

## Citywide Instructional Expectations Case Study

### Guiding Questions

#### Overview

The 2014-15 Citywide Instructional Expectations help schools reflect upon and refine their practice in order to prepare all students to graduate college and career ready. One strategy for reflecting on practice is to examine how other schools have approached their work. These case studies offer insights on how teachers, school leaders and field support staff make decisions and engage stakeholders to develop school-wide practices to strengthen student achievement.

Case study schools have strong practices in building coherence among their culture, structures, and instructional core. The school communities voluntarily and generously shared their work in order to develop case studies that:

- Reflect authentic practice in a New York City school
- Include resources or artifacts from the school
- Connect to one or more of the 2014-15 Citywide Instructional Expectations components: Knowledge of Students, Instructional Focus, Collaborative Professional Learning

#### Guiding Questions: Instructional Focus

*From the 2014-15 Citywide Instructional Expectations:* An instructional focus is a school-determined priority that integrates multiple initiatives into a cohesive vision for strengthening student achievement. It is rooted in the school's needs and has a direct and evident impact on classroom practice. An instructional focus is developed after examining multiple sources of information, including the strengths and needs of students. It brings cohesion to a school's goal-setting process, comprehensive education plan, teacher and administrator development goals, and decisions about resource allocation. It is emphasized throughout the work of the school, including in school-wide professional development plans, the observation and feedback cycle, and communication with families.

1. What information in this case study suggests how the instructional focus is embedded in:
  - Structures
  - Professional Learning
  - Resources
  - School Culture
  - Classroom Practices
2. How has this school's instructional focus impacted students?
3. What decisions did the school leader make to support implementation of an instructional focus?
4. What questions does this study raise? What data or evidence would you like to add?
5. What practices does your school have in place that support the implementation of the instructional focus?
6. What systems and structures do you need to refine to better implement the instructional focus?

#### Potential Next Steps: Team activities and tools on the [Common Core Library](#)

- [School Reflection Protocol](#)
- [Instructional Focus Development Tool](#)

# Raising Expectations One School at a Time

**Myles Horton Academy:  
Relentless Questioning, Learning, Caring**

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## Introduction: Myles Horton Academy

Located on the fourth floor of a large school campus, Horton Academy (HA) is one of several small schools in the building. In its seventh year, over thirty HA staff members are responsible for nearly 350 students in ninth through twelfth grade. Of those students, about four-fifths qualify for free and reduced lunch, more than a quarter are Black, almost three-quarters are Hispanic, and a small number are White. About one-fifth of the student body receives special education services and about one-quarter are designated English language learners (ELLs), including 25-40 students who arrive during the year, mainly from the Dominican Republic.

The study highlights school leadership's approach to providing a coherent instructional vision, a culture that engages teachers through collaboration and shared learning, and the impact of this collaboration and support on co-teaching in the classroom. The three stories that comprise this case study each highlight different aspects of this work: 1- bringing a coherent instructional approach, 2- deeply engaging teachers, and 3- using collaboration to push higher-order questions for all learners.

## Bringing a Coherent Instructional Approach

Last year, Laura Elvin, who had been assistant principal at Horton Academy for several years, took over for the founding principal of the school. She arrived in the position knowing her top priorities would be to shift the school culture and provide more focus and support to faculty. Ms. Elvin feels the school has been able to make some positive changes. One teacher comments, "When I started here the school was a mess. It's been cool to be part of this significant shift, this change in expectations. Laura took over and she has done a lot to shift the attitude."

Having received a low grade on the school's Progress Report the year before, one of Ms. Elvin's first orders of business was to focus HA teachers on a clearer vision of good instruction than had existed in the past. She explains, "It's really important to focus on one or two things. We can't focus on too much at once." In trying to determine what that focus should be, Ms. Elvin realized perseverance could be the key to their students' success. "There was a gap between our expectation and the kids' motivation. We're raising the standards, we want them to meet the standards, and we don't want them to give up." This understanding led her to define Horton Academy's focus as, "Being Relentless." That overarching value has led to two guiding principles for the school, which Ms. Elvin posed to the faculty at the beginning of this year: 1- How do we leverage our core value of character to increase student achievement? 2- How do we increase rigor without leaving students behind? Attending to these two principles in combination with a focus on relentlessness has helped the staff to increase the level of rigor, the depth of student engagement, and the sense of strong school culture at Horton Academy.

As a way to practically address the guiding principles and also respond to the Citywide Instructional Expectations, Ms. Elvin then focused the faculty on two specific instructional goals: "developing higher-order questions and getting students to explain their thinking." Ms. Elvin believes they need specific structures and supports in order to enact the school's goals, and so, since the beginning of the year, the expectation has been for all classes to adhere to a consistent unit and lesson structure based on Understanding By Design (UBD). Specifically, Ms. Elvin has set the expectation that, in each class, regardless of grade level or content area, units be planned according to Big Ideas and Essential Questions, and that lessons be structured with a Do Now, Objective, and Guided Question. Students are provided with daily or weekly packets that include content, short answer questions, and opportunities to practice and/or demonstrate what they have learned that day.

Mr. Olinick explains that the packets help their students practice skills, such as annotating, that allow them to become more independent. Some students choose a Spanish packet, others work in English. He describes how he has been emphasizing Stop and Jots, short-answer questions that break up longer reading passages, and how this has "helped improve scores and grades; kids have more success with guided questions." For one teacher,

success lies in boosting students' confidence: "Our lowest performing kids are so used to failure. We create really scaffolded materials. Having kids form an opinion without being right or wrong, that's creating opportunities for success."

Ms. Elvin credits this consistent lesson structure, oriented around guided questions, with an increase in rigor and student voice in many classrooms of the school. "If you had come here a year ago, you would have seen primarily PowerPoint-centered teaching. We still have Power Points, but it's not the majority of the lesson. One teacher explains how she sees the instructional goals, "It should be the students who are doing the real thinking." Students are apparently feeling an impact as well. Two ninth-grade girls were overheard comparing Horton Academy to their middle school experiences. "The teachers really care about us here," one stated. "They get us to do the work. They get us to think."

The CIE highlights the importance of working with students on academic and personal behaviors (i.e., persistence, engagement, work habits/organizational skills, communication/collaboration skills and self-regulation) and the staff at the school appears to embrace such efforts as part of their roles in their students' lives. On any given day, teachers can be found in conversations collaborating and problem-solving around the specific personal needs of individual students, especially those who are most at risk. "In grade-level meetings, we're always addressing kids who are falling off track, talking about behavior issues, interventions," remarks a teacher. "In Student Intervention Team [SIT] meetings we talk strategies," shares another teacher. Every week in Advisory kids have a progress report printed out and we target specific individual kids who are at risk for attendance, assignments, passing, and we figure out extra supports and interventions."

The relentlessness of the teachers and principal in implementing these kinds of interventions seems to be making a difference. In early May, only three or four seniors have no chance to make up their credits or pass enough Regents tests in time to graduate, a significant drop in numbers since one year ago. A few weeks before the Regents, a new t-shirt appears on many students in classrooms throughout the school. On the front: "I AM...". On the sleeve: "ON TRACK". On the back: "RELENTLESS".

## Deeply Engaging Teachers

Horton Academy's assistant principal position was eliminated when Ms. Elvin became principal, and she says that has made it harder to provide the quantity of instructional support she envisions, especially considering the fact that there are twelve non-tenured teachers at the school this year. Although the principal and teachers describe the school as understaffed and under-resourced, teachers consistently report that they appreciate the support she offers, and also find support from each other in grade level teams, departments, and co-teaching relationships.

"I'm very protective of my staff and my kids," Ms. Elvin explains discussing how she strives to set a caring, supportive tone and demonstrate the value she has for people's work. Whether compensating teachers for extra work or meeting individually with students who are at risk of not passing their classes, Ms. Elvin strives to make sure people know that she notices and values their contributions and provides the support they need. While pushing the school in new directions, Ms. Elvin also puts an emphasis on what she calls "working from your strengths." Throughout the year, she has facilitated discussions about what is going well and how to build on it across the school.

Ms. Elvin invests time each week to observe classrooms and give feedback to teachers on their lesson planning and delivery. She completes formal and informal observations of teachers on a regular basis, reviews unit plans from teachers over email, and meets for one-on-one reflections with teachers at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Ms. Elvin's focus for her feedback to teachers this year is on the questions teachers are using and the instructional planning they do. Ms. Elvin finds that she has seen a difference throughout the school. "I think students are more engaged. I used to walk in classrooms and without fail there would always be a couple of kids

with their heads down. And I rarely walk into a classroom now where that happens. I see students forming opinions in writing, in peer-to-peer conversation. I'm seeing more evidence of critical thinking."

As part of her approach to engaging and supporting teachers, Ms. Elvin believes there have to be opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other and participate in school-wide decisions. To move towards a distributed leadership model, Ms. Elvin has designated experienced teachers as mentor teachers and she meets with them once a week to help them help newer teachers. She has assigned guidance counselors to grade teams so that communication and collaboration around students' academic progress is smoother. Teachers note that the staff is now much more on board with the school's vision and approach to instruction.

Teachers express that the positive tone and effective supports Ms. Elvin has put in place empower them to be supportive of one another, too. Many identify their grade level and department colleagues as people they go to when in need of help. Teachers report that this collaboration has been instrumental in their collective efforts to increase rigor and draw out student thinking as well as informing their efforts around preparing students for Regents exams.

The principal and teachers acknowledge that there are still improvements to be made, but they are motivated by the impact they are observing on student work and engagement. One teacher describes, "Kids anticipate that they'll have to respond to the guided question. They look for ways to find connections in the lesson. Two years ago it was the three highest performing kids who would have an answer. Now, it's everyone."

## Using Collaboration to Push Higher-Order Questions for All Learners

As she became principal of Horton Academy High School, Ms. Elvin took a close look at data on the performance of English language learners and students with disabilities. "ELLs weren't passing the Regents at the same rate, and we have a growing number of ELL students. Students in self-contained [special education classes] were just doing horribly. They were barely getting promoted, and there were all kinds of behavior problems." The combination of Ms. Elvin's analysis of HA's performance data, the CIE, and the City's special education reform led to changes in the school's approach to ESL and special education this year. Ms. Elvin hired two more people who work with ELLs and the school restructured their special education program. ESL and special education teachers partner with multiple core subject teachers. They co-teach rather than "push in," a distinction emphasized by more than one Horton teacher. They provide differentiated instruction to students with special needs, with the goal of having all students engage with rigorous tasks and build CCLS skills.

The implementation of these structures in the beginning of the year introduced some challenges though, according to the principal and teachers. Consistent with Ms. Elvin's rhetoric of openly engaging teachers, she started an inquiry group to look at best practices in ICT and to determine a way forward. "I said to the teachers, 'You guys tell me who you want in these classes. We're going to do everything we can to make that possible.' And then we changed the teachers' schedules to make it work."

As a result of their discussions, they rearranged the ICT groupings for the second semester in order to more effectively and efficiently balance the numbers and combinations of students. Teachers report that they are seeing a positive difference as a result of these efforts. "It's been an amazing difference this semester," says Ms. Colquist, who goes on to describe the impact on one of her struggling IEP students. "There are general struggles with literacy, but students who are 'lower-level' and 'higher-level' learners are using each other more. All of a sudden, this one student is in a class with higher-level students and she's participating and contributing her ideas."

Ms. Elvin's commitment to increase staffing in the ESL and SPED departments has also made a difference for teachers. "I was by myself; I *was* the ESL department until last year. But now we've been able to do more as a team. This year we've been able to focus on looking at student work and then evaluating it through rubrics," comments Ms. Lago, the head of the ESL department.

Regardless of whether they are teaching on their own or with an ICT co-teacher, HA teachers strive for a level of questioning and discussion in which students are actively engaged with ideas and with each other. According to the CIE, teachers are expected to use Universal Design for Learning as they “plan in advance for multiple access points and ways of demonstrating understanding so that all students engage in rigorous learning experiences.” Ms. Colquist offers insight into how she and her co-teachers work together to meet the needs of their students with IEPs. “... We do a lot of annotations and strategies like that as they’re reading. I’m a big fan of Universal Design. There have to be multiple points of access. Several different things they could read, look at, listen to, interact with, create—in order to learn.”

Mr. Olinick describes the culminating project he designed for the Age of Exploration unit in Global History. Through the process of a three-day exploration of primary sources, students choose a perspective, develop a claim and evidence, and write an essay in response to the essential question. Students work in groups for parts of the process, interact with a variety of media, have graphic organizers to guide note-taking, and are repeatedly checking in with teachers as a form of informal formative assessment. Looking over the essay of one student with whom he specifically worked on paragraph writing, Mr. Olinick reflects, “I got him to write in paragraphs on the second try. It’s not focused, but all the ideas are here. It’s still a struggle, but there has been a lot of progress this year.”

While experiencing successes this year, teachers at Horton also see areas where their co-teaching arrangements still need to grow. Some challenges relate to how co-teaching can be supported by the collaborative structures the school has sought to put in place. Teachers express a need for increased opportunities for collaborative planning and problem-solving about curriculum. One explains, “We have 47 minutes each week to plan with SPED and ESL team teachers. We need more time in order to serve our students in the way they deserve.”