

# AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF SETTING A VISION FOR AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION

JILL GROSSMAN AND BRAD CAWN



## AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTIONAL VISION AS A DRIVER OF CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

Leaders who exemplify ambitious instructional leadership codify and pursue a vision of teaching and learning that is rich and complex. These principals establish a vision not only for their school as a whole but also specifically for the quality and rigor of its instruction. In other words, they articulate a desired state for how curricula, tasks, and pedagogical approaches will work together to support student learning, and why that instructional vision is critical to helping students achieve success not only in the next level of schooling but also in college, careers, and beyond.

In this case study, we examine two approaches to defining and bringing to life an instructional vision that emerged from our research at 10 schools. In the first approach — illustrated through the example of P.S. 125 in New York City — principals adopted an existing instructional program that they felt offered a rich learning experience aligned to their vision and made necessary adjustments to their school (e.g., reorganizing the schedule and building teacher capacity) and/or to the instructional program (e.g., integrating more grade-level texts or guided-reading time). In the second approach — illustrated through the example of Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) Middle School — principals developed their own ambitious vision for instruction and sought to create the programming and structures necessary to enact it. Regardless of the approach, our findings suggest the principal is both the key instigator and the guiding force for the instructional vision, and that this vision generates a commitment to — and process for — continually raising the quality and rigor of learning opportunities for students.

## ADOPTING AN INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL TO ACHIEVE AN AMBITIOUS VISION AT P.S. 125

Reginald Higgins, principal of P.S. 125, a district pre-K-5 school in West Harlem, New York City, sought a grand vision for schooling within the confines of the normal constrictions of a zoned neighborhood school where 90 percent of students are Black or Hispanic, 86 percent are low-income, and 38 percent are classified as special education students.

When he arrived as principal, P.S. 125 was, said Higgins, a “failing school” and a “sinking ship” that was at risk for closure. Higgins had recently completed a principal internship, during which he had studied various inquiry-based, progressive models of education, but he was initially skeptical of this type of approach. He had been a teacher for 10 years at a traditional public school in the Bronx and was concerned about the models’ capacity to deliver an equitable and rigorous learning experience for students from impoverished backgrounds.

After further research, which included visiting several schools that were successfully implementing a more progressive approach, Higgins became a convert, and he developed an instructional vision that he felt would enable a “learning experience that creates the kind of intellectual engagement that the Common Core demands.” Informed by his understanding of the end goal for college-and-career-ready standards, Higgins envisioned a school with inquiry-based instruction and student choice, along with a heavy emphasis on arts and cultural programming.

To help set this vision in motion, Higgins decided the school would adopt the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop model. The Workshop model gives students significant choice in reading and writing and utilizes independent work, small-group instruction, and paired and class-wide discussion to “build habits of self-monitoring, sustained reading, and curiosity.” Schools that purchase the curriculum can also receive professional development from Teachers College, which Higgins saw as an opportunity to build his staff’s understanding of how to “teach in a more child-centered environment . . . of creating a classroom where more student voice is heard.”

Higgins could not simply forge ahead with implementing his vision, however. He had inherited a school with a veteran staff, and many teachers lacked the capacity, the will, or both, to change their approach. To build buy-in and enthusiasm, Higgins had to be strategic. He focused his early efforts on getting the school out of probationary status: He built trust and morale among the staff, improved the curriculum, led practice-centered professional development, and identified and developed targeted interventions for students with the greatest need. Once staff could see the school was improving, Higgins piloted the workshop model in pre-K and a single kindergarten class, building enthusiasm among early-grade teachers and raising interest among the rest of his staff. Meanwhile, he continued to build urgency and excitement among teachers for his longer term vision, telling them, “We can create something really unique here, but you have to want to create a movement and understand that in the beginning, it’s going to be messy. It’s not always going to be nice, but I’m going to support you.”

Higgins sees full implementation of his vision as taking roughly 10 years, with multiple stages and activities designed to gradually and sequentially build teacher capacity to bring to life ambitious instruction in every classroom. Though the school has only taken initial steps toward this vision, buy-in has grown, and progress is visible. The workshop model has expanded through second grade, and teachers receive monthly training in the methodology; classrooms and schedules have been rearranged, and nearly a dozen partnerships with New York-area arts and service providers support robust programming for students. Meanwhile, since the Common Core tests were introduced in 2013, the percentage of P.S. 125 students meeting standards has increased by 14 points in English language arts and 17 points in math.

## **CREATING A UNIQUE INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL TO ACHIEVE AN AMBITIOUS VISION AT CASA MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Since founding Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) Middle School in the Bronx eight years ago, Principal Jamaal Bowman has envisioned leading a rigorous learning community. During his time as a fourth-grade teacher, and then as a high school teacher and sports coach, he had watched students come to school with apathy and frustration. But, he said, they were children, so they still had hope and optimism. Creating a school that builds on that optimism, he said, “is what gives me a sense of purpose.”

Bowman’s vision for CASA is what he calls “holistic” education, inclusive of both high-quality content and social and emotional learning. “We want our students to be future leaders, future designers, future engineers,” said Bowman, “so our expectations are rooted in our goal of preparing students to change the world.” Bowman seeks to “expose students to everything,” and his instructional vision emphasizes “deeper learning, more metacognition, and more student ownership of their learning.” His ultimate goal is to realize a Montessori-style approach, in which students have tremendous control over their learning.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.geniushour.com/what-is-genius-hour/>

To bring this vision to life, Bowman has incrementally developed a curriculum and an instructional model that prioritize student choice, inquiry, and significant small-group learning time, with arts, technology, and hip hop enrichment infused into the weekly schedule. Bowman says the Common Core State Standards pushed him to deepen students' learning experiences still further. To provide more opportunities for sustained research, he instituted a twice-weekly "Genius Hour" class<sup>1</sup> that gives students opportunities to investigate a topic or problem of interest in a structured manner over the course of an eight-week cycle. He also revamped the science curriculum, pulling primarily from the city's newly developed science scope and sequence but infusing it with project-based science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) activities, and he collaborated with several external partners to put in place an arts curriculum in which students perform and publish in various mediums.

Bowman also restructured the school day so that students spent more time learning in small groups, and he made writing a major focus in all subjects. "Students are writing all the time," he said. Teachers meet regularly with students one-on-one or in small groups to give them detailed feedback, and benchmark performance tasks are given every six to eight weeks to assess student writing in one of the three Common Core genres — argumentative, expository, or narrative. Finally, Bowman has continued to focus on developing his teachers' capacity to lead Socratic seminars, which he sees as essential to developing the kind of thinking and speaking skills he wants student to master.

Bowman's expansive view of instruction extends to accountability. He is seeking permission from the district to switch from standardized tests to portfolio-based assessments, and to adopt an alternative approach to teacher evaluation based on peer review, student and parent surveys, and student portfolios. Despite his disinterest in standardized assessments, Bowman's ambitious model has resulted in significant increases in performance on state tests. In 2015, his school experienced the largest combined gains on state tests of any district middle school in New York City.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

**What is your school's vision for ambitious instruction?**

**If you do not have a clear vision yet, consider the following:**

- a) What tenets of good instruction do you expect teachers school-wide to enact daily?**
- b) What are the key practices and programming your school is using to help all learners become college and career ready?**

**In what ways are the visions of P.S. 125 and CASA Middle School aligned to the tenets of ambitious instruction?**

**What role should college-and-career-ready standards play in informing and guiding an instructional vision?**

**What conclusions did you draw based on this case study about how to build initial buy-in for an instructional vision?**