

# South Brooklyn Community High School

FINAL REPORT



New York City Department of Education External School Curriculum Audit | August 2011

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# Introduction

## About This Report

This final report is the result of an external school curriculum audit (ESCA) of South Brooklyn Community High School conducted by Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research. This audit was conducted in response to the school being identified as in corrective action under the New York State Education Department differentiated accountability plan, pursuant to the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. The utilized ESCA process was developed for and carried out under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Office of School Development, within the Division of Portfolio Planning.

## About South Brooklyn Community High School

South Brooklyn Community High School (K698) is a transfer high school located in Brooklyn, New York (in Community School District 15). As a transfer school, SBCHS follows the model of its partner agency, Good Shepherd Services (GSS). The GSS manual defines transfer schools as “small, academically rigorous diploma granting high schools for youth between the ages of 16 and 21 who have been enrolled in a NYC public high school for at least one year and, due to excessive truancy and/or dropping out, are too far behind in credit accumulation to be promoted to the next grade level in their current high school.”<sup>1</sup> A prominent characteristic of the GSS transfer school model is the presence of Advocate Counselors. The counselors work with approximately 25–30 students, and their responsibilities include monitoring of student benchmark assessments, assisting students with services needed to ensure attendance, one-on-one student counseling, and facilitating communication between teachers and students.

The school population of 151 students comprises 65 percent Hispanic, 26 percent black, 8 percent white, and 1 percent Asian students. Approximately 1 percent of the school’s students are English language learners<sup>2</sup> and 5 percent of the students are students with disabilities, according to the 2010 Special Education Service Delivery Report.<sup>3</sup> The attendance rate for the school is 67 percent, according to 2009–10 School Accountability Report. In 2009–10, South Brooklyn Community High School did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in English language arts (ELA) for all students, Hispanic or Latino students, and economically disadvantaged students. In addition, the school did not meet the graduation target in 2009–20. In 2010–11 South Brooklyn Community High School’s state accountability status was designated as Corrective Action (Year 1), and as a result the school was required to partner with Learning Point Associates to conduct the external school curriculum audit. Data collection took place from February through May of 2011.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.goodshepherds.org/images/content/1/1/11027.pdf>. Accessed on May 14, 2011, page 7

<sup>2</sup><https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2010/18/AOR-2010-331500011698.pdf>. Accessed on March 3, 2011

<sup>3</sup>[http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/teachandlearn/sesdr/2010-11/sesdr\\_K698.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/teachandlearn/sesdr/2010-11/sesdr_K698.pdf). Accessed July 14, 2011

## Audit Process at South Brooklyn Community High School

The ESCA approach utilized at the high school level examines six topic areas: student engagement, academic interventions and supports, support for incoming students, classroom instruction, professional development, and courses and extracurriculars. Data were collected at the school level through teacher surveys, administrator interviews, classroom observations, and an analysis of documents submitted by the South Brooklyn Community High School during the month of March 2011. From these data, Learning Point Associates prepared a series of reports for the school's use.

These reports were presented to the school during a co-interpretation<sup>SM</sup> meeting on May 20, 2011. During this meeting, 22 stakeholders from the South Brooklyn Community High School community read the reports. Stakeholders included administrators, teachers, advocate counselors, and others. Through a facilitated and collaborative group process, they identified individual findings, then developed and prioritized key findings that emerged from information in the reports.

The remainder of this report presents the key findings that emerged from the co-interpretation process and the actionable recommendations that Learning Point Associates developed in response. Please note that there is not necessarily a one-to-one connection between key findings and recommendations; rather, the key findings are considered as a group, and the recommended strategies are those that we believe are most likely to have the greatest positive impact on student performance at South Brooklyn Community High School.

# Key Findings

After considerable thought and discussion, co-interpretation participants determined a set of key findings. These key findings are detailed in this section.

## Critical Key Findings

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 1:**

The schoolwide behavior plan is not consistently implemented in classrooms to address behavior.

Three quarters of surveyed teachers agreed that there is a schoolwide behavior system in place; however, only half agreed that the behavior management strategies they used are consistent with strategies used in classrooms throughout the school. In addition, 40 percent of teachers reported little or no influence over setting standards for student behavior. Tardiness and behavior were observed as disrupters in approximately a quarter of the classrooms observed by auditors.

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 2:**

Data indicate that teachers use a variety of practices that create opportunities for differentiation and student engagement. However, their use appears to be inconsistent across classrooms.

Eighty percent of observation cycles in English language arts received ratings in the high range for regard for adolescent perspective, which include measures related to opportunities linked to student leadership and autonomy. However, observers noted that only 50 percent of math classes provided opportunities for autonomy and sharing of ideas. When opportunities were provided for peer interaction related to content, they were often not meaningful. Half of the observations conducted received high ratings in the area of quality feedback, in which teachers require students to expand on their answers and push student thinking through questioning, scaffolding, and further explanation. Teachers reported through the survey that they differentiate content and product at least weekly. However, 40 percent of survey respondents reported never differentiating for English language learners, and 60 percent reported infrequent use of student IEPs to plan instruction. During the co-interpretation, participants indicated that opportunities exist for improving differentiation, student autonomy, choice, leadership, and meaningful interactions.

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 3:**

Teachers indicated that half of the teachers either don't use or don't know how to use Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or skills data in their classroom planning or management.

Through the teacher survey, a little more than half of teachers reported never/almost never/infrequently using student IEPs to plan or deliver instruction or utilizing data provided by a specialist. A third of the school's teachers reported that they had not had professional development on using IEPs.

## Positive Key Findings

### POSITIVE KEY FINDING 1:

The school has several formal and informal means of collecting data to inform academic interventions, including PowerSchool, an Inquiry team, Yellow cards, and Speed conferencing.

Positive Key Finding 1 is supported by information from interviews with school faculty and a review of submitted documents. Data indicated that the school collects and utilizes a variety of qualitative, demographic, and other data to assess and address student needs. The school conducts an intensive intake interview, closely monitors student attendance, and tracks academic progress via assessments every three weeks in every subject, and information is regularly and systematically shared among school staff and counselors.

### POSITIVE KEY FINDING 2:

Different forums have been put in place to ensure formal and informal collaboration and conversations within and between agencies.

This key finding is supported by interviews with school faculty and the teacher survey. Data from school interviews revealed that staff members have numerous opportunities for collaboration including the inquiry team, departmental meetings, and monthly full staff meetings. Nearly three quarters of teacher survey respondents reported there are ongoing opportunities to work with colleagues, including informal opportunities. Data on positive collaboration and conversations between agencies are corroborated by the school's most recent Quality Review: "South Brooklyn Community High School's collaboration with Good Shepherd Services reaches an extraordinary level of solidarity that is exemplary."<sup>4</sup>

## Additional Key Finding

One additional key finding was identified by co-interpretation participants but was not prioritized by the group for action planning. However, the auditors found this key finding worthy of consideration in developing recommendations.

### ADDITIONAL KEY FINDING 1:

Student attendance is a focus of the school.

Additional Key Finding 1 is supported by classroom observations by auditors, interviews with school staff, and documents provided by the school. Observation data indicated that, in 7 of the 13 classrooms observed, absenteeism was noted as a major or minor disrupter. Interviewees said that the school's advocate counselors monitor attendance daily and carefully. Documents revealed that such counselors meet with any students that are more than 10 minutes late and will schedule a home visit if a student has not had contact with the school for three days. In addition, according to the 2009–10 accountability report, the school has an attendance rate of 67 percent. Co-interpretation participants acknowledged that, although careful attendance monitoring is currently conducted by the school, the school must remain vigilant in addressing student attendance or any truancy issues.

<sup>4</sup>[http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2009-10/Quality\\_Review\\_2010\\_K698.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2009-10/Quality_Review_2010_K698.pdf) Accessed on July 20, 2011, Part 1

# Recommendations

## Overview of Recommendations

As detailed in the Key Findings section, participants at South Brooklyn Community High School's co-interpretation meeting prioritized some key findings that highlighted the strengths of the school (Positive Key Findings 1 and 2). Other key findings focused on areas in which the school can improve (Critical Key Findings 1, 2, and 3). Regarding areas of improvement, during the co-interpretation process, school staff and advocate counselors identified inconsistencies in the implementation of the schoolwide behavior plan, inconsistency in student engagement and differentiated instruction, and lack of teacher familiarity with and use of IEP data as areas for action planning.

Although participants at the co-interpretation meeting indicated that there is a schoolwide behavior plan, discussion among meeting participants revealed that the plan is implemented inconsistently across classrooms. The recommendation presented addresses the need to review the existing behavior plan to ensure that it adheres to best practices related to consistent implementation by teachers and the advocate counselors who work closely with teachers to support student progress.

Because students who attend South Brooklyn Community High School enter with a history of attendance and truancy issues, co-interpretation participants emphasized the importance of enhancing student engagement while maintaining the focus on monitoring student attendance so that students will indeed graduate from the school. It is recommended that the school build upon existing mechanisms to enhance and address student engagement so that student attendance will not wane. Among the essential components of the school's transfer model<sup>5</sup> is its youth development approach to instruction, which is expected to foster an engaging learning environment. The integration of the advocate counselor within the school setting is another of the school's essential components. Advocate counselors monitor student attendance and address attendance issues. It is recommended that the school build upon its existing mechanisms to enhance and address student engagement and reduce truancy.

Co-interpretation participants indicated that differentiated instruction is inconsistent across classrooms. The youth development approach to instruction and small personalized school environment are key components of the school's philosophy as expressed by co-interpretation participants and corroborated by documents provided to the auditors. The recommendation on differentiated instruction aligns with the school's core principle of providing an active, rigorous learning environment.

Co-interpretation participants also discussed data that revealed that half of the surveyed teachers reported little or no familiarity with using information in IEPs to inform instruction.

<sup>5</sup> A *Model Transfer School for Replication/Good Shepherd Services Transfer High School Manual* is a document provided to auditors by the school. The 5 Core Principles and 5 Essential Components of the GSS transfer model are described on page 11 of the document which can be accessed online at: <http://www.goodshepherds.org/images/content/1/1/11027.pdf>

The federal government *Guide to the IEP* states, “Each public school child who receives special education and related services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).”<sup>6</sup> Because the IEP is referred to as the cornerstone of quality education for a student with a disability, it is important for those involved in a student’s education to work together to ensure educational success for that student. It is not enough for the special education experts to be familiar with information contained in the IEP. Therefore, teacher familiarity with the IEP was identified as an area of improvement by the co-interpretation participants and warrants effective professional learning opportunities. Resources regarding IEPs are presented.

## THE THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

With these issues in mind, Learning Point Associates auditors developed the following three recommendations:

1. Review the existing schoolwide positive behavior policy and system to ensure that it contains clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect. The policy and related system should be consistently implemented and should include concise social expectations and a continuum of supports, interventions, incentives/rewards, and consequences—including a clear delineation of activities and programs that students are entitled to versus those that are privileges.
2. Expand upon existing schoolwide processes and mechanisms (e.g., essential components of the school) for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, reduce truancy, enhance participation, reduce boredom, and increase strategies to increase student achievement in academic and social skills.
3. Develop learning activities and implement instructional strategies that differentiate instruction for all students, including improved teacher familiarity with Individual Education Plans and the use of information from IEPs.

These three recommendations are discussed on the following pages. Each recommendation provides a review of research, specific actions the school may wish to take during its implementation process, examples of real-life schools that have successfully implemented strategies, and online resources for additional information. All works cited, as well as suggestions for further reading, appear in the References section at the end of this report.

Please note that the order in which these recommendations are presented does not reflect a ranking or prioritization of the recommendations.

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<sup>6</sup><http://ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html#closer>

## Recommendation 1: Positive Behavior Management

### **Increase the consistency of implementation by classroom teachers of the existing South Brooklyn Community High School behavior plan.**

Even though the school has a behavior plan, Critical Key Finding 1 and evidence from reports indicate the behavior plan is not consistently implemented. As noted earlier, student behavior created major or minor disruptions in approximately half of the observed classrooms.

While data collected as part of the ESCA and contextual evidence from the school indicate that a behavior plan exists, ESCA data also show that the strategies and practices required by the plan are not consistently implemented by classroom teachers. The focus should be on efforts to improve student behavior in classrooms and ensure the existing behavior plan is relevant, includes content that meets standards outlined by current research and best practice, and outlines realistic expectations for teacher implementation. The ideas, strategies, and practices included below share this focus.

A focused effort by the school to uniformly implement the school's behavior plan and reduce classroom disruption should include a review of the current behavior plan to ensure it meets the following standards:

- Clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect
- Concise social expectations and a continuum of supports, interventions, incentives/rewards, and consequences
- Clear delineation of activities and programs that students are entitled to versus those that are privileges
- Needs-sensing activities to gauge teacher awareness of the content of the existing plan and rationale behind following or failing to follow the plan as part of classroom management
- Professional learning opportunities, based on the data provided by the needs-sensing activities to build staff capacity to implement the existing plan
- Clearly articulated and enforced administrative expectations regarding staff responsibilities for adhering to the established behavior plan and related policies

### **LINK TO RESEARCH**

One of the greatest obstacles within urban schools is the large number of students whose behavior interferes with their achievement or the achievement of others. Often these students behave in a manner that disrupts the educational climate of the classroom and the school. Yet research studies consistently show that schools that establish a positive social culture also achieve the best academic gains. Thus, one key element for changing this pattern is the consistent implementation of an existing schoolwide behavior program that has been developed with the input and support of parents and the school community. The emphasis is on consistency—both throughout the building and across classrooms. The entire school staff is expected to adopt strategies that will be uniformly implemented. As a result, approaches require professional development and long-term commitment by the school leadership for this innovation to take hold.

Effective schoolwide behavior programs have clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect. Students need a secure, orderly environment that promotes their personal well-being and supports learning. Rules should also be fair and stress the students' responsibility to the school community, their parents, and themselves. All students in the school need to be aware of the rules, the reasons for the rules, and the consequences for breaking the rules. Effective discipline programs are based on praise and encouragement for positive behavior and clear, consistent consequences for misbehavior (Chicago Public Schools, Office of Specialized Services, 1998).

“Effective schools build and maintain a positive ‘social culture.’” Successful students are safe (don't hurt themselves or others), respectful (follow adult requests and get along with their peers), and responsible (arrive to class on time and complete assignments). These foundational skills are essential for a safe and orderly school environment. In addition, members of a positive social culture use “higher order” skills, such as (a) impulse control, (b) anger management, (c) conflict resolution, (d) empathy, and (e) drug and alcohol use resistance and prevention. (California Services for Technical Assistance and Training (CaISTAT).

Positive behavior interventions, used correctly by teachers, administrators, and parents, encourage or strengthen desirable behavior and reduce inappropriate behavior. Positive interventions have a greater likelihood of enabling a student to change his/her behavior in a way that does not interrupt learning. Effective interventions encourage praise and recognition of positive behavior and demand clear and consistent responses to misbehavior. Children and youth tend to respond to positive techniques. In some cases, however, more restrictive interventions may be necessary to control and change extremely inappropriate and aggressive behavior (Chicago Public Schools, Office of Specialized Services, 1998).

Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is based on the research-based application of lessons learned from over 7000 schools currently implementing successful changes in their school environment. SWPBS evolved from valid research in the field of special education. SWPBS is not a curriculum, intervention, or practice but a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidenced-based behavioral practices for improving important academic outcomes for all students (Office of Special Education Programs Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2011).

Researchers have only recently begun to study the effects of schoolwide behavioral management systems and what it takes to implement these systems effectively. While it is too early to offer “recipes for success,” the work of key researchers and their school-based colleagues are providing some encouraging developments.

## Common Features of Schoolwide Behavioral Management Systems

There are different variations of schoolwide systems of behavioral support, but most have certain features in common. The school-based models featured in the sidebar have been selected to show how different features of a schoolwide behavioral management system can apply across urban, suburban, and rural locations.

- Total staff commitment to managing behavior, whatever approach is taken.
- Clearly defined and communicated expectations and rules.
- Consequences and clearly stated procedures for correcting rule-breaking behaviors.
- An instructional component for teaching students self-control and/or social skill strategies.

Apart from sharing these common features, the featured schools recognize that change is incremental and have approached implementation of their schoolwide systems slowly and over an extended time period.

(The Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. Effective Behavioral Supports. American Institutes for Research. Retrieved June 2011 from <http://cecp.air.org/center.asp>)

## IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. Incorporate key guiding principles of student behavior management.

The Office of Special Education Program's Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2011) has established the guiding principles. Included here are those that focus on establishing a set of common behavior expectations:

- **Develop a continuum of scientifically based behavior and academic interventions and supports.**

A well-articulated schoolwide behavior policy/student code inclusive of positive expectations, minor and major infractions, etc. must first be in place. Clarity around expectations for staff's handling of in-class behaviors is important here. Authentic faculty feedback and participation are important throughout the policy and system development processes.

- **Use data to make decisions and solve problems.**

Data on both minor and major behavior incidents should be collected, tracked, analyzed, and utilized in decision making by the team and faculty on a minimally monthly basis. Data should be presented in user-friendly format.

- **Arrange the environment to prevent the development and occurrence of problem behavior.**

This is inclusive of three to five positively stated overarching schoolwide social expectations that are posted and visible around the school, particularly in problem areas.

- **Teach and encourage prosocial skills and behaviors.**

Students should be introduced to and taught the schoolwide expectations, rules for specific settings, rewards and consequence system, and related interventions and supports. Staff should be trained on how to present expectations to students. On-going communication and collaboration with families and the community are very important.

- **Implement evidenced-based behavioral practices with fidelity and accountability.**

Interventions should be multi-tiered, include evidence-based programs or strategies, and increase in levels of intensity. The primary level plan, targeting all students, is the overall behavior management plan for the school. The secondary level plan is for a targeted student group or individual students who did not respond to the first level. The tertiary level plan is highly individualized for the few students who did not respond to the first two levels.

- **Screen universally and monitor student performance and progress continuously.**

The behavior management plan should include scheduled data collection and analysis to evaluate SWPBS outcome and plan future adjustments.

## **2. Determine school capacity.**

It is important to assess and develop the school's capacity to implement a comprehensive program. Key questions include:

- What are the schoolwide social expectations, routines, etc.?
- Who at the school has the ability to both firmly hold students accountable *and* support them as they attempt to adjust to the program?
- What are the procedural expectations of teachers for managing in-class behaviors?
- What manageable recourse do teachers have to address a pattern of disruptive behavior or extremely disruptive and disrespectful instances of behavior "in the moment" (i.e., immediate referrals to a dean/counselor/administration, in-school "timeout room," and criteria for reentry)?
- What is a specific, realistic, and manageable continuum of interventions and supports?
- What is the specific, realistic, and manageable continuum of consequences for patterns of disruptive in-class behavior?
- How will the selected interventions and supports be intermittently monitored and adjusted as needed. What data will be used? Who is responsible for collecting and analyzing the data? What are the mechanisms for notifying and collaborating with students' parents or guardians in the process? How early and how often? Who is responsible for notifying and collaborating with parents?
- What are the thresholds for more severe consequences and losses of privilege for students who exhibit persistent patterns of disruptive behavior and/or extremely disruptive or disrespectful behaviors?
- What outside resources are available to support students and families struggling with issues that are affecting students' behavior, but well outside of the school's capacity to address?

- What privileges and incentives (i.e., extracurriculars, athletics, fieldtrips, social activities) are currently in-place that can serve as points of leverage? Do more need to be identified or developed?
- How are students who actively exhibit established desirable social behaviors formally recognized?

The aforementioned questions can fuel the school's needs-sensing and aid in identifying gaps in awareness and understanding that might be addressed through professional development. In addition, South Brooklyn Community High School's monthly community meetings can be a forum for discussion of issues regarding student behavior.

### Positive Behavior Support in the Classroom

- Arrange classroom to minimize crowding and distraction.
- Provide explicit classroom routines and directions that are linked to schoolwide routines and directions.
- Post three to five positively stated expectations. Teach and reinforce them.
- Provide frequent acknowledgement of appropriate behaviors.
- Give students multiple opportunities to respond and participate during instruction
- Actively supervise classes during instruction.
- Ignore or provide quick, direct, explicit reprimands/redirections in response to inappropriate behavior.
- Incorporate multiple strategies to acknowledge appropriate behavior (points, praise) linked to schoolwide strategies.
- Provide specific feedback in response to social and academic errors, and correct responses.

Classroom Management: Self Assessment Revised. Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. University of Connecticut. (April 7, 2006). Retrieved from [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org) June 2011.

## A Case Study on the Schoolwide Application of Positive Behavior Support in an Urban High School

**A rare three-year participatory case study of schoolwide PBS implementation in an urban high school yielded the following findings.**

- **The school required three years to implement the plan.** The school required three academic years to approach full implementation across five domains of the plan: defining expectations; acknowledging expectations; setting up a system for responding to behavior; making data-based decisions; and managing the plan. Two other domains—teaching behavioral expectations and gaining district support—were more difficult to achieve.
- **Behavioral outcomes were positive.** After three years, the school saw significant reductions in the total number of referrals per student per year, incidents of serious disobedience of authority, the number of daily referrals, and school uniform violations. As a result, less administrative time was spent on discipline, and instructional time in the classroom increased. In addition, the action researchers identified a number of challenges to implementation that they considered unique to high schools:
  - It was important for this adolescent population that rewards/acknowledgments be meaningful and “cool,” but not “babyish.”
  - There was a need to overcome staff resistance to directly teaching behaviors rather than reinforcing them. This points to the need for a system in which teaching of these behaviors occurs on a regular basis and is integrated into the curriculum. Understanding the training, priorities, and needs of high school teachers is also critical.
  - Owing to the complexity and sheer size of many high schools, initial implementation may take longer and require more energy and effort during the initial data gathering efforts and development of partnerships than at other levels. Moreover, a perfect stepwise assumption should not be made regarding the succession of interventions.
  - Because of the sheer numbers of staff and students that are within a large high school, developing and agreeing on a consistent policy for a range of issues requires sustained effort.
  - Another challenge was the modification of the discipline referral form to meaningfully assess and track behaviors. Modifications included making it easier for teachers to provide data about the location and time of referrals, and asking teachers to hypothesize about the students’ possible motivation for their behavior (e.g., gaining attention).

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Bohanon, H., Fenning, P., Carney, K. L., Minnis-Kim, M. J., et al. (2006). Schoolwide application of positive behavior support in an urban high school: A Case Study. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 8(3), 131–145.

## Recommendation 2: Student Engagement

**Expand upon existing schoolwide processes and mechanisms (e.g., essential components of the school) for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, reduce truancy, enhance participation, reduce boredom, and increase strategies to increase student achievement in academic and social skills.**

This recommendation builds upon certain existing essential components of South Brooklyn Community High School that impact student engagement, which include the youth development<sup>7</sup> approach to instruction (e.g., engaging, hands-on activities and assignments that have real world relevance), a personalized small school environment, and the integration of advocate counselors in the school setting. For example, co-interpretation participants acknowledged that, although advocate counselors carefully monitor student attendance, the school must remain vigilant in addressing student attendance or any truancy issues. The school is in a unique position in that pertinent information is obtained through the intake process and advocate counselors who serve as attendance monitors and liaisons with teachers. These factors may allow the school to impact students' personal issues that may interfere with student engagement or a student attending school regularly.

### LINK TO RESEARCH

Student engagement provides an essential foundation for increasing achievement levels. “Educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards” (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 2).

In a report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which was taken by 42,754 students, Yazzie-Mintz (2010, pp. 2–3) describes a spectrum of student disengagement—from temporary boredom to dropping out—and attributes this disengagement to the following: uninteresting and irrelevant material, work being too challenging or not challenging enough, no interaction with the teacher, not liking the school or the teacher, not seeing value in the assigned work, adults at the school not caring about the student, safety and bullying concerns, schoolwork not connecting to real world or real work, feeling little connection with any adult at the school, teacher favoritism, ineffective instruction or instructional methods, feeling unheard and not responded to or respected, and feelings of frustration and disconnection.

When students feel marginalized or alienated at school, they lose interest and become disengaged. Yazzie-Mintz (2010, p. 17) concludes that there are considerable gaps not only in academic achievement but also in student engagement and suggests the integration of engagement data with academic data as a useful tool for school planning and decision making.

Factors that would increase student engagement, according to the surveyed students, (Yazzie-Mintz, pp. 18–23) are as follows: supportive and nurturing schools; increased individualization; classes that are more fun as well as interactive, experiential, and relevant;

<sup>7</sup> Description of the youth development component is based on the GSS manual at <http://www.goodshepherds.org/images/content/1/1/11027.pdf>. Accessed on May 14, 2011, pages 18–19.

### QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Center for Mental Health in Schools (Website)

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Website)

<http://www.casel.org>

Illinois Learning Standards for Social/Emotional Learning (Website)

[http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social\\_emotional/standards.htm](http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm)

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility (Website)

<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>

a schoolwide belief in relationships, respect, and responsibility; coaching and modeling for the staff of good student engagement practices; reflection on and response to student ideas; adult understanding of student skills, strengths, and interests and having these qualities inform instruction; experiential learning and interdisciplinary studies; and opportunities for students to work together on finding solutions to real-world problems and issues.

Students need to build a sense of self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2003) in an inclusive environment in which they can achieve competence. They should be engaged in authentic and personally meaningful work, using a culturally relevant curriculum with an appropriate level of difficulty and challenge—one that requires problem solving (Voke, 2002). In addition, Gordon (2006) suggests the recognition and leveraging of individual student strengths and recalls a typical student response from the 2005 Gallup Youth Survey (pp. 77–80):

“My teacher understood the way that I learned and worked. I was never criticized for my ideas or feelings, but I was met with questions and ideas that could change the way I looked at something.” —Jessica, 17, Waverly, IA (p. 77)

A rubric titled the “Partnership Guide for Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, pp. 185–187) offers a list of engagement activities (establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning and engendering competence) and assessment tools. The Executive Summary of *Engaging Schools* (National Academy of Sciences, 2003) provides 10 recommendations for reaching “the goals of meaningful engagement and genuine improvements in achievement” for high school students (pp. 4–9). Easton (2008) discusses engaging struggling high school students by using experiential learning, essential questions and a whole-child perspective in curriculum development, instructional strategies, professional development, and teacher evaluations. “If there is a secret to motivation in the classroom,” says Gordon (2006, p. 80), “it lies in the interaction between the teacher and the student.”

“There is a growing consensus that whatever else is done, schools must also become places where it is easier for students and teachers to know one another well and for students to connect to the school and its purposes,” says Sergiovanni (2006, p. 58). “Schools in other words must be caring and learning communities.”

## **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: WHOLE-SCHOOL PRACTICES**

Incorporating student engagement practices should be part of the annual school improvement process. Whole-school practices such as building a safe and supportive school environment are part of this process. Students can learn effectively only in environments in which they feel safe and supported and where their teachers have high expectations for their learning. Implementation of a schoolwide positive behavior plan that is based on pro-social values, social competencies, incentives, and positive peer relationships will lay the foundation for classroom-level work and must occur before the classroom work can begin.

The following guidelines were developed by the Victoria Department of Education and Early Child Development (2009) for implementation of effective student engagement strategies across whole schools at the building level:

**1. Create a positive school culture.**

This aligns with South Brooklyn Community High School's core principles of building community and healthy relationships and its essential component of a small personalized school environment. Teachers and staff must continue to recognize students as individuals by acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of the student population. The school must find ways to connect students to school (through clubs, sports, student council, and other activities) so they develop a sense of belonging. The school should provide transition programs and practices at different stages of schooling that will minimize anxiety, increase resilience, and ensure that students develop a readiness to enter their new environment and make successful transitions between year levels.

**2. Encourage student participation.**

The school can continue to give students a voice at the required monthly school community meetings. Giving students a voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it also is about having the power to influence change. Incorporating meaningful involvement of students means validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education to improve the school.

**3. Proactively engage with parents/caretakers.**

Keys to successful partnerships with parents/caretakers and families include strong two-way communication, volunteer opportunities, curricula-related collaborations, shared decision making, community-based partnerships, and efficacy building.

**4. Implement preventative and early interventions.**

The school needs to determine how it will intervene in a consistent manner when students exhibit disengaged behaviors—specifically poor attendance and anti-social behaviors. Prevention strategies should target the whole school and should be designed to reduce any risk factors that may contribute to attendance or behavioral issues.

**5. Respond to individual students.**

The school should build upon the Student Plan for Success<sup>8</sup> sheet developed by the school which contains anecdotal records of student academic progress and how learning needs are being addressed. This document can be expanded to include specific information regarding how individual students who have behavioral issues will be supported. It is imperative to coordinate early intervention and prevention strategies that utilize internal as well as external support services in order to identify and address the barriers to learning that individual students may be facing.

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<sup>8</sup> This document, provided to auditors by the school, details academic issues that individual students may be experiencing and how they are being addressed.

South Brooklyn Community High School can continue to build upon the structures that it has in place (e.g. monthly community meetings). This can make it easier to develop positive learning relationships, including small learning communities, alternative scheduling, team teaching, teaching continuity, school-based enterprises, and professional learning communities.

## **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: CLASSROOM PRACTICES**

Keeping middle school students focused and engaged in the classroom is quite a challenge amid the entire complex changes—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social—that they experience during this phase of their lives. Youth ages 11 to 13 years (a period sometimes called the “tween” years) are characterized by a growing desire to think and act independently while at the same time caring deeply about being accepted by peers and being part of a group (Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

### **1. Relate lessons to students’ lives.**

A relevant curriculum relates content to the daily lives, concerns, experiences, and pertinent social issues of the learners. Teachers can gain insight into student concerns by taking periodic interest inventories, through informal conversations, and from classroom dialogue (Learning Point Associates, 2005). These issues and topics then can be incorporated into units, lesson plans, and further classroom discussions.

### **2. Make the learning authentic.**

Newmann et al. (1995) advocate for authentic instructional practices to engage learners and offer three criteria for authentic instructional practices: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school.

The first criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate the construction of knowledge by acknowledging students’ existing understanding and experience. Identifying students’ preconceptions and initial understanding is critical to the learning process. “If students’ preconceptions are not addressed directly, they often memorize content (e.g., formulas in physics), yet still use their experience-based preconceptions to act in the world” (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 5).

The second criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate disciplined inquiry through structured activities; the inquiry process is critical to the construction of knowledge (Marzano, 2003; Newmann et al., 1995). This process consists of building on the learner’s prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding, integrating new information, and using the knowledge in new ways.

The third criterion for authentic instructional practices is value beyond school (Newmann et al., 1995). This criterion may entail connecting content to personal or public issues as well as the demonstration of understanding to an audience beyond the school. Examples of such activities include writing persuasive letters to the city council to advocate for a skate park, interviewing community elders for an oral history project, or communicating the impact of a development project using scientific concepts.

### 3. Give students choices.

Finally, providing choice in middle-level classrooms will engage learners. Providing opportunities for students to select a topic or text acknowledges young adolescents' need to exercise more decision-making power. Giving students ownership in their learning process increases motivation and keeps interest levels high. Students who have a strong interest in a specific subject may wish to pursue an independent project. These projects may be used as a differentiated way to explore the curriculum. (See "Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom.")

#### Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom

Following are some suggestions for showing regard for adolescent perspectives. These ideas are based on the work of Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth (1997) and Tomlinson (1999).

- Independent projects will extend learning beyond the curriculum in the textbook and develop enthusiasm, commitment, and academic skills in addition to allowing students to develop deeper relationships with subject matter.
- "Brainstorming with...children on what kinds of projects they could do may also generate ideas teachers may never have thought of on their own" (Smutny, 2000, p. 7).
- Surveying students' interests in the beginning of the school year will give teachers direction in planning activities that will 'get students on board' from the start.
- Surveying again at key points during the year will inform teachers of new interests that develop as their students grow.
- Interest centers are designed to motivate students' exploration of topics in which they have a particular interest. They are usually comprised of objects that students can explore, such as shells, leaves, maps, or projects, and are centered around broad topics. Students can choose from the menu and note their choices accordingly. Teachers decide how many items on the menu (minimum) that each student is required to complete. This is adjusted to meet instructional needs on an individual basis.

## **Examples of Student Engagement**

**The National Center for School Engagement (2007) compiled the following examples of student engagement best practices from school districts across the United States:**

**Factor in Math Fun:** *In Oswego, New York, a Factoring Fan Club was created for 9th grade math students to get them excited about factoring, to keep it fresh in their minds, and to be “good” at factoring. Source: Oswego School District, Oswego, NY*

**Celebrate Pi Day on 3/14:** *This event was created to help students enjoy math by offering a fun-filled day honoring pi. Events included a pie eating contest, measuring the diameter and circumference of round objects to calculate pi, and other games related to circles. Source: Independence School District, Independence, VA*

**Mobilize Community:** *Community Now! is an asset-based community development tool of the Connection Institute. It uses asset-based language and planning to bring the community together to discover what values the community shares as a whole. It then works to mobilize community members around its assets and shares values to become proactive in its planning rather than reactive. Source: Kittery Children’s Leadership Council, Kittery, ME*

**Collaborate with Higher Education:** *In Mesquite, Texas, a local college delivers 3.5 hours of continuing education courses (“Educational Opportunities”) to truant students and their families. The curriculum includes the negative consequences associated with poor school attendance and the positive consequences associated with scholastic achievement. Discussion of transition from high school to college is discussed and a tour of the college is provided. Source: Dallas Independent School District, TX*

**Offer Incentives:** *As a reward, a lunch-time soccer game is organized for students with good attendance by school staff. Source: Summit School District, Frisco, CO*

**Support Positive Behavior:** *Jacksonville School District adapted the principles of Got Fish? (a book to build business morale) for the classroom. Principles include: being there, play, choosing your behavior, and make their day. Students are recognized when observed “living” each of the principles. Source: Jacksonville School District, Jacksonville, FL*

**Create Student-Generated Classroom Rules:** *In Eugene, Oregon, students create a list of classroom rules to be followed. Each student signs off on the rules and is held accountable by fellow students. In addition, they developed their own “honor roll”, in which students are recognized for doing their best, following directions, and not talking out more than 3 times a day. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR*

**Facilitate Positive Student-Teacher Connections:** *Some schools in Oregon encourage students to sign up for a one-on-one lunch with their teacher during school time. The teacher uses this time to get to know the student and offers them encouragement and praise. Children and youth benefit when their teachers demonstrate that they care about student well-being in addition to academic success. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR*

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## Recommendation 3: Differentiated Instruction

**Develop learning activities and implement instructional strategies that differentiate instruction for all students, including improved teacher familiarity with individual education plans and the use of information from IEPs.**

### LINK TO RESEARCH

Differentiation of instruction means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs of students. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual. Differentiating does not mean providing separate, unrelated activities for each student, but does mean providing interrelated activities that are based on student needs for the purpose of ensuring that all students come to a similar grasp of a skill or idea (Good, 2006). Teachers can differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment according to the readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of their students (Tomlinson, 2003).

Qualitative and meta-analysis research indicates that students in differentiated classrooms achieve better outcomes than students in classrooms without differentiation (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Tomlinson et al., 2003). When instructional materials are differentiated to meet student needs, interests, and readiness, academic gains increase (Lou et al., 1996). Students in classrooms that are effectively differentiated have been found to have achievement gains on state tests in reading and math (Brimijoin, 2001; Tieso, 2005).

While there is no single set of strategies that constitutes differentiated instruction, Hall, Strangman, and Meyer (2011) have identified several guidelines that are noted to help educators form an understanding and develop ideas around differentiation.

- Instruction moves beyond minute details and facts, and is concept-focused and principle-driven.
- Several elements and materials are used to support instructional content.
- “Flexible grouping is consistently used.”
- “Initial and on-going assessment of student readiness and growth are essential.”
- Learning tasks are interesting, engaging, and challenging.
- Student products allow for “varied means of expression, alternative procedures,” and provides “varying degrees of difficulty.”

### IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

School leaders can support the effective implementation of differentiation within and across classrooms by providing time for teacher planning for differentiation and execution of plans; providing ample and suitable materials for academically diverse classrooms; and developing and otherwise ensuring access to differentiated curriculum.

#### QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

*A Look At Differentiating Instruction, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement* (Publication)

[http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter\\_NL\\_Feb09.pdf](http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Feb09.pdf)

*A Teachers Guide To Differentiating Instruction, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement* (Publication)

[http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter\\_NL\\_Jan07.pdf](http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Jan07.pdf)

## 1. Focus on foundation.

**Embed professional learning opportunities around differentiation within the school's annual professional development plan.** Schools that have moved to schoolwide implementation of a differentiated approach to instruction caution that the process is both complex and not something that can be implemented quickly. The success of efforts to differentiate instruction will ultimately lie with teachers. However, some teachers will lack either the necessary knowledge or skills (Gregory, 2003). To help teachers prepare to make the change, schools should provide resources on differentiated instruction and time for teachers to discuss them. Teachers may need training in strategies—such as curriculum compacting and learning centers—that can be used to support differentiation (Protheroe, 2007).

## 2. Analyze student needs.

**Identify which assessments will be given and how assessment data will be used for purposeful student grouping.** Gaining an awareness of student knowledge and understanding is a key component of successful differentiation. Assessments can be formal or informal. These can be schoolwide, universal screening tools, content-area diagnostics, or assessments to gauge students' knowledge and familiarity with a topic prior to the start of a unit of study. Decide which assessments teachers will use to accurately measure their students' strengths, weaknesses, and interests and provide guidance for next steps in instruction. Results should be tracked and used to design instructional strategies tailored to student needs.

### Structures for Differentiated Instruction

**One choice for differentiated instruction is tiered assignments.** “Tiered assignments are designed to instruct students on essential skills that are provided at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. The curricular content and objective(s) are the same, but the process and/or product are varied according to the student's level of readiness” (The Access Center, 2005, p. 2). An example of this in practice in an English language arts class could occur when “students with moderate comprehension skills are asked to create a story-web. Students with advanced comprehension skills are asked to re-tell a story from the point of view of the main character” (The Access Center, 2005, p. 2). Both sets of students are working toward the objective of reading and comprehending literature at grade level.

**Another structure for differentiated instruction is flexible grouping.** “Students work as part of many different groups depending on the task and/or content. Sometimes students are placed in groups based on readiness, other times they are placed based on interest and/or learning profile. Groups can either be assigned by the teacher or chosen by the students. Students can be assigned purposefully to a group or assigned randomly. This strategy allows students to work with a wide variety of peers and keeps them from being labeled as advanced or struggling” (The Access Center, 2005, p. 3). In practice “The teacher may assign groups based on readiness for phonics instruction, while allowing other students to choose their own groups for book reports, based on the book topic” (The Access Center, 2005, p. 3).

The Access Center: Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8. (2005). *Differentiation for reading*. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved June 24, 2011, from [http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training\\_resources/documents/Reading%20Differentiation%20Brief.pdf](http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/documents/Reading%20Differentiation%20Brief.pdf)

### 3. Design instruction.

**Design lesson plans, including instructional strategies, learning activities, and assessments that incorporate differentiation.** Once all stakeholders have a deep understanding of what differentiated instruction is and what it is not, the current structure of the curriculum and its supports or lack of supports for differentiation, and student needs, teachers should work collaboratively to design and embed instructional strategies into the curriculum that support differentiation. They should also identify opportunities to infuse different parts of the curriculum with differentiated instructional strategies.

#### IEP Resources for More Information

The following resources can be reviewed and referred to regarding the use of IEPs to improve instruction:

Assessment, Individual Education Plans (IEP), Rights and more... (Website)  
[http://stevens\\_mom.tripod.com/id15.html](http://stevens_mom.tripod.com/id15.html)

A Guide to the Individualized Education Program (Website)  
<http://ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html#closer>

*Creating a Quality IEP: Individualized Education Program Manual* for NYCDOE (Publication)  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/916F2D1C-8D46-4635-A988-45D9CC13F561/0/CreatingaQualityIEP.pdf>

*Implementation Plan for the Reform of Special Education: A Two-Year Phase-in Process Focusing on the Advancement of Student Learning and Achievement* for NYCDOE (Publication)  
[http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/C2D033F2-14F1-4D6B-9950-70ACAD7E2768/77537/SpecialEd2YearPlan\\_Winter2010.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/C2D033F2-14F1-4D6B-9950-70ACAD7E2768/77537/SpecialEd2YearPlan_Winter2010.pdf)

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