

We have spent the middle of this school year in [continued pursuit of our Why](#), and our hope is that this update letter serves as a look-in at the different actions/activities/events (the “Whats” and “Hows”) we have been facilitating as we move towards our purpose of advancing equity within our schools. As is tradition, we look to literature for a champion that best reflects our journey to this point.

Written by Patricia Newman, *Neema's Reason to Smile* is an inspiring account of a young girl who knows that a quality education can serve as the HOW she needs to access the future she deserves. The story follows Neema and her mother as they build towards their dreams—using a dream basket to store their hope. Along the way, unforeseen circumstances arise that cast doubt on whether their dreams will come true. Fortunately for Neema, she is deeply connected to her WHY—and that conviction carries her through. In District 26 we are similarly on our journey towards our dreams, and when the unforeseen arises, our connection to and commitment towards achieving our Why outshines adversity and shows us just how many reasons we have to smile.

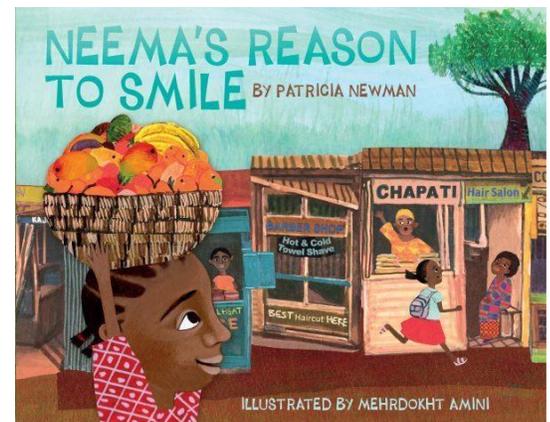
NURTURING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

**The girl inches onto the log, her basket heavy on her head.
One wobbly step... another... across the creek and into town.**

Outside the red door, I stop and smile at her.

“I am Neema. Welcome to my school.”

Our children are born dreamers. The most demanding challenge before us is to learn each of our students and develop educational experiences that allow them to unlock the greatness within them. Often, words like these are easy to write; succeeding in such endeavors is hard work, and we have to own that sometimes they are not successful on the first attempt. For our schools to become true vessels of equity, they must have both the right lens to see students for where they are in their development, as well as a range of interventions to draw upon so that every child can continue achieving their dreams. This fall and winter, all schools in our district have sent their key point-persons to sessions run by the Queens North Borough Office to support the development of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). A thoughtful, collaboratively developed MTSS is exactly the kind of *WHAT* our schools need in service of *HOW* they advance towards their *WHY*.



As critical as supports such as the MTSS are for students, thoughtful, intentional decisions about teaching and learning are the first interventions that should be made on their behalf. We remain committed to ensuring that our schools are up to the task of

engaging the dreams of students as soon as they enter the system. This winter Kindergarten teachers from across the district met for the middle two (of four) sessions of our Kindergarten Summit. In collaboration with Anna Arrigo and Jennifer Wynne from the Queens North Borough Office, the Summit is providing an arena for teachers and leaders across the district to share HOW they are introducing challenging content to students and leveraging their interests to keep them engaged. We can hardly wait until May, when the final Kindergarten Summit for the year will take us into the classrooms that have taken the learnings from the Summit and applied them in their classrooms!

BUILDING COHERENCE Pre-K-8

At daybreak, we talk hand-in-hand down the dusty path to town. Can mama hear my lion heart roar for school?

At their very best, our schools are dream factories where our students can develop their own set of personal “Whys” and begin on the paths towards them. Part of our team’s HOW is supporting the sharing of best practices through ongoing Equity & Excellence Spotlight Series. During our January Spotlight on the Arts visit to MS 158, we saw students deeply invested in growing their works of art under targeted facilitation of their teachers. In February, our Spotlight on Social Emotional Learning & Supportive Environment took us to PS 205, where we saw students engaged in explicit and curriculum embedded social-emotional learning lessons where they were working in partnerships or small groups to identify personal or characters’ emotions. Most recently, our March Pre-Kindergarten for All visit to PS 376 took us inside classrooms that have embraced all students as leaders in their own learning through experiences related to water. Just as water takes the shape of the vessel it occupies, the water units across classrooms took shape according to unique, student-generated inquiries about the role water plays in their lives.



In PreK, “teachers are sparking wonder and igniting learning in our children.” Today we concluded our final Spotlight Schools Series of the year @ps376 w/ a Spotlight on the #PreKforAll Equity & Excellence initiative.



7:19 PM - 22 Mar 2019

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Collaboration is the lifeblood of our HOW; for our school leaders to create the learning environments where dreams come true, they need continued opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues. Our Principal and Assistant Principal Learning Communities (PLCs) have continued their inquiry-based journeys into the heart of what is (and what is not) working inside of our schools. The middle of the year has been full of our PLCs taking advantage of intervisitations to get a plurality of perspectives on how our work outside the classroom is beginning to have an impact inside of student experience. As a corollary to this school-based investigation, we dedicated time during the January and February meetings to a mid-year PLC share so that our leaders had time to reflect and share how this structure is impacting their leadership. In these moments the concept of #TogetherIsBetter is at its most apparent.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AT EVERY LEVEL

My hand tightens on hers, “I could be a teacher.”

“Or a doctor,” she says.

Teacher Madam hands me a white shirt and a red skirt. Mama empties the Dream Basket into Teacher Madam's hands.

When Neema's access to opportunity increases, so to does her range of possible future careers. Central to HOW we move towards our WHY is a commitment to presenting students with fun and challenging tasks. If students are to step into the jobs of tomorrow, they need to be engaged with tasks that are inspired both by the world we inhabit as well as the future into which we are bounding. At the heart of our efforts in this regard is [our District's STEAM Framework](#). On Tuesday, March 19th the best and brightest minds from our schools gathered at PS 221 to celebrate at our Second Annual District STEAM Fair. The Fair represented the collective work and collaboration of students, parents, teachers and administrators across District 26, highlighting innovative STEAM projects from 17 schools representing Kindergarten through 8th grade, and close to 200 students showcasing their talents! There were so many projects this year that Fair Coordinators Taso Lampoutis (AP, MS 67), Brett Cluff (AP, MS 74) and their team had to create galleries in both the gymnasium (Engineering) and the cafeteria (Science & Technology). Projects like these embody what we hope becomes the norm for student experiences in our schools: every spark of inquiry, a coin; every application of that spark, a deposit in our Dream Basket.



TY to the D26 STEAM Team for organizing our 2nd Annual District STEM Fair. SHOUT OUT to all D26 Scientists & Engineers for sharing your passion for curiosity, discovery and innovation with our community.

#TogetherIsBetter



8:09 AM - 20 Mar 2019

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One lonely coin remains. I put it in the Dream Basket.

The middle of the school year asks the most and seems to give the least back. In the sea of everything, it might feel as though all the coins in your Dream Basket have been spent, that your dreams might seem impossibly far away. In times like this remember that we spend our year with the people that matter the most: the children of our district. Our shared successes with them are the coins we deposit in our dream baskets. Sometimes it is hard to see, but success lives in our schools with greater frequency than setback. Because #TogetherIsBetter, you are never alone; you are never on empty.

Value this special time in our lives. Remember: Twitter is *HOW* we know about *WHAT* you're doing in service of your *WHY*. If something from your corner of the district is unlocking the potential of our students, Tweet it to us [@D26Team](#) so we can celebrate the ways in which dreams are coming true in your school!

Whether it's in the field or in the district office, we look forward to the next time we see you as we continue our journey. Until then, have a great Spring!

Sincerely,
Danielle Giunta and the District 26 Team