HOW TO IMPROVE COLLEGE READINESS AT URBAN SCHOOLS

A three-pillared plan is helping low-income students become college and career ready
There is a dire need for students to leave high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college and compete for stable employment. Unfortunately, this need for better college preparation has eluded many of America’s low-income, urban school communities.

Thus, we are witnessing the proverbial “Matthew Effect,” where the poor remain poor and millions of low-income students and families are being left behind with little hope for the social mobility that is the cornerstone of the American Dream. There has never been a greater need for a call to action to help our nation’s low-income students.
We know what it’s like to put this into action at a real high school, which we will refer to as the “All Too Familiar High School” (ATFHS). The school is a comprehensive high school enrolling students in grades 9–12 with just under 1,000 students. The socioeconomic composition is one of low-income, working-class families with just under 70 percent of the student population qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. The student body is 70 percent African-American, 20 percent white, 8 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian. Approximately 18 percent of students receive special education services. Like many American schools, as ATFHS demographics shifted to a low-income, working-class community, the school has struggled to improve student performance.

District leadership has placed an emphasis on increased access and equity for low-income students. The top priority is improving graduation rates, especially for disadvantaged subgroups. To reinforce the importance of graduation and to emphasize the importance of college and career readiness, the administrators first and foremost need to ensure that students are being provided equity in the form of resources and skills needed to attain success on these measures.

Understanding the importance of college and career readiness, ATFHS crafted its “College Readiness Action Plan,” aimed at improving student outcomes in the areas of graduation rate, SAT performance, and increased access to and success in the AP program. This action plan falls into three “pillars,” each containing actionable strategies.

Pillar #1: Graduation Plan
The school is basing its graduation plan on the idea of “promise of preparation.” At ATFHS, this promise means ensuring students graduate with the literacy competencies necessary to be successful in their postsecondary school endeavors and to become well-informed citizens.

The school subscribes to the belief that literacy is “the real social justice” and is the single most important factor in leveling the academic playing field for students. Staff denoted purposeful reading, writing, annotating, and discussion as its essential instructional areas to drive literacy improvement and determined that these focus areas were essential to quality core instruction across all content areas. The staff is committing to a schoolwide literacy focus using department meetings and cross-curricular, professional learning teams to ensure teachers are supported in this collective approach to improving literacy.

Students at ATFHS are increasingly engaged in literacy-based lessons, including daily sustained independent reading in all academic content areas; the use of Cornell Notes; and frequent classroom discussion to improve comprehension of text. Further, the school has implemented a research-based reading intervention program that uses targeted small-group, blended instruction to support growth in student reading abilities.

Any school will have subsets of students who need additional support to meet expectations. Knowing this, ATFHS has developed a tiered progress-monitoring process and accompanying mentor program to help students persevere to graduation. Students in each graduating class are organized—based on credits earned, GPA, and a student’s status on state assessments—to place them into one of five probability tiers: (a) very high, (b) high, (c) moderate, (d) low-moderate, and (e) at-risk.

Understanding the best predictor of future performance is past performance, the supports and interventions for the students intensify for those who are at
risk of not graduating on time. Students in the at-risk and low-moderate tiers are assigned weekend, summer, and after-school credit recovery options, assigned a staff mentor, and placed on biweekly progress monitoring with the school counselors. Counselors also work with the students’ teachers and parents to ensure there are collaborative efforts to support the students’ success. This level of support by way of frequent communication is essential to getting students back on track to graduation.

Parents of students who are not meeting target goals at the interim or end of quarter are required to attend a conference with the student, counselor, and a member of the administrative team to set clear goals for how the student can succeed from that point forward. Students assigned to the moderate tier receive similar supports, with the exception of the credit recovery, since these students require monitoring but not credit acceleration. Students who are off track on the basis of state assessments are offered in-school and after-school intervention sessions geared toward reviewing key concepts and topics.

**Pillar #2: The SAT**

The second objective measure of college and career readiness is the SAT, and its importance has increased significantly in the past three years as a result of the district’s implementation of “Junior SAT Day.” No longer can schools inflate class SAT scores by siphoning the top—allowing only those believed to be the best and brightest to sit for the SAT. Schools’ scores are a reflection of the aggregate school performance. Thus, this data serves as a good means to set goals and monitor improvement. The fact that junior SAT day takes place at the end of students’ junior year with emphasis on critical reading, writing, and math ensures it is a school goal that most staff can support.

The first strategy undertaken by ATFHS was to ensure that all Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)—the quantitative component of the teacher evaluation system—were based on argumentative writing. This approach was chosen because argumentative writing requires the ability to research, weigh evidence, organize ideas in a coherent manner, and present cogent facts. Implicit in crafting a sound argumentative essay is the ability to read multiple sources and take copious notes on the varying perspectives.

This focus on argumentative writing also emphasized the importance of reading and annotating. This collective approach ensured there was a systemic means to improve schoolwide achievement in the area of literacy, more specifically, argumentative writing, across all content areas.

As another part of its strategy, the school counseled all students in grades 10 and 11 to take the PSAT. Grade 10 PSAT scores are used to determine which students would be best served to participate in the grade 11 SAT prep course; these scores are then used to help students assess the areas in which they could improve the most, and an online resource is used to provide targeted instruction. The SAT prep course is scheduled such that students are enrolled in SAT prep math and reading on alternating days for the duration of the school year.

Cognizant that the school’s focus on literacy would have a limited direct impact on improving math performance, the math department implemented daily SAT drills in all sophomore and junior classes, and the department organized after-school SAT “Blast Sessions” open to all juniors. These sessions focused exclusively on SAT mathematics content and allowed the school to support more than just those juniors in its math SAT prep course. These math department initiatives, coupled with the schoolwide literacy focus, were also key in helping to improve SAT performance.

**Pillar #3: Advanced Placement Exams**

Because success on AP exams provides a consistent measure of college and career readiness (and success on these exams is associated with higher rates of college success), the school wanted to improve AP performance, so it formed an AP committee. The committee determined it would take a two-pronged approach to improving performance—the first would focus on consistent instruction in AP courses, and

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the second would center on improving the school’s AP culture.

To improve AP instruction, the school made sure that all AP and honors-level teachers received the training necessary to fully understand AP curriculum. The school incurred the cost for these teachers to attend the College Board’s AP Summer Institute, and regular attendance at this and similar trainings were an expectation.

Quarterly Projections
The committee has held monthly meetings focused on sharing best practices for teaching writing and active reading strategies; analyzing student responses to free-response questions; discussing how each teacher was aligning classroom assessments to exam content; and planning quarterly AP student boot camps focused on AP skill-building in the areas of time management, sustained independent reading, note taking, and crafting sound essays.

The committee also successfully procured a grant to be used for purchasing supplemental materials and funding after-school and weekend AP tutorials to further support students. Teachers used multiple sources of student data to project exam scores for each of their students and were challenged to examine how closely their quarter grades mirrored students’ projected success on the pending AP exam.

Teachers were then asked to use these quarterly projections to better support students not making the progress necessary to succeed. This type of reflection and dialogue helped teachers develop a better understanding of students’ needs. The school also purchased software that gave students access to hundreds of AP multiple-choice questions. This software is a means to provide assessment reviews, and it provides teachers with student outcome data disaggregated by course topics.

To improve AP culture and to build a more inclusive AP program, ATFHS began to actively seek out potential AP students. The school held AP socials and AP boot camps, provided AP students with “AP jerseys,” and sponsored annual $1,000 scholarships awarded based on student enrollment and success in AP courses. Teachers were encouraged to recommend students based on work ethic and ability, regardless of whether the students were identified in the “AP potential” process. This gave voice to the teachers who best know and understand students’ abilities. Counselors strongly encouraged students aspiring to attend four-year colleges to take at least one AP course prior to graduation.

Sustaining Success
Since implementing this three-pillared plan, the school has seen many successes. We’ve seen a 6 percent increase in the on-time graduation rate, a 53 percent increase in SAT scores, and a 12 percent increase in class participation. We’ve doubled the number of students achieving the College Board’s college readiness mark of a combined 1550 on the SAT. There was a 50 percent increase in AP exam participation, with a 5 percent increase in the number of students achieving a qualifying score of three or higher. Plus, as a by-product of this plan, the amount of scholarship money awarded to students has more than doubled.

While we know that this plan is by no means a panacea for the challenges associated with ensuring low-income urban students graduate high school on time and emerge college and career ready, the staff does believe that these strategies can be helpful in improving college and career readiness for students. The ATFHS community is looking forward to continuing these efforts to prepare its students for life beyond high school.

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