

Raising Expectations One School at a Time:

Themes and Implications from Interviews with School Leaders, Teachers and Students on New York City's 2013-2014 Citywide Instructional Expectations

Executive Summary

During the 2013-14 school year, Eskolta School Research and Design conducted an investigation into implementation of this year's Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) in New York City at three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. Four themes related to successful CIE implementation are explored here: the importance of efforts on the part of leadership to streamline and integrate the CIE into ongoing work at the school, the influence of a coherent instructional focus, the centrality of teacher teams, and the ways in which schools selectively chose and adapted new curricular resources.

Developing Instructional Focus: Messaging and Support. When school leaders succeeded in streamlining new initiatives and integrating them into their school's existing structures and principles, teachers were less anxious about this year's work and more positive about their shifts in practice. In contrast, at schools where teachers felt more anxious and shifts were less evident, leaders said they were still developing their own understanding of the Common Core, thereby hindering their ability to streamline and integrate that expectation. In a related finding, leaders expressed frustration with outside support that focused on understanding general concepts without addressing the realities of implementation.

Maintaining Instructional Focus: Coherence and Impact. The coherence and impact of a school's instructional focus were positively related to teachers' perceptions of their work and shifts in practice. When impact appeared greatest, instructional foci bore two features. They were actionable – that is, they were tied to specific instructional strategies and support – and they were anticipated – that is, they were intentionally integrated into and built from prior years' work.

Teacher Teams: Structures and Supports. Teachers at schools with well structured teams reported being less overwhelmed and more positive about their work this year. At these schools, leaders carefully cultivated teacher leaders and provided modeling and guidance matched to clear expectations for planning and facilitation. Another important finding at these schools was the way in which teacher team leaders worked: these teachers led their teams through a proactive and clear set of responsibilities, pushing their teams to develop a common set of practices aligned to the school's instructional focus.

New Curricular Resources: Choices and Implementation. Alongside the City's established expectations, this year saw the release of City-selected curricular options in elementary and middle schools. The choice between adopting such curricula with little modification or engaging in more adaptation or independent development generally tracked to school level: the elementary schools in the group adapted materials less (and in the case of elementary math, generally adopted), middle schools adapted more, and high schools engaged in more independent development. In most cases, school staff highlighted the need to supplement curriculum to address existing skill gaps for students who were below grade level. Their ability to do so was notably affected by the quality of teacher teams. This work was also influenced by the fact that leaders, teachers, and students associated Common Core-aligned curriculum with high-stakes testing and described a negative impact of such testing on students.

Four Inter-locking Themes. The four themes of this report are tightly intertwined: schools with a strong instructional focus tended also to be schools with strong teacher team structures and leaders who worked hard to integrate new initiatives into existing work. This could be, in part, because these practices build upon and rely on each other (i.e., It is easier to integrate new initiatives if you have a strong instructional focus that has guided rich and diverse work at your school), and could be, in part, because they flow from a common focus on adult learning and development that supports a culture of collaboration. Differences in findings for the elementary schools in the study, in contrast to the middle and high schools, suggest that further investigation may be merited into the differential impact of the Common Core and Danielson *Framework* on schools serving the youngest students.

Methodology. Schools in this study were selected based on New York City Quality Review results that suggested moderate success in implementing the CIE while serving an unscreened population that qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch in numbers equal to or greater than the City average. Structured interviews with 40 teachers and nine school leaders were augmented with semi-structured interviews with 34 students and eighteen informal conversations with teachers looking at student work.

For further information, please access the [full report](#).