

A Tiered Approach for Improving Male Middle School Student Outcomes

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Cahn Fellows Inquiry Project Report

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ABSTRACT

Middle school ages are formative years in the development of young men as scholars and citizens. Educators have struggled to achieve the same literacy outcomes for male students at the same rate as female students (Reardon, Fahle, Kalogridges, Podolsky, & Zarte, 2018). While male students across the country have failed to keep pace with their female counterparts in English Language Arts, the results for boys of color are especially disproportionate (Emdin, 2016). In this paper we describe a tiered approach to addressing the gap in literacy performance between the male and female students at Renaissance School of the Arts. The approach focused on three tiers: Book Clubs, Teacher Implicit Bias and Individuating. Thus far our approach has generated positive growth on both reading levels and discipline referrals for the male students at Renaissance School of the Arts.

INTRODUCTION

Renaissance School of the Arts

Renaissance School of the Arts (RSA) is a middle school located in the East Harlem section of New York City serving 180 students. Our school is focused on providing students with a robust education in three major arts disciplines as well as a rigorous academic curriculum. The administrative team has been in place at RSA for four school years and is currently engaged in its fifth year of leadership. Our school has experienced significant academic progress over the course of the last four school years. In addition to academic gains our school has undergone a significant shift in organizational culture as well. While our school has steadily demonstrated and experienced growth, we have not achieved all of our goals. Therefore, we are constantly in pursuit of ways to enhance our organization. The Cahn Fellows project has served as a catalyst to examine a very discreet issue that we as a school have experienced and cultivate a means to systematically enhance this identified area.

Vision

Renaissance School of the Arts will become the premier arts program in District 4. Our students will gain entrance to and be competitive at the top arts high schools in New York City.

Mission

Through high level arts courses, the collaborative inquiry process, rigorous academic curricula, explicit social emotional instruction and a focus on enhancing literacy rates, our students will be prepared for success in all aspects of life.

RSA offers a curriculum that focuses on core content academics with a heavy focus on the arts. The fantastic students of RSA represent the best East Harlem has to offer. While RSA has great students and families the community of East Harlem has been assigned several negative designations by the NYC Department of Health. East Harlem ranks as the 12 highest percentage of families living under the poverty level. 36% of the adult population of East Harlem has attained a college diploma. The average college diploma attainment rate for the borough of Manhattan is 61%. Additionally, the East Harlem community ranks 5th in NYC incarceration rates, 1st in public housing per square mile within all five Boroughs that encompass the greater New York City Metropolitan area and 4th in the city for injury assault rate which is twice the city average. Within the community, RSA has a reputation for a school on the rise. Improved proficiency and attendance rates have been strong indications of the school's progress.

The school's curriculum combines academic instruction, intensive arts study and exposure which affords every one of our students the opportunity for high academic success. Our faculty collaborates with consultants from Metamorphosis Learning and faculty from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project to enhance the rigor of the curriculum. Additionally, every child focuses on an area of arts study. Our students receive instruction from both our staff and our partnership teachers in their areas of arts. One of the unique aspects of this school is its instructional model which includes cross-content, cross-discipline planning and instruction.

As a school we have the deep belief that all our students are capable of achieving great heights. Additionally, we believe our students learn best when they are actively engaged and learning from one another. Each lesson begins with a student leading the class and each lesson has specific activities that support collaborative exploration of content. Through engagement our students learn best.

Partnerships

In addition to our curricular offerings RSA leverages two key partnerships to counteract and reverse the effects of some of the challenges our students face in the community. In 2015 our school developed a partnership with the social work organization Partnership with Children, this partnership provides mental health and community based services to our school community. Specifically, this group works with students and families to ensure the students are supported in and out of our school. Partnership with Children provides RSA with a team of

social workers and a community school director. The Community School Director serves as a liaison to the myriad of social services organizations in the neighborhood and our school community. These social service organizations include but are not limited to vision screening and free eye glasses, dental screenings and reduced cast care, and basic health services. In addition to Partnership with Children, we also partner with an organization that provides enhanced academic support, Citizen Schools.

Our partnership with Citizen Schools provides our school with 13 college educated adults that come into the school and collaborate with our teachers and administrators to enhance the educational experience for our students. These individuals are identified as Teaching Fellows. They are provided with a stipend from Americorps which alleviate college loan debt. When the teaching fellows are at RSA they have three primary functions. First, they run a series of book clubs based on research conducted at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Second, they work within a specific content area and push-into classes to offset the staff to student ratio and in effect reduce class size. Finally, they coordinate our extended learning day program which runs till 5:48PM five days a week. Research has shown that closing the achievement gap is directly related to time on task and engagement with academic tasks (OCED 2012). By increasing the school day and providing our students with rich extended learning opportunities, our students have demonstrated significant progress on statewide assessment metrics. To demonstrate progress or the lack of progress in a specific subgroup, however, requires further examination of the conditions that have generated our problem.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The issue that is having the greatest impact on the success of Renaissance School of the Arts is the disproportionate underachievement of our male students compared to our female students. These issues of disproportionate success have led the leadership team to craft a specific problem of practice. City, Ellmore, Fiarman and Teitel (2009) identify the problem of practice as “something that you care about that would make a difference for student learning if you improved it” (p.102). To that end, the team at RSA has decided that we will target one specific sub-group to have the greatest impact on our students’ outcomes.

Our team decided to examine the sub-group of male students. Renaissance School of the Arts has a greater number of female students than male students. 60% of the students at Renaissance School of the Arts are female and 40% of the students are males. 45% of the female students at Renaissance School of the Arts achieved a proficient score on the 2018 New York State English Language Arts examination. The male students, on the other hand, have not had similar success, only 15% of the male students at Renaissance School of the Arts achieved proficiency on the 2018 NYS ELA examination.

The confounding piece of this specific sub-groups' underperformance is that the school has had several targeted approaches to improve outcomes for young men that have not yielded satisfactory results. These observations have led the leadership team to determine the problem of practice that would have the greatest impact on our school. This problem would be to focus on resolving disproportionalities between the male and female students within the school. Additionally, these observations led the team to two focus questions.

Problem of Practice

Because the school has not been able to effectively develop methodologies specific to our male students, this specific sub-group has not demonstrated success on the NYS ELA examination.

Focus Questions

This problem of practice has led our team to develop two questions that will guide our exploration of this topic. The first question is a school centered question and the second a leadership-focused question.

1. How can we help our male students achieve higher levels of proficiency on the 2019 NYS ELA examination?
1. How can the leadership team facilitate a shift in the organizational mindset that addresses achievement expectations?

Both of these questions require additional exploration. Determining metrics that we will use to evaluate progress towards solving our problem will be the team's first step. Because our team is steeped in the Datawise process we will be using two sets of data to examine these issues. First the team examined disparities that were pronounced in academic data. The team will create a data overview using students NYS ELA examination data coupled with diagnostic data from a blended learning assessment, iReady. "Before committing to a particular course of action or investing time in developing possible solutions, it is important to understand the learner centered problem" (Boudett, City and Murane, 2013). Developing a learner centered problem required an examination of student data and an examination of classroom instruction.

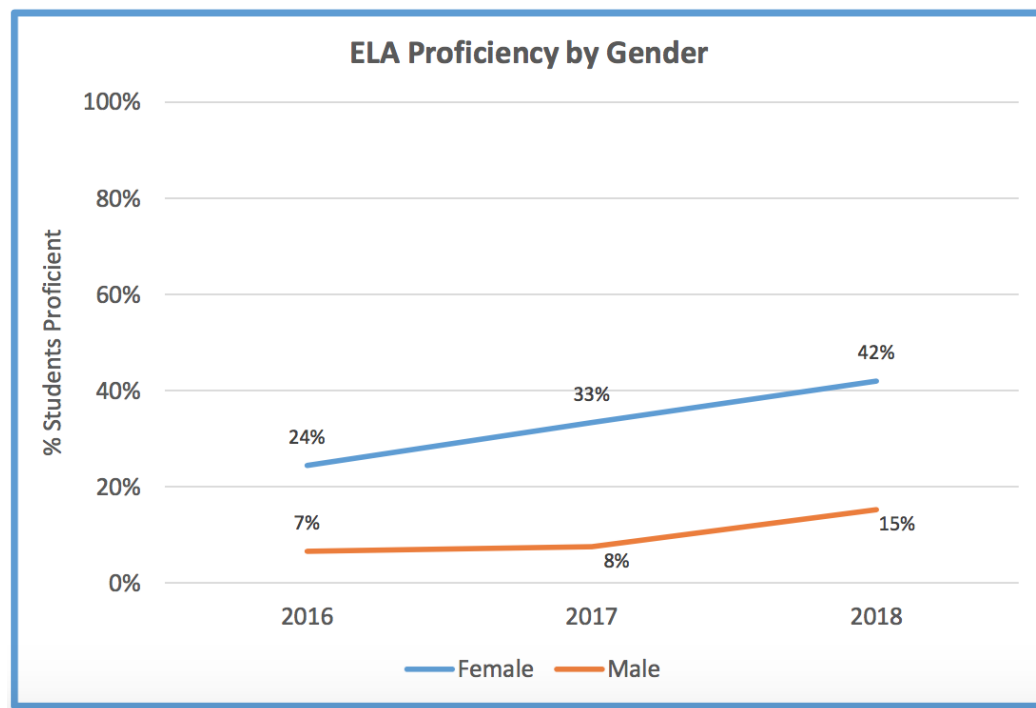
Another step within the Datawise process was to examine classroom instruction. Boudett, City and Murane (2013) explain that there are many factors that impact student learning that lay beyond a teacher's control. Instruction, however, is within the teachers sphere of influence and therefore, will be the focus of the action plan (p.37). Additionally, identifying underlying or root causes of issues provided our team with sufficient data to properly generate an action plan.

The second question was to instigate a shift in organizational mindset. The intent of this project is to impact the entire school communities' mindset. Every constituent in the school has to reimagine our approach to educating our young men. These constituencies include administrators, teachers and students. First, we believe that there were implicit messages that we were sending as an organization that impact our male students' self-perception. Next, we intend to examine instructional practices prevalent within our school that may reinforce negative male stereotypes. Discovering the root causes of this issue has the potential to transform our school. Prior to transforming our school, we had to start from the beginning.

Benchmark Data

When the current leadership team took over at RSA in the fall of 2014, the percent of students that achieved proficiency on the NYS ELA examination was 4%. As of June 2018 the proficiency rate has risen to 34%. While the school has seen growth in proficiency rates, there are subgroups of students that still have not demonstrated similar growth. To focus our efforts, we have decided to zoom in on our male students. As demonstrated in Figure 1.1, our female students have significantly outperformed our male students in ELA Proficiency as measured by the NYS ELA examinations for grades 6-8.

Figure 1.1



Identifying specific reasons for this trend has escaped our leadership team. In the past we have attempted a variety of interventions to counteract this effect. But our efforts have not

generated the desired results. Next the team took time reviewing the data around discipline within our school to determine the levels of disruption to education is experienced by our male students. Additionally, we wanted to get to the mindset of our staff. As demonstrated by figure 1.2 there is a disproportionality between the number of suspensions our young men received as opposed to our young women during the 2017-2018 school year. Which is significant because our male students represent only 40% of our entire student body.

Figure 1.2

# of Suspensions by Gender for the 2017-2018 School Year		
	Male	Female
ISS	15	6
OSS	3	1
Other	0	0
Total Number of Students Receiving ISS and OSS	18	7

ISS= In School Suspension OSS= Out of School Suspension

This table illustrates the disproportionate rate of negative discipline consequences our male students were receiving compared to our female students. This data led the team to consider the academic setting our school provides for our young men. Additionally, the team decided on a strategy to get information from the students to determine their feelings and opinions about their experience within the school.

METHODS

The next phase of our project was to assemble a team of staff members that would commit themselves to identifying the root cause of the stated disproportionality. This would develop into the school-wide equity team and upon their creation they have been charged with two goals. First identifying why, the boys have consistently demonstrated low performance on standardized examinations and secondly, to develop a plan to address the identified causes of disproportionality.

Our equity team consists of five staff members including the principal. Each of the staff members that elected to participate previously expressed a desire to address this specific issue of male and female disproportionality. Upon the initial meeting the team did not know where

to start, but we knew that examining quantifiable data would be a good way to anchor ourselves to a concrete metric that we would use as a guide to achieving our goals. It was determined that the best metric for monitoring the progress towards our goal were the iReady online benchmark examinations and the teacher referrals to the help desk. The iReady tests was held three times throughout the school. Our help desk is a positive behavior intervention strategy that has been developed to reduce the severity and causes of incidents at RSA. Students are referred to the help desk if they become disruptive in class. At the help desk, a staff member works with the student and engages them in an opportunity to reflect on the situation. Ideally, following the protocol, students are returned back to class. Before we could exclusively examine the academic data or discipline referrals our team needed to reflect on the problem of practice further.

First, to help us develop a deeper understanding of the problem, we identified protocols that could be used to breakdown the data to identify disproportionality. We identified specific disproportionality through three data tools. First, we examined the composite index, the risk index and relative risk ratio (Fergus, 2017). These specific data tools allowed our team to determine which subgroups of students received suspensions at the school. We were able to see disproportionality very clearly. One of our first findings, were the disproportionality between our male students' and female students' discipline referrals. After confirming our original theory, we decided to search for specific reasons our male students demonstrated undesirable behaviors during class time. Our collective team believed that engaging our male students positively at a higher rate as opposed to being subjected to consequences for being off-task would improve overall student performance and reduce the number of male referrals.

In an effort to identify the root causes of male student disengagement, we conducted focus groups for our target group of students. Through this process we determined our male students' reading interests and interests outside of the classroom. We also asked a few questions about their opinion regarding the school and their attitude towards staff members. Through this survey we determined several key findings.

Findings:

- Male students felt as though the expectations for discipline were different for boys and girls.
- Male students feel more comfortable working with male staff members.
- The majority of male students surveyed enjoy realistic fiction over other genres of literature.

These key findings influenced our action plan in several ways. We began by examining our school structures to determine pathways for us to introduce additional activities that incorporated these findings into our plan. We focused on a three-tiered approach to addressing the problem of practice and focus questions. First, we focused on leveraging gender specific book clubs. Second, we focused on developing teachers to better understand personal implicit bias we all possessed. Third, we employed a strategy called "individuating" to improve relationships between teachers and our boys.

BOOK CLUBS

Next, our team focused on developing gender specific book clubs. There was an examination of the book list our young men were reading in their guided reading classes. Our team identified several new texts for inclusion into the book club program to be more reflective of the boy's interests. Our teachers discussed several book titles with the boys and selected new titles. Additionally, in collaboration with our partnership organization, the students were able to select text at Barnes and Noble which were subsidized by a community based organization.

This specific book club had a male instructor that was well versed in the growth mindset research. Additionally, the instructor received coaching and support from a teacher leader on specific ELA strategies. Next, we focused on several texts such as Spiderman: Miles Morales, and a series young adult books Tyrell. The team was thoughtful about including opportunities for students to select titles on their own and read texts that the students considered high interest.

IMPLICIT BIAS

The Equity created a professional development series that required staff members to examine their personal beliefs about our young men. Teachers and staff members participated in a four-part series using protocols from Glenn Singleton and Edward Fergus. Finally, the principal conducted data conferences with each staff member where each staff member identified three male students that they would focus on and specifically plan for during each lesson. Teachers were held accountable for their target students' progress. In addition to having an academic focus on our boys the staff engaged in "Individuating" conferences as well

INDIVIDUATING

"Individuating" is a process by which one group of people works to take the perspective of another group. This is done through a systemic approach to create a social situation that alleviates any pressure of required work. Our team utilized an existing protocol. Staff members met with 3 male students and had lunch with them. While they enjoyed the lunch that was provided the teachers asked the students a series of targeted questions. These questions were.

1. Do you feel as though teachers treat you differently because you are a boy? How so?
2. Do you feel as though consequences are applied fairly to boys and girls?
3. What could teachers do to change the way they teach to help you be more successful?
4. How does your race make you unique?
5. How does your race/gender impact your actions or how you see yourself as a student?

After garnering responses to the questions, the staff worked to examine the different responses and the similarities that they boys experienced. Then we engaged in an “Affinity Mapping¹” protocol which allowed us to process the qualitative data.

The school engaged in these three steps throughout the course of 9 months. To evaluate the progress of our approach we used two data points. First, we examined iReady benchmark testing data for our male students exclusively. Next, we examined referrals to our ‘Help Desk’²

RESULTS

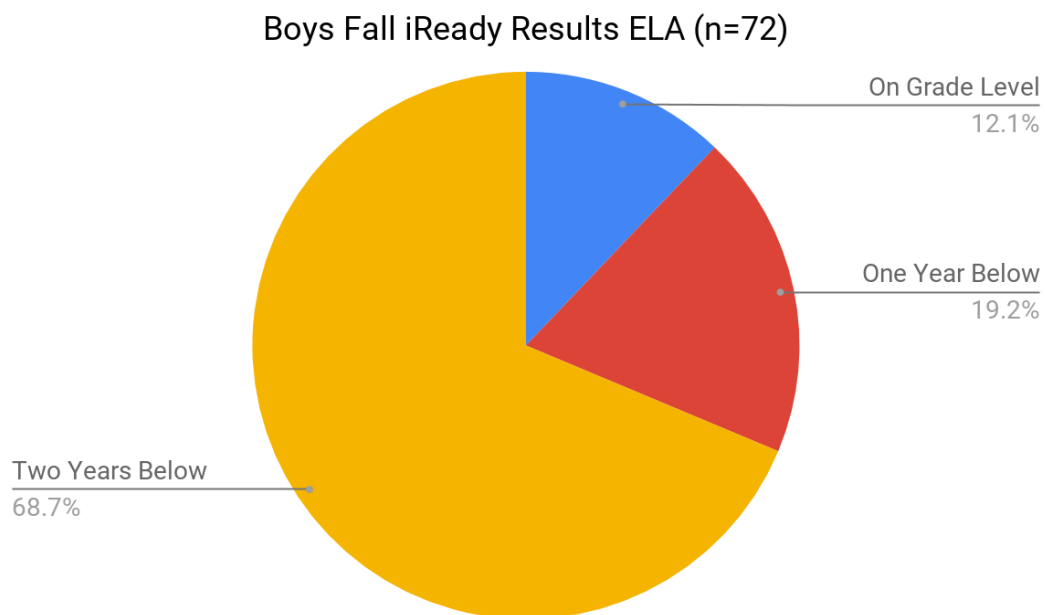
To this point we have only generated speculative or predictive outcomes. We used two metrics to evaluate the program's effectiveness. To measure students’ progress in Reading we used the iReady program. To measure the effect of the individuating and implicit bias work the team examined referrals from the Help Desk to determine the rate male students were referred for behavior intervention. The iReady program determines where students are relative to expected outcomes for their specific grade level. So, students are categorized in one of three ways. First students are identified as ‘On Grade Level’. Second ‘One Year Below’. These students are usually the students that are very close to proficiency but are not there just yet. Finally, students designated as ‘Two Years Below’. These are low level students that are in need of enhanced remediation. Additionally, the final group of students identified as two or more grade levels below, represents the majority of male students.

In figure 1.3 the diagnostic testing conducted in September revealed that 68% of our boys were two or more grade levels below. This revelation was not surprising but a bit disheartening. For students to move two grade levels in a calendar school is overwhelming. To move 36 students up two grade levels borders impossible.

Figure 1.3

¹ Affinity Mapping Protocol can be found in the Appendix A

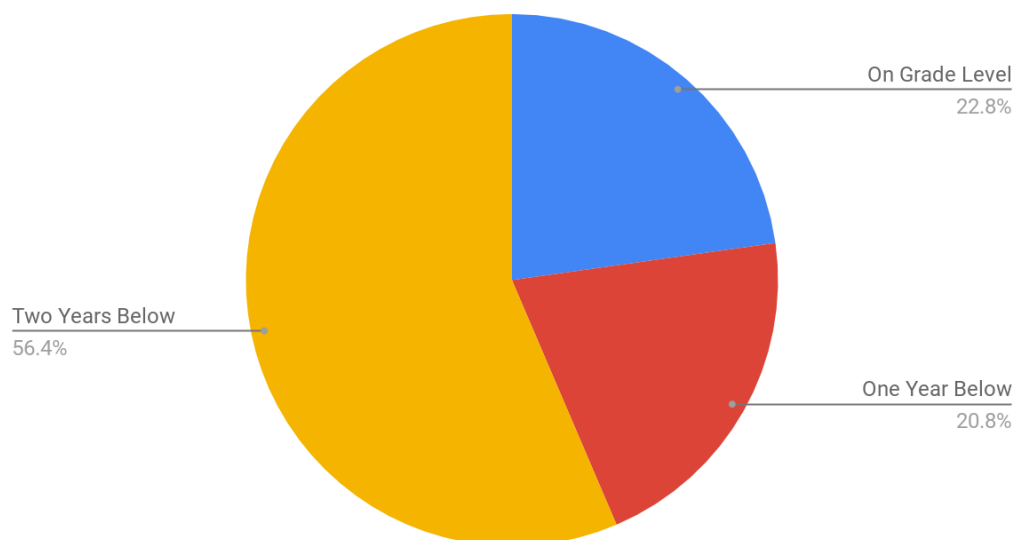
² Help Desk Teacher Referral forms are also listed in the Appendix B



Nevertheless, our team has begun implementing parts of our program to remedy this identified disproportionality. As a result, during our second round of iReady testing we did see an increase in the number of students in our target group be identified as 'On grade level'. Additionally, our young men demonstrated a lower percentage of students identified as 'Two or more grade levels below'. In figure 1.4, the results from the winter benchmark testing are represented.

Figure 1.4

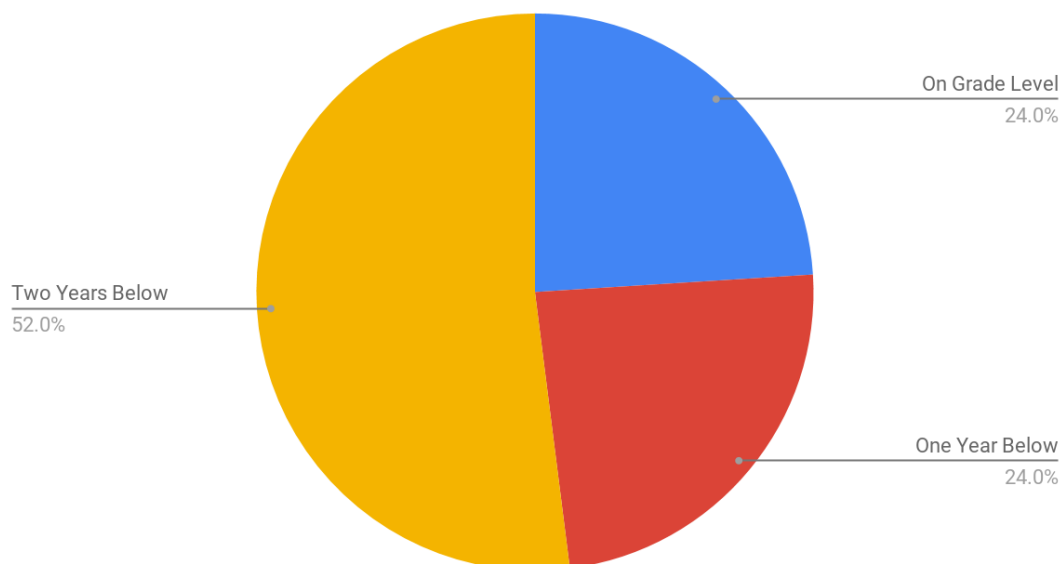
Boy Winter iReady Results ELA (n=72)



The final round of annual testing for the iReady ELA program concluded during the second week in May. The targeted group of students had a high rate of growth overall on the iReady diagnostic but the growth of student proficiency between the Winter and Spring administrations was not as strong. In figure 1. 6 the Spring iReady results for the boys is listed below. The growth of the target group was not instigated by the book clubs exclusively but the data suggests that their gender specific reading groups could be a pathway to enhance male student performance on state-wide examinations. The New York State ELA examination for 6-8 grade students was administered in March. The examination results have yet to be released. The leadership team believes that the iReady online platform is a strong predictor of student proficiency on the statewide test. In addition to making academic gains we determined that opinions of boys within our school needed to shift.

Figure 1.5

Boys Spring iReady Results ELA (n=72)

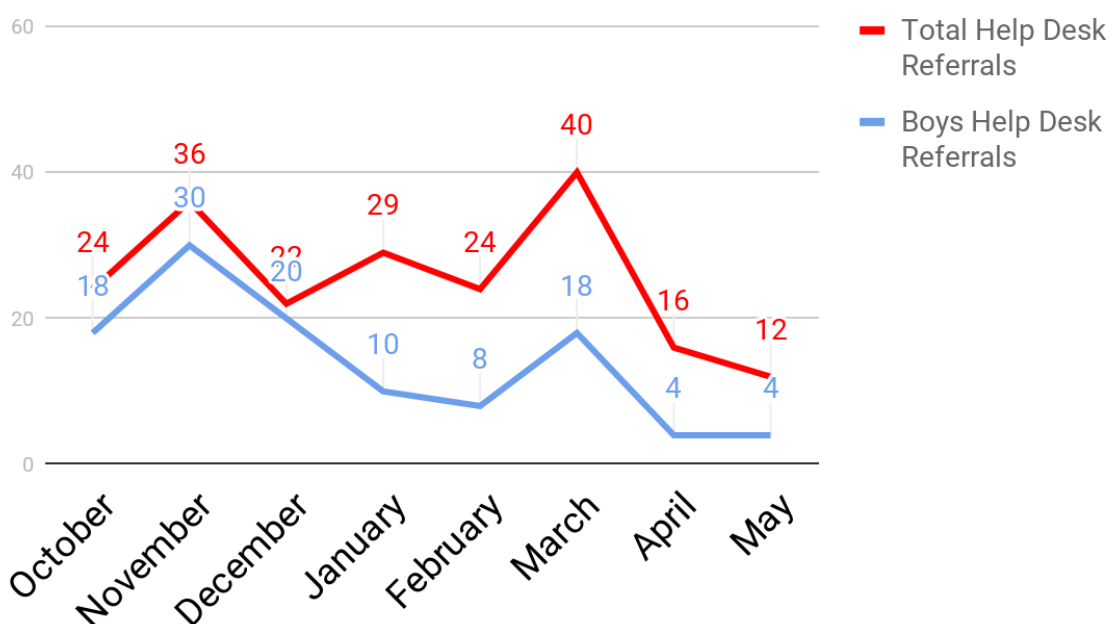


To measure the shift in attitude by the staff and the boys our team examined the rate boys were being referred to the help desk. Students are referred to the help desk if they are being disruptive during a class. When a teacher refers a student to the Help Desk they complete a teacher referral form and the student is required to complete a reflection sheet³ with a staff member while they are at the Help Desk. Following the completion of the reflection form and a discussion with the staff member the student is escorted back to class.

We began our program of individualizing and professional development in November. In figure 1.6 you will see the rate of male student referred to the help desk was higher at the beginning of the school year. Following the execution of the data conferences, professional development and individualizing conferences, the percentage of boys sent to the help desk was lower by the later part of the school year.

³ Student Reflection Sheet Appendix C

Help Desk Referrals Oct 2018-May 2019



These results suggest that working closely with the staff to focus on the referral of boys at our led to a lower rate of referrals. These methods have yielded positive outcomes thus far but as we move forward we plan on refining our efforts. Like anything you do in a school after you try it the first time, the cycle of improvement begins again. Our team will continue to examine teacher bias and the relationships our staff has with our students. Additionally, the book club model will continue to be refined. After considering the modification of titles, our team plans to include other titles aligned with influencing our student's mindset.

REFLECTIONS

The Cahn Fellows program has been the catalyst for this project. While we have engaged in a variety of intervention strategies for our young men in the past. It our work with both Dr. Riehl and Dr. Drago-Severson. Dr. Riehl's work on systems thinking helped our team to think differently about why we were not yielding the results we desired. By including the students voice our systems for examining text were directly influenced as well as our thinking on how our organizational messages influenced the outcomes.

During our sessions with Dr. Severson, our team explored the different possibilities for adult learning. By developing the Individuating strategy, our teachers were able to influence our school wide strategy. But the greatest influence the Cahn fellows program had on this project were my incredible colleagues. By having the time and situation to discuss challenges that we encountered was wonderful. Several challenges were encountered along the pathway towards achieving our goal of improving male student performance in literacy. Due to a myriad of

completing priorities, managing time and maintaining focus on the project remains a challenge. Committing significant time to this endeavor is impossible. Hence, leveraging the time that is available is paramount for achieving success. Therefore, it was very important of our team to respect the time allotted to examining this issue for doing just that, examining the disproportionality issue totally.

Another challenge we encountered was the lack of buy-in for the project from a few staff members. By in large our staff is comprised of fairly young teachers with an overall willingness to implement many initiatives. In this instance, however, the teachers demonstrated a lack of effort in implementing this initiative with fidelity and consistency. In order to attempt to overcome this obstacle, the principal met with teachers individually to ask how they could be best supported in their implementation. Additionally, during the strategic data conferences that were held staff members worked with the principal to identify specific supports they could put in place for our young men.

Encountering these issues and dealing with problems is part of the leadership process. This project forced me to really dig into the opinions within the organization. This Cahn Journey helped me grow as a leader and has helped me think about my school in new ways.

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APPENDIX A

AFFINITY MAPPING PROTOCOL

Developed by educators in field, adapted by Ross Peterson-Veatch, 2006.

Description

This activity works best when begun with an open-ended analytic question that asks for defining elements of something, or that has many answers and thereby provides many points of entry for deepening a conversation.

Example: What is the purpose of discussion? Or, perhaps: What do you need to be able to contribute to discussions?

Preparation

Hang pieces of chart paper on a wall in the room so that small groups can gather around the paper. Hand out to every participant a “block” of sticky notes (perhaps 5-10 maximum).

Process

1. Ask the question and request that participants write one idea in response per sticky note. Instruct them to work silently on their own.
2. Split into groups (of 4-8). In **silence**, put all sticky notes on the chart paper.
3. Reminding participants to remain silent, have them organize ideas by “natural” categories. Directions might sound like this: “Which ideas go together? As long as you do not talk, feel free to move any sticky note to any place. Move yours, and those of others, and feel free to do this. Do not be offended if someone moves yours to a place that you think it does not belong, just move it to where you think it does belong — but do this all in silence.”
4. Once groups have settled on categories, have them place post-it notes on chart paper in neat columns. At this point, ask them to converse about the categories and come up with a name for each one.
5. Have the groups pick a spokesperson to report their ideas to the larger group. Gather that data, and have an open discussion using questions such as the following to help participants make connections between each groups’ responses and categories: a. What themes emerged? Were there any surprises? b. What dimensions are missing from our “maps”? Again, any surprises? c. How did this expand your knowledge or your notion of what the question at the beginning asked you to consider?

APPENDIX B

HELP DESK TEACHER REFERRAL FORM

CLASSROOM TEACHER TO COMPLETE

Student Name: _____ Teacher Name _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

**Violations to the School Code of Conduct requesting support from the Help Desk
(Check all that apply):**

- Disruption of the learning environment
- Using non-academic language in school
- Using cell phone in class
- Eating food or drinks (not water) in classroom
- Refusal to follow classroom policies
- Engaging in bullying
- Other: _____

Classroom Interventions**(Check all that apply):**

- Restorative conversation took place *outside* the classroom
- Restorative conversation took place *inside* the classroom
- Student was given multiple corrections and urged to improve behavior before support at the help desk

APPENDIX C

STUDENT REFLECTION PROTOCOL

HELP DESK STAFF + STUDENT TO COMPLETE

Staff at the Help Desk: _____

Time of Help Desk visit: _____

Date: _____

1. Why were you sent to the Help Desk?

I was sent to the Help Desk because....

2. How did your actions affect the classroom teacher and the students?

My behavior affected the classroom teacher and/or the students...

3. How did your behavior affect your learning?

My behavior affected my learning...

4. *When I return to class I will....*

****Failure to improve your behavior will result in a referral to the Dean's office****