



Haven Academy:
**Our Model, Why It Works,
and What Every School &
Organization Can Learn.**



Our Story

For more than 150 years, The New York Foundling has responded to the needs of the community to support New York families — growing from its earliest days as a respite home for abandoned infants to an organization that today offers a comprehensive spectrum of community services. While The Foundling’s approach has evolved with time, our core mission has not: To help every child grow up in a loving, stable environment and give every family the opportunity to thrive.

Through decades of The Foundling’s work, we have seen firsthand how children in the foster care system and those from low-income backgrounds are failed by our educational system: held back by unaddressed trauma and a lack of academic and social support. Compared to a general school population, children in foster care have poorer attendance rates, are less likely to perform at grade level, and are more likely to experience behavioral challenges. This gap has dire long-term consequences: Without intervention, only **25%** of children in the child welfare system graduate from high school. Only **3%** graduate from college.

For too long, we allowed this achievement gap and these outcomes to persist. We allowed unrealized potential to become the norm.

In 2008, The Foundling set out to do something about it.

We took on a mission no one had ever attempted before, creating the nation’s first public charter school to focus explicitly on child welfare-involved families: **Mott Haven Academy Charter School**. Located in the Mott Haven neighborhood of The Bronx, Haven set out to serve a unique student body with an even split between:

- Children in foster care
- Children receiving services preventing entry into foster care
- Children residing in the community of Mott Haven, a neighborhood with one of the highest poverty concentrations in New York City and the nation

From the earliest days of planning Haven, we focused on a single guiding question: *If we built a school specifically designed to address the trauma that students had faced in the child welfare system and in a neighborhood with concentrated poverty, what kind of outcomes were possible?*



Haven Academy: A Story of Growth

2008

Haven Academy opens its doors with an inaugural class of 100 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade.

2014-15

Haven welcomes its first class of Pre-K students

2019-20

Haven adds its first class of 8th graders

Today

Haven Academy is a full-scale, Pre-K through 8th grade public charter School, educating 500 students per year



We give children an educational home.

Over the past fourteen years, Haven Academy has grown from two classes totaling 100 students to a full-scale public charter school, educating 500 children per year across ten grade levels. We have been a pioneering force in early and elementary education: from our early adoption of pre-kindergarten, to a social-emotional curriculum that teaches valuable life skills beyond the classroom, to a trauma-informed approach that supports the whole child.

Our goals are simple: Remove the barriers to academic success faced by our children. Support them through crisis. Work to prevent *additional* crisis. Improve their emotional stability and academic abilities. And in doing so, put every young person on a path toward a better future. Against great odds, Haven Academy and its students have achieved extraordinary results: outperforming comparison groups on standardized New York State testing; building trust in families and children; and improving community ties throughout Mott Haven.

Key Results

Academic Performance

On state ELA and math tests, Haven students have historically **outperformed** their peers in the district, city, and state.

Student Behavior

Chronic absenteeism is **16% lower** than the district average — even with a student body that is more likely to miss school.

School Environment

Haven students feel **more** emotionally supported at school than their peers in the district. **91%** feel they have at least one adult at school to confide in.



It's time to share what we have learned.

With Haven's first-of-its-kind model and demonstrated results, we have attracted attention from local and national press wanting to profile our work, neighboring schools looking to partner, and schools and organizations from across the country that are interested in emulating pieces of the model.

Sharing our work is fundamental to the Haven mission. We want these organizations to know what we have come to know: our successes, our challenges, and how we believe this work should continue to grow.

Why? Because what happens at Haven Academy echoes far beyond our walls. There are tens of thousands of children either in New York City's child welfare system or in preventive programs, and hundreds of thousands nationally.

The number of families experiencing homelessness continues to rise. If we can apply elements of Haven's successful, proven model elsewhere, we can change even more lives.

In this moment, our conviction in the Haven Academy model is stronger than ever.

As New York City and the country emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, every child and young person has been impacted in a unique way. They are walking into the classroom with far more than a backpack on their shoulders. Some may still be reeling from the social isolation; others from the loss of a loved one. No matter what the circumstance, every child needs support to reach a bright future.

Our Model & What We Can Learn

In the summer of 2022, we commissioned new research to understand what makes Haven Academy work – and what lessons other schools and organizations, both in New York City and nationwide, may take from our model.

Our team developed findings based on an in-depth research process including:

- Interviews with current and former Haven Academy staff, Board members, and external experts
- A review of internal Haven documents and training materials
- A review of published articles and materials about Haven
- Analysis of proprietary Haven data
- Review and analysis of public data sets released by New York City, New York State, and local nonprofit organizations
- A robust research survey

Among other findings, this research revealed four defining characteristics of Haven Academy. Each characteristic provides a lesson that other schools, organizations, and communities can apply. These four lessons are:

1 Culture matters!

“Nothing happens at Haven by accident,” noted several longtime Haven leaders. Culture is difficult to quantify, but it is immediately felt when talking to any staff member or walking through Haven’s halls. The school’s culture is shared through values, common language, expected norms, and behaviors which are made explicit throughout the organization. Every staff member embodies Haven Academy’s culture and it has strengthened over time, largely because of strong continuity and training.

91% of Haven teachers believe that leadership has set a clear vision for the school

When a clear vision and culture are defined at the top, they can be translated into actionable behaviors in the classroom. Teachers reinforce their classroom directions by pointing to the values. When students act out, discussion of their behavior is connected back to the values.

Haven Academy’s culture is directly responsive to the needs of its student body, rooted in a trauma informed approach. While most schools simply don’t have training or exposure to the unique needs of children in the child welfare system, Haven staff explicitly learn about it from Day 1. They are exposed to staff from child welfare agencies, learn about the processes and procedures of the system, and enter the classroom with a different mindset and approach than teachers in most schools.

The Haven Academy culture is also defined by a “tight/loose” approach that is different from almost any other charter school: building processes that are structured and predictable, while also allowing flexibility for each child. Haven does not remove students whose behavior poses a challenge, either from the classroom or the school community. Instead, teachers are trained to create and implement individualized plans for specific students as needed. Large portions of the student body follow these individualized plans, whether formal or informal, and greatly benefit from them.

2

There is no substitute for robust staffing — inside and outside of the classroom.

Haven Academy's level of staffing is the single most quantifiable difference between it and other schools. **We place two teachers in every classroom**, both in general education and integrated co-teaching settings.

This decision wasn't made lightly: It quite literally *doubles* the cost of instructional staff for general education classrooms. But it is a strategic choice that pays significant dividends. One of the few authoritative studies on class size found a measurable difference between outcomes and engagements when elementary school students were in small classes (13-17 students) versus the typical class of 22-25 students. That benefit only grows when educators have deep experience, like those of Haven do.



25:1

Student-to-social worker, guidance counselor, or other support resource at Haven Academy.

127:1

Average student-to-social worker, guidance counselor, or other support resource in District 7 elementary and middle schools.

Given the number of students with behavioral challenges at Haven, this model also ensures more time-on-task for all students. Picture a second-grade classroom where one student places his head down and starts to kick his feet against the table. In a typical classroom, the teacher needs to take away time from the rest of the class to assess what kind of intervention is needed – diverting every child's attention, and leading to a prolonged distraction. At Haven Academy, however, much of the disruption is avoided: One teacher can lead the full class in instruction while the other checks in with the student and decides how to proceed.

Robust staffing is also a priority *outside* the classroom. In an average year post pandemic, Haven had four full-time social workers, two social work supervisors, a middle school guidance counselor, eight social work interns, and five behavior specialists. For children involved in the child welfare system, Haven Academy social workers are closely connected to agency and ACS caseworkers. Haven staff have more in-depth knowledge of how the child welfare system works than a typical school social worker, and therefore are better equipped to be good advocates for what children need.

3

Continuity is everything

Haven Academy has seen remarkable continuity in mission and leadership over its fourteen years, starting at the top. Under the continued leadership of key members of its founding leadership team, Haven has grown and evolved its instruction and social-emotional support while never losing sight of its core values or mission. The result? Teachers and staff stay at Haven — and in turn, students benefit from the deep relationships they form with adults.

Survey after survey indicates Haven teachers have high confidence in leadership and buy into the Haven model, with a range of benefits including robust on-the-job training, behavioral supports, and growth opportunities. As a result, Haven’s educators are extremely experienced: Most teachers who come to Haven already have prior teaching experience elsewhere.

This continuity provides benefits that are felt throughout the entire school ecosystem: Haven’s culture is stronger because these values are so deeply ingrained in teachers and staff who have been at Haven for long periods. Relationships are built with students and families *because* they are built on trust developed over time.



26-33% Typical annual instructional staff turnover at New York City charter schools.

7-23% Typical annual instructional staff turnover at Haven Academy

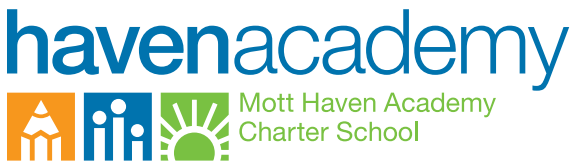
38% Of NYC charter school teachers have been teaching for 6+ years.

73% Of Haven teachers have been teaching for 6+ years.

4

Work with a dedicated social services partner in the community.

Haven Academy has been anchored since the beginning by its partnership with The New York Foundling. Some benefits of this partnership are clear: The Foundling works with the same population of families and children that Haven Academy seeks to reach educationally, believes in Haven’s model, and supports the school financially and through its mission. Haven Academy operates in a physical space that The Foundling built from the ground up, and Foundling staff serve on Haven’s board and provide valuable strategic direction.



Yet there are also more subtle benefits. In its earliest years, individuals and staff at The Foundling and Haven Academy created a staff and student pipeline between the two organizations that has only grown stronger over time. Haven and The Foundling share information to address the special academic needs of the child welfare population, and provide school staff with professional development training on how the child welfare system works as well as the specific demands on children and families. Teachers are trained to recognize, interpret, and understand behaviors in this context thanks to The Foundling.

Additionally, Haven and The Foundling offer holistic support and services for children and families as needed from housing to health care to food insecurity. Haven staff have relationships with case planners to help better support families in crisis, offering connected care. The Foundling also operates a medical clinic on the 4th floor of Haven’s building — a clinic which offers primary care to any and all Haven families in need.



Where We Go From Here.



This is a moment unlike any other for our educational system, both in New York City and nationwide. Every child and family has been affected differently by the pandemic – the isolation, the disruption, the economic impacts, and the loss – and is now re-emerging into a new world and new moment.

We believe this environment has only reinforced the importance of a model like that of Haven Academy: one that takes a trauma-informed approach, prioritizes social and emotional skills beyond academics, and instills these values at a young age. Students like those at Haven were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Already, we see evidence that the Haven model is boosting their social-emotional recovery.



These four lessons — the importance of school culture, of robust staffing, of continuity, and working with a dedicated social services partner in the community — are a starting point. Not only for schools directly supporting youth in foster care, but *all* schools and organizations who want to put young people on the path to a better future. There is significantly more work to do and to learn from. Haven Academy will continue to pioneer new models, share what we have learned, and put our young people first.

