



Partnership
with Children

Student Voice and Engagement (SVE) Research Report 2026: **A Model for Healing Centered Education**

Beyond the Stage:
What Happens When Theater
and Mental Health Come
Together in the Classroom

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**We don't bring brilliance to these schools.
We make sure nothing extinguishes it.**

**That belief has guided Partnership with
Children's work in New York City public
schools for 118 years. SVE put this
premise to the test; not with a mission
statement, but with four years of data.**

Who We Are

Partnership with Children is one of New York City's longest-standing school-based mental health and youth development organizations. Since 1908, we've embedded licensed clinical social workers, youth development specialists, and teaching artists directly inside public schools. Today that work reaches 20,000 students and families across 40+ schools in all five boroughs.

What SVE Set Out to Test

In 2021, Partnership with Children merged with the Center for Arts Education (CAE), joining CAE's arts pedagogy with our trauma-informed mental health infrastructure. The premise of that merger was that arts education and mental health support are stronger as one system than two. The Student Voice and Engagement (SVE) program was built to test this idea and create an infrastructure that could be used across all our schools.

With four years of funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Assistance for Arts Education Grant, awarded in 2021 Student Voice and Engagement placed professional teaching artists side by side with PWC clinical social workers in four schools in Brownsville, Brooklyn — P.S. 165K, P.S. 446K, P.S. 284K, and P.S. 298K — all within Community School District 23 (CSD 23). Brownsville was one of the New York City zip codes hit hardest by COVID-19, with infection rates more than double the citywide average in May 2020. Layered on top of obstacles the community already faced:

- CSD 23 was designated a state “target district” for low academic performance
- 86.3% of students living in poverty district-wide
- Chronic absenteeism was at 46.0%, nearly double the citywide rate of 26.8%
- Three of the four SVE schools had poverty rates above 97%

These are also schools full of kids with big imaginations and important things to say. SVE gave them a stage for it.

A cohort of 175 students moved through the model from second through fifth grade, receiving weekly theater instruction built around the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL 5) framework for social-emotional learning (SEL), embedded mental health support, and an annual trip to see a Broadway show; for most of them, a first.

86.3%

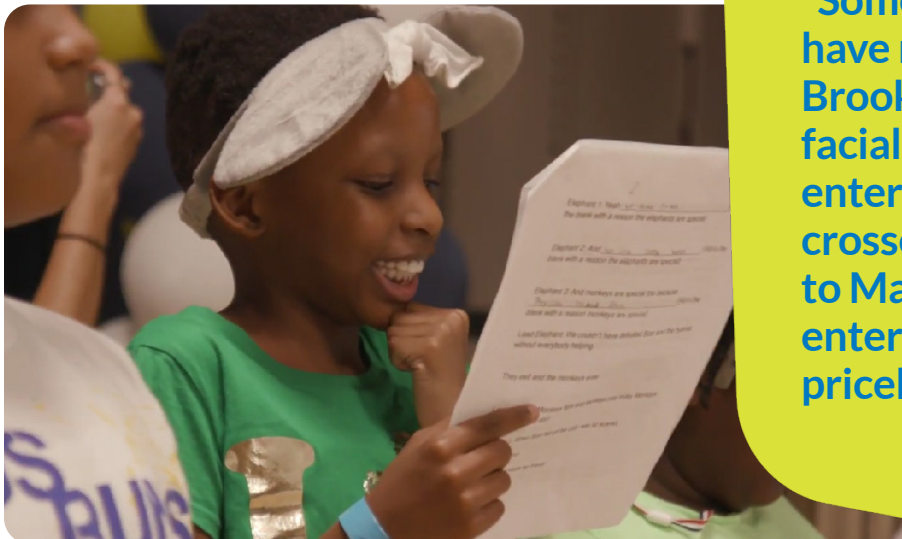
of students living in poverty district-wide

46.0%

chronic absenteeism, nearly double the citywide rate of 26.8%

3 of 4

SVE schools had poverty rates above 97%



“Some of these students have never been out of Brooklyn. I watched their facial expressions as they entered the coach bus, crossed the bridge to go to Manhattan, and as they entered the theater. It was priceless!”

– Teacher

What We Found

The results make a compelling case for arts education as a foundational component of healing-centered schools.

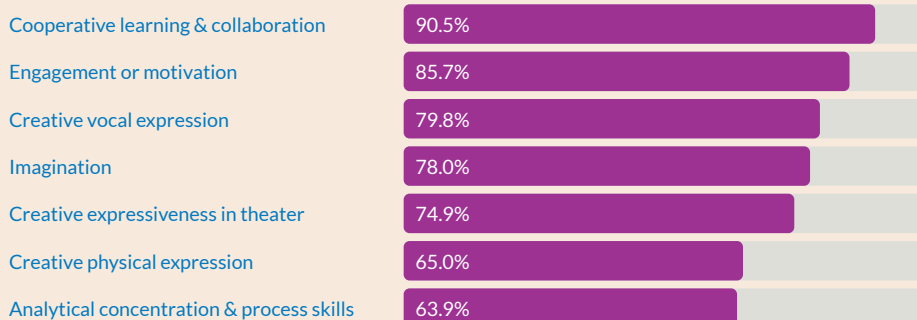
Across 90 independent classroom observations over the life of the grant, students' SEL competencies rose from a 71.7% to an 82.6% mean rating. Theater skill development climbed from 63.2% to 83.0%. Both gains were statistically significant ($p < .01$) and regression analysis identified **the single strongest predictor of SEL growth: consistent classroom opportunities for expression in theater**. The arts weren't supplementing social-emotional learning in this model. They were driving it.



By 2025, students displayed great growth in the skills educators find hardest to teach directly.

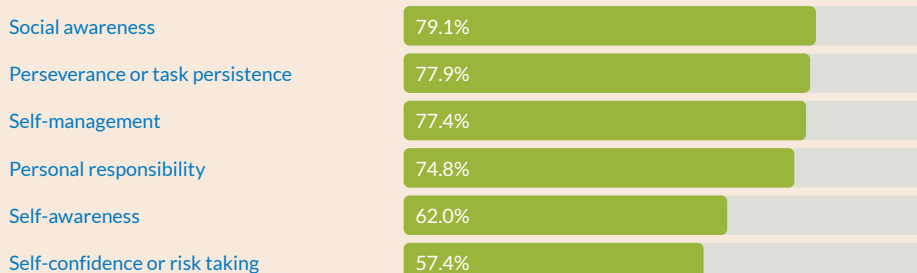
Theater skills

Avg % of students observed demonstrating each indicator



SEL indicators

Avg % of students observed demonstrating each indicator



82.6%

students' SEL competencies rose from a 71.7% to an 82.6% mean rating

83.0%

Theater skill development climbed from 63.2% to 83.0%

Three key differentiators

Three key differentiators distinguish Student Voice and Engagement from arts programming or SEL programming delivered on their own:

- 1. Co-designed instruction.**

Teaching artists and social workers built curriculum together, pairing theatrical technique with SEL goals defined by the school-based staff.
- 2. Sustained, looping relationships.**

The same teaching artists with students across grade levels, building the kind of trust that students repeatedly named as the reason they were willing to take creative and emotional risks.
- 3. Culturally responsive content.**

Students told their own stories. Over four years, that meant choral poems rooted in their own neighborhoods, experiences, and stories; and a reimagined *Wiz* where Dorothy finds her way back to Brownsville.

None of this is unique to theater. The architecture — an arts discipline plus an embedded mental health professional, aligned to a shared SEL framework, sustained over years — translates directly to visual art, music, dance, or media arts, in any district willing to invest in the collaboration it takes.



“I believe one particular student grew to be more confident in expressing his hidden voice. He volunteered to be a speaker during our school-wide ‘Black Wall Street’ showcase. This is something we’ve never seen him be confident enough to do. We applauded his efforts and credit SVE opportunities to express themselves.”

– Social Worker

Where We Go From Here

The evidence has answered whether this works in Brownsville. Now the work is bringing it to the next school, the next district, and the next community ready to invest in what their students already have inside them. Partnership with Children is ready to support that expansion through professional development for teaching artists and educators, technical assistance for districts building similar models, and continued research as we grow this evidence-backed model for healing-centered education across our own New York City schools.

175 students in Brownsville learned that their voices carry.

They shouldn't be the only ones.
This brilliance is in every classroom
Let's make sure we hear what they have to say.

Imagine what we become when we all join in.

Of the 16 teachers studied, nearly everyone agreed that students grew in confidence, collaboration, and imagination.

Our full research report and other resources related to our model for healing-centered education are available at partnershipwithchildren.org/SVEresearch

Our Presenters:



Wesner Pierre
Chief Executive Officer
Partnership with Children



Tal Bar-Zemer
Program Director, Arts
Education
Partnership with Children



Camille Thomas
Teaching Artist
Partnership with Children

Our Schools & Staff

P.S. 165 Ida Posner

Principal Jason Rivers
Cate Anderson, Michelle Baek, Jennifer Orellana, Tremaine Richards, Marcus Pass, Shanice Trotman

P.S. 446 Riverdale Avenue Community School

Principal Tawana Vasquez
Katie Nicholson, Rachel Carney, Kristie Villanueva

An immense thank you to our schools, the principals, and staff for supporting our efforts and collaborating with us to bring this work to life in their classrooms, every week, for four years.

P.S. 298 Dr. Betty Shabazz

Principal Danaika De Los Rios
Lavona Cassimy, Rosalie Murray, Keycia St. Marthe, Chelsea Clouden, Cindy Casseus

P.S. 284 The Gregory “Jocko” Jackson School of Sports, Art, and Technology

Principal Keva Pitts-Girard
Alex Teitel, Sarah Yo, Janielee Ortega, Karleen Beckles, Brittney Barclay

Our Teaching Artists

Our utmost gratitude to our teaching artists, who showed up in these classrooms week after week, year after year, building trust, teaching craft, and giving students the room to become who they wanted to be onstage and off.

Val Ramirez, Karim Sekou, Courtney Brian Devon, Weux Babineux, Kassandra Perez, Lorena Marin Martinez, Jonelle Robinson, Simon Salinas, Camille Thomas

Full Research Report Written by:

Rob Horowitz, Elizabeth Beaubrun, Tal Bar-Zemer, Hollis Headrick, Sam Leopold



Partnership
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Thank you to **SXSW EDU** for giving us the platform to share our findings publicly for the first time. And to **WPP Media** — thank you for the chance to share four years of theater and social-emotional learning with the people who make Partnership with Children’s work possible.

Support the expansion, continued research, and implementation of healing-centered education in schools

INVEST IN THE WORK

Support our work and help expand mental health services for students.

[Partnershipwithchildren.org/donate](https://partnershipwithchildren.org/donate)



BRING THE MODEL TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Connect with our staff and let’s work together to transform our schools with healing-centered education.

development@partnershipwithchildren.org

There are many ways to support PWC and help expand access to critical mental health services for students across NYC.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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