Back on Track

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

HOW TO HELP STRUGGLING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REACH COMMON CORE STANDARDS

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

By Lili Allen and Cecilia Le

MAY 2014

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.

www.jff.org

Jobs for the Future's **Back on Track Through College Designs** represent the next generation of schools, programs, and pathways that reengage youth and young adults who are off track to graduation or disconnected from school and work. The three-phase Back on Track model—Enriched Preparation, Postsecondary Bridging, and First-year Support—puts youth and young adults on a path to achieving their postsecondary and career aspirations. The Back on Track model is one of JFF's Early College Designs, which blend high school and college in a rigorous and supportive program.

jff.org/backontrack

The New York City Department of Education is the largest system of public schools in the United States, serving about 1.1 million students in over 1,700 schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lili Allen, director of Back on Track Designs, leads JFF's work with communities that are building portfolios of quality pathways to graduation and postsecondary success for off-track and disconnected youth. Allen also directs JFF service delivery and product development addressing effective strategies to re-engage and support these populations. Her publications include *Back on Track to College: A Texas School District Leverages State Policy to Put Dropouts on the Path to Success* and *Bringing Off-Track Youth into the Center of High School Reform: Lessons and Tools from Leading Communities*.

Cecilia Le, former senior project manager at JFF, developed publications and products that capture the key approaches designs that connect young people to postsecondary success. She also designed college transition and completion strategies and coached youth-serving organizations in building pathways for young adults disconnected from education and work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jobs for the Future is grateful to the dedicated principals, teachers, and counselors at the schools in the Transfer School Common Core Institute who shared their work with us, and in particular the staff at East Brooklyn Community High School, Harlem Renaissance High School, Liberation Diploma Plus High School, and The High School for Excellence and Innovation. Staff in these schools opened their doors to us and generously shared their emerging work so that we could capture early lessons for New York City and for the field. We are especially grateful to principals Pat McGillicuddy (East Brooklyn), Nadav Zeimer (Harlem Renaissance), Tyona Washington (High School for Excellence and Innovation), and April Leong (Liberation Diploma Plus).

We are grateful to Vanda Belusic-Vollor, Debbie Marcus, and Lynette Lauretig at the New York City Department of Education, for their commitment to the most struggling students in New York City and in particular for Lynette Lauretig's vision for this population's success that drove the development of the Transfer School Common Core Institute. We also thank the staff of Eskolta and reDesign, and in particular Michael Rothman and Antonia Rudenstine, who were key advisors in the development of this paper, read early drafts, and helped with drafting sections of the text. In addition, Eskolta and reDesign coaches shared their experiences with us and helped us understand the nuances of their deep work of coaching schools.

This paper was prepared by Lili Allen and Cecilia Le of Jobs for the Future. Carol Gerwin, Adria Steinberg, and Sophie Besl assisted with editing. The paper was designed by Rochelle Hickey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **5**

PART 1. DESIGNING A CRUCIAL COMBINATION: INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT *AND* SCHOOL-WIDE CHANGE **8**

Theory of Change 8

Design Elements 9

PART 2. BUILDING A COHERENT PROGRAM: FIVE CRITICAL AREAS OF WORK **12**

Leadership of the Academic Program 12

Development of Common Core-aligned Sub-skills 12

Implementing Common Core Instructional Shifts 13

Fostering Successful Academic and Personal Behaviors 13

Changing Feedback, Assessment, and School-wide Conversations about Learning 14

PART 3. LESSONS LEARNED **16**

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FORWARD **33**

INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, the New York City Department of Education has been a national leader in high school reform and improvement, demonstrating that it is possible to boost both student achievement and graduation rates. The city's aggressive implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) provides a new challenge and a new opportunity.

Developed with the recognition that global, social, and economic imperatives create a new urgency for a better-educated workforce and citizenry, the Common Core aims to prepare all U.S. students for college and careers. The standards identify the knowledge and skills that all students should know and be able to do in English language arts and math in each grade from kindergarten through high school. In most states, they represent a significant leap in expectations. In practice, this means schools must intensify their efforts to ensure that every student can demonstrate competencies that only a fraction of them have yet attained. Educators anticipate that the transition will be difficult for many current high school students, whose first decade of education was organized around meeting different sets of standards. But for the young people who have struggled to meet the previous—and generally less demanding—standards, achieving Common Core proficiency will be particularly daunting.

This report documents the pilot phase of a promising NYC professional development initiative designed to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to prepare the city's most vulnerable high school students to master the Common Core. These students, who are considered far "off track" because they have fallen far behind or previously dropped out, attend "transfer schools," which are designed to reengage youth who are over-age and lack the credits to graduate. The NYC Transfer School Common Core Institute—sponsored by the district's Office of Postsecondary Readiness, with coaching from partners Eskolta and reDesign—began as an eight-month pilot during the 2012-13 school year. Twelve of the city's fifty-two transfer schools participated. The program expanded to a full year in 2013-14 and five additional schools joined.

Students typically arrive at transfer schools with significant gaps in skills and knowledge and without critical behaviors that promote academic success. While the initiative centers on this specific population, the Department of Education understood early in its development that the Institute could ultimately yield lessons for schools across the city. "We have students in our regular high schools who are not prepared for the level of work required by the Common Core," said Vanda Belusic-Vollor, executive director of the Office of Postsecondary Readiness. "The students who are furthest from meeting the standards need our help, and it is our job to draw lessons from this initiative for school leaders and teachers across the system."

Because thousands of high schools across the country grapple with educating students who enter unprepared for high-school-level work, lessons from the Institute will be applicable to a broad cross-section of schools and students striving to reach Common Core standards nationwide.

This paper is organized into four parts. The first describes the Institute's design, which addresses support for high-need high school students through the crucial combination of instructional improvement and school-wide systems change. The second section explains the five areas of work that participating schools embraced during the Institute's pilot phase (and continued in 2013-14) to begin to align their curricula to the Common Core. The third section details the major lessons learned during the pilot, with case studies highlighting the experiences of individual schools that illustrate each lesson. Last, we look ahead to future plans for the Institute and the potential impact of the work going forward.

FAST FACTS: NYC TRANSFER SCHOOLS

- 52 schools
- Designed to reengage students who have dropped out or have fallen behind in credits
- Ages 15-21 (varies by school)
- Typically 150-300 students per school
- Entrants have completed at least one year of high school
- Full-time regular schedule Monday-Friday
- Support for academic and personal behavior goals
- Access to tutoring, Regents prep, extracurricular activities
- Develop college and career plans
- Graduates earn a traditional high school diploma

Source: NYC Department of Education

FAST FACTS: TRANSFER SCHOOL COMMON CORE INSTITUTE

- 12 schools in 2012-13 pilot
- 5 additional schools in 2013-14
- Designed to build capacity of transfer school teachers and leaders to prepare students to master Common Core State Standards
- Coaching partners: reDesign (redesignu.org) and Eskolta (eskolta.org)
- Sponsored by NYC Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness

Source: NYC Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness

THE STAKES

The stakes for students, schools, and teachers will grow as each of the 45 states to adopt the Common Core decides how and when to assess student mastery of the standards. New York has been rolling out the first state Regents tests aligned with the Common Core in the spring of 2014. Students graduating in 2022 will be the first required to pass the tests at a college- and career-ready level. Across the country, individual states are making their own determination about whether—and when—Common Core proficiency should be a high school graduation requirement. They are also deciding whether to tie results to teacher evaluations and school accountability systems.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION

Office of Postsecondary Readiness, New York City Department of Education

The NYC Department of Education launched the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation in 2005 with a groundbreaking analysis of the district's over-age, under-credited students. The study documented their outcomes in traditional high schools and in transfer schools (schools designed specifically for this population) and outlined a strategy for dramatically improving their graduation rates. The DOE's systemic reform strategy resulted in the aggressive development of an expanded portfolio of transfer schools targeting over-age and under-credited students. Multiple Pathways is now housed in the Office of Postsecondary Readiness and continues to serve as an engine of innovation for the DOE, with lessons learned about preparing the most vulnerable youth for postsecondary success informing its work overall.

PART 1. DESIGNING A CRUCIAL COMBINATION: INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT *AND* SCHOOL-WIDE CHANGE

Part of the power of the NYC Transfer School Common Core Institute is its unique design. Most Common Core professional development efforts focus on discrete tasks, such as developing Common Core-aligned units, developing protocols for looking at student work, or designing performance tasks. The Institute goes further by providing comprehensive support for Common Core implementation, focusing simultaneously on both instructional improvement and school-wide change. Coaching partners reDesign and Eskolta specialize in these areas, respectively, and both work with each participating school. The Office of Postsecondary Readiness provides oversight, coordination, and technical assistance.

Theory of Change

Capacity-building initiatives often focus either on changing teacher practice or on changing a school's systems and structures. Yet as a decade of high school reform has shown, significant shifts in teaching and learning are unlikely to take hold without attention to the broader systemic and structural shifts needed to support instructional change. Likewise, solely emphasizing changes in the academic infrastructure will not necessarily result in measurable improvement in classroom instruction.

Institute designers believed from the outset that both kinds of change are crucial to helping off-track students meet Common Core standards. This entails focusing not just on what happens in the classroom, but also on the leadership and infrastructure that fortify teaching and learning. Schools must consider the quality of their data analysis, grading policies, and articulation of competencies, as well as their culture, vision, and language used to discuss student progress and goals. It is equally essential to examine the effectiveness of more concrete tools, from writing rubrics to Internet access.

“In the Transfer School Institute, we’ve figured out how to do individualized coaching of teachers while pushing the systems at the school level forward at the same time,” said Lynette Lauretig, Senior Director of Multiple Pathways in DOE’s Office of Postsecondary Readiness. “Doing one without the other [means] we would have systems in place without teachers prepared to teach differently, or teachers more prepared without the school-wide systems in place to support and reinforce their efforts.”

Design Elements

The Institute’s work begins each fall with school-based strategic planning to establish goals and create an action plan for the upcoming year. School staff and leaders work intensively with coaches throughout the year to meet their goals. The coaching organizations, Eskolta and reDesign, are longtime district collaborators, with broad and deep experience in supporting schools that serve the city’s most vulnerable students. The schools also participate in multiple cross-site meetings where teachers and leaders share best practices and learn from one another’s experiences. The Office of Postsecondary Readiness works with schools and coaches to help refine and codify best practices as they emerge.

Early school-based planning

The Institute’s pilot phase launched with a search for schools that would be dedicated to pursuing both instructional improvement and school-wide systems change. In order to determine which schools would be the strongest candidates, the selection process established two requirements.

First, the application asks each school to commit to a Common Core implementation plan in at least three of five key areas of work: leadership, development of competencies and sub-skills, teaching and learning, feedback and assessment, and academic and personal behaviors. (Part 2 of this paper describes the five areas of work in detail.)

Second, the application asks each school to identify a team of staff members and administrators that would advance the Common Core work during the pilot, and then spread the work across the staff. In the Institute’s second year, this group became known as the Common Core Acceleration Team (CCA team).

After a school is admitted to the Institute, the reDesign coach and Eskolta consultant matched to the school schedule a half-day planning meeting with the principal and the CCA team. During the session, the school's principal, staff, and coaches build out an implementation plan based on the school's goals and objectives that were identified in the application.

Customized, site-based coaching

Customized coaching for each school is the centerpiece of the Institute. All participating schools receive a total of 25 to 30 days of coaching from reDesign and Eskolta. Their work is grounded in an inquiry approach designed to identify promising practices, provide and co-create tools and materials, try out new approaches, and support instructional improvement through one-to-one intensive coaching. Schools receive coaching support that builds on the Common Core foundational work that they have already undertaken. Each school plans and executes a project that moves students toward meeting higher standards in a specific area of learning.

The reDesign organization focuses on instructional change and leadership development. The coaches support the entire teaching and learning process, including unit and lesson planning, in-class modeling and co-teaching, classroom observations, and professional development. Simultaneously, Eskolta facilitates systems change within schools. Coaches help staff to customize and pilot new practices for data collection and analysis, new processes for providing students with constructive feedback, and new policies and tools to support grading and assessment. Because two different organizations provided coaching to each school, coaches were careful to coordinate their work, conferring regularly to assess and strengthen the interplay between their support services.

Cross-site learning opportunities

In order to share practices and decrease the isolation school staff often experience, the Institute hosts multiple cross-school learning sessions throughout the year—two full-day Saturday sessions for CCA teams, several sessions for school leaders, and a series of content-based sessions for teachers and counselors. The year concludes with a conference for all of the transfer schools in the city. Through these opportunities, Institute schools develop a cross-site "community of practice" that lives beyond the Institute itself.

During the pilot phase, designers made modest demands on school leaders and teachers regarding cross-site learning, in recognition of the challenge of coming together after long work days and weeks. Initially, cross-site sessions were limited to a fall kick-off meeting and two full-day Saturday sessions. However, the convenings proved to be extremely popular; all schools had representatives at all of the meetings, sending leaders, teachers, and, in some cases, community-based partners. (More than 90 leaders and staff members, representing the 15 Institute schools, attended the second-year's Kick-Off Session in fall 2013.)

As a result, Institute planners expanded cross-school learning opportunities in the second year, adding the leadership series and the content-based working group sessions for teachers and counselors:

- **Leadership Series:** During the pilot phase, leadership cross-site sessions were held twice. But the pilot revealed that leaders were eager to meet across schools more frequently to think together about how to address the particular challenges of effectively implementing the Common Core with far off-track students. In the Institute's second year, leaders have had up to five opportunities to collaborate with each other.
- **Working Groups:** During the Institute's second year, teachers and counselors have had the opportunity to join a group that meets three or four times during the year to dig deeply into a specific aspect of their practice. These sessions were not part of the pilot phase. Groups are facilitated by Eskolta and reDesign coaches, and explore two of the Common Core "Instructional Shifts:" Writing from Sources and Staircase of Complexity; as well as "Providing Students with Feedback and Developing Academic and Personal Behaviors."

The Institute continues to culminate with the city's annual Transfer School Conference, hosted by the Office of Postsecondary Readiness and Eskolta. The conference is the largest cross-school learning opportunity for practitioners serving this population. Nearly 650 educators from across 34 schools attended at the end of 2012-13. Prior to the conference, Institute teachers worked with the district, Eskolta, and reDesign to develop conference sessions on their Common Core alignment efforts. They presented 12 workshops, exploring topics such as "Scaffolding Argumentative Writing to Align with the Common Core" and "Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Questions: An Introduction to the Question Formulation Technique."

Laboratory for emerging best practices

The Institute was designed with the knowledge that there were no existing efforts to establish a comprehensive Common Core alignment strategy for struggling students. The national discourse about the Common Core has focused squarely on the challenges for on-track high school students. While realistic in their aspirations, the Institute designers have been committed to using this opportunity to dig deeply into the work of developing new practices and refining existing ones to ensure that far off-track students are not left behind in the new effort to prepare all young people for postsecondary opportunities. "They revise as they go," Lauretig said. "The whole point is to get it right."

The goal is for the Institute to serve as a laboratory that uncovers and codifies emerging best practices to address the most significant gaps in skills and knowledge facing off-track students. In addition to gleaning information from site visits, cross-site meetings, and the Transfer School Conference, the Office of Postsecondary Readiness surveys participants, analyzes progress, and documents the work.

PART 2. BUILDING A COHERENT PROGRAM: FIVE CRITICAL AREAS OF WORK

It became clear during the Transfer School Common Core Institute's pilot phase that in order to create a coherent academic program that enables all students to meet Common Core standards, schools must engage in five interrelated areas of work. These areas of work incorporate both instructional and school-wide systems reform, and illustrate the complexity of the changes required for any school to move toward Common Core implementation.

Leadership of the Academic Program

School leaders must place themselves at the center of the work of organizing a school's academic program around the Common Core. It is their responsibility to drive the shift in mindset required for teachers and counselors to embrace the mission of preparing all students, especially those struggling in school, to graduate with the skills necessary for college and career success. Leaders must understand and articulate how the Common Core differs from current standards. Often, leaders must reexamine the allocation of time, human, and fiscal resources within a building in order to maximize support for staff.

For example, schedules may need adjustment in order to ensure that teachers have common planning time to identify sub-skills to target within the Common Core. As teachers begin to redesign curriculum units and modules around the new standards, the school may need new texts or other curriculum resources. As teachers find better ways to track student learning and provide useful feedback, the school may need to revise or acquire new tools. Leaders also must determine how students should receive supports to develop academic and personal behaviors that are important for success after high school. Leaders may engage the school's community partners, such as youth development organizations, in order to integrate them as essential players in students' academic and social development. Without a school leadership's full engagement in Common Core implementation efforts, there is enormous potential for teachers to be stymied in their efforts to shift teaching, learning, and assessment practices across the school.

Development of Common Core-aligned Sub-skills

Building a Common Core-aligned program requires a deep understanding of the standards, which are complex and call for students to undertake several different kinds of thinking at the same time. One of the most powerful ways for teachers to gain facility in working with the standards is to parse out the smaller skills, or sub-skills, within a given standard. For example, Common Core Writing Standard 1 asks students to "Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence." Teachers working with students on this standard will need to help them learn a variety of sub-skills: to read closely, analyze, find evidence, take notes, evaluate topics, and put

together a logical argument. The process of deconstructing the standards in this way helps teachers determine how much scaffolding their students will need.

Identifying the sub-skills within particular standards is careful, detailed work that takes considerable time. It generally should be undertaken with the goal of building consensus among a group of teachers. Some standards are relevant across content areas. Often, teacher teams from several departments need to work together to identify the sub-skills they will address in their courses, taking into account the need for students to apply these skills to increasingly complex and discipline-specific texts.

Implementing Common Core Instructional Shifts

The Common Core calls for several key “instructional shifts,” including regular practice with complex texts and vocabulary, using evidence from texts, and building knowledge through nonfiction. Once teachers have begun to identify sub-skills, they can start to plan lessons that will support students in learning them, both as individual skills and as clusters of related skills. Teachers must organize instruction to enable students to continually build their background knowledge and academic vocabulary through a series of investigation and synthesis activities. Units and modules must be constructed to provide students with multiple opportunities to practice and master the sub-skills, building toward demonstration of proficiency. Ultimately, classrooms must be flexible, individualized places, where students are provided with ample time to work actively with the material.

This area of work is especially challenging for teachers of the most vulnerable students, because so many young people arrive in high school lacking foundational background and content knowledge, particularly in science and social studies. Shifting the focus of lessons from content alone to content and learning strategies turns the focus of lesson planning to the skills students need in order to reach Common Core standards. Teachers then modify instruction to emphasize active practice and application of the sub-skills, establishing a foundation for students to become increasingly independent as they undertake academic tasks.

Fostering Successful Academic and Personal Behaviors

All young people require certain social-emotional skills and behaviors not only to master Common Core standards, but also to succeed in the college and professional environments they will join after graduation. These academic and personal behaviors include: metacognitive skills that enable students to reflect on their learning process; qualities that support resilience; strategies to engage and persist in challenging work; and mindsets that suggest scholastic success is not only possible with the application of effort, but also valuable for meeting life goals.

These behaviors and mindsets are especially critical for youth who have struggled in school in the past and may not have recognized the need for them. They can be developed in a variety of

ways: through regular, frequent meetings with counselors or advisors, where students have opportunities to reflect on their progress; through classroom practices that provide structures for students to take responsibility for their own learning; and through feedback that helps students understand how they learn and how to self-regulate as they work through complex, challenging tasks.

COMMON CORE ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL BEHAVIORS

Persistence	Persistence is needed to support long-term commitment to educational goals through a positive mindset and self-efficiency.
Engagement	Engagement supports achievement in school by increasing students' social-emotional connection to the environment and their social confidence.
Work Habits/ Organizational Skills	Strong work habits and organizational skills support successful navigation of college and careers.
Communication/ Collaboration Skills	Communication and collaboration are essential skills in successful college and career transitions.
Self-regulation	Self-regulation is key to resiliency. Students must develop coping skills, self-control, and confidence to work through challenges.

Source: New York City Department of Education, 2011

Changing Feedback, Assessment, and School-wide Conversations about Learning

For students who previously received failing grades and need to accelerate learning significantly in order to graduate college ready, it is critical that educators complement work on instructional shifts with a reimagining of report cards. Using new kinds of report cards can help students better understand the skills underlying Common Core mastery and the possibilities for growth, while enabling teachers to adjust instruction based on information that had never before been available. This typically involves two key shifts. The first is moving away from numeric grades and toward grades that provide clear feedback on the degree to which students have demonstrated "proficiency" on specific skills aligned to the Common Core. The second is moving away from assessment based on classroom-level metrics and toward assessment based on interdisciplinary rubrics aligned to skills that apply across classes. For example, several transfer schools are implementing outcomes-based assessment by identifying a common set of outcomes, or competencies, that students should be able to demonstrate across classrooms. In an outcomes-based system, there is no failure; students take the time they need to meet the criteria, receiving a variety of supports and multiple opportunities to demonstrate their competency.

These shifts enable staff to have more constructive conversations with students about their performance than they could have had previously. Students and teachers begin by discussing the specific academic skill at issue ("How can you work toward proficiency in developing a claim and counterclaim?"), rather than an abstract number to increase ("How can you improve your grade from a 60 to at least 80?"). Focusing on skill development also helps teachers to identify patterns in learning and growth. Simple online tools make it easy for teachers to enter rubric-aligned grades and then review patterns in a student's skill acquisition in and across classes and over time.

TRANSFER SCHOOL COMMON CORE INSTITUTE

Participating Schools

Joined in 2012-13 (Cohort 1)

- Harlem Renaissance High School
- High School For Excellence And Innovation (Manhattan)
- Bronx Haven High School
- Bronx Arena High School
- South Brooklyn Community High School
- Olympus Academy (Brooklyn)
- East Brooklyn Community High School
- Liberation Diploma Plus (Brooklyn)
- Metropolitan Diploma Plus High School (Brooklyn)
- North Queens Community High School
- Independence High School (Manhattan)
- Bronx Academy High School

Joined in 2013-14 (Cohort 2)

- Murray Hill Academy (Manhattan)
- Edward A. Reynolds West Side High School (Manhattan)
- Mott Haven Community High School (Bronx)
- Brooklyn Frontiers High School
- West Brooklyn Community High School

PART 3. LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout the Institute's pilot phase, school leaders, teachers, and coaches reported a number of early lessons emerging from their work. The lessons described below represent the four most important themes—lessons that continue to drive the work going forward. We follow each lesson with a case study illustrating how that lesson played out in an individual school.

Lesson #1: Leaders must craft whole-school plans for implementation of the Common Core, while simultaneously establishing a narrow focus for the work to proceed.

One of the biggest challenges of implementing the Common Core is that the new standards deeply affect every aspect of a school's academic program, yet attempting to revise a whole program at once is inadvisable. During the pilot phase, Institute schools faced choices in numerous areas between going broad by trying to engage in school-wide overhauls, or going narrow by tackling only one aspect of a bigger issue.

Before we investigate specific choices the schools made, it is important to consider one choice that Institute schools did not need to make themselves: whether to seek deep change in just a few classrooms or to seek broad change across the school. As noted above, the Institute was intentionally designed to address both types of change at the same time. A key lesson from the pilot phase is that the dual focus on instructional coaching and academic infrastructure proved to be an effective combination to begin the multi-step process of changing an entire school. Instructional coaching had a narrow focus, targeting a small group of teachers in order to build a few experts in each school. Rethinking the academic infrastructure benefitted from the broad perspective gained from bringing together educators from multiple classrooms to reflect on and improve school systems.

As school leaders and staff progressed in their work, they realized that striking a balance between narrow and broad change made sense in deciding several key issues, including the extent of staff involvement, the skills on which to focus, the new teaching strategies to learn, and the aspects of the academic infrastructure to redesign.

The first critical choice for Institute schools was deciding who would "lead" the work. Principals, the official school leaders, often faced a steep learning curve with regard to the Common Core because most national and local efforts have been focused primarily on classroom teachers. Compounding the challenge was the fact that their learning is typically a much more solitary endeavor than it is for teachers, because of the inherent isolation of the role. To support principals in addressing these issues, the Institute required schools to identify a team of staff members and administrators (the CCA team) that would be responsible for advancing the work as a pilot, and later sharing the work with the full staff. Principals who were most effective in moving the work forward also intentionally involved themselves in meetings of this pilot group, keeping informed even when they could not do more in-depth work because of the pull of competing priorities. In this way, the Institute encouraged a single focus through the pilot team

and intentional involvement of the principal, but did so with the expectation that the initial focus would enable expansion over time.

Office of Postsecondary Readiness staff, along with reDesign and Eskolta coaches, met with each principal at the beginning of the Institute's pilot to map out an action plan, paying careful attention to the role of the school's leadership. Across the schools, there was significant variation in the roles that leaders crafted for themselves.

For instance, at Bronx Haven High School, Principal Lucinda Mendez worked with the reDesign coach to develop an observation tool and then undertook teacher observations with both the coach and the assistant principal. At the same time, the Eskolta coach was working with two teacher leaders and two counselor leaders to revise the school's grading policy and assessment strategy. This team decided to develop new rubrics that would allow the full staff to assess students' participation, academic behaviors, and an initial aspect of their academic work: making an argument. The team working on the grading policy kept Mendez informed of their progress so that she could strategize with them about the eventual rollout across the school.

At Harlem Renaissance High School, Principal Nadav Zeimer identified the English language arts department head to lead the work, as she would soon become the school's instructional assistant principal. The ELA Department became the pilot team, working to develop summative performance tasks that could be used as exemplars for the full school as the rollout expanded in year two.

Another choice that Institute schools faced concerned the skills on which to focus. The most effective schools were those that identified five or fewer skills that they would focus on across multiple disciplines. For example, at Bronx Arena High School, a competency-based school that had previously identified over 50 competencies to use to track student progress, the Institute work focused on narrowing down the list to a few "high-leverage" competencies that could guide teaching and learning across classrooms. At Metropolitan Diploma Plus High School, teachers worked with Institute coaches to identify three key writing skills (using evidence, revision, and making claims and counterclaims) and one academic behavior (self-regulation) to guide their work.

Each school also had to decide on which areas to focus instructional change. Institute teachers started working to align their curriculum and lessons to the Common Core before the state launched new tests aligned to the new standards. In a traditional four-year high school, teachers could have begun changing lessons to align with the Common Core standards for incoming ninth-graders, while continuing to prepare older students to meet current state standards and pass existing tests. But in a transfer high school, where students enter at various stages in their high school careers, teachers had to find a way to "shift" their curriculum and instruction for all students without leaving them unprepared for current academic demands. Rather than try to change every aspect of their pedagogical practice, Institute coaches tended to focus on just a few. For example, teachers at Metropolitan Diploma Plus High School used "writing-on-demand"

tasks to help students build certain writing skills. At South Brooklyn Community High School, Institute participants worked extensively on strategies to scaffold student persistence to help students engage independently and from multiple entry points in the work.

Under any circumstances, these instructional shifts would be a significant challenge. But in order for schools to fully implement the Common Core, they also need to review and fine-tune their assessment systems and academic infrastructure—what they assess, how they assess it, the ways they use data to identify gaps in student learning, the feedback they give to students and families about student progress, and how they record and report student grades. This was a fourth choice schools faced, and once again Institute participants found greater success when they focused on one specific aspect of the work than when they attempted to redesign the entire academic infrastructure. At Bronx Haven and at the High School for Excellence and Innovation, participants focused on redesigning the school's progress reports, while at East Brooklyn Community High School, they focused on revising their outcome rubrics. The scope of the work was both broad and deep, and each piece required careful attention and planning, coupled with extensive professional learning.

In the pilot phase of the Institute, principals received support at their schools. In the second year, the Institute formalized its supports with the establishment of the Leadership Series, consisting of five opportunities for principals to meet, share practices, and explore solutions to some of the challenges of implementing the Common Core specific to schools whose entire population has significant gaps in background knowledge, skills, and academic and personal behaviors. The goal is to begin to codify leadership practices that support successful Common Core Implementation with students who are far off track.

CASE STUDY #1: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TO DRIVE WHOLE-SCHOOL CHANGE

East Brooklyn Community High School

East Brooklyn Community High School has long used an extensive distributed leadership model. Principal Patrick McGillicuddy has authorized departments and teacher leaders to make significant decisions about the curriculum, the outcomes-based assessment system and, now, the academic program's full alignment to the Common Core. Simultaneously, he has invested time and coaching resources in developing the skill set of what he calls the "Instructional Coaching Team," composed of himself, the assistant principal, a lead teacher, and the lead special education teacher. The experience of this school highlights how narrowing its focus—by working with a small team, on select skills—can increase its impact.

Participation in the Institute is allowing the principal to leverage both his Instructional Coaching Team's skills and his department heads' capacity, while continuing to allocate significant resources to the ongoing development of both groups. Perhaps most significant about East Brooklyn is the leaders' clear stance as learners: they assume they do not have the answers to this work, but rather that solutions will be found through a combination of their own ingenuity and their close collaboration with reDesign and Eskolta coaches. During the pilot phase of the Institute, almost every teacher in the school was impacted by the work, either through coaching undertaken by the Instructional Coaching Team, or through their department work on outcomes-based assessment.

Through participation in the Institute, the Instructional Coaching Team was able to meet biweekly for several hours, supported by their reDesign coach. The team had three goals: to further develop a culture of literacy at the school, to strengthen the team's capacity to support teachers in their work, and to support departments as they refine, organize, and map the school's course-based outcomes with the Common Core.

Throughout the pilot phase, the Instructional Coaching Team's weekly meetings began with a two-hour learning period that included ongoing book studies and case study discussions of the teachers the team was actively supporting. Each group member committed to ensuring that other work would not interfere with this time. After the learning session, the reDesign coach spent the bulk of the day shadowing different members of the Instructional Coaching Team as they did coaching work with teachers (e.g., observations, model teaching, post-observation discussions, and unit/lesson

planning sessions). The role of the reDesign coach was to observe Instructional Coaching Team members, provide feedback, model coaching practices, and co-facilitate the coaching session with the teacher.

At East Brooklyn, individual teachers develop course outcomes and related outcome rubrics for every course they teach. While Institute coaching was underway across the school, department heads were collaborating to identify a discrete set of specific Common Core-aligned “outcomes” (also known as “competencies”) that could be the focus of teaching across classrooms. East Brooklyn students receive course credit when they demonstrate that they meet the criteria established for at least seven of a course’s ten outcomes. At the start of the Institute, these outcomes varied across classrooms and were aligned to the New York State Standards, not the Common Core. Through their work in the Institute, department heads—working closely with Eskolta’s coach—analyzed outcomes from every course in the school to identify where similar outcomes appeared in courses multiple times across and between departments. Several Common Core-aligned outcomes appeared repeatedly across disciplines: analyzing/evaluating; oral communication/presentation; and revising/improving work. Working with their coach, department heads reviewed existing rubrics for high-frequency outcomes and relevant language from Common Core standards. The department heads then developed a common language for the high-frequency outcomes to be used in every course at the school, setting the stage for teachers and students to share clear, consistent, high expectations.

Lesson #2: Coaches and leaders need to identify the goals, beliefs, and routines already in place in their school and organize Common Core work around one of these.

Institute partners intentionally connected their new work to previous efforts to build higher-level student skills at the schools. This approach has parallels in the classroom practice of "building background knowledge"—identifying the key existing knowledge a student brings to a lesson and finding ways to build upon that knowledge in order to engage them and lead them into new learning. This may seem counterintuitive, given that the Common Core is often described as a dramatic shift in expectations for schools and students, requiring a radical rejection of efforts preceding them. The reality, however, is more nuanced. At virtually all of the schools participating in the Institute, leadership and varying numbers of faculty had already developed ways to emphasize critical-thinking skills in their planning, instruction, assessment, and feedback to students. There was already a recognition that if they did not arm students with the skills to be questioning thinkers, they were not preparing them for life after graduation.

Olympus Academy offers a prime example. The school had developed a weighted point system for gauging the rigor and grading of student assignments. With an Eskolta coach, the school started a research study to examine the consistency with which points were assigned by different teachers and the implicit expectations for student learning in different courses. After reviewing the report, school staff were more prepared to rethink their prior practices and consider the level of rigor required from their point system. As happened across many of the schools, after this level of respect and trust was established, participating staff were able to review their prior practices more honestly in light of the expectations of the Common Core and begin to revise them accordingly. They redefined skills to meet the expectations for metacognition and high-level thinking; refined their teaching strategies to scaffold the engagement with texts and problem solving; and modified their tools and procedures to better capture the thinking and learning expected.

Similarly, South Brooklyn Community High School already had systems in place to give frequent feedback to students on their academic progress. Rather than introducing the Common Core in a vacuum, at this and similar schools, Institute coaches began by looking with teachers and counselors at the skills that had already been highlighted in assessments and progress reports and lining these up against the language and expectations in the Common Core. The group was thereby able to arrive at a rubric that grew from their practice while also meeting Common Core expectations.

At many schools, educators had already investigated the reasons why students struggle with reading and writing, and sought to use student conferences to help them reflect on their challenges. In these schools, Institute coaches explored how to shift the emphasis of conference conversations to focus explicitly on the Common Core-aligned skills with which students were struggling. For example, at Bronx Haven High School, students previously were graded on whether they participated in class, but not on specific participation skills. The school reframed “participation” as a challenge of engaging in speaking and listening skills, with further details drawn from the Common Core. This effectively added rigor to the definition of participation while aligning it to the Common Core; counselors now confer with students on their progress in developing these skills, such as posing questions that promote good class discussion and contributing positively to a collegial class environment.

In other Institute schools, faculty already consistently used templates for planning units and lessons. While these templates may not have been aligned with the Common Core, they served as a meaningful starting point. Institute coaches could then offer samples of other templates and compare them to the ones already being used, so that educators could identify ways to synthesize the old and new approaches.

Institute coaches often spent their initial four to eight weeks in a school seeking to understand and build upon the language, concepts, and materials that staff were already using in their practice. In this sense, at the school level, there was no radical disruption of practice, but instead an incremental movement. This decision to spend time layering onto what already

existed did not lessen the impact of the work, but instead appears to have enhanced it by enabling school staff to more readily and deeply engage with reform efforts than they would have otherwise. Now, in the second year, the Institute is attempting to standardize this process without depersonalizing it, so that coaches can learn about their partner schools as quickly as possible and move forward with projects that build upon their experience.

CASE STUDY #2: A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR THE COMMON CORE

Harlem Renaissance High School

At Harlem Renaissance High School, the work of the Institute was brand new for teachers and the principal. The 2012-13 school year marked the first time the school was working with either of the two partner coaching organizations—reDesign and Eskolta. Nonetheless, the school's story demonstrates the value the two new coaches placed on building upon existing reform efforts. Both organizations carefully collaborated with teachers to build upon the framework and development that had begun in prior years.

Only one year before the pilot phase, Harlem Renaissance High School was at risk of closure. The school was spared after city data showed the school had made marked improvement. But Principal Nadav Zeimer knew things were turning around well before the city published school progress reports. He had instituted alternatives to suspension and integrated video projects into the curriculum. He also meticulously studied the school's own real-time data system, which includes daily anecdotal logs, weekly grades, and disciplinary incidents.

After starting work with the Institute, one major change that Harlem Renaissance launched was a new school-wide grading policy that focuses on culminating assignments aligned to the Common Core. The culminating assignment for each unit determines 40 percent of student grades, and teachers must reorganize their lessons to help students successfully tackle these. Zeimer chose his team of four English Language Arts teachers to engage deeply in and refine this work, and eventually lead its spread to the rest of the school.

When the reDesign coach began working closely with the four ELA teachers in late fall of 2012, the ELA team had recently begun using a framework called Habits of Effective Reading to tackle students' low literacy skills. One important part of the coach's work was to help the team examine the common language that they were already comfortable using, and make connections to the Common Core. Within the Habits of Effective Reading were building blocks to help students move toward proficiency on the Common Core writing standards. In beginning to organize teaching and learning around the Common Core, the teachers grappled with how to connect what they were already doing to the language of the Common Core in a way that felt authentic, and to construct the necessary scaffolds for students to achieve those standards.

“Because we’re starting with culminating assignments based on the Common Core, it’s becoming more natural as we map backwards from those,” said Annie Tomasiewicz, the lead teacher who coaches other teachers schoolwide. “At times it has felt like we’re speaking in a way where we’re dropping all these buzzwords. Learning to speak the language is the hard part. Part of it is being patient as we get better and better at aligning to Common Core.”

To help make that transition, the school’s Eskolta coach cross-walked the Habits of Effective Reading with Common Core standards so that teachers could see where they overlapped, and where language and objectives were similar. He worked with the teachers on developing “showcase units”—model units that embody effective teaching and scaffolding and can serve as exemplars for other teachers. For each teacher’s showcase unit, the coach used the culminating assignment to develop a skill-based rubric that served as a springboard for teachers to develop formative assessments that test the skills within the rubric. In this way, Harlem Renaissance has taken a more individualized approach than other schools, developing a Common Core-aligned rubric specific to each unit.

Harlem Renaissance had intended to roll out the work of the Institute to the entire school in the second year, but staff concluded by the end of the pilot phase that they needed to move more slowly and build upon the strong foundation they had set. The focus for 2013-14 has been built on the pilot phase: developing formative assessments, using data to inform instruction, and giving students the type of feedback that allows them to work toward their learning goals.

Lesson #3: Align to the standards first and only then reach toward meeting the highest levels of the standards. To do this, educators must be able to meet students where they are, but have a strong plan for supporting them in getting to where they need to be.

Implementing the Common Core poses a particular challenge for schools working with large groups of over-age, under-credited youth. The vast majority of these students have academic skills and background knowledge far below the level assumed by the new high school standards, and their struggles to master academic and personal behaviors that are crucial for learning compound the problem. Transfer schools offer far off-track students the chance of a fresh start, an opportunity to experience success in high school. A large part of the success of transfer schools is the creative combination of a strengths-based approach and an extensive safety net: central to the transfer school model is the belief that one has to meet students “where they are,” identifying their strengths and leveraging these to address their gaps.

As schools begin to implement the Common Core, the need to maintain this approach is clear. However, educators are also aware that emphasizing growth, in the absence of a discussion of the standards, can set students up for unrealistic expectations regarding their level of preparation. Unfortunately, the gap between the skills of most transfer school students and the skills required to graduate college and career ready is wide. The challenge here is two-fold. First, the work of preparing far off-track students for graduation under the Common Core is considerably more daunting for educators and students than under the previous standards. Second, helping students become aware of how far away they are from meeting the new standards has the potential to sabotage their already fragile sense of themselves.

Widely touted strategies for implementing the Common Core are built on the assumption that students can read "challenging texts independently and closely," if given the opportunity. However, a large proportion of over-age, under-credited high school students are not equipped to do this, whether they are enrolled in transfer schools or traditional high schools.

Institute schools are a laboratory for addressing this challenge. For example, as teachers select literary and informational texts to read with students, they emphasize complex texts. However, they are deeply cognizant of the fact that students become better readers when they primarily read at their “lexile” level, which poses some challenge but not great difficulty. (At transfer schools, student lexile levels are typically what the Common Core considers appropriate for fourth- to eighth-grade students.) If transfer schools focus only on complex texts that are too challenging, the reading capacity of many students will not increase. Lead teachers at North Queens Community High School were intensely focused on exploring this particular set of instructional challenges. Their reDesign coach assisted in their development of a sophisticated scaffolding tool, named the Learning Genome. The tool was crafted to provide practitioners in all text-based courses with extensive support in teaching students to effectively use a repertoire of independent learning strategies as they undertake reading, writing, and making meaning of complex texts.

A similar challenge exists in the sciences and social studies, where the Common Core assumes students have background knowledge on which to draw as they develop the skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis in relation to complex texts. For example, in a high school U.S. History course, students will typically explore the Administration’s role in the Cuban Missile Crisis. For a wide variety of reasons, transfer school teachers cannot assume that all of their students know where Cuba is or what the former U.S.S.R. was, let alone why Cuba and the U.S.S.R. would be siding against the United States in a two-week confrontation. Moreover, if students’ primary access to all of this information is through a complex informational text that explores the issues at a deep level, a majority of the students will be unable to undertake a meaningful close reading and analysis.

While the move away from rote memorization of content is something that many transfer school teachers embrace, their work with students has to be carefully calibrated, ensuring that analysis is strategically scaffolded so that students are not confronted with tasks so far beyond their

capacity that learning is compromised. As the Institute moves forward, several schools have begun to use the scaffolding tool developed at North Queens to support their development of units and lessons that help students use independent learning strategies.

In other schools during the pilot phase, coaches helped transfer school leaders and teachers to address the standards through a careful sequencing that went first to alignment and second to aspiration. For example, at Harlem Renaissance High School, work on alignment focused on taking standards that the school was already using for student learning and helping teachers to compare these to the exact language and ideas in the Common Core. Work on raising aspirations could occur afterwards when teachers looked at their newly aligned standards and looked for the exactly matched level of the Common Core. For example, at one school it was only after teachers finished the alignment that they realized they had been scoring as "proficient" work that would meet the seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade standards, given that students had started well below these levels.

The fact that the Common Core provides a sequence of learning standards from kindergarten to twelfth grade enabled teachers to accurately identify student levels even when they are far below high school. This helped teachers communicate individual learning goals to students in a way that did not necessarily tell the "grade level" of a skill, but did emphasize the amount they had to grow in order to eventually attain college readiness. Though they are treading carefully, teachers expressed confidence that continuing to be transparent with students would be essential to helping them meet Common Core standards. “It’s showing the students where they’re expected to be and not hiding it from them, even if they’re far from it,” said Zena Wouadjou, an ELA teacher at Harlem Renaissance High School. “You tell them… the level where they are expected to be so they’ll be more receptive to your teaching. You’re being honest with them about what’s expected, and showing them that this [work] is not just something you made up: it’s leading somewhere concrete.”

For this reason, in the Institute’s second year, some schools and coaches are focusing on the idea of "learning continua" that can refocus conversations away from whether a student’s skills are at "grade level." Rather, teachers and students can discuss what skills a student has exhibited and what the next developmental step is, whether that is early in a sequence (and therefore reflective of lower "grade levels") or later in a sequence (and therefore closer to graduation standard).

CASE STUDY #3: USING DATA TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION

High School for Excellence and Innovation

The experience of the High School for Excellence and Innovation offers a clear case of meeting students where they are while building the scaffolding to help get them where they can be. Eskolta and reDesign coaches worked together to help the school's pilot team review their own existing expectations for student learning against those articulated in the Common Core. The work proceeded from alignment to aspiration as educators saw that they would need new strategies to move student learning to higher levels.

The High School for Excellence and Innovation serves a population that Principal Tyona Washington calls "the forgotten students"—those who leave middle school already over-age and significantly behind grade-level skills. The school opened in far upper Manhattan in 2009 as a high school designed to help these students make a successful transition and stay on track toward a diploma. Because 43 percent of the students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities, a third of the school's teachers are dually certified in a content area and special education, and the school uses an integrated, collaborative team-teaching model. With the partnership of East Side House Settlement, a community-based organization, the school offers a wide range of youth development supports and activities to help students reflect on past experiences, expand their skills and strengths, and adopt successful academic and personal behaviors. After students participate for a few months, Washington says she sees a transformation in them: "What I hear over and over from them is, 'I didn't believe anyone cared about me.'"

Eskolta and reDesign have collaborated with the school for years, developing and implementing a school-wide focus on literacy improvement. Washington viewed the Institute as a powerful opportunity to broaden the school's work by developing a strategy for collecting and analyzing data on students' mastery of the Common Core standards to inform instructional planning in a much more robust way. Washington explains: "The content is not driving what we're doing here; it's the development of the skills." Because Washington and her department heads knew students were not strong argumentative writers, they determined that their Common Core work would begin with a focus on the skills of making claims and counterclaims, finding and using supporting evidence, and writing strong conclusions.

The school's Instructional Team has long held a weekly meeting, and during the Institute they became solely focused on Common Core alignment. With support from

their Eskolta coach, the Team's work began with an examination of the relationship between the Common Core standards and their own expectations for student learning. The process was sobering, as they discovered that while their units were aligned to the standards, the standards students were meeting were more appropriate for seventh graders. Undaunted, the team took this as an opportunity to refine the feedback they give to students, examining and revising their rubrics to allow them to give students specific information about each of the skills they were working on. They began by constructing their own language to make the standards more meaningful to themselves and their students, and to think deeply about the skills and proficiency levels. Then they mapped their work with the language in the Common Core to see where their own language could be revised to better align.

It quickly became clear that the shift to the Common Core would require the development of a new common language and accompanying tool that would enable teachers across the school to track growth on the continuum to proficiency for each of the articulated skills. "There were definitely a lot of patterns," said science teacher Stefanie Valsamopoulos, after she had input data on her students for the first time. "Kids were not hitting the standards on the same things."

This is powerful information for teachers; however, in many places this might not lead to a shift in instructional practice. At the High School for Excellence and Innovation, and other Institute schools tackling this particular challenge, reDesign coaches support teachers in exploring effective practices to address the variation in student proficiency. "This support helped me think about how to modify my instruction—I wasn't scaffolding and modeling enough, said Valsamopoulos. "I came up with a way to teach claim and counterclaim differently, because that's where students were weak. They weren't able to make a claim on their own without a sentence starter. They were picking facts that had nothing to do with what the author was saying, and they couldn't connect evidence to the claim. I changed the way their graphic organizer looked to scaffold that better."

Throughout this process, the school's reDesign coach regularly reviewed the Eskolta data tool on the trends in student learning to find patterns in student performance on specific skills. She saw teachers' development of increasingly challenging performance tasks as the inflection point between the reDesign and Eskolta work: "In the past, just one grade was given to students, teachers didn't chunk out the various skills that students need to acquire, and assessments weren't necessarily aligned with what was being taught." Now teachers are designing performance tasks by backwards mapping from Common Core aligned-skills, and assessing student progress multiple times each trimester.

Lesson #4: Shifting to the Common Core is a process that requires an explicit focus on metacognition not only from students, but also from adults.

One of the fundamental shifts the Common Core requires is an emphasis on the critical-thinking skills necessary for students to think deeply about the problems they are solving or texts they are reading. To do this effectively, students themselves need to be able to engage in "metacognition"—that is, the ability to think about their own thinking and articulate how they are learning. In order for students to develop the habit of metacognition, the adults teaching them must do the same.

The demands on students are clear. For example, students who struggle to identify why they believe that one side or another of an argument is more convincing will doubly struggle to construct an argument in which they offer both a claim and a counter-claim, as expected by the Common Core. The Common Core emphasize skills like research, revision, and using evidence—skills that require reflective thought and a healthy willingness to question one's own thinking. Many students in transfer schools have experienced such self-questioning in the past as a sign of weakness, confusion, or failure. The Institute addressed this by helping students shift their practice to set aside time and set up structures for metacognition. For example, many teachers at Institute schools focused in the pilot year on how they could bring questioning into the classroom, not simply by engaging in more higher-order questions, but by helping students to analyze the types of questions they were asking in order to reflect on this capability.

Both reDesign and Eskolta coaches supported practitioners in engaging in practices that would support students' use of metacognition. reDesign, working with teachers on planning and in the classroom, helped teachers introduce learning strategies that both modeled and asked students to articulate their thinking. Eskolta, working with cross-classroom teams, helped devise methods to introduce skills and give feedback to students in a way that offered explicit opportunity to reflect on their performance in relation to them. This combination—reflection inside and outside the classroom, reflection on one's own learning and on one's own progress as a learner—can yield a crucial synergy between pedagogical practice and routine school systems around feedback and assessment.

Adults need to reflect on their learning as well. At East Brooklyn Community High School, Principal Patrick McGillicuddy explains that the Leadership Team Coaching sessions emphasized three general approaches to supporting teachers, in addition to providing specific pedagogical strategies: "First, stopping and asking teachers to articulate what they are learning from the coaching sessions and how they can apply it to their practice. Second, asking teachers to reflect on facilitation of the coaching sessions to provide feedback on how effective they felt the coaching sessions were. And third, using a constructivist method to review pedagogical concepts with teachers, rather than just telling, lecturing, and reviewing the concepts."

Across the Institute, the one-on-one work of reDesign coaches with teachers has emphasized explaining and reflecting on instructional choices. This, in turn, has helped teachers become

more facile at modeling their own thinking for students. Simultaneously, Eskolta coaches, working with groups of teachers and leaders, would facilitate inquiry processes for looking at existing rubrics, assessments, or student work, and question the reasons for their specific designs and what they could learn from them. (*See case study below.*)

Finally, many Institute participants recognized that metacognition was critical for students to engage in the skills that are foundational to those that are enumerated in the Common Core. Skills such as keeping oneself organized or arriving to class on time prepared to learn require a high degree of metacognitive awareness. These skills, which the NYC Department of Education has labeled as “academic and personal behaviors” are not explicitly named in the Common Core but are nonetheless central to the development of transfer school students who have been disengaged from school in the past. For example, at Metropolitan Diploma Plus, a rubric for self-regulation drew attention to students’ ability to manage their time and schedule. This opened the door for conversations between staff and students and suggested questions they could ask them to encourage reflection on their own behavior.

CASE STUDY #4: DEVELOPING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF PROFICIENCY THROUGH A FOCUS ON STUDENT WORK

Liberation Diploma Plus High School

At Liberation Diploma Plus High School, the Institute work began in earnest in January of 2013. The story of the school's experiences serve as a window into the critical role metacognition plays in the Institute. First, it can be seen in the inquiry structure that the schools and its reDesign and Eskolta coaches used for teachers to reflect on the work. Later, it can be seen in the skills teachers are asking students to practice as they work on restating math problems in their own words and articulating their thought processes in ways they had not before.

All New York City transfer schools are small, but Liberation Diploma Plus High School has fewer than 200 students and only 10 teachers. This close-knit school community in Coney Island rallied after Hurricane Sandy flooded the school's lower two floors. Other schools battered by Sandy relocated temporarily, but Liberation students and staff stayed put and started cleaning. By the end of the year, little evidence of the former wreckage was visible, and Liberation applied the same zeal to ensuring that students leave on graduation day ready to face college and the challenges ahead.

Principal April Leong characterized the Institute as an opportunity to give teachers the space to focus on the population they serve, how they can align their work to the Common Core in a way that is authentic to the transfer school context, and what additional scaffolds they will need to develop. Before the year began, Leong and Assistant Principal Bruce Gonzales identified the competencies they would focus on: making claims and counterclaims for ELA, and word problem analysis for math.

A major vehicle for the work at Liberation is an inquiry cycle in which Gonzales and a core team of teachers meet weekly to assess and discuss student work around a specific topic, and then share their insights with department members. The school's work in the Institute has strengthened the inquiry culture, providing teachers with better clarity about what they are looking for in student work, and why.

Structuring inquiry around student work has been a critical step, because the work revealed a lack of consensus among teachers about appropriate standards for proficiency. What one teacher considered proficient was considered "weak" in another teacher's eyes. Ultimately, the staff realized that they were unsatisfied by the quality of their assessment tasks, as well as the quality of students' products. The collective study

of student work developed buy-in for the Common Core. Leong remarked: “You don’t create a different idea of proficient to make kids feel better. That’s the whole point of the Common Core. People have different ideas of what proficient looks like for different kids, and we have not been truly honest about and accountable for that.”

In response to this new awareness and understanding, the staff developed rubrics that would support them in assessing the quality of their tasks and student work products.

Liberation provides an interesting example of different approaches to rubric creation and their trade-offs, since the language arts team (including ELA, science, and social studies teachers) and the math team took somewhat different approaches to developing Common Core-aligned rubrics. For language arts, the Eskolta coach began by interviewing the teachers about what sub-skills they wanted to focus on in the claim/counterclaim rubric. The coach and teachers developed their own rubric with language from other rubrics and publicly available resources—including the language for claim/counterclaim embedded within the Common Core standard for argument. Then, seeing that the many items in the rubric had made it too unwieldy to be useful, they pared it back down to what they thought was essential. In math, the process was less formal—the two teachers owned the process and developed their rubrics from scratch, brainstorming the sub-skills and what they thought proficiency should look like, and then mapping that against the Common Core. As a result, they owned the process more completely, but it went more slowly. The rubric was still under development at the end of the pilot phase.

Leong created a level of accountability around the inquiry cycle that hadn’t existed before, clearly laying out expectations and asking participating teachers to sign memos agreeing that they would structure their teaching around the sub-skills to be studied in inquiry. The weekly inquiry cycle holds teachers accountable to teach each sub-skill, because they know their students’ work will be scrutinized on a specific day.

As the Common Core requires, Liberation’s math teachers have focused heavily on helping students develop problem-solving strategies and approaches. For every algebraic word problem, students now must restate the problem in their own words and then set up a system of equations. The new rubric requires students to write explanations of each step and justify why they did what they did. In class, students look at examples of other student work, assess whether it is correct, and analyze the approach used.

At first there was a lot of resistance, math teacher Jeff Stern said, because students were unaccustomed to writing in math class. “They wanted to be told the steps and

follow the procedure, not construct it," Stern said. "But now they are doing it. They are articulating their thought processes, even the students with very low skills."

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FORWARD

Now nearing the end of its second year, the Institute is still young, but there appears to be strong potential for more lessons to emerge that can inform the national, state, and district discourse about the Common Core standards.

For New York City, the Institute will continue to operate as a laboratory, encouraging the development and sharing of effective practices to support over-age, under-credited students across the system. The cross-site "community of practice" is providing a much-needed opportunity for practitioners to collaborate around urgent and significant work. Already, participating schools have signaled the importance of the Institute: all of the schools in the pilot phase applied for a second year in the Institute; five new schools joined the Institute; and participation in cross-site meetings has been extremely strong, with representation from all school leaders and their teacher teams.

The Transfer School Common Core Institute can function as a model to other districts. For those districts that have schools primarily serving over-age, under-credited students—such as alternative schools or GED programs—the lessons are directly transferable in the overall design of the initiative and the specific school-level work. But there are lessons here for any district with students entering high school underprepared for high school level work. Especially as the new Common Core-aligned assessments come on line, districts can look to the NYC Common Core Transfer School Institute to understand how the strategies emerging at the school and classroom levels can inform their work with all high school students challenged by the Common Core.