



## THE CURRICULUM AT CLASSICAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

*Meticulously researched – Intentionally designed – Key to scholar success*

### **The Back Story: Why We Created a Standards-Based Curriculum**

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 to pass. Until 2010, these cut scores were 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 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, and CCS 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 a curricular approach that focused on test prep as a means to getting students just far enough to pass the exam.

### **The Journey: How We Innovated Our Approach**

At Classical Charter Schools, 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, we decided to reevaluate our curricular approach. The goal was to create proprietary curricula that addressed all the state standards for each subject area and grade level while

facilitating 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<sup>1</sup> discusses a “backward design” concept that involves the following steps in curriculum development:

- Planning begins with the end in mind. In this cause, 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 I adopted the approach outlined above. The objective was to provide a foundation on which unit plans, including daily objective calendars, could be created referencing internally developed scopes and sequences<sup>2</sup>. The final step would be writing lesson plans based on the unit plans, ensuring that each lesson is clearly and directly aligned to the relevant standards and goals.

To create the strongest scopes and sequences, the curriculum team solicited information and recommendations from every teacher in the school throughout the Spring of 2010. A combination of administrators and teachers then developed CCS’ internal scopes and sequences. Unit planning began with professional development sessions guided by the curriculum project’s mission statement:

*to create and improve standards-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 unit plan creation led to a better understanding of the NYSED-mandated standards and how the content and skills students were expected to master fit together within and across grade levels. This institutional knowledge created school-wide instructional alignment of the skills the NYSED requires students to master.

Collectively, our teachers wrote 374 unit-plans throughout 2010-2011. We hired a Director of Curriculum and Instruction who audited the unit plans to ensure high quality both in rigor and content. The focus for teachers in the 2011-2012 school year shifted to creating rigorous and aligned lesson plans. All curricula would eventually be saved to the cloud to preserve for teacher use - and to begin building Classical’s instructional backbone.

Over the next year CCS enjoyed a stable, rigorous curriculum aligned at every level with the state standards that allowed for revision or adjustment as necessary. Revisions to the curriculum were based on scholar performance on standards-based assessments. 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 lesson 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 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. Since 2012, our pass rates have continued to outperform other district and charter schools in the New York City area. Additionally, the curriculum was shifted once again to align with the Common Core in a collaborative effort across instructional staff.

### **Curriculum and the Classical Charter Schools 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 Classical Charter School's mission of preparing each scholar to excel in high school and beyond.

### **The Journey Continues: Continued Advancements**

Between the year 2012 and today, there have been numerous improvements to both Classical's curriculum and our processes for creating, refining, and preserving it. Our core values of accountability, innovation, and rigor drive our continued growth in the curricular realm and allow our teachers to provide a world class education to their scholars.

After Classical's scripted curriculum was born in 2010, it was and has been regularly vetted and revised through a Curricular Audit and based on teacher and instructional team feedback. Roughly 70% of Classical's curriculum is 'scripted' and the remaining 30% is 'unscripted', allowing for greater flexibility and teacher discretion in response to classroom data. Examples include ELA Reteach (Kindergarten) and Math Reteach (K-8) where a block is devoted to reviewing content and skills needing more immediate reteach based on data collected. Unscripted curriculum has bulked up Classical's instructional toolkit and enabled teachers to respond more readily to data and meet the specific needs of scholars in their classrooms.

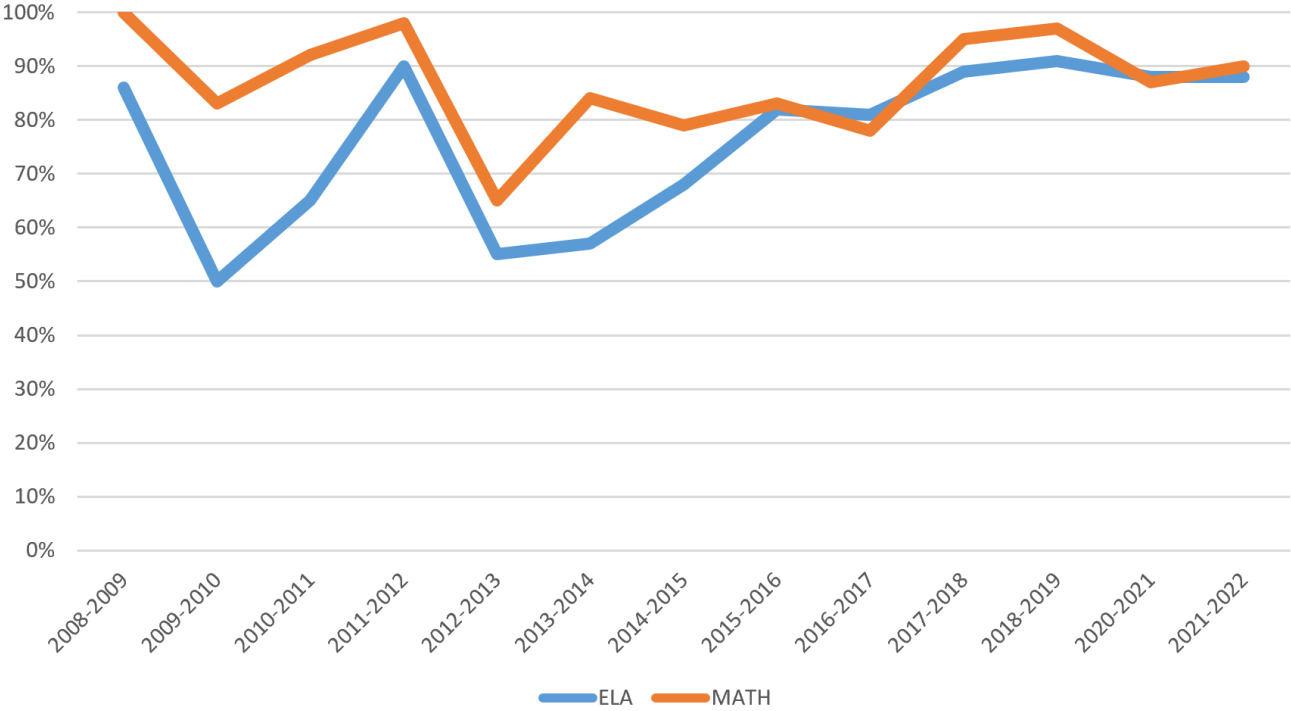
The theme of more nuanced, exploratory learning has also shifted Classical's curriculum starting in the 2015-2016 academic year. It was in this year that 'Close Reading' was introduced in classrooms, providing an opportunity for scholars to examine literature more closely and discourse more thoroughly around both main ideas and author's craft. This resulted in richer class discussions, deepened critical thinking, and an improved runway to prepare K-2 scholars for more rigorous texts and classes in the years ahead.

In the years to follow, there was a movement to increase exploratory learning in math, moving beyond an outdated and restrictive procedural approach to problem solving. The 'Number Stories' block was introduced into the elementary curriculum, followed by the inclusion of "explore problems" into 'scripted' math lessons. Reducing

the frequency of teacher models puts the power in the hands of scholars to show what they know and share their problem-solving strategies with their peers. Not only do these improvements strengthen scholar understanding of content and strategies taught, but they instill in children a sense of confidence and love of learning that might have otherwise laid dormant if lecture-style teaching dominated the classroom.

Classical’s ever-improving curriculum, coupled with our strategic professional development program for teachers, has contributed to greater scholar achievement over the years. In the 2015-2016 school year, Classical’s average pass rates were 82% in ELA and 83% in Math, a 27% and 18% increase from 2012-2013 when the State test shifted to the Common Core. In 2021-2022, following an unprecedented year of remote and hybrid learning due to the pandemic, Classical’s average pass rates were 88% in ELA and 90% in Math. For students with disabilities, pass rates were 68% (ELA) and 78% (Math), and for ELLs 85% (ELA) and 88% (Math). These achievements showcase the positive impact of Classical’s curricular advancements, as well as our network’s tenacity and innovation navigating the world of remote and post-pandemic learning.

Classical State Test Pass Rate History



Another critical focus of Classical’s continued growth is our work with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This initiative was sparked in 2020-2021 in response to staff feedback, and with the goal of creating a diverse, inclusive, relevant, and culturally global curriculum including socio-emotional and interdisciplinary learning opportunities. While the project is still ongoing, our staff have completed roughly 1200 hours of curriculum work in 2020-2021, 900 hours of curriculum work in 2021-2022, and are expected to complete 700 hours of curriculum work in 2022-2023. One especially positive impact has been increased and diversified representation in texts put in front of scholars. The ideology here is that children should be exposed to texts as “mirrors”, not solely “windows” so that they might see themselves in stories and make greater personal connections<sup>3</sup>.

We continue to work to improve and expand our socio-emotional and interdisciplinary learning at Classical through the inclusion of morning meetings, recess, and “Classical Conversations” in which our scholars discourse about a range of critical and relevant current events.

### **Keeping the Machine Running: Our Processes**

Critical to any strong curricular program are the processes by which it was created and will continue to improve. Classical’s Curricular Audit is an ongoing process by which teachers and instructional staff reflect on the clarity, rigor, and effectiveness of current curriculum and make recommendations to improve. These recommendations may be technical edits, content changes, or involve larger-scale revisions (ex. text replacement). The audit is added to once per trimester and reviewed holistically in June to inform next steps for curricular assignments during the summer and following school year. Teachers are core to the revision process as well, but with the establishment of a curriculum team and support from the instructional coaches, Classical has been able to reduce the hours of curriculum work for teachers. For context, curriculum work hours assigned to teachers decreased from 2,465 in 2019-2020 to 243 in 2022-2023. This creates more space for our teachers to prioritize quality lesson preparation and data reflection.

Other innovations have included the creation of a Curriculum Calendar to organize the academic year and improve logistics for materials preparation, and systems for collaboration across school-sites as our network has grown. Instructional coaches serve as Grade Level Vettors to support an assigned grade with curricular oversight and streamline cross-network communication to ensure high-quality rigorous instruction is aligned across schools. A critical feature of our instructional success at Classical is curricular alignment. As the Classical network grows, a major goal will be to preserve the curriculum and its processes as they are refined so that excellent education continues to happen across classrooms at all school sites. To do this, it will take a well-oiled machine, which is exactly what we are building at Classical Charter Schools.

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

<sup>2</sup>“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.

<sup>3</sup>“Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” by Rudine Sims Bishop, The Ohio State University. Originally appeared in Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom. Vol 6.