

Inaugural Yale Fellows Teach & Learn In NHPS

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In a first-floor classroom at Clinton Avenue School, student-teacher Lizmarie Maldonado watched as her mentor Donata Dziejma, the school's only special education resource teacher for grades 3 and 4, led her students through an impromptu lesson in adding three-digit numbers and writing problems out in expanded form.

Maldonado was not only learning from Dziejma — she was also minutes away from stepping up to practice teaching herself, as one of 23 members of the inaugural cohort of the Yale Teaching Fellowship program, a partnership among Yale, New Haven Public Schools (NHPS), and Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU).

On a recent Thursday, Dziejma was informed before starting her fourth-grade math class that the students were struggling with recalling the standard algorithm for addition, so she shifted the lesson to help students practice the skill.

Maldonado watched Dziejma remind the students constantly throughout the lesson that “you’re brave enough to try” and to “explain your thinking because I can’t read your mind.” She noted that a lesson in her SCSU classes wouldn’t include the in-person learning she was receiving at Clinton.

After watching Dziejma during the math lesson, Maldonado headed to the front of the classroom to try her own hand at teaching — showing her fourth graders how to “stretch out the numbers” in expanded form.

The Yale fellowship that Maldonado is a part of kicked off this year with a focus on NHPS’ teacher shortage areas of math, science, and special education. Fellows like Pepazahariou are matched to be mentored by a current NHPS educator to show them the ropes for 20 hours a week, and then move into a full-time teacher residency experience in the spring.

Additionally, the fellows are enrolled at SCSU to gain teacher certification in Connecticut and a two-year Master of Arts in Teaching — with Yale paying each student’s full tuition. Fellows receive a living stipend of \$47,380 during the first year of the fellowship

In total, Yale has allocated \$10 million to the teaching fellowship to span over a total of four cohorts for the next six years, with an aim of bringing 100 educators with masters degrees to NHPS. The program requires that the fellows work in NHPS for at least three years after completing the program.

The program also offers a course track for current teachers to become cross-endorsed in special education, and for paraprofessionals and support staff to move into certified teaching positions.

Maldonado and fellow Clinton Avenue special education student-teacher Hilbania Pepazahariou, among others, are learning how to pivot a day of instruction — not thanks to a lesson from a book, but instead through the time they're spending watching and teaching alongside NHPS educators.

For this school year, Pepazahariou was matched with Clinton Avenue's K-2 special education resource teacher, Elena Pradith, who mentors her daily. Pradith said that she also has been learning so much from Pepazahariou as a student-teacher with new perspectives.

Pradith said that as the school's only K-2 special education resource teacher, she typically doesn't have a grade level team or staff in the same role who she can brainstorm with or just talk to, as educators.

She said that now, after 23 years as an educator, Pepazahariou offers that to her. She added that Pepazahariou brings a "refreshing" light to her own teaching, allowing her to learn along the way.

Pepazahariou said despite the challenges of late night studying to pursue both her masters and her teaching certification, she has found a career that she is happy and motivated to do everyday. "It feels like home here, and like I've found my purpose," she said.

She noted that in addition to being showered in hugs every morning, she is inspired by on-the-ground work that allows her to "see my mentor in difficult situations, and just how to handle it with grace."

Pepazahariou said she takes mental notes of Pradith's ability to always be the calm adult in the room. On Thursday, she continued to see Pradith in action, especially at 10 a.m. when the two were meant to transition new students into their classroom but had to pause those plans and adjust when a student broke down in tears in the school's stairwell.

Pepazahariou offered support as Pradith navigated the situation and followed Pradith's lead in calling the school's administrators, counselor, and paraprofessionals to help.

"Learning in my classes helps, but seeing it all in person is another level," Pepazahariou said. She had a test on phonetics earlier in the week that she then got to see in practice when Pradith taught the lesson in class the next day. "I'm getting so much. I don't want to leave the building."

Yale Teaching Fellowship Director Christine Gentry said on Thursday that the fellowship aims to show "teacher prep done right," as both the mentor-educator and student-teacher work symbiotically through the "most intense and meaningful professional development of their life."

The fellowship, Gentry said, accomplishes both the goal of preparing new teachers for the job and retaining current teachers by encouraging them through the challenge of explaining daily the effectiveness of their teaching methods.

Unlike other teacher residency models that limit aspiring educators' time in real classrooms, the Yale fellowship prepares future teachers by bringing them into the classroom every day. The program's gradual release design tasks student teachers in the spring to take over a portion of a class.

The gradual release and mentorship model, Pepazahariou said, "actualizes" the job of teaching for her and helps her "understand it in broader perspective" in a way that a college course can't fully do.

Pradith said that she began teaching in San Francisco two decades ago with an emergency teaching credential. "I did student-teaching in my own classroom, and my mentor was the assistant principal who didn't have a whole lot of time. It was a struggle, and I was searching for professional development myself on things like behavior management," she said. "I've been doing this long enough to give the support I didn't receive."

In her math classroom on Thursday, after taking up the teaching mantle from her mentor, Dziejma, Maldonado became familiar with the visual chart Dziejma uses to show the students how to easily count out large numbers, like 554.

She said she learned how to better give explicit instructions to students, like instructing them to watch as the teacher models solve a problem, then guide the student through a solution as a group, and finally task them with independent practice.

Maldonado concluded that she enjoys the mixture of both learning through college lectures and hands-on in the classroom through the fellowship. "If I don't understand why a teacher does something while researching, I can connect the dots by asking my mentor or observing her in class," she said.

Meanwhile, around 10:30 a.m., self-contained special education teacher Nicole Cassidy mentored Clinton Avenue's third fellow, Sofia Morales. Even during the recess period, Cassidy showed Morales the importance of giving students physical and mental learning breaks and how to manage the group safely outdoors alongside paraprofessional supports.

Morales grew up in New Haven and attended Edgewood School and New Haven Academy. She aspires to be an educator because when she reflects on her own K-12 experience, she said she had a lot of teachers who did not live in New Haven. She also dealt with cultural clashes in the classroom that limited her engagement with classes at times and were "not conducive of learning." She said she hopes her experience growing up in and knowing the full picture of New Haven will help her in the classroom to make students feel seen and engaged.

So far, when asked about teaching, Morales said, "I love it."

In 2021, Cassidy mentored former student-teacher Sara O'Shea, who is now also a self-contained Special Education Teacher at Clinton Avenue. While she enjoyed her past experience as a mentor, Cassidy said this student-teaching experience for Morales is different and special because Cassidy will mentor her for the entire school year. In the past with O'Shea, and even for her own student-teaching 13 years ago, Cassidy only had an eight-week placement in a classroom to learn the ropes of being an educator in person.

"It's important to see the inner-workings more, and Sofia has been able to jump right in. It will allow more ease for her transition later," Cassidy said.

The fellowship, she added, exposes student-teachers to the way a special education team can function effectively, like Clinton Avenue's.

She recalled being a first-year teacher and finding several other new educators who also struggled with classroom management. "It's one of the things that new teachers struggle with the most. We all need exposure to seeing the reality of having to manage challenging behaviors. This helps with seeing classroom strategies and humanities."

Applications for second cohort of the fellowship opened this month and close on Jan. 1, 2026. New Haven Promise partners with the program to advertise applications to New Haven residents and Promise graduates like Morales.

Ninety-six percent of the inaugural cohort members already lived in Connecticut. Forty three percent lived in New Haven, 35 percent went to public schools in New Haven, 61 percent work or have worked for NHPS, 48 percent are first-generation or low-income college graduates, 35 percent speak Spanish, 9 percent know American Sign Language, and 74 percent identify as non-white.