



LEADING FOR CHANGE

# *Building a Culture of Deeper Learning at the Donald McKay K-8 School*

**2019 BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH**  
*from the School on the Move Prize*



# ABOUT THE SCHOOL ON THE MOVE PRIZE

EdVestors launched the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize in 2006 to highlight the public school successes that often go unnoticed amid the many real challenges facing urban schools. Each year, a number of Boston public schools document rapid student progress that outpaces the rest of the district, and by recognizing and sharing how schools improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students. In 2018, the Donald McKay K-8 School was named the Prize winner and recipient of the \$100,000 award. In partnership with the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, EdVestors is pleased to release this case study, which sheds light on the McKay School's improvement story.

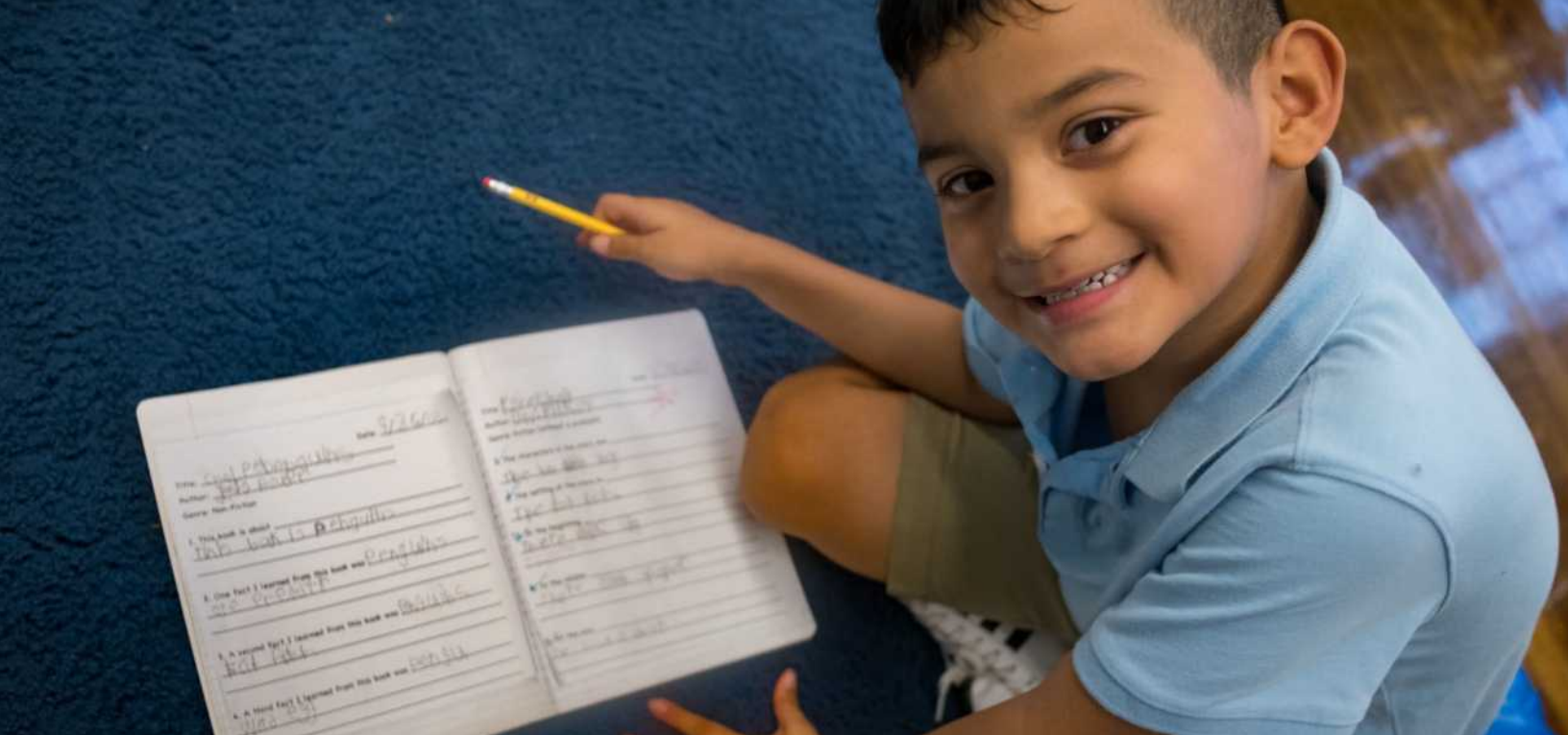
## ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER

The Rennie Center's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).

## ABOUT EDVESTORS

EdVestors' mission is to increase the number of schools in Boston delivering dramatically improved education outcomes for all students. EdVestors is a school improvement organization that combines strategic philanthropy, education expertise, and implementation support to help schools create the conditions for school change. We work at the classroom, school, and system levels as a seed funder for school improvement; to develop, demonstrate, and share best practices across schools; and to achieve citywide, student impact in targeted issue areas—currently K-12 arts education, middle grades math, and career pathways. For more information, please visit [www.edvestors.org](http://www.edvestors.org).





# DONALD MCKAY K-8 SCHOOL

On the third floor of the Donald McKay K-8 School in East Boston, a group of 8th graders huddle together in the hallway outside their classroom. They've been researching, recording, and editing podcasts, which they plan to send to the NPR Podcast Challenge next week. Today, as they finish editing, they reflect on their experience over the past two weeks. Christian\* invited his mother onto his podcast to discuss her immigration journey from Honduras to Boston. In the process, he uncovered pieces of his mother's story that he hadn't known before. "I found out what it was like for her getting here," he said, "and how she felt in East Boston when she first arrived." His classmate Sofia focused her podcast on the impact of beauty standards on the body and the mind. "It's something I've experienced," she said. "You feel like you're not good enough if you don't look a certain way and a lot of people don't feel comfortable talking about it." Her conclusion: "We should talk about this because you can grow to appreciate yourself and not care what people think."

Like the 8th-grade podcasters, students and teachers across the McKay have the freedom to be creative, to learn by doing, and to experiment with new methods of learning that are relevant to students' daily lives. And amidst this new way of teaching and learning, academic achievement has steadily improved, as evidenced by the McKay's 2018 EdVestors' School on the Move Prize win. The school has not always been this way. In 2013, the McKay was among the lowest-performing schools in Massachusetts, ranked in the bottom 6 percent of schools statewide. According to staff, the building was characterized by a "closed door" culture: teachers lacked opportunities to learn from their colleagues, and staff collaboration was virtually nonexistent. The McKay's journey to the school it is today was

made possible by a significant shift in adult culture at the school. A learner mindset and a commitment to continuous improvement are expected of every adult—and every child—in the McKay School community.

The school's improvement strategy, which is characterized by a shift from a top-down approach to one of distributed leadership, aligns with national and international research on effective models of school transformation.<sup>12</sup> A 2010 McKinsey and Company study found that effective schools employ different interventions to move from poor performance to fair, from fair performance to good, and from good performance to excellent.<sup>3</sup> Mirroring this approach, McKay principal Jordan Weymer implemented strategies that led to initial academic gains at the McKay. After building trust with teachers and establishing baseline instructional expectations, Weymer then created structures for teacher leadership and decision-making—a promising practice seen in previous School on the Move Prize winners.<sup>4</sup>

The following case study describes the three phases of the McKay's school improvement journey. It begins by exploring an intensive, principal-directed focus on instruction in the first years of reform, which seeded a culture of learning at the school and provided a platform for ongoing teacher- and student-driven school improvement. At each phase, the case study highlights key practices that facilitated the McKay's transformation from a place where learning was quiet and highly structured to a place where learning is noisy, active, and engaging.

*\*Student names have been changed to protect confidentiality*





### ABOUT THE DONALD MCKAY K-8 SCHOOL

Located near East Boston’s bustling Maverick Square, the McKay serves more than 800 students in pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. Nearly 90 percent of students are Latinx and over 80 percent speak a first language other than English. Sixty percent of students come from economically disadvantaged households and many are from recently arrived immigrant families. While two-thirds of kindergartners arrive at the McKay each fall without the early literacy skills that indicate kindergarten readiness (versus 39 percent for the Boston Public Schools as a whole), by year’s end, that number has flipped—with two-thirds of students now meeting grade-level expectations for the end of kindergarten. Across grade levels, the McKay matches or exceeds the performance of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) in English language arts and math.

#### STUDY METHODS

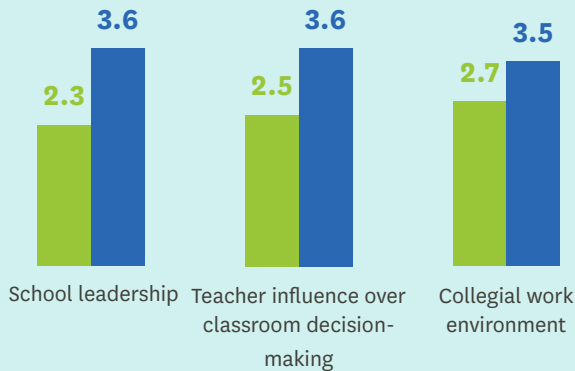
The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy partnered with EdVestors to examine the school-level factors that contributed to improvement at the McKay between 2012 and 2018. Information presented in this brief represents findings from a comprehensive data and document review; focus groups with students, parents, teachers, and administrators; and a set of classroom observations meant to uncover key practices, both academic and non-academic, at the school.

### MCKAY IMPROVEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

#### Teacher Perceptions Over Time

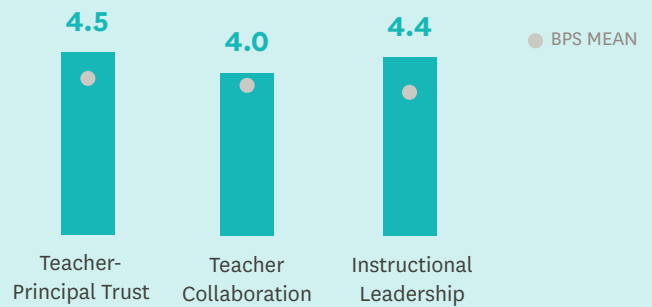
BPS Climate Survey (4 point scale)

● 2012-2013  
● 2015-2016



#### Teaching Environment

2016-17 School Quality Report (5 point scale)



### Student demographics

**93%** Students of Color

**59%** English Learners

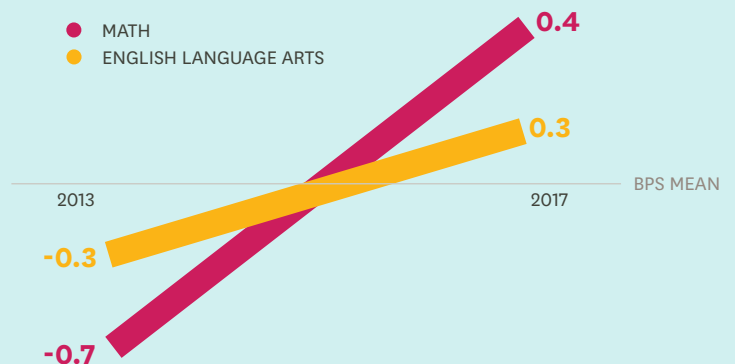
**88%** High Needs

**810** Students

### Academic Gains

MCAS and PARCC, standardized scaled scores

● MATH  
● ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS





# PHASES OF TRANSFORMATION

The following case study is divided into three sections, each describing a specific phase of the McKay's school improvement journey. It begins by exploring an intensive, principal-directed focus on instruction in the first years of reform, which seeded a culture of learning at the school and provided a platform for ongoing teacher- and student-driven school improvement. At each phase, the case study highlights key practices that facilitated the McKay's transformation.

**PRINCIPAL-DIRECTED  
REFORM (2012-2013)**

**BUILDING TEACHER  
LEADERSHIP (2014-2016)**

**STUDENTS AT THE CENTER  
(2017-PRESENT)**





## LAYING THE FOUNDATION 2012-2013

### *Uncovering instructional needs*

In the summer before his first year as principal, Jordan Weymer met individually with every teacher to identify the McKay’s existing strengths and needs. In conversations about instruction, teachers raised concerns about scripted curriculum that did not adequately support and challenge students. According to Weymer, classroom observations in September confirmed teachers’ concerns. He visited language arts classes where students had little access to full-length, complex texts. In math classes, he saw minimal opportunities for students to apply mathematical concepts to real-world scenarios. Weymer decided to invest his time in building teacher capacity to deliver standards-aligned, engaging instruction.

### *Creating a culture of trust*

Weymer knew that without teachers’ trust, no amount of professional development would create lasting instructional change. In his interactions with staff, he worked to create a sense of safety before asking teachers to make major shifts in their practice.

Early in his tenure as principal, Weymer began a team meeting by sharing a piece of constructive feedback about his leadership style that he received from a 6th-grade student. In front of the entire staff he admitted a personal area for growth and conveyed his plans to improve. According to teachers, the meeting was a turning point: Over the next several months Weymer regularly modeled vulnerability and authenticity in his conversations with staff. Teacher culture slowly began to shift. Mistakes were treated as opportunities for improvement and teachers began to take risks, ask each other for support, and try new things in the classroom. Weymer instituted an open-door policy where teachers could come to his office anytime to share their feedback, concerns, ideas to improve the school, and personal factors that impacted them in the workplace.



### *Supporting standards-aligned instruction*

Where teachers had found evaluations and classroom observations to be a negative experience in the past, Weymer shifted to a focus on providing instructional coaching to teachers. He visited classrooms regularly to observe, celebrate successes, and offer ongoing feedback. The McKay moved away from one-size-fits-all professional development, favoring job-embedded supports based on the needs of individual teachers and grade-level teams.

Every teacher received copies of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and met in teams to unpack the standards, ensuring that every staff member understood grade-level expectations and was equipped to communicate these expectations to students. In partnership with colleagues and administrators, teachers adjusted lessons to more fully address the meaning and rigor of the standards.

Weymer created a set of classroom look-fors, “The McKay Way,” which detailed instructional expectations and guided individualized teacher coaching. As standards-based instruction improved, teachers benefitted from significant autonomy to determine how they would meet “The McKay Way” in their classrooms. Weymer asked staff to invite him into classrooms when they were trying new things. Teachers began to deliver instruction in different ways. Some lessons worked well, and others did not. Every mistake was recognized as an opportunity to learn.

### STRUCTURING THE SCHOOL DAY FOR COLLABORATION

Systems and structures are critical to facilitate teacher leadership and collaboration at the McKay. The school provides substitute coverage for weekly teacher leader preparatory periods. All other structures are made possible through the creative use of the school schedule, which is adjusted annually to maximize teachers’ meeting time, and by providing small annual stipends for teacher leaders.

- Daily** Common planning time for all teachers within each grade level
- Weekly** 90-minute grade-level team meeting  
60-minute preparatory period for teacher leaders  
60-minute meeting for all teacher leaders (before school)
- Monthly** Teacher leadership coaching with external consultant

**Maximizing resources**

As teachers began experimenting with their instruction, leaders focused on creating the systems and structures needed to begin the shift from principal-driven reform to teacher-empowered improvement. Specifically, leaders changed the school schedule to maximize time for teacher collaboration and worked with BPS Central Office to expand enrollment. This allowed the McKay to meet increased demand from families which led to more resources through BPS’ student enrollment-based funding formula.

The McKay strategically used this funding to invest in teachers and classroom instruction. This included instituting a full inclusion co-teaching model, in which a fully-licensed special education teacher and a regular education teacher work together to meet the needs of students with disabilities within the regular education classroom, as well as eventually using school funds to engage external experts to build teachers’ skills as educators and leaders. The McKay also invested in cluster substitutes, educators who are at the school daily regardless of teacher absences, to provide coverage for teacher meetings. Maximizing the resources of time and money allowed for more frequent grade-level team meetings when teachers would work collaboratively to plan instruction and identify supports to meet the needs of all learners.



**“School transformation is all about attending to both the professional and the personal.”**

—JORDAN WEYMER

**THE MCKAY WAY, 2012 vs 2018**

*The initial, principal-created McKay Way established expectations for teachers around the delivery of rigorous, differentiated, standards-aligned instruction. As priorities and leadership at the McKay shifted over time, the teachers revised the McKay Way to focus on building-wide practices that support the whole child.*

**2012**

**MANAGEMENT**

M

- Routines/groupings
- High expectations and accountability

**CONTENT**

C

- Thematic units
- Standards-based objectives
- Effective planning

**KNOWLEDGE**

K

- Effective instructional practices for mastery of concepts/skills/strategies

**ACTIVITIES**

A

- Differentiated
- Active, meaningful engagement with ample time to practice

**YES OR NO**

Y

- Assessment—are students learning?
- Feedback and adjustments

**2018**

**MINDSET**

M

We are capable learners, thinkers, and leaders. We learn from our mistakes, accomplishments, and each other.

**CONNECTIONS**

C

We are a connected community made up of students, families, school staff, neighbors, and partners. We include everyone and respect and value our differences.

**KINDNESS**

K

We will be kind to everyone in our community, including ourselves. We practice kindness, care, and compassion for others and ourselves.

**ACTIVE LEARNING**

A

We are critical thinkers that continuously advocate for our learning and lead with a joyful mindset.

**YOUR FUTURE**

Y

We believe in the power of education to create a better future for everyone.

## SHIFTING POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY 2014-2016

### *Developing teachers as leaders*

A revised schedule at the start of the 2014-2015 school year dramatically increased time for teacher collaboration. To ensure that teachers were equipped to use this time effectively, the McKay hired a consultant to provide teacher leadership coaching. Teachers representing each grade level applied for leadership positions. The consultant coached teacher leaders in building trust amongst their colleagues, using effective facilitation techniques, structuring planning time, setting up online agendas, and providing roles for all team members. According to staff, teacher collaboration and professional culture improved dramatically.

Teacher leaders began meeting regularly with Weymer to consult on schoolwide priorities as part of the Teacher Leadership Team (TLT), taking on the responsibility of communicating their decisions to grade-level teams. In the beginning, school leaders regularly attended all grade-level team meetings, providing support for teacher leaders. As teachers grew in their leadership roles over the course of the year, administrative involvement decreased, and teachers led meetings independently.

### *Seeing the impact of teacher leadership*

During a team meeting in late 2014, a 4th-grade teacher raised a concern. Her students had just completed a Civil Rights unit lasting only five days and she was hesitant to move on. “None

of the readings really captured the Civil Rights Movement,” she remembers thinking. “Issues of racism and discrimination are so real to our students and we are ending the unit while students still have so many misconceptions about the activists and the context at the time.” Her colleagues agreed. They worked together to replace the one-week unit with a three-month Civil Rights unit, during which students read novels including *Glory Be* by Augusta Scattergood and *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson. The Achievement Network, a national nonprofit, provided teachers with data and planning tools to ensure that all teacher-created materials aligned with Massachusetts standards. Student and teacher engagement skyrocketed during passionate and difficult discussions related to slavery, segregation, and activism.

Opportunities for teacher leadership were not isolated to core curriculum and instruction. When a group of teachers approached Weymer about a need to build community among students, he asked them to come up with a plan. The teachers recommended implementing restorative practices at the school, which place students in charge of resolving peer conflicts. Several McKay teachers had used restorative practices in the past and they valued the focus on rebuilding trust when challenges and conflicts arise. Within months, the McKay hired the Suffolk University Center for Restorative Justice, which trained every teacher in restorative practices. Guided by a teacher, students across grade levels began to gather regularly in small groups to openly discuss their experiences and listen to the perspectives of others as a means of strengthening community bonds and responding to difficult situations.



*“We became really close as a grade-level team. You can walk into any of our classrooms and we’ll be doing the same thing... we’re able to brainstorm and help each other.”*

—MCKAY TEACHER



## SUSTAINING INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT 2017-PRESENT

### *Deepening student engagement*

Five years ago, classrooms across the McKay were quiet. Weymer set a simple goal for McKay teachers: more kids talking in class. Teachers incorporated “talk moves,” such as asking students to repeat their peers’ comments or clarify or critique their peers’ reasoning, rather than the teacher performing this role. For students who were hesitant to speak in class, classrooms began using silent hand signals, allowing students to indicate their agreement with a peer’s comment or ask another student to say more. Early results were promising and students across grade levels began to build upon their classmates’ thoughts and ideas.

As teacher leaders began shaping schoolwide priorities at the McKay, they recognized that despite substantial progress, student conversations in class still had room for improvement. In partnership with Weymer, they brought in external expertise through Boston University’s Student Discussion Lab to continue deepening student conversations.

With support from BU, teachers at the McKay analyzed classroom discussions with an equity lens. Teachers conducted classroom observations to collect data on the characteristics of students who were called on by teachers and peers. Staff reviewed that data and began asking difficult questions, such as “why are students with a lighter skin tone getting called on more than their peers with a darker skin tone?” Teachers have since identified equity in discussions as a schoolwide priority. They are engaging students in their efforts to create more equitable classrooms. “A lot of schools might have seen improvement and stopped pushing, but we know that we can always go further,” one teacher said. “We are just scratching the surface of our focus on equity at the McKay.”

### *Creating a responsive school*

In 2018, teachers recognized that the school’s focus and culture had changed, and their guiding principles needed to adapt as well. Teacher leaders engaged their colleagues to revise the “McKay Way,” creating a shared vision for ongoing school improvement. *See page 6.*

Where the first version centered on strengthening individual teacher practice, the new iteration recognizes the bright spots that have emerged through the past five years of school transformation and shifts the focus to meeting the needs of the whole child, both within classrooms and as a school. The “C” that once stood for “content” now stands for “connections,” with an action statement recognizing the need to value the cultural and linguistic heritage of others. Teachers use this set of guiding values within individual classrooms and grade levels; the next step will be to embed these practices into the ongoing work of the school and schoolwide decision-making.



### *Supporting immigrant students and families*

The McKay’s need to support the whole child became more urgent as teachers recognized the negative impact the national conversation around immigration was having on students and families. “We had kids coming to school afraid that their parents were going to be taken from them and we had to do something about it,” one teacher said. Staff began posting signs across the school expressing their support for undocumented students and families. They organized a “Know Your Rights” presentation for families to be held at the school. One teacher proposed the idea of an Immigrant Pride Week to the student government. The students were immediately on board.

On a Monday morning in June 2018, the inaugural student-led Immigrant Pride Week began. Across the McKay, teachers delivered lessons on immigration and students planned an assembly. Students made hats adorned with flags and messages of unity. The week culminated in an immigration rally during which the entire school community marched around the McKay school building. The event was a success, and middle school students immediately envisioned something bigger. When school started again in the fall, 8th graders called city council members and the Boston Police and received permission to host an expanded, neighborhood-wide march in 2019.

## FORGING THE PATH AHEAD

At the McKay, staff recognize that innovation in teaching and learning is not the product of a single person's lightbulb moment. Instead, it is the collective insights of many, over time, that drive meaningful school improvement. As teachers seek to sustain and accelerate the school's progress, they are focusing their efforts on giving instructional voice and choice to the most important stakeholders—students—engaging them in authentic and meaningful learning experiences. At the same time, teacher leaders are focusing on engaging families more deeply in classrooms and in schoolwide decision-making. Several teachers have begun visiting students' homes to talk with parents about each child's strengths and needs. During these visits, they provide families with information about a range of opportunities to participate in the life of the school.

Teachers appreciate the considerable changes in school culture at the McKay over the past five years that led to significant improvement, but they are quick to shift their attention forward. "We still have so much work to do. Our students give us no excuse not to," one teacher said. "We have families who literally risked their lives to get their children here and we owe them the best education we can possibly give them."

*It's a Wednesday morning in March, and Amalia, a 4th grader, is researching animal shelters in El Salvador on her Chromebook. Last week, along with her classmates, she identified a question to pursue through independent research. Concerned about the number of street dogs in El Salvador, she decided to find out how the country cares for homeless animals. Next week, she will present her findings to her classmates, complete with recommendations for improvement based on the challenges she identified. For Amalia and her peers, student choice is what makes the McKay special. "Teachers want every kid to have a voice here," a student said. "They want us to be heard."*


### END NOTES

1 Fern Snart, *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*, Journal of Educational Change. 12. (2011).

2 EdVestors, *Staying the Course: Sustaining Improvement in Urban Schools*, (2016).

3 Snart, 2011

4 EdVestors, 2016



THE MCKAY TEAM CELEBRATED WINNING THE 2018 SCHOOL ON THE MOVE PRIZE AT THE AWARD BREAKFAST ON OCTOBER 31, 2018



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We are grateful to all who have contributed to the School on the Move Prize and case study. Thank you to the members of EdVestors' School on the Move Prize Selection Panel, and the teachers and school leaders of the Donald McKay K-8 School.

Design by Katherine McInerney  
Photography by Michael Manning



## SCHOOL ON THE MOVE *Prize*

### CONTACT US

EdVestors  
(617) 585-5740 | [info@edvestors.org](mailto:info@edvestors.org)  
[www.edvestors.org](http://www.edvestors.org)  
@EdVestors

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy  
(617) 354-0002 | [info@renniecenter.org](mailto:info@renniecenter.org)  
[www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org)  
@therenniecenter