



SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL
CHARTER SCHOOL

CURRICULAR APPROACH

Each year, elementary school students throughout New York State take a series of content area exams promulgated by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). These NY State Tests assess students' mastery of various standards. In reading and writing, the State Test is called the English Language Arts assessment (ELA) and the standards are called performance indicators. The State Math test standards are broken out into content strands. Both performance indicators and content strands are created by the NYSED.

For the NY State Math exam, the NYSED delineates within the content strands what skills will be covered on the exam. NYSED does not, however, publish a similar guide for the English Language Arts (ELA) test. Nonetheless, prior to 2009, the ELA Test was believed by many to be fairly predictable, meaning it was possible for schools and teachers to predict what Performance Indicators would be covered, and then focus teaching only those specific skills. The ELA did not actually cover all of the Performance Indicators mandated by the NYSED.

Each year, the NYSED also set a "cut score" for the exams. The cut score is the score a student must obtain in order to pass the exam. These cut scores were relatively low. For example, in 2009, the cut score for the 3rd Grade ELA exam was 24 (out of 33 points), and the cut score for the math exam was 21 (out of 39). These low cut scores made it possible for struggling students to receive substantial and relatively superficial tutoring and remediation, and pass the exam. The focus for many schools, therefore, was to get students just far enough to pass. In the 2009-2010 school year, the NYSED dramatically increased the "cut score". For example, the cut scores for the 3rd Grade ELA and math exams rose to 29 and 34, respectively¹. Because the cut score increase happened after the test had already been administered, schools did not have an opportunity to adjust test preparation in response to the scoring change. As expected, pass rates plummeted state-wide, and SBCCS was no exception: 3rd Grade pass rates dropped from 86% to 51% in ELA and 100% to 84% in Math. Clearly, many schools' approach to covering content was flawed and the change in the cut score revealed the shortcomings inherent in curricular and test prep approaches that were focused on getting students just far enough to pass the exam.

The curriculum at SBCCS leading into the 2009-2010 school year merged elements of purchased curricula with internally developed knowledge about successfully "teaching to the test." Specifically:

- ELA instruction in the upper grades focused predominantly on “question stems” rather than literary comprehension and analysis skills
- Math instruction focused on a series of algorithmic steps, rather than critical thinking and problem solving skills

At the start of the 2009-2010 school year, the school re-evaluated its curricular approach, and various curricular approaches were researched and considered. SBCCS wanted to create its own curricula that addressed all of the standards for each subject area and grade level and would also enable high student achievement.

The challenge was to determine how to create an SBCCS curriculum that would be stable over time, yet flexible in the appropriate places. One influential resource in addressing this challenge was the book Understanding by Design by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, which outlines approaches and considerations for unit plan development and overall curriculum design. One of the prominent themes in the book is the idea of backwards design. This concept stresses the following in development of a curriculum:

- Planning for curriculum creation begins with studying the state-mandated standards, because mastery of these standards is the end goal for every student
- State standards are then used to build assessments and tasks that will demonstrate students’ mastery of the skills delineated
- Lessons are then planned in a sequence developed to build the skills necessary for mastery on the assessment
- Based on this approach, mastery of the assessment measures mastery of the corresponding state-mandated learning standards

In December 2009, after four months of reflection, study, and consideration, a concrete plan crystallized. South Bronx Classical decided that, per recommendations from Understanding by Design, their curriculum would be built based on the NYSED standards, which would serve as a “stable” foundation, on which scopes and sequences would rest. (The “scope” is the allocation of the performance indicators or content strands across units; namely, decisions around **what indicators** should be grouped together and covered in the same unit. The “sequence” is the **order** in which the groups of skills should be taught.) Unit plans, including daily objective calendars, would then be created from these internally-developed scopes and sequences. The final step would be writing lesson plans based on the unit plans. Based on this approach, each lesson would be clearly and directly aligned to the NYSED content strands.

To create the strongest scopes and sequences, it was important to get information and recommendations from every teacher in the school. To accomplish this, the team talked to teachers throughout the spring of 2010. Based on the information gathered, a combination of administrators and teachers developed SBCCS’ internal scopes and sequences. These scopes and sequences address each and every one of the NY State performance indicators.

Once the scopes and sequences were established, the focus shifted to creating unit plans. Various curricular consultants informed the team that, typically, full curriculum development takes three years just in writing unit plans, and those plans may not even address all of the standards, but rather focus on a subset of prioritized “power standards.” However, the team believed that the school could write all required unit plans within a much shorter timeframe, setting a goal of 18 months and, since SBCCS’ extended school day and school year

allowed teachers to cover more material, the curriculum could incorporate all 28 Performance Standards, consistent with the school's mission. After our first prototype unit plan, written in March 2010, the team spent the next five months crafting units for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades.

The work was both challenging and enlightening. By creating the units, teachers better understood how the content and skills their students were expected to master fit together over the course of a school year and also across grade levels. Most importantly, unit planning allowed teachers to become familiar with the NYSED mandated performance indicators and content strands for each grade. This institutional knowledge created school-wide instructional alignment of the skills the NYSED requires students to master.

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, professional development sessions began with a presentation on SBCCS' curricular philosophy and approach. The presentation started with the project's mission statement: "to create and improve standard-based scopes and sequences, cohesive and interrelated unit plans, and detailed and flexible lesson plans, all in an organized format for all subjects and grades". The presentation also outlined the present stage of curricular development (unit plan creation), and previewed the next step (lesson plan development).

With the tone set by this opening PD, the focus for the 2010-2011 school year continued to be unit plan creation; every teacher in the school, across all grades and subjects, created unit plans throughout the year. And by the end of the school year, teachers were invited to create all the remaining unit plans over the 5 week summer break. As a result, by July 2011 all unit plans were completed. In total, SBCCS teachers wrote 374 unit plans in just under a year and a half.

In July, the school hired a new Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Her first task was to audit all the unit plans to ensure their high quality both in rigor and content. This review is ongoing, and is scheduled to be completed by April of this academic year (2012).

The focus for teachers in the 2011-2012 school year thus shifted to creating more rigorous and aligned lesson plans. Lesson plans are drafted based on the daily objectives delineated in each unit plan. This ensures that each lesson covers the appropriate scope in the appropriate sequence and that the lessons remain aligned to the state standards. The lessons created this year are evaluated by grade team leaders for content and implementation.

By August 2012, SBCCS will have created a stable, rigorous curriculum aligned at every level (scope and sequence, unit plan, lesson plan) with the state standards. The curriculum will also be appropriately flexible, as lesson and/or unit plans can (and should) be revised or adjusted when necessary. The strongest determining factor in whether revisions or adjustments are necessary will be student performance data, based on assessments that are also state standards-aligned. Importantly, the specific performance indicators or content strands being tested are prominently listed on each internally developed assessment. When scholars take a test, the process of alignment that has led to that assessment is, therefore, clear: the unit plan was developed to address the specific skills outlined by the standards, the lessons plans for the unit were developed to teach the specific skills, and the test was developed to assess the specific skills.

The project of developing such a comprehensive curriculum has been a massive, but productive undertaking. The NY State test scores for the 2010-2011 school year, when the unit plans were still being created, already provide evidence of the impact of the project. SBCCS' pass rates for 3rd Grade were 64% in ELA and 88% in math¹; scores that are significantly higher than in the preceding school year.

Mastery of the NYSED content strands, while essential, is itself only part of the school's mission. A curriculum consisting of objectives, lesson plans, and assessments aligned to the NYSED standards also means that:

- Scholars will be taught, in each grade, all of the skills the state requires
- Scholar mastery of each skill can be effectively and accurately assessed
- Scholar mastery of the previous year's standards means that they will be ready and able to learn the skills required under the present year's standards
- Standards alignment across and within grades reduces gaps in knowledge that occur when students have not learned what they are expected to know

A strong, thoroughly-aligned curriculum, therefore, also furthers South Bronx Classical Charter School's mission of preparing each scholar to excel in middle school and beyond.

¹ The pass rates for the 4th and 5th Grade were also strong for the 2010-2011 tests. In 4th Grade, pass rates rose to 67% in ELA and 92% in math, compared to pass rates of 47% in ELA and 81% in math the previous year. 2010-2011 was the first year of 5th Grade at SBCCS, and 5th Grade students obtained pass rates of 83% in ELA and 97% in math.