

# At Risk for More Than Academic Failure

**B**uilt at the epicenter of low-income housing, poverty, crime, and drug trafficking, New York Avenue School (NYAS) in Atlantic City, New Jersey, serves large numbers of homeless and high-mobility families and English-language learners. Most parents did not attend college and few, if any, siblings or other relatives continued their education beyond high school. NYAS, which opened in 2004, is a K-8 school where 95 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Seventy-nine percent of the population is black and 17 percent is Hispanic. When the school was opened, many questioned why the district would build a multimillion dollar state-of-the-art school for such a marginal population. Because of the vision of our superintendent, NYAS has evolved as an exemplary model of effective urban education.

NYAS is undergoing a transformation that has a positive, measurable impact on the attitudes, beliefs, and values of students, staff, parents, and community. I became principal of the school in 2007, and since that time I have focused on increasing academic achievement and convincing neighborhood stakeholders that NYAS can be a haven of hope, a center of transformation, and an epicenter of community change. By coordinating instruction and increasing staff accountability, our school improved academic outcomes. In the 2008-2009 school year, NYAS reduced its overall failure rate by 10 percent on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge and reached adequate yearly progress.

## Solving Social Challenges

NYAS students, however, were at risk for more than academic failure. For this reason, programs were developed to impact the academic and social challenges students face. For example, I established Dare to Be Kings, an after-school mentoring program where boys address the thug mentality that often lures middle school students to embrace street culture. And because young girls who live in poverty receive

less parental supervision and are five to seven times more likely to become pregnant teenagers, I established Dare to Be Queens to encourage them to clarify their future goals and avoid negative behaviors. In Wise Guys, boys learn about responsibility, money management, and physical and emotional wellness.


These are only a few of the programs offered to NYAS students through a collaborative partnership with AtlantiCare Behavioral Health's Atlantic City Family Center. The goal of the Family Center, which is located within the school building, is to support families, strengthen the community, and give necessary attention to the social needs of students so they can experience successful learning outcomes.

Students of poverty often lack learning resources at home and do not have affirming experiences. That's why I extended the school day to include before- and after-school tutorial programs. Students can come to school at 7 a.m. to receive nurtured instruction and a well-balanced breakfast. Once they've been tutored after school by committed staff members, students can attend another after-school program, Club Destiny, which lasts until 7 p.m. Taken together, these programs create a safe place for students from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. In addition, I extended the school week to include Saturday school, which consists of a half-day of educational enrichment for students who would otherwise be idle. NYAS has become a place where students in the community come to learn and to have fun.

## Instructional Accountability

The change in school culture has been extensive, affecting academic achievement and social interactions. The change has also spurred teachers' acceptance of greater accountability. I refined procedures for lesson plan review to ensure that all feedback guided teachers toward increased student-centered and differentiated instruction. Closely tracking lesson plans has enhanced classroom practices and instruction. Additional programming was implemented based on formative benchmark data. The data allowed for strategic interventions that were targeted to meet the specific needs of students. As a result, NYAS is on an academic achievement track that it has never before experienced. Data from our state achievement tests show significant academic achievement from 2006 to 2009. For example, the number of students achieving proficiency or advanced proficiency in language arts/literacy increased 30 percent for third graders and 23 percent for eighth graders. In math, for the corresponding years, the number of students achieving proficiency or advanced proficiency increased 48 percent for third graders and 10.5 percent for eighth graders.

In keeping with the mission of the school, teachers are proud to provide a first-class education to every student who passes through the school's doors. The educational services are provided to students without regard to social or economic obstacles. Saturday school and before- and after-school programs have been so successful that they have been considered districtwide.

When I became the principal in 2007, I began to close the achievement gap. We still have much work ahead of us, but the school has been recognized for its accomplishments at the district and state levels. This success is based in large part on my ability to help change the attitudes, beliefs, and values of students at NYAS. 

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