



Narrative Report 2018-2019

NAME OF FELLOW: Kevin Froner

EMAIL ADDRESS: kfroner@schools.nyc.gov

NAME OF ALLY: Tanya Howell

EMAIL ADDRESS: THowell3@schools.nyc.gov

NAME OF SCHOOL: Manhattan Hunter Science High School

WEBSITE: MHSHS.org

STREET: 122 Amsterdam Avenue, RM 651

CITY: New York City STATE: NY Zip Code: 10023

ABSTRACT

Begin with You: from School to Self What began as a project to address a rising tide of social-emotional and behavioral incidents, including mental health issues and myriad forms of stress related occurrences found within the student body, led to a project aimed at shifting student culture, followed by an initiative to address teacher inter-connectedness, and ultimately a process which returned us to the self, to “be the change” we were hoping to effect.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing epidemic in K-12 education, one we are only beginning to fully articulate. A confluence of factors including a tech/social media overload, sleep deprivation, and new teacher-student evaluation systems have added mounting pressures on children and those who teach and care for them. In addition, we are finding that political divisiveness and economic uncertainty are only compounding these issues, leading to high levels of stress and general angst.

It was our hope through the Cahn Fellows’ project to “turn down the noise,” and implement systemic and transformative changes, including mindfulness, movement, and other restorative and self-reflective practices to reimagine and transform our community.

Manhattan Hunter Science High School Mission, Core Values, and Demographics

Manhattan Hunter Science is an early college high school with a science focus designed to give students the tools they need to achieve college readiness. The following core values are representative of our school culture:

- I. We never give up on a student.
- II. We prepare all students for college readiness and success.
- III. We appreciate, respect and embrace our school’s cultural diversity.
- IV. We support and encourage rich and meaningful after-school experiences.
- V. Our school is a community where every staff member, student, and family has a voice.

MHSHS is a small school community dedicated to guiding every student through rigorous academic programs, while preparing every student for a successful transition to college. Hunter College is an integral part of Manhattan Hunter Science High School, from collaborating with faculty and enrolling students in college-level courses on its own Upper East Side campus, to providing a full time 12th grade college experience where students develop important early college skills, including academic research and writing, effective study habits, and time management.

Our dedicated faculty assists our students in overcoming challenges through a strong school community that supports their emotional as well as academic needs. We aspire to set high reaching goals that stretch our talents and expand our horizons.

As an early college high school we not only prepare our students for postsecondary success but do so in three years. In their fourth year, our seniors travel to Hunter College where they enroll in both high school and college courses. Students develop the college readiness

skills to succeed on a college campus, including time management, collaboration, self-advocacy, and effective study skills.

At MHSHS we not only graduate nearly 100% of our students on time but do so with close to a full semester of college credits. This results in over 90% of graduates accepted to four year colleges and universities.

- *Demographics (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status of students)*

Hispanic: 36% | Asian: 25% | Black: 16% | White: 17 %

- *Special features of the school culture*

Early college. Senior year at Hunter College – CUNY

- *Image in the neighborhood and with respect to other schools*

Over 6,000 applicants each year for fewer than 120 seats.

- *Special curricular focus.*

College aligned curricula.

- *Special accomplishments and records of achievement*

Ranked in *Newsweek's* top 20 in the nation for schools which serve high poverty populations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While MHSHS has continued to make extraordinary progress academically, emerging as one of the top schools in the nation for serving diverse populations of students, stress levels amongst students and faculty have increased significantly over the last 2-3 years. In response we have implemented mindfulness and yoga classes. Despite these initiatives, in the 17-18 school year we recorded a significant rise in suicidal ideation as well as verbal and physical altercations. In short, we need to do more.

As leaders (principal and dean respectively) we began with ourselves and Gandhi's adage to "be the change (we) wish to see." To measure this change we began by looking carefully at Online Occurrence Reporting System, as well as New York City School Survey data including the following three survey questions:

Q3e Percentage of students say that their teachers support them when they are upset.

Q4b Percentage of students say that there is at least one adult in the school that they can confide in.

Q4e Percentage of students say that their teachers treat them with respect.

METHODS

Our initial goal was to reduce stress amongst students to be measured by both quantitative (OORS reporting data regarding behavior/social-emotional incidents) and soft (qualitative/anecdotal) data. As we continued to work our way through the layers of the issue it became evident that we were confronting a systems wide problem, and shifted our methodology.

To engage the full faculty in addressing these systems with us we reimagined faculty meetings by utilizing Otto Scharmer's work on awareness based system thinking (see *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, 2018). This approach to self-reflective inquiry work led us down an exploratory path to not only assess our student culture but the culture of our faculty.

In attempting to engage in discourse regarding not only our student culture, but the culture of our faculty, it became apparent that the place to begin was with ourselves. The following guiding questions appeared to capture this work: Are the kids reflecting our behaviors? Are we reflecting their behaviors? Are we all part of and at cause of this system which is being reflected by the entire community?

These questions continued to deepen both my (as a Cahn Fellow) and our (as a school community) understanding of the paradigm as we began to see and sense our role in contributing to the high levels of student stress. Some of the contributing factors included the following: classes which heavily weigh exams, a discourse of competition and achievement, grading policies which favor results over process (while espousing a belief in process over results), and work presented without purpose.

We then began to confront the reality that we were the system we wanted to change. The teacher. The student. The parent. The principal. Yet, often we talk about the larger system as if it lives outside of ourselves.... "The DOE did _____ to us." "The system puts _____ pressure on teachers....on students." "The system....the system...the system..." By framing our experiences in this way in the past we were left victimized by an amorphous autocrat ostensibly dictating our experiences "from above." We needed to reclaim our political efficacy within the system, in addition to our agency.

Timelines of Initiatives

September: Opened the year with a full day PD where each faculty member shared their personal vision for each student. The result was the development of a shared vision to support the work of the school's mission and vision.

School assembly to address our expectations for the year and discuss many of our observations regarding student stress.

Additional meeting with the junior class to begin a dialogue regarding supports for what is typically a highly stressful and challenging year.

Principal meetings with all of the advisories to reinforce our de-stressing initiatives as well as vision setting conversation. Each student was asked to write down their own vision (Who do I want to be and what do I want to do when I graduate from college?) 300+ student visions collected.

Back to School Night: 100+ parents set visions. Conversation about stress and what role families can play in supporting our initiative.

Faculty review of student visions.

Shared vision created: *Each student may one day be whoever he or she chooses to be.* Many students in the city graduate so far behind with regards to early college skills that they are left fighting an uphill battle to then achieve college and career success. As a community we co-constructed a shared vision which articulated the belief that every student has a right to pursue a dream (lawyer, doctor, teacher, writer, artist, entrepreneur....) and that pursuit begins the day the student walks on our campus.

October / November: Faculty reports highlight not only continued stress but a wave of academic integrity violations and an obsession with grades.

November: Faculty PD shifts to focus on our student culture. A second shift mid-November as it became apparent that we needed to begin with the faculty culture.

December-March: Transition to subcommittee meetings to address student culture with a collective response.

RESULTS

Throughout this process I have been oscillating between the transformation of the self and the transformation of the community. When I lean too far into the world around me, the adage “to be the change you wish to see,” returns me to center, and when I become oversaturated with insight and self- discovery I transition from the self to the community. This has been the most important personal and qualitative shift. Nevertheless, how do we capture results from authentic conversation? Below you will find the most significant quantitative data, which includes breakthrough results we can only correlate with our yearlong inquiry. The data captures student experience from the first semester, and was released this spring 2019.

Highlights from the Student Perception Survey Data:

- Our results improved in all 5 categories (Classroom Climate, Classroom Engagement, Pedagogical Effectiveness, Rigorous Expectations, Teacher-Student Relationships).
- Of the 27 subgroupings we demonstrated improvement in all 27
 - “If you walked into class upset, how concerned would your teacher be?”
 - 65% now report very to extremely concerned.
 - The new category average (Teacher-student relationships) demonstrated a 9% increase moving us to above the city and borough averages 5% and 7% respectively.
- “When your teacher asks how you are doing, how often do you feel that your teacher is really interested in your answer?”
 - 75% now report frequently to almost always (an 8% increase from the previous year).
- With regards to pedagogy we noted an 11% jump in “How interesting does this teacher make what you are learning in class?”

This cultural shift has been experienced, as well as felt, however, with 27 out of 27 survey questions demonstrating a positive cultural shift we had the data to confirm that things were moving in a direction consistent with our initial goals and objectives.

REFLECTIONS

I have shared the following throughout this report, and once again return to the guiding practice that framed my Cahn Fellowship experience- change leadership begins with the leader. All initiatives in the 18-19 school year began with me. All policies and practices began with me reflecting on my own practices. All feedback to others began with me reflecting on my actions and habits. While I have enjoyed placing Gandhi's words on various placards, posters, and other placeholders, in addition to the pleasure of uttering the words, "Be the change you wish to see," it has been the struggle to live that change which has exposed myriad blind-spots and forced me to confront my Self.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this process my ally provided the space for authentic communication and co-reflection. It was this deep connection to another, what Buber calls "I and thou," where we discover ourselves through another. Tanya has been that interconnected being to reflect with on a journey we have travelled together. What we created and confronted we did in partnership. The school community has not just changed but has gone through a transformative cultural shift.