaged students or from all schools.





HOW THIS LOOKS IN PRACTICE

Bold school leaders paint a vivid picture of teacher support and professional development in action. Rather than settling for general statements like "we improve instruction," principals and assistant principals point to specific, measurable goals that connect directly to individual teachers and student data. Leaders shared stories with us that followed this type of logical progression: "We had five students close to grade level on the winter interim who struggled with Subclaim #1, so the coach and teacher focused on X, Y, and Z instructional strategies over the next three months. That plan, along with the weekly progress monitoring of data we have in place, gave us confidence that the students would reach proficiency by the state test. For teachers whose weekly data indicated that they needed additional support implementing the plan, we carved out time in the master schedule for them and their coach to meet daily to review and practice lesson plans to drive student learning forward."

Finding time in everyone's daily schedule to successfully implement something like that can be a challenge, so we asked Bold leaders how they think about time. At one Bold elementary school, a period of steady but stagnant growth prompted the leadership team to look closely at how time and resources were being spent. They realized instructional coaches were stretched thin—handling everything from test coordination to technology troubleshooting—leaving less time to support teachers. The team redefined priorities: core responsibilities like student learning, belonging, and data-driven instruction became everyone's job, while specialized operational tasks were reassigned to dedicated staff. The result was immediate and transformative. Coaches devoted their days to being present in classrooms, examining lessons with teachers, offering targeted feedback, and helping educators elevate their practice.

One last important piece about teacher support and professional development: every Bold school relies on high-quality math and reading curricular materials, which we confirmed by cross-referencing EdReports reviews.[9] However, they see the curriculum as a springboard, not a script. Teachers are empowered to adapt lessons and resources, ensuring instruction is responsive to each classroom's unique needs, while staying anchored in the curriculum's approach to conceptual understanding.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THEIR APPROACH

The approach to teacher development at Bold Performance Schools mirrors findings from a comprehensive review by the Learning Policy Institute, which found that effective professional development must be delivered in a sustained, practice-focused, and collaborative manner that is directly connected to teachers' daily work. In contrast, generic, one-shot workshops were unlikely to change practice.[10]

A meta-analysis by Kraft, Blazar and Hogan (2018) found that effective, ongoing teacher coaching produces an average effect size of 0.18 standard deviations on student achievement.[11] Research on teacher collaboration also shows similar benefits. When teachers have structured time to examine student work together, discuss instructional challenges, and learn from each other's practice, both teacher efficacy and student achievement improve.[12]

[9] EdReports (2025). Reviews of K-12 instructional materials. Retrieved from https://www.edreports.org/reports

[10] Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/effective-teacher-professional-development-report

[11] Kraft, M.A., Blazar, D., & Hogan, D. (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. Review of Educational Research, 88(4), 547-588 retrieved from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/kraft_blazar_hogan_2018_teacher_coaching.pdf

[12] Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S. O., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. A. (2015). Teacher Collaboration in Instructional Teams and Student Achievement. American Educational Research Journal, 52(3), 475-514. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1063553

STRATEGY 3

BUILDING STRONG COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Bold Performance Schools prioritize relationships as the foundation for high expectations. They create cultures where staff, students, and families know and genuinely care about each other.

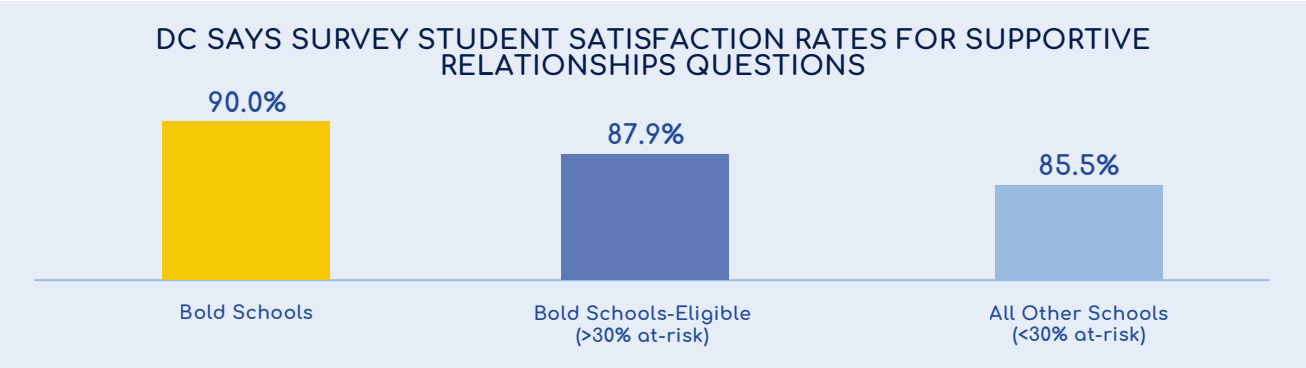
HOW THIS LOOKS IN PRACTICE

At Bold Performance Schools, the power of community and relationships is felt the moment you walk through the door. Educators describe their school as a safe, joyful space where students arrive happy and eager to learn. That joy is intentional: when teachers bring positivity and care, students respond with engagement and energy, which in turn fuels the staff's commitment. This virtuous cycle is fostered through mindful interactions, thoughtful physical spaces, and a culture that celebrates both academic and social-emotional growth.



One teacher reflected: "Kids feel safe when there are rigorous expectations...you have to teach." Many of the Bold instructional leaders described school environments that focus on high expectations for all students paired with genuine support, believing that this approach helps students feel valued and love school.

In the spring of 2025, OSSE launched the first statewide school climate surveys (DC SAYS - Survey About Your School) for students, educators, and caregivers. The student survey asked questions about their sense of safety, belonging, expectations, relationships, and preparedness for school. This year's Bold Performance Schools had statistically significantly better results for the "Supportive Relationships" questions on the school survey.



Community-building at many of the Bold schools starts with knowing students deeply—as people first, learners second. Teachers invest time in understanding students' lives, motivations, and challenges, which allows them to tailor support and respond empathetically. Student needs take precedence in all decisions, from scheduling to extracurricular options to field trip choices.

Educators see challenges as shared and solve them collaboratively with a "your data is everyone's data" approach. At one Bold secondary school, educators emphasized the importance of understanding each student's background and individual motivations, molding instruction that taps into their unique interests and aspirations. The result is a school culture where joy, rigor, and deep relationships reinforce each other, creating environments where students and staff thrive together.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THEIR APPROACH

The emphasis on relationships at Bold schools is strongly supported by research. A meta-analysis by Cornelius-White (2007) found that learner-centered, relationship-focused teaching approaches account for 10% of the variation in student achievement. When students feel known, valued, and cared for, they engage more deeply in learning.[13] Schools with high levels of trust among teachers, students, and families, built through consistent, caring interactions, that build growth mindset showed significantly higher rates of academic improvement over time, especially for students in schools with lower levels of achievement. Effect sizes ranged from 0.18 to 0.25 standard deviations on student achievement.[14] Students who report a strong sense of belonging show 25% higher motivation and effort in academic tasks.[15]

[13] Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. Review of Educational Research, 77(1), 113-143. Retrieved from https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-08194-004

[14] Bryk, A. S. & Schneider, B. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. Russell Sage Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.russellsage.org/publications/book/trust-schools-0

[15] Yeager, D.S. et al. (2019). A national experiment reveals where a growth mindset improves achievement. Nature, 573, 364-369. Retrieved from https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-019-1466-y

STRATEGY 4

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS AND SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION

Bold schools recognize that some students need more quality attempts to be successful at the highest levels, so they strategically implement need-based small groups, interventionists, and high-impact tutoring to ensure all students can access grade-level content while addressing individual learning gaps. The key is that interventions are strategic, data-driven, flexible yet intentionally structured, and implemented as early as possible.

HOW THIS LOOKS IN PRACTICE

At one Bold campus, they consider small group instruction to be foundational, forming needs-based groups using weekly DIBELS-based assessments to focus on which phonics and reading skills students have not yet mastered. This precise, targeted approach is a non-negotiable part of their teaching. Groups remain flexible, changing as students' needs evolve to prevent rigid tracking and ensuring instruction is always responsive.



At another elementary school, instructional coaches also serve as interventionists, delivering targeted support in math and reading to students who need more time and expertise. This ensures interventions are led by skilled educators who can diagnose gaps and deliver effective instruction, and coaches have the opportunity to work directly with students to ensure that they fully understand students' evolving needs. A couple of Bold schools adopt a fully inclusive model where all support staff—special educators, multilingual educators, and interventionists—work together with lead teachers in their classrooms, not as pullouts, to help every student access grade-level content. Instead of separate curricula and goals, the team provides additional scaffolds as needed so all students work toward high standards.

One last impression we left with from our Bold school visits: growth is not just measured by reaching grade level; it's about continued progress. Teachers regularly analyze data to set new goals, fostering a growth mindset where every student is challenged to keep moving forward, which includes moving the needle for students who "meet expectations" on the state test towards "exceeding expectations" the next year.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THEIR APPROACH

The intervention approaches at Bold schools align with strong research evidence. A comprehensive meta-analysis of tutoring programs found that high-impact tutoring produces significant achievement effect sizes of 0.37 standard deviations on average, with the most effective programs showing impacts exceeding 0.50. The key is that tutoring must be frequent (at least 3 times per week), sustained (for at least 10 weeks), and delivered by well-trained tutors or teachers of record.[16]

Hattie's (2009) research on small-group instruction indicates effect sizes of 0.49 when groups remain flexible and instruction is tailored to their specific needs. Flexibility plays a critical role, as rigid tracking may negatively impact students, especially when compared with the positive results of small group activities that are data-driven, responsive to learning outcomes, and receive targeted instruction.

The practice of maintaining access to grade-level content while providing intervention is supported by research on "productive struggle" and high expectations. When students are given the chance to engage with grade-level material alongside targeted support for gaps, they can develop skills and confidence.[17]

[16] Nickow, A., Oreopoulos, P., & Quan, V. (2020). The impressive effects of tutoring on PreK-12 learning: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from https://www.nber.org/papers/w27476

[17] Hattie, J. & Donoghue, G.M. (2016). Learning strategies: A synthesis and conceptual model. Science of Learning, 1, 16013. Retrieved from https://www.nature.com/articles/npjscilearn201613

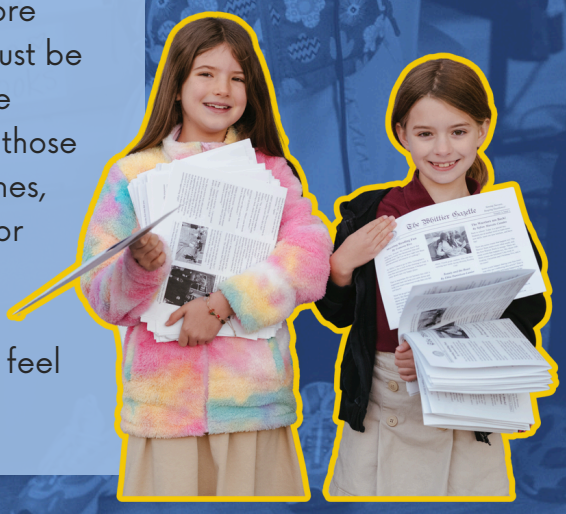
STRATEGY 5

EMPHASIS ON JOY, BELONGING, AND STUDENT OWNERSHIP

Bold school leaders create cultures where joy, fun, and love are essential. They know students work hardest for people they care about and in environments where they feel safe and valued. Students are active partners in their learning, not passive recipients.

HOW THIS LOOKS IN PRACTICE

When we asked Bold school leaders what makes their school special, they all emphasized this point: school must be more than a place for math and reading—it must be a place of joy, love, and opportunity. One leader explained, "Kids work hardest for those they care about, just like adults." Sometimes, this simple truth can get lost in the push for higher test scores, yet Bold Performance school culture proves that real growth comes from environments where students feel valued, respected, and safe.



This year's Bold Performance Schools had statistically significantly better results for the "Belonging," "Rigorous Expectations," and "Self-Efficacy" questions on the school survey than non-Bold schools serving larger populations of economically disadvantaged students and all other schools.

DC SAYS SURVEY STUDENT SATISFACTION RATES BY DOMAIN

	Belonging	Rigorous Expectations	Self-Efficacy
Bold Schools	66.1%	83.4%	58.8%
Bold Schools- Eligible (>30% at-risk)	58.7%	74.5%	53.2%
All Other Schools (<30% at-risk)	62.6%	74.5%	54.9%

Joy at these schools can be seen in daily celebrations, the positive energy from all adults in the building, and meaningful relationships between educators, students, and families. Crucially, this fun atmosphere exists alongside high academic expectations. This philosophy runs throughout Bold schools: students meet high standards because they trust the adults who believe in them, and when there is a choice between what is easy for adults or best for kids, student growth always wins.

Achievements are celebrated, and the goalpost keeps moving because success means continuously improving. This outlook shapes a culture where students are encouraged to keep growing and ask, "what's next?" instead of settling for meeting expectations.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THEIR APPROACH

The emphasis on joy, belonging, and student agency at Bold schools is supported by contemporary research. Positive school climate, including feelings of safety, belonging, and engagement, is associated with growth in student achievement.[18] Brain science research shows, at a fundamental biochemical level, how happiness is linked to building stronger neural networks and student achievement. Students who feel joyful and supported are more likely to take academic risks, persist through difficulties, and achieve at high levels.[19] Bold Performance Schools work daily to provide exactly these conditions.

[18] Osher, D., et al. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. Applied Developmental Science, 24(1), 6-36. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650

[19] Charlot, J., Leck, C., & Saxberg, B. (2025). Designing for Learning Primer: A Synthesis of Key Insights from the Science of Learning and Development. Transcend Education. Retrieved from https://transcendeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Designing-for-Learning-Primer_Web_20250307-Version.pdf

CONCLUSION

In Bold Performance Schools across DC — in neighborhoods east of the river and in transitioning communities, in traditional public schools and charters — educators are doing something extraordinary. They are proving that all students regardless of their family's socioeconomic status can achieve at levels that match or exceed national averages. They are real schools serving students who face real barriers, and Bold school educators refuse to let these realities become excuses.

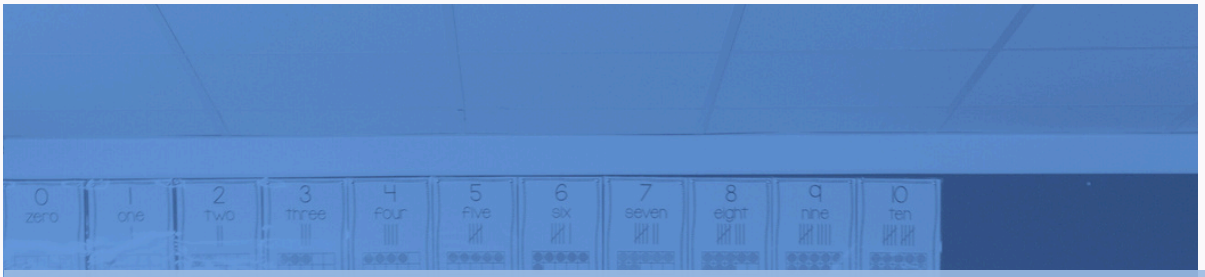
They build systems and cultures that enable every student to thrive. They use data daily to improve their instructional support for students and propel growth. They invest in teacher development and build relationships because a collaborative school environment is a prerequisite for high expectations. They provide targeted interventions to ensure all students can access rigorous, grade-level content. They cultivate joy as the fuel that makes hard work sustainable.

The results speak for themselves. Students at Bold Performance Schools are on track to close achievement gaps that have persisted for generations. If current trajectories hold, economically disadvantaged students at Bold schools will outperform state and national averages for all students within three years. Some of the Bold schools are already there.

The question facing DC is whether Bold Performance Schools will remain exceptional or become the norm. **We believe that when school leaders and educators have access to the right tools, training, and trusted spaces to collaborate cross-sector around "bright spots" in the data that DC will become the first jurisdiction in U.S. history where economically disadvantaged students score at or above the national average.**

[18] Osher, D., et al. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. Applied Developmental Science, 24(1), 6-36. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650

[19] Charlot, J., Leck, C., & Saxberg, B. (2025). Designing for Learning Primer: A Synthesis of Key Insights from the Science of Learning and Development. Transcend Education. Retrieved from https://transcendeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Designing-for-Learning-Primer_Web_20250307-Version.pdf



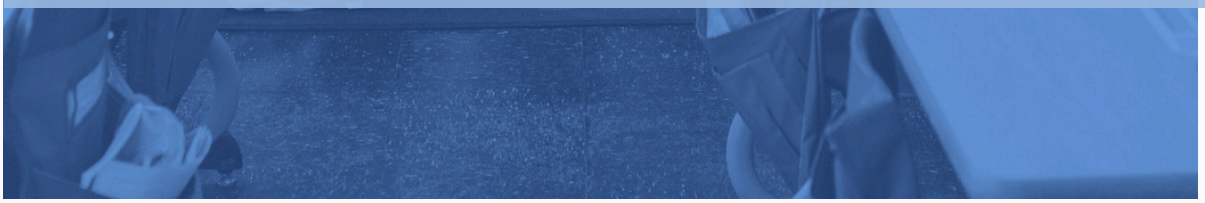
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- **Kelley Scholl and the OSSE Data, Assessment, and Reporting team** for the amount of data they made publicly available that we utilize for conducting the Bold Performance analysis, and for providing reference data on the alignment between NAEP and CAPE/PARCC proficiency that empowered our analysis of whether schools were meeting bold, national benchmark goals

- **Dara Zeehandelaar Shaw, Director, DC Education Research Collaborative, and Moriah Macklin, research analyst, Urban Institute,** for analyzing additional publicly available data of student performance, student survey results, teacher retention, and discipline from the Bold Performance Schools compared with non-Bold schools

- **The leadership teams at each of the Bold Performance Schools** for the time meeting with the EK12 team to share about their strategies and promising practices



APPENDIX: BOLD PERFORMANCE PPAE MODEL DATA

The tables below provide statistics on the accuracy of the four proficiency predictive models we calculate per grade band to generate every school's PPAE (Percent Proficient Above Expected) value: root mean square error (RMSE), absolute error, and correlation coefficient. The lower the error and stronger the correlation, the more accurate a model is in predicting historical state test results at a school level. We generate composite models in math and English language arts (ELA) for every grade band (upper elementary, middle, and high school) for both publicly-reported proficiency thresholds, career-ready benchmark (CAPE 3+) and selective college-ready benchmark (CAPE 4+). Every schools' overall PPAE is based on the average difference between actual performance and each model's output.

COMPOSITE MODEL COMPONENTS

GBT: Gradient Boosted Trees - an ensemble method that builds an additive model in a stage-wise fashion, where new decision trees are added to the model to correct the errors of previous trees

DT: Decision Tree - a non-parametric supervised learning method that uses a tree-like model of decisions and their possible consequences

DL: Deep Learning - models using deep neural networks to automatically discover complex patterns in data

Lin: Multivariate Linear Regression - straightforward statistical model that finds the best-fitting linear equation to describe how multiple input features affect multiple continuous output variables

Ensemble: This is the composite model inclusive of the four model components listed above, weighted based on their correlation coefficient in the ensembled overall model

ES = elementary school
MS = middle school
ELA = English language arts

3+ = career-ready benchmark on CAPE test
4+ = selective college-ready benchmark on CAPE test

Overall Model	Model Component	RMSE	Absolute Error	Correlation Coefficient
ES ELA 4+	GBT	89	72	0.951
ES ELA 4+	DT	45	34	0.971
ES ELA 4+	DL	78	61	0.908
ES ELA 4+	Lin	89	7	0.877
ES ELA 4+	Ensemble	10	8	0.944
ES Math 4+	GBT	87	7	0.962
ES Math 4+	DT	42	3	0.976
ES Math 4+	DL	79	62	0.915
ES Math 4+	Lin	9	72	0.882
ES Math 4+	Ensemble	103	81	0.949
ES ELA 3+	GBT	10	81	0.928
ES ELA 3+	DT	56	41	0.956
ES ELA 3+	DL	97	75	0.863
ES ELA 3+	Lin	106	83	0.832
ES ELA 3+	Ensemble	11	9	0.921
ES Math 3+	GBT	104	86	0.930
ES Math 3+	DT	49	35	0.970
ES Math 3+	DL	107	86	0.846
ES Math 3+	Lin	121	97	0.799
ES Math 3+	Ensemble	118	98	0.926
MS ELA 4+	GBT	77	61	0.956
MS ELA 4+	DT	37	25	0.973
MS ELA 4+	DL	63	49	0.922
MS ELA 4+	Lin	72	57	0.894
MS ELA 4+	Ensemble	81	65	0.952
MS Math 4+	GBT	74	53	0.952
MS Math 4+	DT	3	21	0.980
MS Math 4+	DL	55	43	0.933
MS Math 4+	Lin	73	55	0.880

Overall Model	Model Component	RMSE	Absolute Error	Correlation Coefficient
MS Math 4+	Ensemble	7.6	5.6	0.957
MS ELA 3+	GBT	8.9	7	0.92
MS ELA 3+	DT	4.4	3.3	0.963
MS ELA 3+	DL	7.7	6.1	0.888
MS ELA 3+	Lin	9.1	7.3	0.832
MS ELA 3+	Ensemble	8.8	7.2	0.935
MS Math 3+	GBT	9.2	7.3	0.935
MS Math 3+	DT	4.4	3.2	0.97
MS Math 3+	DL	8.5	6.7	0.894
MS Math 3+	Lin	9.6	7.5	0.845
MS Math 3+	Ensemble	9.8	7.9	0.941
HS ELA 4+	GBT	9.4	7	0.921
HS ELA 4+	DT	4	2.9	0.973
HS ELA 4+	DL	7	5.6	0.918
HS ELA 4+	Lin	7.6	6.1	0.899
HS ELA 4+	Ensemble	8.9	7.1	0.952
HS Math 4+	GBT	10.3	5.2	0.847
HS Math 4+	DT	2.7	1.5	0.986
HS Math 4+	DL	5.6	4	0.939
HS Math 4+	Lin	7.1	4.9	0.898
HS Math 4+	Ensemble	7.9	4.5	0.961
HS ELA 3+	GBT	10.4	8.3	0.914
HS ELA 3+	DT	4.8	3.6	0.967
HS ELA 3+	DL	9.3	7	0.874
HS ELA 3+	Lin	10.1	8	0.844
HS ELA 3+	Ensemble	10.7	8.7	0.93
HS Math 3+	GBT	9.9	6.6	0.893
HS Math 3+	DT	4.8	3.5	0.961
HS Math 3+	DL	7.7	5.6	0.906

The table below provides the weights of each covariate we utilized in the production composite model.

Model	Economically Disadvantaged	Students of Color	Students w/ Disabilities	English Learners	Mid-year Entry Rate
ES ELA 4+	0.799	0.841	0.397	0.006	0.268
ES Math 4+	0.812	0.866	0.340	0.060	0.228
MS ELA 4+	0.811	0.826	0.442	0.048	0.330
MS Math 4+	0.807	0.842	0.286	0.015	0.318
HS ELA 4+	0.622	0.859	0.529	0.138	0.360
HS Math 4+	0.772	0.863	0.178	0.152	0.274
ES ELA 3+	0.763	0.735	0.420	0.046	0.345
ES Math 3+	0.768	0.735	0.387	0.126	0.323
MS ELA 3+	0.655	0.676	0.544	0.031	0.370
MS Math 3+	0.747	0.705	0.417	0.019	0.427
HS ELA 3+	0.363	0.717	0.366	0.092	0.442
HS Math 3+	0.616	0.823	0.303	0.038	0.407

APPENDIX: BOLD PERFORMANCE SCHOOL PUBLIC DATA ANALYSIS

The table below provides statistics on additional publicly available data about DC schools from the 2024-25 school year. It shows that the 2025 Bold Performance Schools have better student survey and achievement results than other Bold-eligible schools, those that serve at least 30% economically disadvantaged. Their rates of teacher retention and discipline incidents were not statistically significantly different. We analyzed whether Bold Performance Schools' data were different from other Bold-eligible schools and from all other schools, serving more affluent students.

Statistic	Bold Performance Schools	Bold Schools - Eligible (>30% at-risk)	Other Schools (<30% at-risk)	Diff. b/t Bold and Bold-eligible	Diff. b/t Bold and All Other
Chronic Absenteeism	36%	43%	22%	*	**
Teacher Retention Rate	75%	74%	80%		
In-School Suspension Rate (SY23-24)	2%	2%	1%		
Out-of-School Suspension Rate (SY23-24)	8%	9%	5%		
CAPE 4+ ELA	40%	22%	58%	**	**
CAPE 4+ Math	32%	14%	49%	**	**
Belonging (SAYS Student Survey)	66%	59%	63%	**	
Emotional Regulation (SAYS Student Survey)	35%	38%	46%		*
Importance of Attendance (SAYS Student Survey)	87%	79%	79%	**	**
Perseverance (SAYS Student Survey)	68%	63%	63%	*	*
Rigorous Expectations (SAYS Student Survey)	83%	75%	75%	**	**
School Safety (SAYS Student Survey)	55%	48%	62%	**	*
Self-Efficacy (SAYS Student Survey)	59%	53%	55%	*	
Supportive Relationships (SAYS Student Survey)	90%	88%	86%		**
Valuing of School (SAYS Student Survey)	71%	64%	64%		*

Note: differences are statistically significant if indicated * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$


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THE BOLD LEADER



What Makes a Principal Bold?

When we ask educators at Bold Performance Schools what makes their schools successful, they usually do not start by talking about curriculum, data systems, or instructional strategies. They often mention their principals. Not in an obligatory, check-the-box way that educators sometimes praise their leaders, but with genuine conviction and specificity. What we learned from staff about their Bold school leadership:

- **They trust but verify with an emphasis on continuously improving**
- **They are "yes, and" people who believe students and teachers deserve to thrive in all the important ways, and collaborate with everyone to problem solve ways to make that vision possible**
- **They set the tone by balancing a deep care for their staff and students, working hard and smartly, and finding wins to celebrate with everyone**

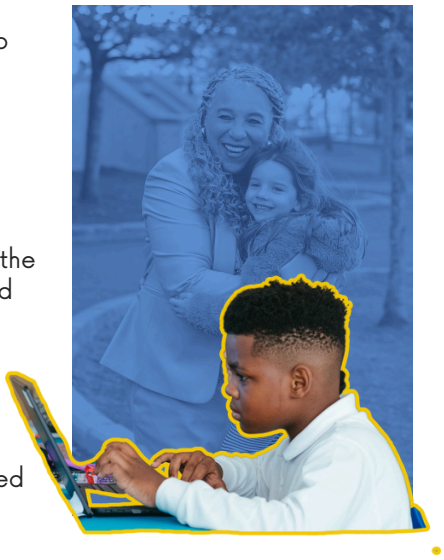
Trust But Verify, Always Improving

Bold school leaders are delegators who build strong teams and give them real autonomy to make instructional decisions. They empower teachers and coaches to solve problems independently, make strategic choices about instruction, and take ownership of student outcomes. This trust does not mean hands-off leadership. Bold principals stay close enough to know what is happening in classrooms, review data regularly, and lean-in to provide support when teams need it. The verify part is about ensuring accountability and offering help before small issues become major problems. This approach creates cultures where asking for help is a sign of strength because everyone understands the journey is filled with bumpy roads that lead to beautiful places.

"Yes, And" Leadership

Bold school leaders operate from a fundamental belief: students and teachers deserve to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and professionally. Bold leaders seem to reject false choices and instead find ways to honor multiple truths simultaneously.

Yes, students need to make strong academic progress, and they need opportunities to build quality relationships with each other and their teachers. Yes, math and reading are critically important for students' futures, and they should engage with art, sports, music, science, and social studies daily. Yes, every minute of every day matters, and it should include joyful learning moments and meaningful breaks to rejuvenate.



This "yes, and" approach extends to how they think about their people. Yes, teachers need rigorous expectations plus the space to accomplish them, and if data suggests, the intensive support to meet them. Yes, students need grade-level content, and they need scaffolding to access it. Yes, we need to use data to drive decisions, and we need to celebrate growth along the way.

When a "yes, and" strategy presents operational challenges, they ask, "How might we make this work?" They collaborate with teachers, coaches, families, and students to problem-solve creative solutions, developing environments where staff feel empowered to innovate, take risks, and contribute solutions. The result is shared ownership of the school's success and a culture where everyone is invested in making a bold vision for students come to fruition.

STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS THAT SCALE SUCCESS

How Systems Enable Bold Schools to Thrive

When we ask Bold principals how district and state systems enable them to be successful, they emphasize the balance between autonomy, strategic guidance, and support in technical areas. Here were the key takeaways:

- **Leaders feel their systems provide "trust but verify" autonomy that enables them to make better decisions for their schools based on student needs and staff talent, giving them space to make mistakes while maintaining high expectations for student results**
- **They appreciate the ability to strategically connect with other principals in their network to ideate over shared challenges and learn promising practices. Several leaders expressed interest in participating in cross-sector networks around specific goals and workstreams if convened**
- **Principals praised how system leaders provide invaluable expertise in financial and operational areas, enabling them to focus more time on improving school climate and core instruction**

Autonomy With Accountability

Bold school DCPS and charter principals describe their relationship with district leadership as "trust but verify" — the same philosophy they use with their own teachers. System leaders give principals real decision-making authority over scheduling, staffing, resource allocation, and instructional approach. This flexibility allows principals to adapt to their students' unique context rather than implementing one-size-fits-all mandates.

At the same time, district leaders maintain clear accountability for results. Principals have autonomy over the "how," but everyone aligns around the "what" — ensuring all students achieve at high levels. This balance enables innovation and responsiveness while maintaining coherent focus on outcomes. When schools need to restructure schedules for tutoring, protect coaching time by shifting operational responsibilities, or deploy funding in ways that match their students' needs, they have the authority to do it.

Strategic Networks for Collaborative Learning

Bold principals appreciate opportunities to learn from peers. For DCPS principals, cluster meetings provide structured time to connect with colleagues. For charter network principals, cross-campus leadership meetings create space to analyze shared challenges. When functioning effectively, these networks focus on specific problems of practice monthly (e.g. examining math subclaim data, discussing intervention approaches, troubleshooting student engagement challenges). Principals meet at each other's schools, see how "bright spots" work, and leave with concrete ideas they can implement immediately.

Several Bold school leaders expressed strong interest in participating cross-sector networks — structured opportunities to learn from high-performing schools across both DCPS and charter districts. Creating formal learning networks around specific goals might allow Bold schools to multiply their impact.

Operational Expertise and Sustainable Funding

Perhaps the most underappreciated system support Bold principals mentioned: high-quality operational and financial expertise from central offices or network leaders. Principals praised system leaders who handle complex budgeting, ensure compliance, navigate procurement, manage facilities, and solve human resource challenges. The value proposition is simple: every hour a principal spends on operational complexity is an hour not spent improving instruction or school climate.

Beyond structural support, Bold principals emphasized one resource above all: sustainable funding for what works. Federal recovery dollars enabled many Bold schools to hire interventionists, retain staff for consistency when enrollment temporarily declined, and launch intensive tutoring programs that accelerated achievement. Leaders emphasized the importance of being able to count on resources year after year, so they can build sustainable programs and accelerate performance for all students.