

Looking Inwards to Move Forwards

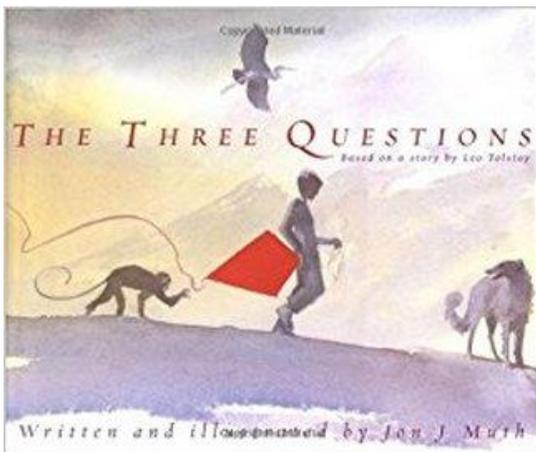
June 2018

[With the help of Auggie](#), we launched the 2017-2018 school year with the boundless optimism that can only come from a fresh start. While our enthusiasm was unbridled, we were not without purpose. We challenged ourselves to seek out the Wonder in District 26 through the lens of key questions. Our work across this year has yielded incredible learnings about the power of emotions and the conditions necessary to uphold the key pillars of our district. As we look back on this year, and begin to organize for the next, we find ourselves in a powerful moment. We know *what* we want to do, while at the same time we are in an ongoing process of discovering the best ways *how* to carry out our mission. To frame this moment, and all of the questions we continue to grapple with, we look to great literature to help us find a path forward.

How do we model (and provide models of) self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior for all stakeholders so that our district represents the very best of how we want our students to treat themselves and others?

What illustrates our commitment to upholding democracy, equity, diversity and social justice as pillars of the district, school, and educational experience for all students across District 26?

There once was a boy named Nikolai who sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. "I want to be a good person... but I don't always know the best way to do that."



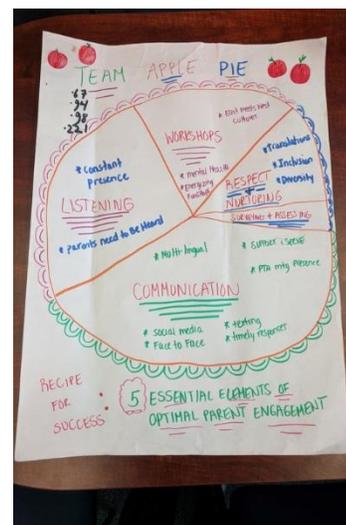
These words set the stage for the Nikolai, the main character of the book, *The Three Questions*, by Jon J. Muth, and in this letter we will use the three questions Nikolai poses to frame how we have approached our work. In pursuit of achieving our District vision and mission, we have organized around three of the following priorities: *nurturing an inclusive community*, *building coherence across Pre-K-8 feeder patterns*, and *growing leadership at every level in pursuit of Equity and Excellence for All*. While we have made great strides, it is important for us to ask the right questions, so that we continue to provide students with the excellent educational experience they deserve.

What is the right thing to do?

The most important thing is to do right by the one who is standing by your side.

Nurture an Inclusive Community

Social-emotional learning is at the heart of our District's Comprehensive Educational Plan, and the CASEL Framework serves as an anchor to our work. This year, we were able to capitalize on resources available through the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Grant to provide our school leaders training in Emotional Intelligence, as well as school-level team training in [the RULER approach](#). When working through a challenging problem, all members of a team need to feel like their voice is heard and valued by the other members of the team. At every level of our work, the development of emotionally intelligent charters provided teams with a common starting point so that no matter how challenging the conversation, there were supports in place to maintain a space where participants could see themselves in the work and move closer to solving the big problems we face.



Our work surrounding inclusivity was deepened this spring through engaging experiences with Cornelius Minor and Dr. Bryant Marks on social justice and implicit bias. Looking to the future of our work nurturing inclusion in our district, surely we will be leaning on the participants in our **Diversity in Educational Leadership** series to serve as empathetic presences within their buildings as they engage our communities in ongoing conversations to define what equity, diversity, democracy and social justice means in District 26. As part of this work, we are excited for the challenge of grappling with these three questions:

Who could we be if we were more inclusive?

What mechanism or structures would allow for that?

How will we defend those mechanisms from deteriorating back to exclusivity?

When is the best time to do things?

You can't pay attention to everything yourself, you need a pack to keep watch and help you decide when to do things.

Building Coherence across PreK-8 Feeder Patterns

No great decision is arrived at without consultation, conference, and deliberation. We live in an interconnected world and the decisions made in our elementary schools have deep implications for our middle schools (and vice versa). It would do our children a great injustice if the decision makers in our schools did not have the benefit of a diverse range of perspectives to think through the potential impact of their decisions. New for this year, we capitalized on being a zoned district and organized Principals, Assistant Principals, Guidance Counselors, Teachers and Parent Coordinators into professional learning communities (PLCs) within their respective PreK-8 feeder patterns. While every PLC was supported by a member of the District 26 Team, this work would have never reached its heights without our ongoing partnership with the Queens North Field Support Center—thank you for your continued support; we are onto something special and can't wait to see what this next year brings!



This spring saw us further leverage the power of working in feeder patterns to experience deeper thinking and new approaches to mathematics instruction as part of our work with Metamorphosis LLC. When we think about math we need to move beyond the idea of there being one right answer to a problem—very few things in the world are cut and dry. Our mathematics instruction has the potential to equip our children with the practice they need in embracing problems for which there might be more than one right answer. There is magic in the process, and potentially the power to change the world.

Additionally, Parent Coordinators and Guidance Counselors have embedded time within their monthly meetings to collaborate with feeder pattern colleagues to grow a PK-8 continuum of support for families. It is in this space which we realize that our work hinges not just on preparing our students for what's waiting for them in high school, but deepening our understandings of both our students as individuals, as well as the diverse options available to them, so that all of our students continue on to the high school that is going to bring out their best. As we think

about ensuring a robust Pre-K through 8th grade (and beyond) experience, these questions will be critical to our success:

Are we engaging with sufficiently diverse perspectives?

Does everyone have equal voice at the table?

Are we able to notice difference without added value?

Who is the most important one?

The most important one is the one you are with.

Grow Leadership at Every Level in Pursuit of Equity & Excellence for All

To ensure that the [Equity & Excellence initiatives](#) came to life in our district, we designed and implemented a robust professional learning plan, which had at its core opportunities to develop the leadership of others. Facilitated by District AP's, District Team Members, and in partnership with FSC and/or other partners where applicable, year-long PLC's were formed to support district stakeholders in understanding and implementing the Equity & Excellence Initiatives with fidelity. Known as "District Projects," experiences provided needed support to schools, while challenging their facilitators to learn about themselves as leaders. This spring, for the first (and assuredly not for the last) time students led the celebration of the leadership of these projects at our annual CDEC Ballroom Dancing and Awards Night. The night was an overwhelming success and further confirmed our belief that our children are capable of excelling in each and every situation we put before them. Moreover, the night supported our stance that anything is possible when there is strong partnership between our schools and the Community District Education Council—thank you for everything you do in service of our schools.

We have done amazing work to establish new levels of expectation surrounding the quality, texture, and depth of experience in our community—and we are overwhelmed by the extent to which all of you have risen to that challenge. As far reaching as our work was across the district this year, whether it was into classrooms, professional learning spaces, or



out into the community, the next frontier of our leadership work might be a journey inwards. To assess how good of a job we are (or at times are not) doing with ensuring equity and excellence for all students, we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable; we need to be able to ask ourselves the tough questions, whose answers hold the key to ensuring that the greatness of our district reaches all students:

In what ways are we leveraging our ability to listen as part of our coaching?

How are we building bridges from where people are to where they need to be?

Are we providing ourselves with enough opportunity to live at the edges of our comfort?

We are ready for this work. Like any set of rigorous questions, there might be some productive discomfort that comes with unpacking their truths, and that is okay—it is our hope that the foundation we have laid this year has positioned our community stakeholders to lean into this reflection and

embrace this next part of our journey with the same levels of purpose and presence that have come to be the hallmarks of our community.

It has been an incredible year in District 26 due to the commitment and dedication of the tremendous students, parents, community members, elected officials, and DOE staff supporting us. As a collective team, we continue to be the living embodiment of "excellence in education!"

Enjoy your summer and we look forward to partnering with you again next year!

Sincerely,

Danielle Giunta, and the District 26 Team