CLASSICAL
CHARTER SCHOOLS

THE CURRICULUM

Background

Each year, elementary school students throughout New York State take a series of content area exams promulgated by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). These NY State tests assess students' mastery of various standards. In reading and writing, the State test is called the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment. Both the ELA and the Math tests are based on the Common Core Learning Standards.

For many years, the ELA test was believed by many to be fairly predictable, meaning it was possible for schools and teachers to predict what content would be covered, and then focus teaching only on those specific skills.

Each year, NYSED also sets a "cut score" for the exams. This is the score a student must obtain in order to pass . Also, until 2010, these cut scores were initially relatively low. For example, in 2009, the cut score for the third grade ELA exam was 24 (out of 33 points), and the cut score for the math exam was 21 (out of 39). These low metrics made it possible for struggling students to receive relatively superficial tutoring and remediation and still pass the exam. The resulting focus for many schools was to get students just far enough to pass.

In the 2009-2010 school year, however, NYSED dramatically increased cut scores. For example, for the third grade ELA and math exams the cut scores rose to 29 and 34, respectively. Because the cut score increase happened after the test had already been administered that year, schools did not have an opportunity to adjust test preparation in response to the scoring change. As expected, pass rates plummeted statewide that year, and SBCCS was no exception: our third grade pass rates dropped from 86% to 51% in ELA and from 100% to 84% in Math. The upward change in the cut score made clear the shortcomings inherent in curricular and test prep approaches that had been focused on getting students just far enough to pass the exam.

Teaching based on Tests or Standards?

At SBCCS, the curriculum leading into the 2009-2010 school year consisted of elements of purchased curricula modified according to internal knowledge about successfully "teaching to the test." ELA instruction in the upper grades focused predominantly on "question stems" rather than literary comprehension and analysis skills. Math instruction focused on a series of algorithmic steps, rather than critical thinking and problem solving skills.

At the start of the 2009-2010 school year, the school decided to reevaluate its curricular approach and alternate strategies were researched and considered. The goal was to create proprietary curricula that addressed <u>all</u> of the state standards for each subject area and grade level but that also enabled high student achievement. The challenge was to determine how to create a curriculum that would remain stable yet be able to be revised.

One influential resource[1] discusses a "backward design" concept that involves the following steps in curriculum development:

- Planning begins with studying the state-mandated standards, because mastery of these standards is the end goal for every student.
- The state standards are then used to build assessments and tasks that will demonstrate students' mastery of the skills delineated.
- Lessons are then planned in a sequence designed to build the skills necessary for mastery on the assessment.

Based on this approach, a student's mastery of the assessment measures corresponds to mastery of the state-mandated learning standards.

After four months of rigorous study, in 2010, South Bronx Classical adopted the approach outlined above and to base the school's curriculum on the NYSED standards. The objective was to provide a foundation on which unit plans, including daily objective calendars, could be created referencing internally-developed scopes and sequences[2]. The final step would be writing lesson plans based on the unit plans. Again, the goal was to insure that each lesson would be clearly and directly aligned to the relevant.

To create the strongest scopes and sequences, the curriculum development team solicited information and recommendations from every teacher in the school throughout the spring of 2010. A combination of administrators and teachers then developed SBCCS' internal scopes and sequences. Unit planning began with professional development sessions which first reiterated the curriculum project's mission statement:

> *to create and improve standard-based scopes and sequences, cohesive and interrelated unit plans, and detailed and flexible lesson plans, all in an organized format for all subjects and grades.*

The work was both challenging and enlightening. Teacher involvement in actually creating unit plans led to a better understanding of how the content and skills students were expected to master fit together over the course of a school year and across grade levels. Most importantly, unit planning allowed teachers to become familiar with the NYSED-mandated performance indicators and content strands for each grade. This institutional knowledge created school-wide instructional alignment of the skills the NYSED requires students to master.

Our teachers, across all grades and subjects, wrote 374 unit plans throughout 2010-11. Then we hired a new Director of Curriculum and Instruction who audited all the unit plans to ensure high quality both in rigor and content. The focus for teachers in the 2011-2012 school year then shifted to creating more rigorous and aligned lesson plans.

Over the next year SBCCS enjoyed a stable, rigorous curriculum aligned at every level with the state standards but allowing for revision or adjustment as necessary. The strongest determining factor for revision is student performance data based on assessments aligned with state standards. Importantly, the specific performance indicators or content strands being tested for are prominently identified on each assessment. When scholars take a test, the process of alignment that has led to that assessment is clear: the unit plan was developed to

address the specific skills outlined by the standards, the lessons plans for the unit were developed to teach the specific skills, and the test was developed to assess the specific skills.

The project of developing such a comprehensive curriculum has been a massive, but productive undertaking. In the 2009-2010 academic year, our average pass rates were 50% in ELA and 82% in math. In the 2011-2012 academic year, our average pass rates were 90% in ELA and 99% in math.

Curriculum and the SBCCS Mission

Mastery of the standards, while essential, is itself only part of the school's standards-based curriculum project. Other goals included:

- Scholars will be taught, in each grade, all of the required skills
- Skill and content mastery can be effectively and accurately assessed
- Mastery of the previous year's standards means that they are able to learn the skills required under the present year's standards
- Standards alignment across and within grades reduces gaps in knowledge that occur when students have not learned what they are expected to know

A rigorous, thoroughly-aligned curriculum, therefore, also furthers South Bronx Classical Charter School's mission of preparing each scholar to excel in high school and beyond.

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[1] Understanding by Design by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, a book which outlines approaches and considerations for unit plan development and overall curriculum design.

[2] "Scope" refers to the allocation of performance indicators or content strands across units, i.e., the decisions around **which indicators** should be grouped together and covered in the same unit. "Sequence" is the **order** in which the groups of skills should be taught.