



Cahn

**DISTINGUISHED
PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

Unlocking student reading success: Elevating young minds with phonics excellence

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2022 Cahn Cohort

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ABSTRACT

If we engage students in daily phonics instruction, utilizing all of the components of the FUNdations curriculum with fidelity, then all students will be able to successfully decode on grade level.

During the 2022-2023 school year, our theory of action was both system focused and evidenced based. The work has been centered around the fidelity of phonics delivery instruction in K-2 classrooms. Through intentional, systematic adjustments to the flow of the day, program resources/supplies, and teacher training, we have been able to show great progress in students reading on grade level or above. In order to train teachers and offer support throughout the school year we adopted a lab site classroom model with a FUNdations lead teacher. With the support from our district literacy coach, our lead teacher was able to collaborate and open her classroom to colleagues to share best practices, observe lessons, and disseminate updates from district meetings/training. Additionally, our teachers were able to observe exemplar lessons on FUNdations components during PL time and used a self-study checklist as part of the school's fidelity implementation plan. As a result of this implementation plan, our students made great progress across all literacy pillars, not just phonics.

In our journey to cultivate strong and confident readers, our approach to teaching phonics stood apart. Our program ensured that young students not only learn to read but also develop a deep love for language and literature.

The result? Reading success that transcends the classroom. Our approach cultivated confident readers who excel academically and embrace the joy of exploration through literature. Join us in shaping a future where phonics fidelity, teacher empowerment, and enriching resources converge to unlock the doors to reading triumph for every young student.

INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn Fellowship project focused on phonics fidelity, teacher professional development, and resources to deliver phonics instruction 30 minutes daily as prescribed by the program.

Given our shared understanding of literacy as the foundation of success in contemporary society, our unwavering commitment to teaching phonics with fidelity became the cornerstone to our structure. Our designed process focused on authentic, research based techniques that met the needs of diverse learning styles and students.

With a dedicated team of passionate educators, we created a nurturing environment where each child's unique potential was celebrated. Through hands-on activities, interactive centers, and meaningful connections to decodable readers, our students developed a deep grasp of phonics principles. As a school, we set a high goal for second grade students and ourselves; by the end of second grade, every child under our guidance would confidentially read, comprehend, and express themselves with fluency.

School Profile:

Our school's overarching goal is to strive to be an inclusive community that treasures diversity, empathy, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and relationship building. Within this ambitious goal lies student experiences tied to curriculum and instruction.

Our mission at P.S. 94Q is to foster collaboration among parents, students, and staff and to enrich the learning experience of each child through high expectations, academic rigor, and a "thinking" curriculum. In an atmosphere that is rich with cultural diversity, we provide a differentiated program of instruction that sets the highest standards for all our children while celebrating individuality and encouraging creativity. We are preparing them to meet the academic and technological challenges of both the present and future. Our community endeavors to be lifelong learners, socially responsible citizens, and unique individuals interested in and concerned about the world in which we live.

PS 94Q, also known as the David D. Porter school is a thriving urban school community of about 330 students from Prekindergarten to grade 5. Our student body is 73% Asian, 13% Hispanic or Latino, 8% White and 1% Black students. We currently have an ICT (integrated co-teaching) class on each grade level from kindergarten through grade 5. Additionally, English Language Learners make up 13% of our total population, and 11% of students have Individualized Educational Plans.

Our school has received a few special designations in the last couple of years, such as National Blue Ribbon School 2020, NYSED Recognition School, Computer Science for All School, Respect for All School, Civics for All School, and 2023 NYS School of Character.

Our school community is unique in what we are able to offer our scholars extracurricular activities, integration of curriculum with computer science, clubs, in-school residencies of computer science, robotics, musical theater, visual arts, and more. Our students are also benefiting from having a Maker Space where they can show their creative side through the engineering process and apply what they are learning in other content. This past school year we

opened our Hydroponics Lab to further students' understanding of science curriculum, sustainability, and the world beyond the classroom. To expand students' interest in the field of science, research, robotics, and computer science, our school has a FIRST Lego League Team and a VEX IQ team. Both robotics leagues focus on 21st-century skills, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and leadership. After all, our school motto is, "21st century creators, innovators & explorers".

While curriculum and instruction are at the forefront of our mission, we have equally invested in ensuring our students are mind and body ready to learn. For the past couple of years, we engaged our students in daily SEL practices through morning circle meetings, school-wide events, activities, and celebrations. Our school's SEL team, the Mindful Mentors, continuously works to enhance school experiences for our students. As a school partner in the Strong Resilient NYC program, we used a strength-based social and emotional learning screener to prioritize interventions for various students. With the data from the screener, we worked on helping our students develop these essential skills by using targeted, highly responsive support for each individual student. In order to continue strengthening our social-emotional character development practices we applied and got accepted into the NYC Lighthouse Collaborative program for the 2023-2024 school year. The Lighthouse Collaborative (LC) is a cross-district instructional improvement initiative designed to support the NYC Chancellor's Four Pillars, with an emphasis on expanding our ability to "scale, sustain, and restore what works" through collaborative inquiry and sharing of promising practices.

Although our school budget does not match the scope of the work we do with our students, we have been fortunate to partner with our local politicians to fund projects and activities. Additionally, our PTA has been instrumental in raising funds and donating back to the school in order to support various initiatives and programs. PS 94 continues to be a leader in creative programming, extracurricular offerings, and a high standard for instruction.

Benchmark data:

Based on the Fall 2022 data from our screeners we identified a need for phonics instruction in K-2 classrooms in order to meet our school-wide goal of all students reading on grade level by the end of second grade. Through data analysis processes 16% of kindergarteners, 46% of first graders, and 18% of second graders have been identified as scoring below grade level on the Acadience screeners. Overall about 26% of K-2 students started school performing below grade level. Upon further dissemination of data, we discovered that 46% of English Language Learners scored below benchmarks and 60% of students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEP's) in the K-2 grade band scored below benchmark for Fall 2022. This data created a sense of urgency

in our school and pushed phonics and phonemic awareness in the K-2 classrooms to the forefront of instruction for the 2022-2023 school year.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the 2021-2022 school year, we identified 32% of K-2 students that scored below grade level in early literacy skills throughout the year, as measured by the Acadience beginning, middle, and end of year screener. Our guiding question that drove the inquiry for this project was, *“What are the necessary instructional shifts in K-2 to increase phonics proficiency by the end of second grade?”*. This inquiry question provided an opportunity for leadership shifts and teacher practices to be elevated so that we can respond to the data needs, thus creating a school-wide focus for all. The MTSS team members were tasked with the following question at the beginning of the process, *“How can we support teachers in implementing the Foundations curriculum with fidelity?”*

This data has not only affected students' ability to become literate by the end of second grade but it affected how we think as a school about literacy development. It has created a movement at PS 94Q where unpacking reading success will be our focus for many years to come.

In order for us to further understand the root cause(s) of these results we conducted an audit using an Outcomes Driven Model inquiry with our Multiple Tiers of Student Supports (MTSS) team. During this data analysis, we aimed to discover if this is a student gap or a system gap so that we can proceed with the appropriate plan of action. Across early childhood grades, we identified a system gap (core instruction) as it pertains to phonics and phonemic awareness as the area of immediate support. After validating the need for support with teachers during Data Review meetings, and then discussing it at our MTSS meeting, we then identified specific students across K-2 grades to receive intervention support. Acadience and i-Ready data helped us narrow down which intervention program would benefit students in need of phonemic awareness or phonics support.

Upon further investigation, we discovered there were two root causes, a lack of coherence and fidelity in using the phonics curriculum, and a lack of resources in grades K-2 classrooms. All these various pieces of data allowed us to form an action plan for the school year.

In our efforts to tackle these concerns, we knew we had to focus on four main components.

- Component 1: Enhance core (Tier 1) instruction
- Component 2: Curricula resources to strengthen core (Tier 1) instruction

- Component 3: Professional development opportunities for core (Tier 1) enhancement
- Component 4: Provide the proper intervention to below level students

Simultaneously, our district identified phonics instruction as one area of improvement across all schools which opened up opportunities for learning alongside coaches and sharing of resources.

METHODS

Our collective “why” as a school was centered around the conditional statement of “**If** we engage students in daily phonics instruction, utilizing all of the components of the FUNdations curriculum with fidelity, **then** all students will be able to successfully decode on grade level”.

Our work started with identifying staff members to become part of the MTSS team, Tiers 2 / 3 providers, and student support team members. We created a schedule for team meetings, cycles of instruction, and progress monitoring, along with professional learning series. We then proceeded to identify the need of support and validate our data using the Outcomes Driven-Model. The teachers and teams reviewed the beginning of the year Acadience and iReady screeners and identified a system gap in Tier 1 instruction.

Our next step was to group students strategically using the Acadience Reading Initial Grouping strategies while working with classroom teachers on delivering phonics lessons with fidelity as scripted in the FUNdations curriculum. Although phonics instruction was not new to our school, we knew there were some gaps in delivering 30 minutes daily of phonics and we were missing some resources. The teachers self-assessed using a FUNdations confidence level survey to identify their needs. We then inventoried classroom and student resources from posters to tiles and manuals. As a school, we then created a classroom non-negotiable and preferred materials checklist. We also identified a spotlight teacher with promising practices in order to support newer teachers. Our district coach worked with our spotlight teacher and then with individual teachers to coach and guide us through the 30 minutes of phonics instruction. Additionally, our school-wide professional learning plan included cycles of “learning and doing” about fidelity to the program and implementation of the lessons. Once we had about 4 months of training in fidelity implementation, we started to make our rounds to each teacher for non-evaluatory visits using the Self Study Checklist and Creating a Learning-Focused Classroom checklist.

In addition to our classroom teachers, our Tier 2/3 providers were trained in their programs and our Data Specialist also checked in with them every 6-8 weeks for questions, comments, concerns, and students' progress. Providers were also asked to keep an intervention log to see

patterns of students' attendance, and lessons taught.

During the school year, our MTSS Rolling Agendas were made public to the school staff on the schoolwide Landing Page where staff can check in on our work. To continue to support our Phonics work and Interventions, the MTSS team created data cycles and progress monitoring dates around district benchmark administration windows.

To enhance our core instruction, we were also strategic while preparing students for administration by providing Reading Pillar Centers from past Acadience materials to familiarize students with specific subtests that will be administered during benchmarks with real time feedback. Through this process, specific students were identified who are not projected to meet "on benchmark" level determined by cut points for the MOY (middle of the year) and EOY (end of the year) assessments. Then teachers would utilize materials at least 3x a week with those specific students.

RESULTS

"If we engage students in daily phonics instruction, utilizing all of the components of the FUNdations curriculum with fidelity, then all students will be able to successfully decode on grade level".

The result? Our approach cultivated confident readers who excel academically and embrace the joy of exploration through literature.

Our school decreased in reading deficiencies from 26% to 18% during the 22-23 school year, an 8% decrease. Overall from the 21-22 school year to the end of the 22-23 school year, reading deficiencies decreased from 32% - 18%, a 14% decrease.

Highlights from BOY to EOY as per Acadience assessment:

- Kindergarten students performing below benchmark decreased from 16% to 12%.
- First grade students performing below benchmark decreased from 46% to 21%.
- First grade students performing 2 years below benchmark decreased from 28% to 16%.
- Second grade students performing below benchmark increased by 1% from 20% to 21%
- Overall our school decreased in reading deficiencies from 26% to 18%.

To sustain and enhance this positive trajectory, we are introducing Heggerty phonemic awareness into our curriculum, aiming to further enhance students' proficiency in sound

production and oral language development throughout all K-2 classes. Our primary focus will be on English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities, ensuring that phonics and phonemic awareness become integral components of daily instruction in all early childhood classrooms.

As leaders, embarking on this systematic journey and learning side by side with our teachers was a truly enriching experience. Together, we significantly deepened our comprehension of the Science of Reading research, the foundational literacy principles, and a diverse range of intervention programs.

In essence, the Cahn Fellowship program elevated our leadership capabilities, nourished our spirits, and ignited a renewed determination to push the boundaries of achievement for all students.

REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS

Fellow Reflections:

The beginning of my Cahn Fellows journey started with the nomination and invitation to apply to the Cahn Fellowship Program. The timing was so right; coming out of the COVID 19 pandemic, dealing with a huge personal loss, and trying to keep up with so many moving pieces, I admit I had lost my way a little bit, even though the school was recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School along with many other accolades. The opportunity to participate in this highly acclaimed program and to further develop my leadership skills was what I needed at a time when I thought about what's next for me in this very large NYC Department of Education system. I certainly didn't want to be part of the statistic of 16% of principals leaving the profession.

The confident principal starting year 10 today, is in part due to the learning I have done during my year as a Cahn Fellow. In addition to the amazing Cahn Fellowship staff, mentors, speakers, peers, and my ally, the time to reflect and learn, is what I have appreciated the most. The sessions were impactful because I was able to step out of my own school to learn and interact with like minded peers and mentors. As a NYC Department of Education principal, all of my learning experiences have been crammed into short sessions in the usual school libraries without much time to reflect and speak with my peers. This program allowed me to have the time and space to learn, reflect, share, and set personal goals. Each time I returned from various Cahn Fellows sessions I had a refreshed look at my role as a leader in my school community and beyond. One of the most impactful sessions was by far the Gettysburg trip. During this trip, it

became clear that a leader must be able to adapt. Successful leaders learn to read their surroundings, adapt, challenge their abilities, and step out of their comfort zones. I often reflect on my journey as principal and see the changes within myself through the years, as I am able to relate to the experiences of the Gettysburg commanders.

Over the years I have evolved from being the person in charge to the person that is charging everyone to take ownership of the work. Dr. Brian Perkins' Strengths Finder workshop resonated with me greatly, identifying and intentionally utilizing team members' strengths and the correlation to impactful change for the school community is what I have been working on since becoming a principal. His sessions and the research behind the work reaffirms my journey as a leader in a fast paced environment filled with yearly changes in curriculum, structures, and mandates. Through the sessions, I've learned that people under our leadership have four basic needs: trust, compassion, stability, and hope. When all these basic needs are met, progress happens. As a leader I have been working on creating an environment where all voices are heard, information is being shared with all stakeholders, lead with compassion yet hold people accountable, and offer opportunities to grow by bringing new initiatives to the school.

While each session has left an impression on my thought process, the topic that resonated with me the most was Dr. Barbara McKeon's discussion on "Leading from Wellness," especially considering my experience in leadership during the New York City pandemic. As leaders, it is our intrinsic need to take care of everyone else around us, thus leaving us last. Emotional wellness has been the area that hasn't received enough attention in our training as school principals. It has been the missing element in our overall health. Dr. McKeon's "toolbox" of simple, yet important steps to take in our daily interactions is something that I have on my desk as a reminder. Simple reminders to keep moving every 20 minutes, listen to respond not react, focus on what you can control, have a picture of your loved ones on your desk, and much more, all to improve our emotional wellness.

My ally, assistant principal Danielle Quartarone, has been a great partner during this journey and every day since we started working together. Her calmness, her reassuring ways, and her deep understanding of systems and structures have supported our school's initiatives. Dr. Ellie Drago-Severson's work on teaming and adult learning has inspired the work we have done with our teams during this last school year. My ally supported these teams, learned alongside these teams, and encouraged them every step of the way. The impact of this work has been highlighted by our success in phonics proficiency for grades K-2. Danielle's leadership skills have been elevated as a result of this program in the area of monitoring instructional priorities, leveraging people's skills, and supporting adult learning.

Ally Reflections:

From the moment I was asked to participate in the Cahn Fellowship Program by my principal, Laura Avakians, I was immediately intrigued and honored to be a part of this experience. To think I was going to learn alongside the most talented leaders in education was very humbling. Although I knew the commitment was going to be a sacrifice in my personal life, leaving my husband and toddler at home, all while trying to grow my family, I knew I wanted to participate as I always have had a yearning to grow as a leader.

As we begin another school year, I have to thank the Cahn Fellowship Program for all the seeds they have sown over the course of the year to develop me as a stronger leader. Cahn Fellows staff were intentional with every speaker they chose and each person we were seated with which helped pave the way for me as a leader throughout this experience specifically with system thinking and teams. By the conclusion of The Cahn Fellowship, I felt I knew all members of the cohort while gaining insight on leading a school building. A lot of the conversations became very personal and raw, which I'll speak about further in my reflection. Every leader in the cohort had such a unique experience being from different states and demographics which made us think with a shifted lens about the work at our school.

Dr. Anthony Hacking's discussion on "The Neuroscience of Leadership" and NBI (Neethling Brain Instrument) assessment has impacted me greatly. Through this presentation, Dr. Anthony Hacking spoke about the psychological safety of high performing teams and how to create this climate throughout your school community. Interpersonal trust, a shared belief held by members, and a sense of confidence that the group will not embarrass someone for speaking up are a few ways to create psychological safety within your teams. The NBI assessment helped me see my thinking preferences according to the four quadrants and what my areas of strengths were. As an L2 thinker; preserver and organizer I would benefit from having a realist and analyst part of my team as it's my lower quadrant of thinking. Digging into my 8 dimensional brain profile has given me clarity on where we need to fill the gaps on our teams to make them more high performing.

Thinking about a principalship has been one of my goals over the past few years. I often think about how to maintain that family time while being the most effective leader for my school community. That professional and personal life balance I think is one of the hardest areas to maintain as a leader. Dr. Barbara McKeon's discussion on "Leading from Wellness," has provided me with perspective on our emotional wellness and how it can affect many areas in our life if we don't get a hold of it. Dr. Barbara McKeon's stress management flow chart is something I can see using in the near future. The flow chart is very simplistic but I feel these are questions we

typically don't ask ourselves during a stressful situation. Writing out the action we can take or how we will begin accepting stress when it's outside of our control, are all helpful strategies while we are in that stressful moment. Dr. Barbara McKeon's planning tool template, her reminder to keep moving every 20 minutes and to always keep a picture of your loved ones on your desk are all very helpful when thinking about our emotional health and wellness. Besides the discussion and tools provided, hearing from leaders at their most raw and personal times really impacted me the most. As members of the cohort shared their successes, regrets, and fears out loud, I couldn't help but absorb all these lessons learned through their vulnerable moments. I truly internalized and appreciated each person's story and connected it to my personal life, reflecting on those moments as if they were my own. The deep, honest stories were the best professional learning experiences I could've asked for.

In summation, this professional learning experience was truly transformative. This program clearly has impacted me far more than on a professional level. I'm looking forward to applying these lessons learned throughout this experience, not only for myself but for those I also personally mentor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude." —Ralph Waldo Emerson

I feel deeply honored to have been a part of this year's Cahn Distinguished Principals Fellowship cohort. This program has served as a catalyst for ongoing transformation within my school community, particularly at a time when the need for emotional well-being was paramount. This experience has provided the motivation to persevere within the context of a complex educational system.

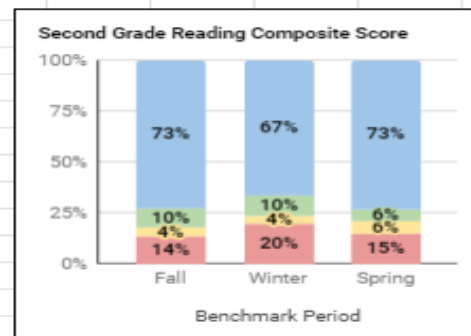
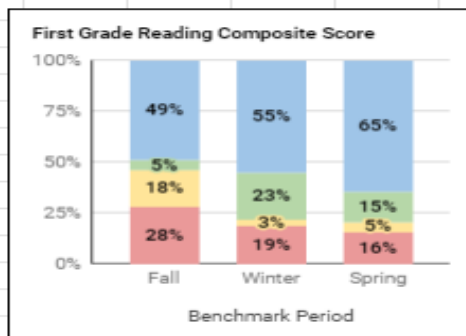
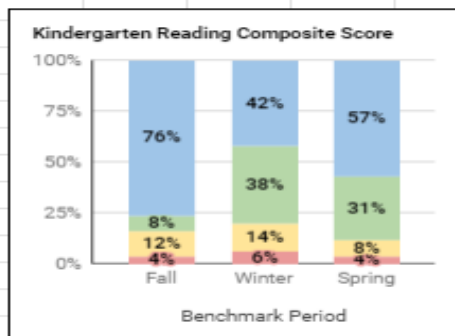
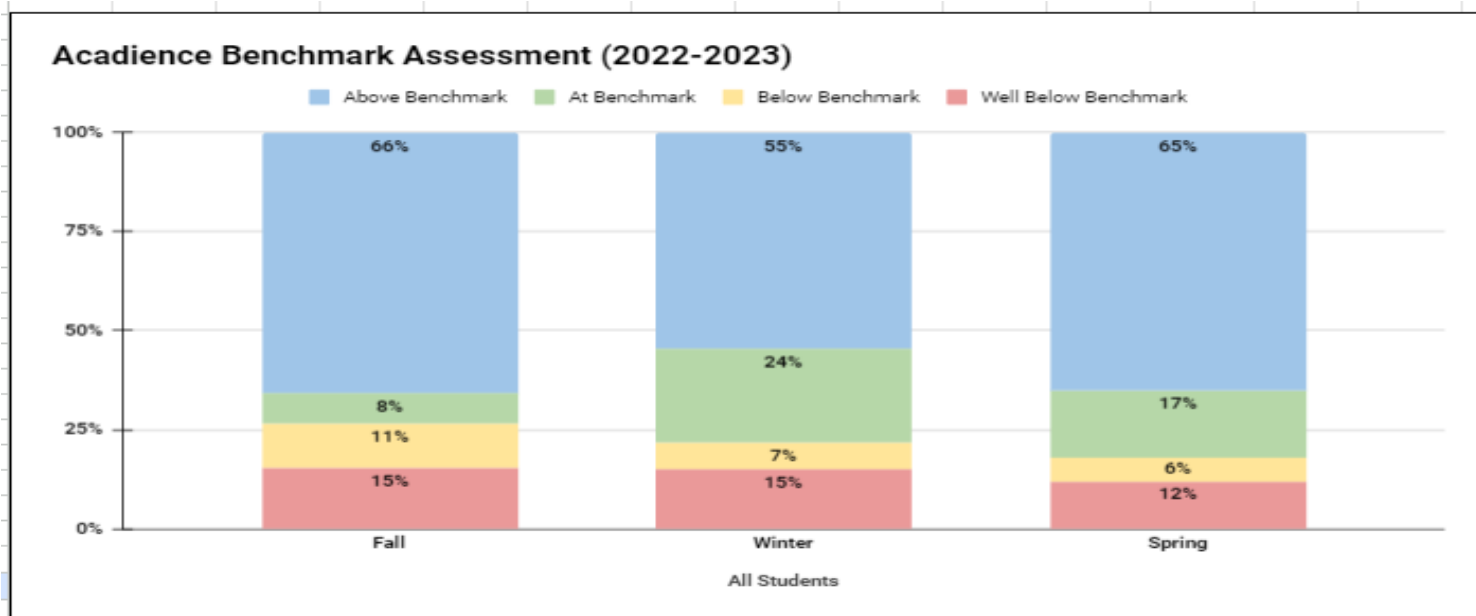
We express our heartfelt gratitude to Superintendent Danielle Giunta for her invaluable recommendation to this program, her unwavering support, and her keen recognition of our sustained dedication to the David D. Porter school community.

Dr. Barbara McKeon, the Cahn Fellowship staff, and our fellow peers have enriched this journey profoundly, adding depth and significance to our experiences. The readings, conversations, and collaborative activities will serve as enduring guides for our roles as school leaders in the years ahead.

Finally, we would like to convey our appreciation to our families for their steadfast support throughout this year-long program and in our chosen profession as a whole.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Acadience Screening Data 22-23



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