



WHEELS
Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School

Minds in Motion

Thomas Rochowicz
Principal

Honorable Members of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce,

I am the principal of the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School, a PreK-12th Grade public school proudly serving the Washington Heights community in New York City. We are a member of the New York City Outward Bound Network and the national EL Education Network.

We serve 865 students. 92% identify as Hispanic, 22% have special needs, and 83% qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Our mission is to work with families to prepare each pre-K through twelfth grade student academically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially to succeed in a post-secondary institution of his or her choice, and beyond.

While our school community implements several innovative practices, we are founded on beliefs that are not that new. We seek to make our students feel known and cared for. We challenge them relentlessly, and we support them unconditionally.

I'd like to describe four moments from this past year from each level of our school that are not only innovative practices, but examples of what we believe education should be.

1. Our Kindergarten students engaged in their expedition, or deep interdisciplinary study, on bees, researching the environmental threats to bees and learning about the advocacy methods of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King. They wrote letters, invited their families, created posters, and marched to our local post office to mail their petitions, chanting the entire way, "Save the Bees!" With authentic purpose for their academic work, our students engage more deeply in their learning.

2. True to our Outward Bound name, when our students join us for 6th grade, we send them camping for three days and two nights, completing ropes courses, and further developing the habits and values that we know are crucial for character and leadership. Students collaborate, challenge, and support each other as they form their Crews. Our school is built on the ethos of Crew, or small groups of students that will build deep relationships with each other and be shepherded by one Crew leader throughout the year. The Crew structure is one of the primary ways that we ensure students feel a sense of membership and belonging every year at WHEELS.

3. Our 9th Grade students in spring semester ELA researched local organizations that address issues that face our community. They researched the issues, met members of the organization, and advocated on their behalf with the Youth Philanthropy Initiative, with the winning team earning \$5000 for their organization. Imagine the courage it takes for a group of 9th graders to present to our entire school community on topics like sexual harassment and immigration. The opportunity to create high quality work that matters, that seeks to make a better world, engages students to exceed expectations.

4. Finally, each December, our seniors, along with seniors from across the EL Education network, march to the post office in an annual rite of passage, marking the end of their academic beginning. We fully expect them to continue to and through college, and thanks to our nonprofit, Friends of WHEELS, attached to our school, we have the resources to support them with both college and alumni counselors. This annual event is only one part of the larger college going



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culture that spreads throughout our school and again communicates to our students the high expectations that we know they can achieve.

To close, each of these moments reflect challenging tasks filled with authentic purpose. Students know that these moments are markers of the high expectations we have for them and for ourselves as educators. And each of these serve to build a deep sense of membership and belonging throughout our school community.

Ultimately, having had these experiences of civic engagement, identity development, and opportunity, our students will be prepared to impact our community and our nation.

Thank you.