



Case Brief

Two Rivers Public Charter Schools

Washington, DC

Year Opened:
2004

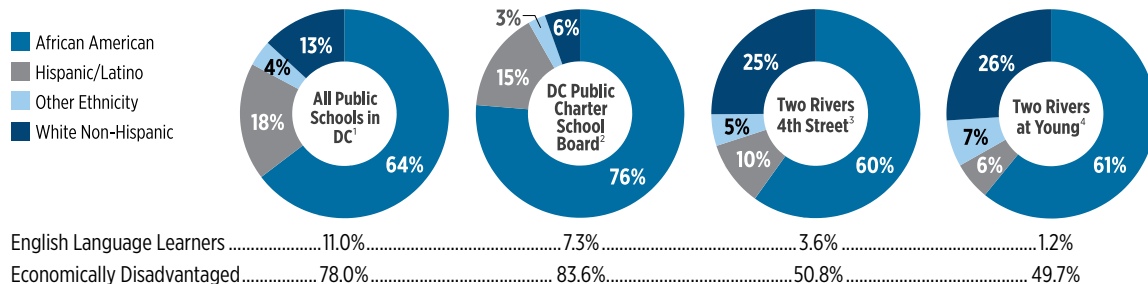
Grades Served:
PreK-8

Total Enrollment
 2016-17 School Year:
687

Two Rivers Data Profile

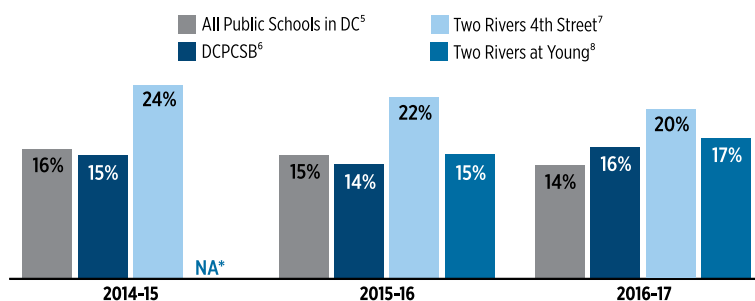
The Two Rivers Public Charter School network in Washington, DC includes two schools: Two Rivers 4th Street, with two campuses serving grades PK3-5 and 6-8, and Two Rivers at Young serving grades PK3-3. Two Rivers' mission is to "nurture a diverse group of students to become lifelong, active participants in their own education, develop a sense of self and community, and become responsible and compassionate members of society."

Chart 1: Demographics Comparison, All Students (2015-2016)



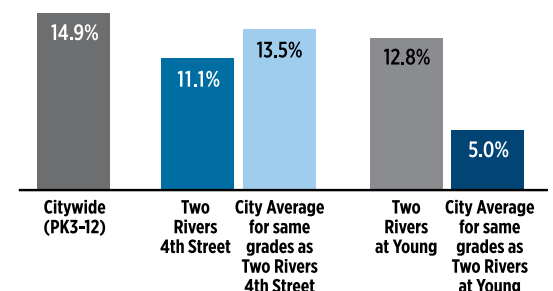
Source: <https://data.dcpsb.org/Equity/Facts-And-Figures-Student-Demographics/t5dx-gywd/data>
 Source: OSSE Equity Reports, 2015-16

Chart 2: Enrollment of Students with Disabilities (2015-2017)



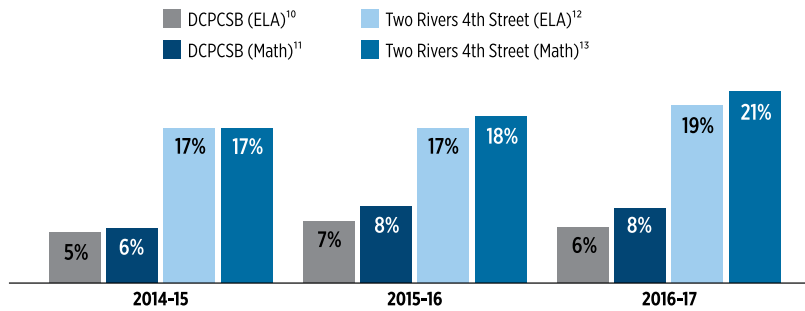
*Two Rivers at Young does not have data for this year due to its recent opening.
 Source: <https://data.dcpsb.org/Equity/Facts-And-Figures-Student-Demographics/t5dx-gywd/data>
 Source: OSSE, Equity Reports 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17

Chart 3: Suspensions of Students with Disabilities (2016-2017)*⁹



*Includes students suspended for one or more days
 Source: OSSE Equity Reports, 2016-17

Chart 4: Percent of Students with Disabilities Passing State-Wide Assessments (2014-2017)*



*Two Rivers at Young did not have any students that were eligible for testing for the school years reported.

Source: (% Proficient) <https://data.dcpsb.org/Student-Performance-/Facts-And-Figures-Data-PARCC/hbik-xxpw/data>
 Source: OSSE PARCC Results Database: <https://osse.dc.gov/page/2016-17-results-and-resources>

Table I: Comparison of Students with Disabilities (2016-2017)

	Two Rivers Combined ¹⁴	All Public Schools in DC (Ages 3-5) ¹⁵	All Public Schools in DC (Ages 6-11) ¹⁶	All Public Schools in DC (Ages 12-17) ¹⁷
Autism	6.00%	9.31%	9.73%	5.35%
Deaf-Blindness	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%	0.00%
Developmental Delay	8.50%	42.39%	8.38%	NA
Emotional Disturbance	4.30%	0.06%	4.46%	9.57%
Hearing Impairment	0.00%	0.36%	0.23%	0.29%
Intellectual Disability	0.00%	0.12%	3.71%	6.86%
Multiple Disabilities	17.90%	1.49%	8.42%	13.85%
Orthopedic Impairment	0.00%	0.42%	0.15%	0.10%
Other Health Impairment	17.90%	5.37%	19.03%	17.26%
Specific Learning Disability	8.50%	0.00%	29.71%	43.47%
Speech or Language Impairment	35.90%	40.24%	15.83%	2.71%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.90%	0.12%	0.08%	0.35%
Visual Impairment	0.00%	0.12%	0.25%	0.19%

Source: Two Rivers internal data, 2016-17

Source: 2016 Data: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html>



Two Rivers School

The mission of Two Rivers is to nurture a diverse group of students to become lifelong, active participants in their own education, develop a sense of self and community, and become responsible and compassionate members of society.

The Two Rivers Public Charter School network is made up of three campuses: two serving students in preschool through fifth grade, and a middle school that enrolls students in sixth through eighth grades. Two Rivers' educational philosophy is exemplified by the Expeditionary Learning (EL) Education model that forms the basis of its method of instruction. EL Education practices engage each child's natural passion for learning to individually develop their curiosity, knowledge, and skills, which increases their unique potential for learning and creativity. At the completion of learning expeditions, students participate in a showcase to present the results of their expeditions and detail the progression of their work. Parents and families attend these events to witness their children's discussion of their work and view evidence of their learning. In this brief, we profile only the two elementary schools, which operate almost identically though on two different campuses. The Washington DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB), the charter authorizer in the city, awarded a charter to Two Rivers Public Charter School in August 2003. The first Two Rivers campus opened in Fall 2004 and moved to its current location in Northeast Washington in 2007. Inside the original campus, an open meeting area with tiers of platform seating serves as the heart of the classroom area, with student work lining the walls of every classroom. Across three floors, the impression is one of energy, excitement, and student activity. Two Rivers' middle school campus is located across the street.

In 2013 the city of Washington, DC awarded Two Rivers the historic Charles E. Young school building to support Two Rivers' expansion to an additional elementary school campus. The Two Rivers at Young campus serves a diverse group of 169 students in preschool through second grade and plans to grow by one grade each year until it serves all elementary grades, preschool through fifth (See Charts 1 and 2). The Two Rivers at Young building, also located in Northeast Washington, DC, is a stately brick building with large white columns that overlooks a football field, the Anacostia River, and power plants. It is reminiscent of an iconic university building from the outside, but inside the bright blues, purples, and greens transport you to a world of imagination. A blue curving path through the hallways provides the impression of a winding river through a grassy meadow, and small artistic touches along the walls continue the theme.

Washington parents apply for enrollment to a Two Rivers Charter School through the My School DC Lottery uniform enrollment system. After the initial lottery, students may enroll off the waitlist.¹⁸ While the Two Rivers' elementary student demographics differ from the district's, with more students who are white, non-Hispanic, and fewer who are economically disadvantaged, the percentage of students with disabilities is higher at Two Rivers than in Washington, DC Public Schools (DCPS) overall (See Table 1). However, both campuses enroll fewer students with more significant disabilities. Two Rivers also

Centers of Excellence: Shining a Spotlight on Promising Practices for Students with Disabilities in the Charter Sector

State charter school laws provide an opportunity for schools to create an instructional environment outside the confines of standard operating procedures within traditional district systems. This autonomy gives charter schools a unique space to innovate — testing, refining, and expanding promising new practices that can better meet the needs of many students who are not well-served in traditional public school settings.

The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) identified Two Rivers as one of four charter schools from across the country chosen as "Centers of Excellence" to showcase and share examples of charter schools that leverage their autonomy particularly well to benefit students with disabilities.

Each Center of Excellence enrolls a proportionate or higher number of students with disabilities relative to the district where the school is located, demonstrates an explicit commitment to developing exemplary programs with a focus on inclusion, and achieves higher-than-average outcomes for students with disabilities. Each Center of Excellence profile is designed to share the story of an outstanding school that provides particular insight into how charter schools — and all public schools — can provide exemplary services to students with disabilities.

encourages its staff to refer students for evaluation for special education services if they have any concerns about the student's progress or development, especially in the area of speech and language, potentially leading to the higher percentages of students at Two Rivers with that designation.

Many families seek out Two Rivers after their students have struggled in other schools, leading to an influx of students in fourth and fifth grades due to Two Rivers' reputation for excellence in special education. Two Rivers has shown a strong commitment to students with disabilities as demonstrated by its focus on inclusive practices, high enrollment rates of students with disabilities, and higher than district average test scores for students in special education. However, it is important to acknowledge that some of the difference in performance may be attributed to the different profile of students with disabilities enrolled in Two Rivers schools relative to DCPCSB and DCPS.

A School Day at Two Rivers

The school day at both of Two Rivers' preschool and elementary campuses begins at 8:30 am and ends at 3:15 pm. The morning begins with morning meeting. Four days of the week, classes have morning meeting in their rooms. However, one day a week, there is a community meeting in each school's large meeting area with everyone in the school — sometimes including family members — sitting in their class groups to hear the morning announcements, share songs, welcome special visitors, reinforce school community, and build excitement about the day ahead. Following the morning meeting, all students, including those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), report to their general education classroom, where they will stay — except during specials such as art and physical education — for the remainder of the day.

Most classrooms at Two Rivers include both a general education teacher and an assistant teacher. Though assistant teachers are not certified educators, they work as partners in the classroom, planning lessons, taking small student groups, and helping with overall classroom management. Students with more intensive needs may also be assigned a dedicated aide to provide one-on-one support throughout the day.

The expectation at Two Rivers is for instruction primarily to take place in general education classrooms, facilitating learning between students with and without disabilities. The majority of special education services at Two Rivers are therefore provided in the general education classroom, with special educators moving in and out of classrooms to provide support, working with individuals or small groups of students as needed. Small groups may work in the hallways or common areas, often including a combination of students with and without disabilities. Special education and general education teachers collaborate to develop and implement lessons for all students.

Administrators, families, and teachers point to Two Rivers' strong student-centered approach to teaching and learning as central to the school's success with students with disabilities. Teachers do not view students with disabilities as necessarily needing "more," — rather, in their view, all students have different needs, and educators' job is to make sure everyone has equal access to engaging content. They provide equal access in part by

providing multiple ways for students to work with and respond to instruction, recognizing student engagement and choice as important parts of the learning process. Teachers proactively plan for differences in the classroom. These instructional practices are the hallmark of an inclusive community.

Two Rivers' core values are encapsulated by: "Learn better together," "Nurture relationships," and "Give access." These values are enacted through two specific practices at Two Rivers: the Responsive Classroom® techniques, and student-led IEPs. Both of these practices support Two Rivers' commitment to inclusive education and its success with students who require special education and related services.

How It Works for Broderick

Broderick is a typical second grade student who receives special education services at Two Rivers. Broderick has been identified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and speech and language impairment, which cause him to struggle with reading and writing. On a typical day, Broderick begins an English/Language Arts lesson in his classroom after the school's morning meeting. Broderick sits at a kidney-shaped table with the special education teacher and three other students, only some of whom have IEPs, working on a phonics-based text and taking turns with choral and individual reading. At the same time, the general education teacher is teaching a lesson on a word family to a small group and the assistant teacher is walking around the room, asking other students questions and providing feedback as they work.

The song, "You Are Beautiful Just the Way You Are," starts to play, indicating that it is time for Broderick and his classmates to transition to their math lesson on the carpet. When Broderick struggles to join the group, the general education teacher gives him a reminder by pointing to the classroom expectations on the wall, which the class wrote together at the beginning the year. Broderick looks at the rules, takes a deep breath, and joins his classmates on the carpet. As Broderick walks back to join the class, the special education teacher moves next to him and says, "I really like how you took that deep breath to calm down."

Broderick's math lesson continues on the theme of collecting and analyzing data. The students have created a survey called, "What Is Your Favorite Candy?" that has four potential answers. They pick up their clipboards, paper, and pencils and begin to ask each other the question. At one point Broderick leaves the other students and asks the general education teacher, "what is your favorite candy?" The teacher uses a call and response to get the class's attention and then asks the students if they think adults should be included in the survey. The students offer a variety of answers and justifications, including Broderick's: "Yes, because they are part of our classroom community." The teacher then leads a discussion about why it is important to agree on who should be included in the survey.

After the class decides that they will only ask students the survey question, students collect the data individually and then come together as a class to report out and analyze what they have found. Throughout the lesson, students compare answers, choose to work individually or as a team, and choose whether to mark the answers on their own paper or hand the clipboard to their peer to mark on their own.

Responsive Classroom

Responsive Classroom® is a set of evidence-based practices guided by the idea that social and emotional growth is as important as academic education; and that individuals learn through social interaction and problem solving.¹⁹ The approach has a strong focus on the individual and how that individual works within the school community. The Northeast Foundation for Children developed the Responsive Classroom approach in 1981 to foster developmentally appropriate strategies and cultivate communities that support a safe environment for learning. Structures such as having morning meetings, building classroom rules together, arranging the classroom to be physically inviting, and promoting student-led learning are hallmarks of the Responsive Classroom method. From the perspective of school staff, these hallmarks are a significant driver of Two Rivers' long waiting list for enrollment, particularly among families with students who have special needs.

All new teachers and assistant teachers at Two Rivers participate in a summer orientation where they receive professional development about key instructional practices, cultural norms and expectations, as well as the nuts and bolts related to organizational policies and procedures. A part of Two Rivers'

teacher orientation includes a focus on Responsive Classroom books, readings, and practices to help teachers understand how to build and maintain safe and welcoming communities. The administration also provides professional development throughout the year, including professional learning communities where teams of teachers study and practice together, observe each other, offer feedback on current practices, and identify next steps. Administrators conduct periodic walk-throughs throughout the year to re-orient teachers to the school norms and the Responsive Classroom practices. In part due to this investment in professional development, Two Rivers has had minimal “regrettable attrition,” or teachers who have left the school to teach at another in the area.

Signs of Two Rivers' Responsive Classroom practices include daily morning meetings, prominent displays of student work, a focus on student choice, and student-led learning. At the beginning of the year, everyone in each class helps create a set of class rules that the teacher prominently displays and to which everyone, including students, refer to throughout the year. Teachers prioritize collaborative learning and use flexible and small group instruction in addition to student centers so students have choices about how to complete a task. For example, in a second grade classroom, students use centers to take part in a reading lesson. Some students are at computers listening to a story being read aloud to them, while others are stamping words and sentences with letter stamps, and two children are on the carpet reading from their basket of books. Each basket is individualized and includes books for that student's reading level and interests. A few students are sorting words into word families (e.g., cat, hat, bat) and another small group of students are writing and drawing stories with their special educator. Each center includes multiple choices for students to achieve the same goals.

At Two Rivers, teachers also greet students and families at the door, and parents report that everyone in the school has an open-door policy, enabling them to talk to teachers or administrators anytime.

The administration is working to refine the school's approach to student behavior to better align with the Responsive Classroom practices. However, drawing from Responsive Classroom, across the school teachers consistently speak to students respectfully and look for underlying communications if students do not follow the rules. The adults also model desirable behaviors and provide specific feedback for students, which is helpful in reducing the need for external motivation. For instance, rather than saying “good job” when a student took a deep breath to calm down instead of acting out, his teacher said, “I really like how you took that deep breath to calm down.” Rather than giving the student a token to reward his good choice, the specific positive reinforcement and self-esteem from making a good choice become his reinforcement. By not relying on rewards and vague external praise, educators enable students to focus on their own actions and behaviors that are under their control. These practices align with the student-centered philosophy at the school.

The Responsive Classroom® Approach Is Based On Seven Principles:²⁰

1. The social and emotional curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
2. How children learn is as important as what they learn.
3. Great cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
4. To be successful academically and socially, children need to learn a set of social and emotional skills: cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
5. Knowing the children we teach—individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach.
6. Knowing the families of the children we teach is as important as knowing the children we teach.
7. How we, the adults at school, work together is as important as our individual competence: Lasting change begins with the adult community.

Source: <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/about/principles-practices/>

Developing Scaffolds for Student-Led IEPs

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires students with disabilities to be involved in the process of developing their IEP, but local school teams across the country determine what that involvement actually looks like for their students. For many, “involvement” means students being invited to an IEP meeting after they turn 14, even though they may have an IEP many years earlier. At Two Rivers, by contrast, students with disabilities are deeply involved in developing their own IEPs from the start.

Teachers at Two Rivers look for opportunities to help all students — including those with and without learning disabilities — learn to set goals, monitor progress toward their goals, and regularly revisit strategies for reaching those goals. These types of skills can be particularly powerful for students with disabilities, helping to facilitate the development of self-determination. So it made sense when a team of special education teachers at Two Rivers developed a specific set of guidelines to help students take a lead in the development of their IEP. These guidelines set out levels through which students progress, year by year, until they are fully a part of the IEP process (see Figure).

Student-led IEPs at Two Rivers extend the components of a Responsive Classroom, and further illustrate the school’s commitment to students’ active engagement and self-determination. To support effective student-led IEP meetings, the director of special education trains each special educator on how to support student-led IEPs, and the commitment to student-led IEPs is reinforced through professional goal-setting and professional development with the special education team. Teachers train students about the IEP process and their role in it,

and then use a rubric to assess each student’s understanding of and participation in his or her IEP process. Many tools that Two Rivers has developed for supporting and implementing student-led IEPs, including training videos made with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia, have been used across the Washington, DC area.

Key Takeaways

Centers of Excellence, like Two Rivers, are schools that provide examples of effective practices that other public schools — traditional and charter — can implement to create programs where all students thrive, including those with disabilities. The lessons learned from Two Rivers and the other Centers will, we hope, inspire other schools that are committed to improving outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on those with disabilities. Key among these lessons at Two Rivers:

1. **Integrate student-focused techniques such as those included in the Responsive Classroom approach, to focus on social interaction and problem solving alongside academic content and create a welcoming, safe school climate; and**
2. **Capitalize on the benefits of learning self-determination, particularly for students with disabilities, by developing, adopting and consistently implementing practices that enable students to be active participants in the development of their own IEP.**

The work at Two Rivers takes a student-focused, holistic approach to learning for all students, including those with and without disabilities. The schools’ outcomes suggest that focusing on students’ social and emotional growth may be just as powerful, if not more powerful, than focusing on academic instruction alone.

Student-Led IEPs at Two Rivers²¹



Source: Two Rivers Google Drive: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kvf4i5PHxv26CsiXJX817QUZJv4i2OenfqPRb8e9zDA/edit>

Research Methodology

This research brief highlights one charter school that is achieving remarkable success with students with disabilities. NCSECS began our nationwide search for such schools with nominations from experts in the field, and narrowed the list based on publicly available data that illuminate charter schools that use inclusive practices and have similar student demographics to the district in which they are located. Within this narrowed list of schools, our team then spoke by phone with school leaders using a semi-structured interview protocol, reviewed documents about the schools' policies and procedures, and made school visits to conduct additional interviews and observe educators and students in action. Our research protocol was based on research-based practices related to inclusion, effective teaching, equitable funding, school-wide systems of support, and administrative structures such as professional development, staffing, and communications.

NCSECS conducted at least one and typically two information-gathering sessions by phone prior to our school visit. School leaders, including charter network leaders, principals, and special education directors, shared information about each school's routines and structure, as well as areas they believed most contributed to the school's success with students with disabilities. These school teams shared school-wide and special-education specific data, as well as school handbooks, master schedules, and charter applications or renewals to help orient NCSECS to their school.

Each school visit included classroom observations and interviews with school and network administrators, teachers, family members, and staff (e.g., instructional aides). Our interviews ensured similar information was collected from each school, while enabling school teams to introduce strategies or characteristics unique to their school community.

Our findings from the data and document review, interviews, and school visits inform each research brief, highlighting the areas most important for the school's success with students with disabilities. We have shared drafts and integrated feedback from each school's administration and faculty to ensure a full and accurate picture of their school.

The **National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS)** is an independent, non-profit organization formed in 2013 to fill a void that has existed since the inception of the charter school movement in the United States, namely a coordinated effort to address the challenges associated with providing special education and related services in charter schools.

NCSECS is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to charter schools and to fostering innovations that will benefit students with disabilities in both charter and traditional public schools by proactively working with states, authorizers, charter school and special education advocates, as well as other stakeholders.

NCSECS's Mission: To ensure that students with diverse learning needs are able to fully access and thrive in charter schools.

Vision: The charter school sector will fully embrace its responsibilities to meet the needs of all students and serve as a model of innovative and exemplary programs for students with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

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Deborah Taub, Julie Kowal, and Lauren Morando Rhim contributed to the research, data analysis, writing, and editing of the case brief.

Endnotes

- 1 DC Public Charter School Board. Facts and Figures Student Demographics. Retrieved from <https://data.dcpsb.org/Equity/Facts-And-Figures-Student-Demographics/t5dx-gywd/data>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 OSSE Equity Reports, 2015-16. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/equity-reports>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 OSSE Equity Reports. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/equity-reports>
- 6 DC Public Charter School Board. Facts and Figures Student Demographics.
- 7 OSSE, Equity Reports 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/equity-reports>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 OSSE Equity Reports, 2016-17. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/equity-reports>
- 10 DC Public Charter School Board. Facts and Figures Data PARCC. Retrieved from <https://data.dcpsb.org/Student-Performance-/Facts-And-Figures-Data-PARCC/hbik-xxpw/data>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Office of the State Superintendent of Education. 2016-2017 PARCC Results and Resources Database. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/page/2016-17-results-and-resources>
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Personal communication. Wilkinson, C., Registration Systems Manager. 06/14/18
- 15 US Department of Education. IDEA Section 618 Data Products: State Level Data Files. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html>
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 The My School DC lottery application is a common application form that is used for any student in Washington DC who wants to attend a participating public charter school, an out of boundary public school, any three or four-year-old preschool programs in the public schools, or any DCPS selective city-wide high schools. Information about how the My School DC lottery works is available at: <http://www.myschooldc.org/about/about-my-school-dc>
- 19 Curby, T. W., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Abry, T. (2013). Do emotional support and classroom organization earlier in the year set the stage for higher quality instruction? *Journal of School Psychology*, 51, 557-569. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2013.06.001. For a list of peer reviewed journal articles that support Responsive Classroom® practices: http://oqoyz1y45eq3itpwe0w2k8-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/sites/default/files/pdf_files/RCES_summary.pdf
- 20 Responsive Classroom. Principles and Practices. Retrieved from <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/about/principles-practices/>
- 21 Two Rivers Google Drive. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kvf4i5PHxv26CsiXJX817QUZJv4i2OenfjPRb8e9zDA/edit>