

ESPERANZA ACADEMY

Imagine a school where learning and growth happen in a community centered in justice and joy. A place where girls feel emboldened to bring their full identities into the classroom, find their voice, and embrace their brilliance. A space where students are challenged to redefine what is expected of them and create a roadmap to their dream lives through emotional well-being and academic excellence.

Esperanza Academy is this place.

We are a tuition-free independent all-girls middle school in Lawrence, Massachusetts dedicated to moving children out of the generational poverty cycle and into fulfilling futures through education.

We play an integral part in addressing the interconnected challenges of racism and poverty through education.



**WE ARE ADVANCING EQUITY,
JUSTICE, AND ACCESS
THROUGH WELLNESS**



We believe that investing in our school as a critical community hub will support the well-being and success of students and their families for generations!



GIRLS ARE STRUGGLING AT RECORD LEVELS



There is a mental health crisis facing today's youth, and young girls are the most heavily impacted. A 2023 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the number of teen girls who say they feel persistently sad and hopeless has grown by 60% since 2011. Middle school students are increasingly depressed and consider suicide at an alarming rate, even more than high schoolers.

Unfortunately, local data mirrors national trends, adding to the growing body of evidence showing mental health challenges are not experienced equally by all young people.

**MORE THAN
95%
OF U.S. YOUTH
SPEND MUCH OF
THEIR DAILY LIVES
IN SCHOOL**

School-based activities can make a profound difference in the lives of young people.

Social and emotional connectivity is likely one of the most potent antidotes we have against significant stress and sadness. Studies have found strong links between a lack of peer support and depression during adolescence.

Children need evidence-based support in schools to cope, hope, and thrive.

CASE STUDY

Sofia was referred to our Music Therapist by her academic advisor due to disruptive behavior in class. Under our therapist's care and guidance, Sofia shared that she was missing her father who had been recently deported to the Dominican Republic. Sofia was encouraged to write a song as a way to express her sadness and anger at this unexpected disruption in her family's life. Although she had never thought of herself as musical, Sofia wrote and recorded an original song that helped her channel her feelings into something that felt safe and comforting. When Sofia found her thoughts spiraling, she would put on headphones and listen to her song. Sometimes she would even get permission from a teacher to step out of class temporarily for a quick reset. By the end of the semester, Sofia's teachers reported that her demeanor and behavior improved remarkably. Sofia shared that she felt more in control of her emotions and was hoping to share the song with her father during an upcoming visit.



In the City of Lawrence, 39 percent of children live in poverty. Meanwhile, 100% of Esperanza students fall within the income eligibility guidelines for Federal free or reduced price meals. The teen years are notoriously stressful even in the best of times, but growing up poor has a lasting influence on personal health. Early adversity can lead to a variety of negative health effects. It can disrupt early brain development and compromise functioning of the nervous and immune systems. As children get older, exposure to trauma can increase the likelihood they will engage in risky behaviors and have more incidents of poor physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Creating a culture of wellness begins with addressing the experiences of young people and minimizing the impact of barriers to wellness such as Adverse Childhood Experiences, social disparities, and structural racism.

When a student struggles cognitively, emotionally, or behaviorally, Esperanza is often the first to identify symptoms and start intervention. Accessing mental health services can feel daunting and cost-prohibitive for overwhelmed, at-risk families. Esperanza's low-income and largely immigrant population often means that our middle school is the sole provider of mental health support for our students.

OUR CULTURALLY RELEVANT RESPONSE



We believe that music, art, and movement are crucial components of a child's development, affecting their academic performance, social-emotional skills, and their ability to reach their full potential.

Creative expression expands our girls' social and emotional intelligence, allowing them to communicate their feelings and boost their confidence to interact with the world around them.

Complementary therapies allow them to work through things happening in their lives, heal from their traumas, and develop into well-rounded learners and leaders.



ESPERANZA SERVES

64 + 224
STUDENTS ALUMNI

100%
GRADUATE

HIGH SCHOOL

ENROLL IN
75%
COLLEGE



100% **GIRLS
OF COLOR**

We are committed to creating an affirming school culture that interrupts bias and primes students with positive associations about who they are and can be in the world.



Restorative Justice focuses on relationships and uses circle practice to build community and solve conflict.



Music Therapy counters the negative neurological and emotional effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences.



Community Wealth centers the values, beliefs, and traditions of the local community in the everyday experiences of our students.



Graduate Support is a 12-year commitment to place each student in high school and support them as first-generation college students.

We are doing what we can, but without more dedicated resources, we are only scratching the surface of what's needed.

Whether through songwriting, singing, or playing instruments, **Music Therapy** has a positive impact on our students' mental health.



Imagine a student finding the confidence to navigate her social anxiety by writing and performing a song about what it feels like to try and fit in and make new friends.

Studies have demonstrated that music impacts numerous parts of the brain, including those involved in emotion, cognition, sensory, and movement. Music therapy is successful in treating a wide range of physical and mental ailments, including depression, anxiety, and fatigue.

Esperanza is being recognized nationally for our music therapy program and first-of-its-kind intersection with restorative justice practices.

Since 2019, Esperanza has had a full-time Board Certified Music Therapist on staff. Our innovative program creates ways for our students to express themselves, manage stress, and heal through music— ultimately increasing their confidence to meet social, emotional, and academic goals.

- All students are enrolled in a weekly Community Music and Wellness period as part of the core curriculum.
- Our music therapist works with our students and graduates in both small group and individual sessions.
- Through a formal partnership with The Center for Music Therapy at Berklee College of Music, all our educators receive professional development to elevate their use of music in their classroom.

Music therapy interventions help students



- Manage Stress
- Alleviate Pain
- Express Feelings
- Enhance Memory
- Improve Communication

At Esperanza, **Movement Therapy** is used to start the day, calm, energize, or re-focus students during transitions.

Whether through dance, yoga, or rhythm work, movement can help students effectively integrate their emotional selves into their physical selves.

Moving helps our students restore balance to their nervous systems by burning off adrenaline and releasing endorphins that help combat situational depression. It is often easier for adolescents to express themselves physically than verbally, and movement therapy offers meaningful benefits without the stigma of traditional talk therapy.

In one study, dancing for just 25 minutes reduced the symptoms of depression by 47 percent, and dancing for 45 minutes reduced the symptoms of anxiety by 57 percent!

Imagine a student creating a dance to express her grief at losing a grandparent during the pandemic.



Imagine a student applying what she learned about the history of braids to process complicated feelings about her curly hair in a community art installation.

Art Therapy is another culturally appropriate tool that can help our students reduce stress, express their feelings, and process their emotions.

BLACK + BROWN STUDENTS HAVE LESS THAN HALF OF THE ACCESS TO ARTS EXPOSURE THAN THEIR WHITE PEERS

With the support of our talented art teacher, our students already use art, and in particular the inspiration of women of color, to reconcile and process the chaos of their young lives.

Art helps our students convey thoughts and feelings nonverbally, often creating the necessary distance that allows for new perspectives to emerge. When we use art to shift a student's attention, their nervous system begins to regulate, and they have access to more empathy and compassion.

A formal integration of clinical art therapy would further help our students:

- improve self-awareness and boost self-esteem
- reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression
- see problems from a different point of view.

We believe that when you take the energy of Esperanza and empower it with comprehensive resources, it will lead to girl power the likes of which the world has yet to see.

Our plans continue to transform our city, our state, and our nation by demonstrating a new model for education that is research-based, outcome-focused, and replicable. Supporting our work is a long-term, multi-generational investment in lifting our community out of poverty.



Jadi Taveras
Head of School

- 1** Meet with the Esperanza Team to discuss opportunities.
- 2** Make a connection. Your interest can inspire others.
- 3** Visit EsperanzaAcademy.org for more stories.



Pati Fernández
Chief Development Officer

