Statement on Therapeutic Education at RFK Children’s Action Corps

We consider therapeutic education to be the most comprehensive form of treatment and instruction we can provide to students. Striking the balance between academics and personal growth, between challenge and ability, it is, to those of us at RFK Children’s Action Corps’ schools, the most complete way to help our students develop into capable, independent people. It builds community while being highly individualized; it acknowledges and addresses trauma not by assuming permanent damage, but by recognizing that our students are so much more than what has happened to them. It is about all types of learning, and the purposeful development of relationships—with the self, with peers, with staff, and with caregivers.

Delivering therapeutic educational programming is an active and thoughtful pursuit. We believe in explicit instruction, realizing that much of how we learn and interact, while individualized and intuitive, is also skills-based, and can therefore be broken into essential parts, taught and practiced. We also believe that every interaction is an opportunity for growth, and pay purposeful attention to offering this skills-forward approach to cognitive, academic, and emotional learning in an experiential model.

Our students come to us having experienced incredible hardships, and our approach is accordingly trauma-informed. But we also realize that they are so much more than these traumas, and view our students through the lens of their strength and ability. Sadly, misinterpretation and maladjustment have skewed their relationships and their own vision of themselves—they are not always able to see what we do. It is therefore incumbent upon us to reflect back to them what we see—capable, courageous survivors with much to offer the world. We challenge deficit-based, pathologizing language, thought patterns, and views whenever we encounter them, as well as work to create additive, creative programming that feeds and uses what is already strong in our students, rather than focusing on fixing a perceived deficiency.

Our students have primary responsibility for achieving their individualized educational and treatment goals, but this work is supported by an educational environment where all of the staff involved are focused on these same goals on behalf of the student. Likewise, individualized response plans and distress tolerance strategies are shared and supported, with gradually increasing independent initiation and management over time. This learning extends beyond the school to caregiver networks as well; collaborating with and incorporating our student’s support systems to increase their success in the classroom as well as to assist in carrying over learned strategies into their relationships outside of the school setting.

Lastly, we simply believe in the power of education. We recognize that for all students, education is the age-appropriate path forward toward an adulthood of choice and fulfilment. This could include a return to public school, a high school diploma or completion certificate, post-graduate studies, or workforce development. For our students specifically, that school environment must deliver social -emotional development, practice co-regulation and self-regulation, and teach deeply the academics and critical thinking skills necessary to become the independent adults that will solve the problems of our future world.