

Engaging, Inspiring and Supporting Hispanic Students for Success

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## **Abstract**

The focus of my Cahn Project is to analyze, understand, and respond to the significant achievement gap in ELA and math for our Hispanic students. Our baseline data was collected from a comprehensive needs-assessment which involved our school community and stakeholders. The assessment involved qualitative and quantitative indicators of the academic performance and social-emotional development of our Hispanic students. Throughout this project, my school community is engaging in cycles of learning focused on effective ways to increase student achievement. We seek to document, measure, and understand the impact of the following school-wide initiatives on our Hispanic students:

- Heterogeneous classes with individualized student scheduling
- UFT contract variance to enhance Small Group Instruction and Teacher Team Inquiry
- Social-emotional supports, including Brain Power Wellness and Parent-Teacher Home Visits
- Academic interventions integrated with sports and wellness

## **Introduction**

Edward Bleeker Junior High School, founded in 1955, is named after a pioneering health professional who dramatically improved access to healthcare in the community. The Bleeker school community provides students with a strong educational foundation needed to thrive as global citizens in a rapidly changing world. It prepares them for college and a career of their choice. Continuing Dr. Edward Bleeker's strides in increasing access to healthcare, our school has implemented mindfulness and emotional wellness initiative. We help foster students' self-esteem by optimizing the social-emotional needs of individual children in a culturally diverse environment to prepare them for a healthy lifestyle and productive citizenship.

Our school is focused on high academic achievement rooted in rigorous instruction through critical thinking and problem-solving. We put students at the center of their own learning by providing individualized programming for students. We ensure that every student's educational experience is engaging, challenging, purposeful, and enabling them to take ownership of their learning through the mastery of academic standards.

J.H.S. 185 is a large community school, serving a population of diverse learners. In order to personalize our students' experience, we have instituted an advisory team for each grade which moves up with them from sixth grade all the way through eighth-grade graduation. From our inception as a magnet school to the present, we have been fortunate enough to educate an enrollment of outstanding children, both from the locally zoned neighborhood as well as from the wider Queens community.

In recent years, our school has gained valuable experience and expertise in all six elements of the NYCDOE Framework for Great Schools. We are partnered with numerous community organizations, social and academic programs, and cultural institutions to help

ground our students in the value of the community while maintaining high levels of academic success that merit admission to the most prestigious high schools. We have successfully adopted and implemented numerous innovative and engaging programs, including Arts Connection, Collaborative Learning Program, Silk Road, Software Engineering, Regents programs in Living Environment, Algebra and US History, Google Apps for Education, and Pupil Path. A component of the framework also includes the parents and our surrounding community members. These stakeholders are integral to our school community as they continuously support the various programs occurring at our school. In addition, they take on active roles through various family and community events. Through a great deal of reflective practice, positive partnerships and collaborations, and committed staff, our school has increased student enrollment, improved performance on standardized assessments, and strengthened relationships with families and the community.

### **Statement of the Problem**

We analyzed our school performance indicators for the past three years, including NY State Assessments, NYC Learning Environment Survey and NYC Measures of Teacher Practice. It is evident that a current problem of practice is that our male Hispanic students are experiencing a significant achievement gap in relation to our Asian and white populations of students. On the most recent NY State standardized assessment in mathematics, only 38% of our Hispanic students achieved proficiency, compared to 55% of white students, and 82% of Asian students. Similarly, in English language arts, 50% of our male Hispanic students scored proficient, compared to 62% of our white students and 74% of Asian male students (Appendix A & B).

In the annual NYC Learning Environment Survey, students and parents had the opportunity to rate our school's level of academic rigor. The qualities that survey respondents were asked to consider include the difficulty of questions students were asked in class, critical thinking opportunities, and the depth of conceptual understanding. In 2018, 72% of students and parents responded positively when considering our school's academic rigor. In contrast, 89% of teachers responded that students felt challenged, and 86% of teachers responded that students had to work hard to do well. Only 83% of students responded that the work they did preparation for their class tests, and only 73% of students said that the homework assignments helped them learn the course material (Appendix C).

Our district's teacher evaluation system, which is based on Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, provided additional insights into student achievement. The instructional components for Questioning and Discussion and Engagement were the areas where our teachers had the lowest overall ratings (Appendix D). In addition, an analysis of low inference notes and feedback to teachers indicated that special education teachers were not utilizing opportunities to provide critical thinking activities for students. Students were not exposed to appropriately challenging tasks that would promote higher-order cognitive abilities.

Rather, tasks were habitually over-simplified and scaffolds were provided with no intention of them being removed.

These findings indicated a need to focus on pedagogical practices surrounding our Hispanic students. Providing these students with greater and richer opportunities for intellectual engagement will help close the achievement gap. It will be important to provide both differentiated professional development to our staff, as well as to instill the paradigm that all students can achieve. Closing the achievement gap is the cornerstone of our school vision that will not only help the Hispanic male students to succeed but also students of all cohorts succeed.

### **Methods**

The instructional cabinet, my teachers, and other stakeholders in the school community collaborated to further understand and address the achievement gap. After receiving preliminary reports in the summer, we realized that the data indicated significant disparities in ELA and Math performance among our Hispanic students compared to other subgroups. My assistant principals and I presented this problem to our staff as an area on which we would focus throughout the year. In addition, each teacher met individually with a department supervisor as part of the beginning-of-year planning conference, and discussed this problem of practice, formulating ways to collect and analyze data. Through the planning conference, our teacher teams began to craft inquiry questions. They reflected on their instructional practices and analyzed student work in order to gain insight on the following:

- “In what specific ways are our Hispanic students struggling academically?”
- “What are the possible underlying factors that cause our Hispanic students to perform below average? “
- “How can we, as teachers and school leaders, specifically address these possible underlying factors?”

We discovered that our Hispanic students generally have not achieved the test scores required to be placed in honors classes thus creating conditions in which our lower-achieving classes are primarily composed of Hispanic students. In addition, the level of academic rigor our Hispanic students' experience may not be consistently appropriate to ensure academic achievement. As a result, we have revamped our school programming model to utilize individualized student scheduling with heterogeneous classes to increase opportunities for intellectual engagement and collaborative learning. This has allowed for more students to have access to classes that are academically challenging.

Our teacher teams within each department are working on improving instructional tasks, with a focus on access and equity. Math teachers are working with district coaches to refine tasks and projects, with the goal of intellectually engaging all students. This year in ELA,

the instructional time has been divided into five periods per week of reading and four periods per week of writing instruction. This change has allowed for students to have more streamlined and individualized instruction by two different teachers in the components of ELA. The teachers have collaborated with each other to support all learners in both disciplines of instruction. ELA teachers have also been integrating Socratic Seminars to include all learners in classroom discussions. Science teachers are crafting inquiry-based lessons that are inclusive to all learners. Tasks and laboratory assignments have been re-aligned to allow students to discover the principles of science through the specific vocabulary in their native language. In addition, translated review books have been purchased to allow all students access to the curriculum. Social studies teachers have purchased and implemented Spanish language handbooks and documents in order to provide all students with access to content specific tasks. The changes being made across all disciplines are giving all students in the school greater access to a rigorous curriculum.

After initial analysis and discussions with the teachers and staff, we reached out to the stakeholders in the school community. These individuals engaged in a needs assessment in order to formulate possible solutions to support our teachers and paraprofessionals in increasing intellectual engagement and academic discourse among Hispanic students. The following areas were identified through discussion and analysis with the school's stakeholders: inconsistency of rigor across all classrooms, inequitable access to honors and Regents classes, lack of social-emotional intelligence to handle academic stress, and lack of parental involvement. The staff engaged in a professional learning cycle focused around differentiating instruction to include rigorous instruction among all learners through content, process, and product. Through the learning cycle, teachers were able to evaluate their own instruction, revise their pedagogy and provide feedback to each other.

In response to the concerns of the stakeholders, we have adopted the Brainpower Wellness program to support the emotional stress of our students, especially at a time when more students have access to rigorous instruction. Thirteen teachers attended three days of intensive training in order to bring this program to our school. In addition, two teacher leaders attended an even more extensive three-day retreat in order to become fully trained to successfully implement the program. Thirty students were chosen to be trained to become Brainpower student leaders and classroom energy masters, four of those students were Hispanic. As part of our Brain Power Wellness initiative, all staff members have taken part in a professional development cycle regarding social and emotional well-being. Through this training, our staff and students have begun taking an active role in fostering a classroom and school environment that recognizes, supports and responds to a student's social-emotional well-being.

Lastly, to increase parental involvement, teachers have been trained to conduct home visits to the families of students in our school and the neighboring elementary schools in order

to establish a stronger relationship between the school and home. Within our school, we have invited parents to participate in the School Leadership Team and Parent Teacher Association meetings. During these meetings, parents are able to express concerns and discuss solutions with the administration and staff. Additionally, various nightly and weekend parent events have been established to foster the relationship of the families to the school.

Benchmark progress was collected after each marking period by analyzing student portfolios, report cards, periodic assessments, staff anecdotes, parent feedback, and informal conversations with students. These check-in points were used to determine which students were at-risk in order for intervention support to be provided to them. The students that were determined to be at-risk were given schedule modifications at the start of the second marking period to include a Small Group Instruction period. This period was focused on providing individualized academic support. To further support the at-risk students, especially the male Hispanic students, we established a before school and Saturday AIS program. The program was open to all students in the school that would like to attend, however, those that were identified at risk were personally invited to attend the enrichment programs.

The school community has adjusted to a great deal of change, as the transition to the individualized student scheduling and heterogeneous grouping to provide access for all learners has been inherently challenging. Throughout the process, it has been important for us to clearly communicate how our action plan aligns with the school vision and our district goals. By collecting and analyzing data through benchmarks, we have been able to build a comprehensive rationale for this project and clearly communicate this rationale to the staff and stakeholders. It has helped us to effectively convey the importance of these initiatives and the impact of changing the way our school's classes and schedules are structured for the improved achievement of all students.

The information gained from this study was shared with the staff in order to allow them to refine their practice to support all students. As a result, the teachers have been modifying and compacting curricula across all subjects to support student access to rigorous instruction. Teachers have been refining their daily classroom instruction in order to incorporate new ideas and strategies to engage learners of all academic levels. The professional development committee has been invested in constructing teacher learning cycles that incorporates new ideas on adult learning and communication.

Parents are adjusting to the elimination of honors classes in grades six and seven, which has been a result of implementing heterogeneous classes. In response to this, teachers are working hard to differentiate their instruction more effectively to provide access and rigor to all students. We are continuing to support our teachers, students, and families with the transition through ongoing professional development, parent workshops, and learning opportunities for all students. Throughout the process, our parents, families, and teachers are seeing that students thrive in environments with diverse learners.

Over the course of this project, we are learning a great deal about individualized student scheduling and other ways to support student needs. We have encountered many challenging situations and have been learning a great deal about how to improve our master schedule for more flexible scheduling. We have experienced logistical issues as a result of adapting to the transition, such as errors in taking attendance, difficulties in changing student schedules, and managing class capacity overages. We have been training staff members, including our secretaries and guidance counselors, to resolve these issues in a timely and efficient manner.

### **Results**

After students received individualized support through Small Group Instruction and the AIS programs, benchmark data was collected and analyzed. All of the Hispanic males who received intervention supports showed improvement on their marking period grade point averages from the first marking period to the third marking period (Appendix E). The students involved in the support programs were interviewed and were able to state ways in which the morning program allowed them to succeed through the support of their teachers. Through these conversations, students and their families expressed that they felt the impact of the academic and social-emotional support programs at school. In addition, they also stated that they benefited from learning together with diverse groups of students. The cohort group of students that showed success in the AIS programs was also involved in extracurricular programs in our school, indicating the more involved a student is at school, the greater their achievement and success in academics.

Our teachers have grown as well. They are seeing the many facets of their students apart from academic performance. Social-emotional development, home life, and personal values are emphasized more in teachers' interactions with students. As an administrative cabinet, we have collectively seen the culture in our classrooms to become more positive and welcoming. This shift is evident through teacher evaluation reports and feedback from teacher surveys throughout the school year (Appendix D). In addition, evidence of this professional development cycle has been seen across classrooms through formal and informal observations. Teachers are embedding rigorous differentiated instructional strategies in order to effectively challenge all learners. Students are being challenged and held accountable at levels of instruction that fit their academic and social-emotional needs.

### **Reflections**

Participating in the Cahn Fellows Program has allowed us to become more reflective in our practice. This project challenged my ally and I to allocate time to work on a project that we, as a community, have grappled with for some time. We found an area of leverage in our school that allowed us to have the greatest impact on all learners. As a result, we made closing the achievement gap of the Hispanic males my top priority.

I blocked out time in my daily schedule over the course of the year to work on this project. By working to close the achievement gap, I have been able to provide more students in my school access to rigorous and individualized instruction. In addition to allotting time, this project has compelled me to be transparent with my staff when explaining new initiatives and programs in the school. As a result, it has required me to hold difficult conversations with my staff and stakeholders regarding the targeting of this specific cohort of students. In response, I have deepened my professional practice around culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is one of the most powerful tools that can be used to lift students out of the achievement gap (Zaretta, 2015 p.15). I tasked my professional development team to construct a cycle of learning focused on cultural responsiveness in school. At this time, the professional development team is conducting a book study on the text, Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain by Zaretta Hammond in order to increase their understanding on how to promote engagement and rigor amongst culturally diverse learners. Through this book study, the team will be better prepared to develop and lead an adult-learning cycle with the staff next school year focused on culturally responsive teaching.

Through this experience as a Cahn Fellow, I have found ways in which I would modify my project to allow it to be even more successful as we sustain it for the future. By heterogeneously grouping the students, we were able to see success in providing more Hispanic students access to rigorous instruction. I plan on keeping the heterogeneous classes next year with some improvements in how the schedules are planned. For example, all students that have the same math teacher will be grouped for the same period for physical education, and all the students who have the same science teacher will be grouped for the same period for their talent period. This type of scheduling adjustment will allow for additional alignment in the students' schedules so that they have a peer that is in the same class at least two times a day. This will help provide the students with consistency in their day so they can form bonds with students that share multiple classes with them. In addition, from a scheduling perspective, this will allow us to program our building to allow for clusters of students to be grouped by a common teacher. In addition, we plan on embedding an advisory period into the students' schedule in order to allow one additional adult to be connected with students in significant ways (Johnson, 2009 p. 1).

I found that children who had connections with teachers in the building through various programs were intrinsically motivated to succeed. By scheduling an advisory period into the programs of my students, especially those of Hispanic males, more students will have a teacher with whom they are able to form a connection. Furthermore, to increase and strengthen the bonds that the Hispanic male students have with adults in my school I plan on making a conscious decision to recruit them into various programs offered before and after school. Some of these programs include various sports teams and academic enrichment clubs. Through student interviews of successful male Hispanic students, we were able to see how the



connections these children formed with teachers fostered their academic growth. Building relationships between teachers and students raise students' expectations for themselves to succeed (McClure, L., Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M., 2010 p.3-4).

Through my participation in this project, I was able to find the importance of using the knowledge of the school community, staff and stakeholders to steward the vision of closing the achievement gap. While doing so it was important to me to maintain trust and positive relationships. Throughout the project, I learned that in order for me to properly address and conquer the gap presented in my student's achievement, I needed to seek the advice of my peers from Cahn Fellows, my instructional cabinet, and the teacher leaders in my school building. A project of this scale requires distributed leadership in order for it to be successfully implemented and monitored. With such a large-scale change in my school building, it was important to not only monitor quantitative data but also qualitative data through conversations with students, staff, and families. Lastly, it was important to have faith in the resilience of the students, staff, and parents throughout the implementation of the project. Change is difficult, but with time and the support of each other, it can happen in a positive manner.

My personal leadership goals have centered on building trust and collaboration in my building and within my greater school community. Working with the Cahn Fellows this year has strengthened my passion and commitment to this goal. The new ideas and concepts I have learned by interacting with other Fellows and their Allies, Exec-Comm, and the professors of Teachers College have been inspirational. I am eager to continue to learn from and grow with other school leaders in the Cahn Fellows.

*"Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge"*

*-Simon Sinek*

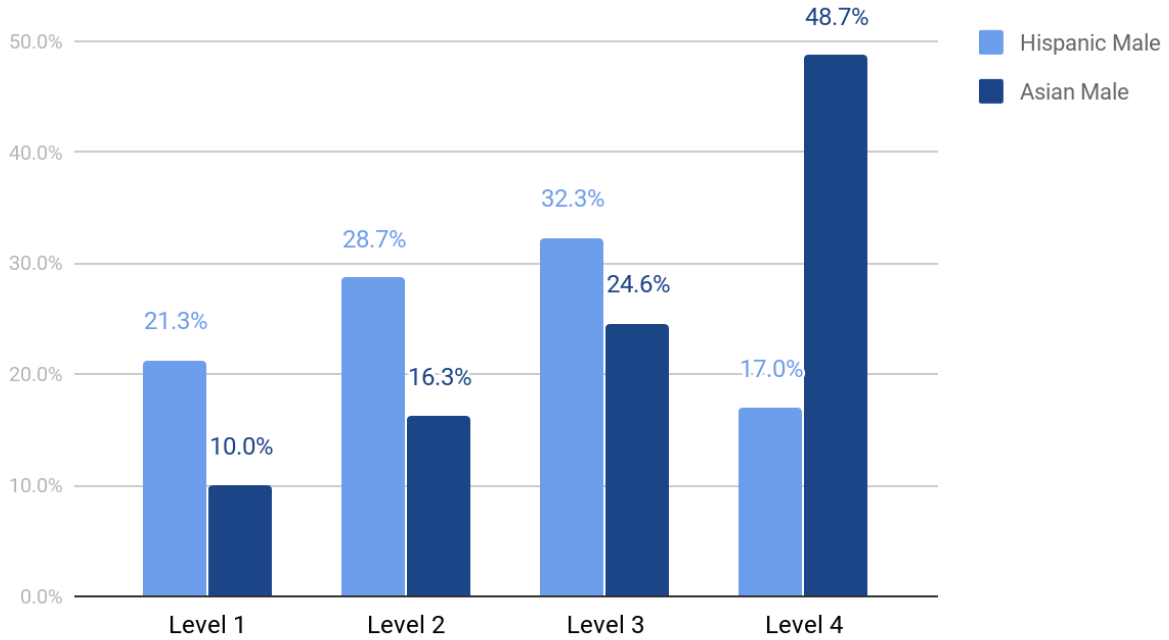
### **Acknowledgments**

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Cahn Fellows Program for Distinguished Principals for giving me this honor to grow as a leader intellectually, personally and professionally. This project could not have been as successful without the support of various individuals along the way. Brian Bradley has been my thought partner in this yearlong journey as we brainstormed ideas, possible problems and solutions. Michael Leung has taken this incredible journey with me as my Ally. The rest of my administrative cabinet, Primal Dhillon and Josefa Sande have collaborated with Michael and me to collect and analyze benchmark data to successfully implement the changes to our school building. My administrative interns, Caitlyn Coffey, Eric Mace, and Christine Olsen, who have contributed to the development and refinement of this project. Nicola Nisco and Michael Russinik for providing technical assistance and creativity in the compilation of my final presentation. My staff and school community for demonstrating resilience and positivity this school year with the vast changes we collectively experienced. Ellie Drago-Severson for coaching my teacher leaders and instructional cabinet in providing effective feedback to teachers. David Beal for working tirelessly in training my staff and students in social-emotional learning through the Brainpower Wellness Program. Joe Rigney from Exec-Comm for leading my staff in understanding effective communication styles. Finally, I would like to thank my Cahn mentors, Nancy Sing-Bock and Aileen Mitchell. Without their unwavering support, I would not have been able to create a project that has brought to light a solution to a problem in my building.

Appendices

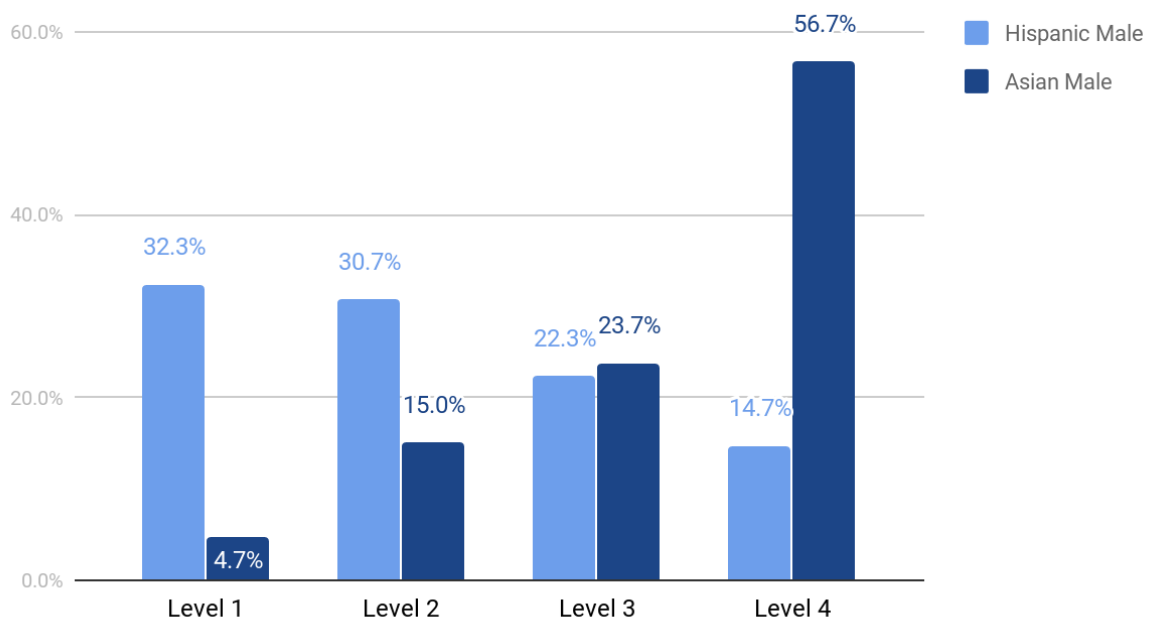
Appendix A

Hispanic Male and Asian Male ELA Assessment Data 2017-2018



Appendix B

Hispanic Male and Asian Male Math Assessment Data 2017-2018



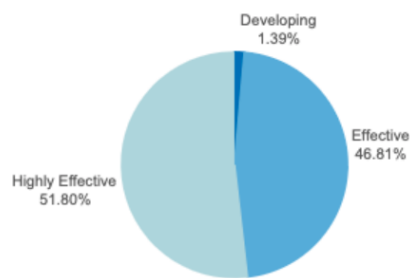
## Appendix C: NYC Learning Environment Survey Results for Academic Rigor

NYC School Survey Measures	Percent Positive	Score	Compared to District Average	Compared to City Average
- Academic Press	72%	3.38	+6%	+0%
+ S 90%	of students say that they are learning a lot in their classes at their school to prepare them for the next level or grade. (Q4a)			
+ S 77%	of students say that their classes at their school make them think critically. (Q4g)			
+ S 58%	of students say that they are challenged in their classes. (Q5a)			
+ S 64%	of students say that teachers ask difficult questions on tests. (Q5b)			
+ S 56%	of students say that teachers ask difficult questions in class. (Q5c)			
+ S 79%	of students say that they work in small groups. (Q5d)			
+ S 78%	of students say that teachers want students to become better thinkers, not just memorize things. (Q5e)			
+ T 89%*	of teachers say that students feel challenged. (Q20a)			
+ T 86%*	of teachers say that students have to work hard to do well. (Q20c)			
+ T 84%*	of teachers say that students respond to challenging test questions. (Q20e)			
+ T 73%*	of teachers say that students respond to challenging questions in class. (Q20g)			

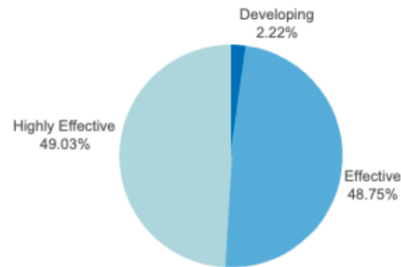
## Appendix D: Teacher Observational Data

### 2017-2018

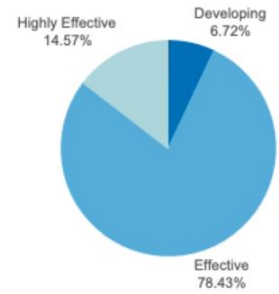
2d: Managing student behavior



2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport

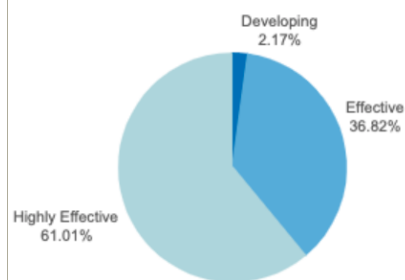


3b: Using questioning and discussion techniques

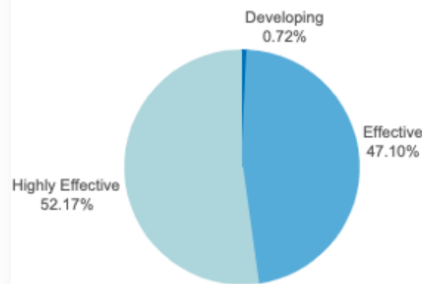


### 2018-2019

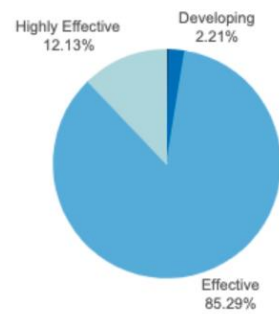
2d: Managing student behavior



2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport

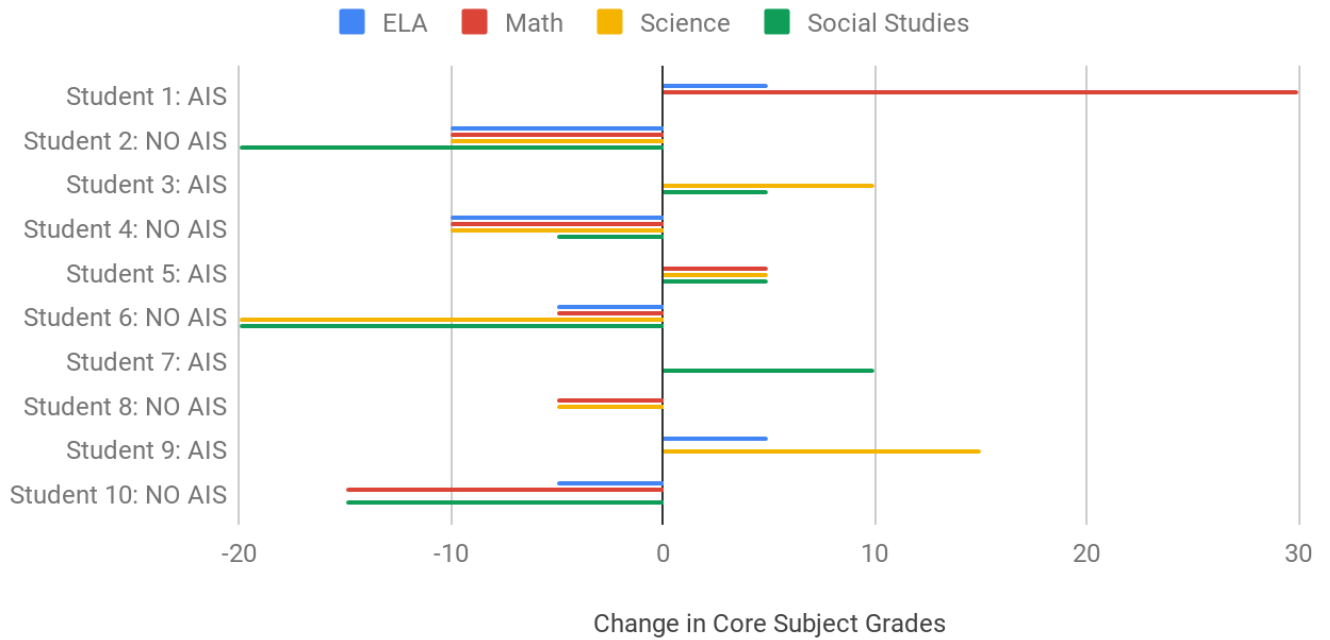


3b: Using questioning and discussion techniques



Appendix E: Progress of Hispanic Males in Core Subjects with and without AIS Support

### Hispanic Male Growth in Core Subjects from Marking Period 1 to Marking Period 3 with and without AIS Support



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