



# Cahn

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PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

**Designing a Feedback Loop: Utilizing Community Input to Cultivate Change**

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2022 Cahn Cohort

## Abstract

As educators we use our expertise to design learning environments that best meet the needs of the communities that we serve. We work diligently to create safe and inclusive environments that engage students and create forums for community members to engage with us and influence our decision-making. Despite our best intentions, and responding to feedback about our schools, we may fall short of meeting the needs of those that we serve.

For young people who have been unsuccessful in school, or who have had interrupted education, creating effective learning environments is all the more challenging. Frequently alternative school educators work to “fit students into school” as opposed to “fitting the school to the student”. Judith S. Kaye High School was designed specifically for young people who have been disengaged from school and frequently have been involved in the court system, foster care, or treatment.

In the Spring and Summer of 2020, as America’s struggle with race and power once again boiled to the surface, Judith S. Kaye began to reevaluate not only what we were teaching but also how we were responding to community voice. Utilizing community meetings and digital surveys we gathered input from our stakeholders to create two new mandated courses. Although we were careful and thoughtful in designing what we thought were engaging and informative courses our students did not pass them at a high rate. In fact, they were performing worse in these courses than in others. We spent this year looking at what may be causing our students to fail our new courses and how we can incorporate feedback not only in course design but also in overall school design so that we may respond to the ever-changing needs of our community.

## Introduction

Our Cahn project was a yearlong study of how we have used community feedback to create coursework and affect school design and the results. Further, we investigated how we can implement a feedback loop that will allow us to continually tailor our school to the needs of the community.

We opened Judith S. Kaye High School (JSK) in 2017 in honor of the first female Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals, whose main advocacy point was to “keep kids in

school and out of court”. JSK High School was specifically designed for students who have been unsuccessful in previous schools, many of whom have been systems-involved, including incarceration, drug and mental health treatment, and foster care. A study that we commissioned our first year indicated that court-involved youth in New York City have historically graduated high school at a rate of about 8%; this number rises to 15% if you include High School Equivalency. An analysis of our first-year students showed that they attended an average of 3 high schools in only the year prior to joining JSK. Often this is an indication that they were placed in involuntary programs (juvenile centers, jail, treatment centers) or had insecure housing. 30% of our first-year students attended 4 or more high schools in only the school year prior to admittance.

Initial school design for JSK took place over the course of a year and included input from an array of stakeholders, including students who had transitioned from involuntary programs to community schools, mental health professionals, The Legal Aid Society, and the Manhattan District Attorney’s office, The Fortune Society, The Department of Probation, alternative school leaders and educators, community-based support organizations, and families affected by system involvement. In consultation with these stakeholders, JSK was designed as a half-day academic and half-day career and technical school where students receive very individualized support. Each student has access to individual counseling, regardless of IEP requirements, and we partner with multiple community-based organizations to assist students with any barriers to their schooling as well as provide them with enrichment programs. We have also partnered with St. Luke’s/ Mt. Sinai’s UPRISE program to provide in-school mental health treatment and ongoing support for trauma and built a learning-to-work component where our students participate in paid internships to develop employment skills. All students are expected to earn the most appropriate high school diploma, either Regents or High School Equivalency, as well as one or more trade certifications in partnership with The School for Cooperative Technical Education. JSK has been designed to engage students who have had significant barriers to their education and serves students who frequently are unable to be served in typical community schools. JSK now has two locations and serves a citywide population in Manhattan and South Jamaica, Queens.

Although we do our best as professionals to create an ideal environment for our students to learn, and our community to grow, even the most seasoned professional needs to listen and

learn from the community that they serve. In the Spring of 2020 when George Floyd was murdered publicly, and the struggle of race and power in America was on graphic display, JSK leadership knew that it was a time that we needed to listen to the community and identify how we could best serve. We organized multiple opportunities for our community to reflect and contribute. We initiated the process with staff sessions to identify how we could best support them personally as well as to elicit ideas for supporting students. We then also held an “Equity Forum” and “Day of Solidarity” for the school community which was a safe place for students to express feelings, share ideas, and ask for help. Throughout the remainder of that school year, we dedicated class time to exploring questions of race, identity, and equity. Perhaps the most informative practice that we used was a community survey in which we asked “If you could choose to learn one thing in school what would it be?”

The results from our community survey were overwhelming and allowed us to identify trends. The responses included “our real black history”, “what makes us as humans equal”, “all of the events that weren’t taught”, “how to invest wisely”, “what makes us equal-also how to budget and build credit”, “how to get rich”, “how to do taxes and save money”. Overwhelmingly our students were asking to learn about American Black History and Financial literacy. As a result of the input that we received from the community, we spent the summer of 2020 designing two new, mandated, courses for every student at JSK. Please see course descriptions below:

#### Examining Systemic racism (ESR)

This will be a course where students examine systemic racism. Students will study the origins of systemic racism and oppression and how it manifests in the world today. We see this course as a way for students to understand the history of our country and the world so that they are better prepared to be advocates for themselves and their communities. The course is broken into three units using relevant film as the driving media-

**Unit 1: Foundations** (Pre-American history/ Ancient Nile River Civilizations/Kemet, Blackness in the Americas, Pioneers of Science/Math/Agriculture/Astronomy)

**Unit 2: Economic Exploitation in America** (Understanding Social Constructs, Impact of Slavery, Racism, Capitalism, Columbian Exchange)

**Unit 3: Pushing for Progress** (Empowerment, Advocacy, Connections, Leadership, Who are you? Where Are You Going?, Civil Rights Past and Present, Buying Black)

## Financial Literacy: Race, Power, and Privilege

This financial literacy course will explore Race, Power, and Privilege in America. We will be studying the American capitalist financial system which has created extraordinary wealth for some and held many others underfoot. We will focus on the connection between the American economic system and racial injustice. We will specifically delve into the effects of the racist policies of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and mass incarceration of people of color.

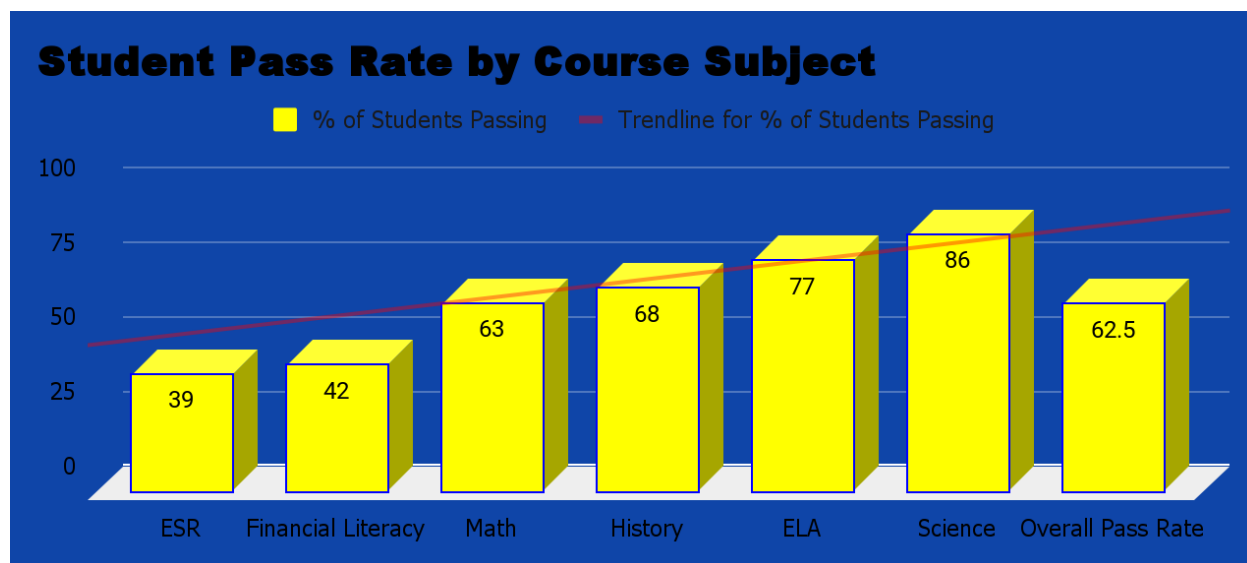
We also intend to offer an economic antidote to many of our societal diseases by focusing on practical, financial skills that will empower you. The goal is for you to thrive (not simply survive). You are supremely talented builders, doers, go-getters, hard workers, inventors, organizers, engineers, and dreamers. With pluck and persistence, grit and grind, knowledge, and education, your generation will break the cycle of substandard living, poverty, and systemic racism. Despite the heavy burdens of our complicated economic system, this class is a reminder of your historical worth. You will learn about resilience against all odds and wide-ranging stories of success. You will be asked to look inward at your own relationship with money, consumerism saving, service, and success in America.

“I’m not a businessman; I’m a business, man! Let me handle my business, damn.” JAY-Z

In the fall of 2020, we introduced these two, mandatory, courses at JSK. Although we witnessed students in deep discussion using higher-order questions and producing powerful and passionate work, they were not passing these classes at a high level.

### Statement of the Problem

Although JSK has remained dedicated to keeping our new courses fresh, and we have included current events and relevant new information to each, our course pass rates for both courses are well below the schoolwide average. In theory, a course designed using input from the community should yield superior achievement. While our overall pass rate sits between 70 and 75% (excluding ESR and Financial Literacy) our pass rate for ESR and Financial Literacy are 39% and 42%, respectively. We created these courses using community voice but clearly, there is a disconnect. Students should be passing these courses at the same rate, if not a higher rate, than the other courses offered at JSK.



Despite considerable interest from teaching staff to teach these courses, and assigning highly effective teachers to do so, our course pass rates in these subjects have been consistently poor.

**Problem of Practice:** Our problem of practice is how to address the poor course pass rates in Examining Systemic Racism and Financial Literacy at JSK.

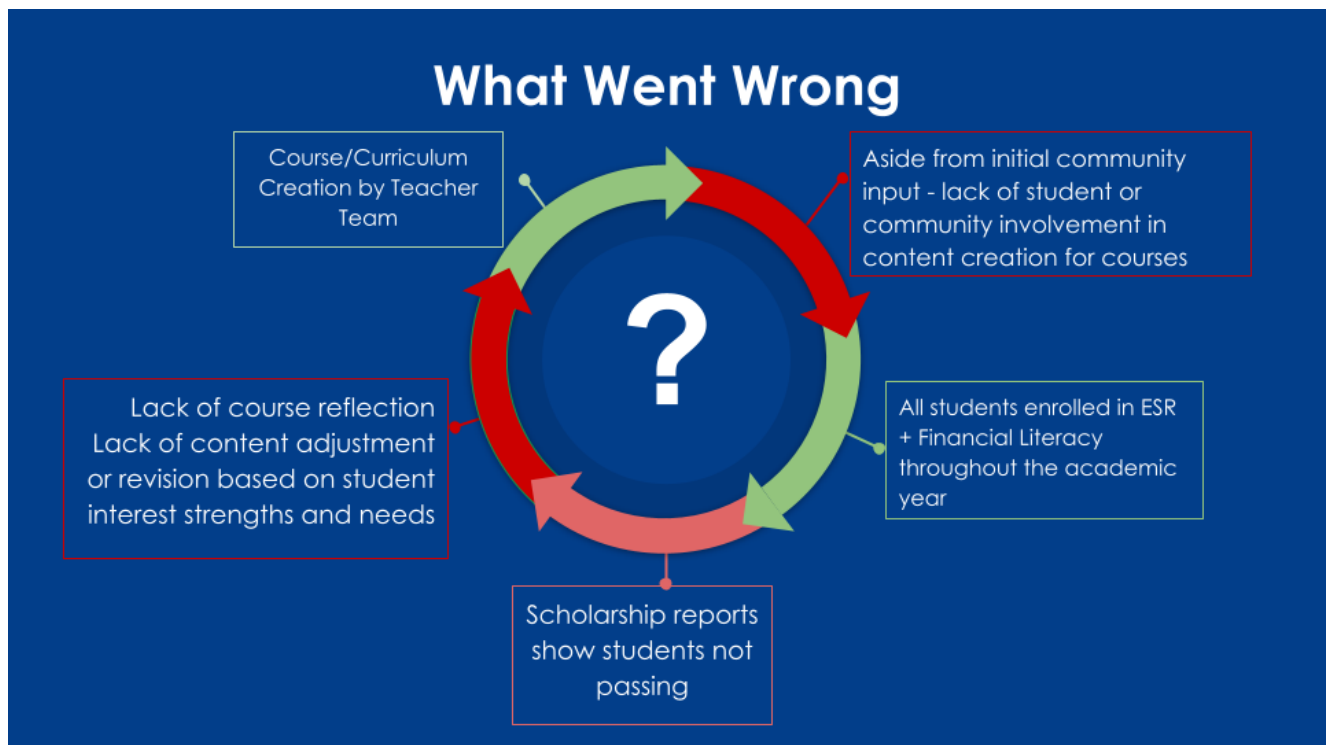
#### Methods

We sought to find antecedents to our poor pass rate and utilized a number of methods to identify them. We conducted interviews with students and staff members and examined other factors that could influence the pass rate such as scheduling and programming.

When we analyzed our scheduling and programming we found no correlation between when a course was scheduled and the outcomes of that course. Similarly, we found that programming for a student, whether they took the courses at the beginning or end of their time at JSK, or if they had a more or less full schedule, had no noticeable impact on the pass rate. Students were doing poorly in these courses even while performing markedly better in others at the same time whether they were new to the school or soon to graduate.

Through our interviews with staff members, we were able to identify where we were strong and where we fell short. The staff members felt supported at the outset of building the curriculum and felt that they had been given the opportunity for rich dialogue with their colleagues throughout the process. All staff members indicated the creation of the course was well informed with community input and the process included voice from multiple staff members. There was a clear curricular goal and our team vetted and stood by their work. After the initial creation, however, there was limited opportunity for them to revise the curriculum with each other and there was no opportunity for them to gather updated input from their students or the larger community. According to them, the courses were starting to feel “flat”, and they felt that they needed a new opportunity to revise their work.

Students had a similar reaction to each of the courses. Although they liked the content of both, by and large, they all had ideas to improve the courses including “more freedom to choose projects”, and “talking more about the people that we know (are familiar with)”. Other students indicated that they hadn’t influenced the decision to create these courses as many of them were not students at the time that we initially gathered data.








Providing students the opportunity to reflect on what they have done enables us to continue checks for understanding and find new ways to teach content or modify content so that it is more relevant and engaging. Similarly, we created an end-of-course evaluation so that students could provide feedback about each course.

## End of Term Course Evaluation

Thank you for your dedication to this class! As your last assignment please complete this short survey. I really value your opinions so please be honest!

chunkele@jskhigh.org [Switch account](#) 

\* Indicates required question

Email \*

Record chunkele@jskhigh.org as the email to be included with my response

Name \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What is something that you learned in this class? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What is something you liked about the assignments? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What is something you didn't like about the assignments? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What is something I could do better as a teacher? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

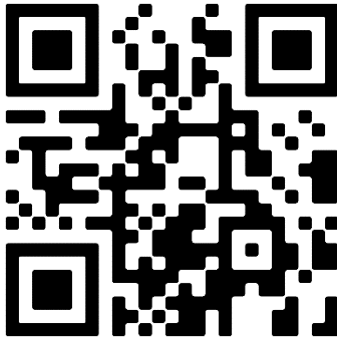
## Course Redesign and Implementation

We will use a new process to redesign our courses that will inform our other courses at JSK as well. Our new approach will include the following:

- Utilize teacher teams to review student response data and identify trends
- Data collected throughout the trimester (at each benchmark), which is about every 10 school days, will be implemented, when possible
- During 3 professional development days throughout the school year teacher teams will use data to create curricular maps which will inform their curricular work for the remainder of the trimester and/ or year
- Although curricular work may be done by individuals, one teacher meeting per month will be dedicated to a review of curricular work before students are exposed to changes in the curriculum
- Students will be prompted to provide feedback throughout the year, as well as have access to a QR code, so that the feedback loop continues to inform us as the student register turns over

### Reflections and Future Plans

Although we have always considered ourselves an institution that recognizes and utilizes voices of all stakeholders it was through this work that we realized where we might be falling short. We have developed a plan to ensure that our students are able to utilize their voices and affect change in their courses but we also wanted to expand this idea. Students should always have access to the ability to change their school as they see fit, but their caregivers and other community members should have that opportunity as well. As such, we are implementing a QR code linked to a feedback form which will be introduced to families at intake, shared through email, and will be posted throughout our two schools so that providing feedback is easy and quick. We will also empower the community to view this feedback so that they may add, modify, or respond to the feedback of others. We will do this in community forums and also allow access to teachers, students, and parent leaders.



# Feedback Form

## JSK Feedback Form

JSK Community: We welcome your feedback and want to hear your voice. Please use this feedback form as a means to share your thoughts, questions, and observations surrounding school environment, teaching and learning, or any other aspect of JSK.

sbrown@jskhigh.org [Switch account](#)



\* Indicates required question

Email \*

Record sbrown@jskhigh.org as the email to be included with my response

Area of Feedback \*

Other

Feedback: \*

Your answer

Submit

Clear form

## Reflections:

Andrew Brown, Fellow

The impact of Cahn has been profound. Interacting with high caliber professionals, in a variety of environments, pushed me to think differently about education, leadership, and even the human condition. Participating in professional sessions and then breaking bread with driven and brilliant educators has been life changing; I will never look at our work the same again. Aside from the comfort you feel being with those who understand your work, your stress, and your love of it all you reflect and dream with practitioners who listen, challenge you, and dare you to be better. I have met lifelong partners in this work through Cahn.

In my 20 year career I have never participated in such rich and relevant professional development. Not only was I surrounded by energetic and effective leaders but we were immersed in content and activities that mattered; from brain science to self care, from broad questions about the purpose of school to finding small management levers that can move mountains. The range of topics, each as powerful as the next, touched on not only so many aspects of school leadership but also types of personalities and who we are. I learned as much about myself this year as I did how to improve my practice and I will be forever grateful.

I am also grateful that Sara Brown joined me on this journey. Sara is an outstanding school leader, and came into the program that way, but her dedication to the work at Cahn has made her more self-aware and reflective. Being together throughout this enabled us to practice with the tools that Cahn gave us within our school and I watched as she evaluated her leadership style and adjusted it throughout the year. Cahn gave us the forum to learn and discuss so that we can methodically improve our school and outcomes for young people.

Sara Brown, Ally

Often in educational settings we are faced with the task of aligning intent versus impact. Unfortunately, we've seen the disconnect between the two from the city level all the way down to the classroom level. Assuming best intentions, it's easy to trust that those in leadership positions want the best for their students and their school community. However, as we saw first hand with our problem of practice- our intent does not always match our impact. On some levels, we were lucky. Our misstep was not detrimental to our school community; we did not derail years of work, we did not cause disconnect or

division. However, we realized that we needed an immediate course of redirection. We needed to take a step back, reflect, and recognize that while our intent was to give voice to our stakeholders and elevate the wants and needs of our community- we dropped the ball on impact. As leaders, it is often humbling to see your best laid plans go awry; to see your well thought out, strategically planned attempts go sideways. It can be easy to take it personally as you begin to question what led to the breakdown and identify how it can be fixed. Luckily, The Cahn Fellowship provided us with a support system to work through these issues and find an outlet to make it right and move forward.

From the very first Cahn Summit, it was evident the positive impact interacting with such distinguished and thoughtful leaders would have on me. There is a wealth of knowledge that came not only from the incredible presentations but also from the interactions with other allies and fellows. People's willingness to share their own experiences, to listen, and to offer meaningful feedback was invaluable. It is not often that you find yourself surrounded by like minded people who understand the unique situations we find ourselves in as school leaders, and who more importantly are willing to share their own experiences with transparency. It is rare to have the opportunity to express oneself without the need for justification of actions- this experience through Cahn Fellows gave us an outlet to reflect and grow through genuine conversation and learning opportunities.

Each summit and subsequent interactions encouraged us to think about who we are as leaders and individuals. We were able to see many iterations of success up close and investigate how our own leadership styles impact our school communities. Self-reflection is not always pretty; being provided with the tools necessary to closely examine our own actions (especially those where the impact did not match our intent) has shifted my mindset. Armed with knowledge imparted on us by Dr. Perkins, Dr. Young, and Dr. Drago-Severson among many others, I feel better equipped to reflect on my practices and decisions and in doing so feel better equipped to lead effectively and efficiently. I'm grateful for the Cahn Community who created a much needed outlet to brainstorm, reflect, strategize and mobilize. A community who, to put it simply, forced me to be better.

#### Acknowledgments

We are so grateful to Chuck Cahn for this beautiful idea and his dedication to urban education

Thank you to the Cahn program staff who made this incredible journey possible

Big shout to Dr. Barb McKeon who was on one of the planning boards for our school and helped to create JSK

Thank you to Dr. Tim Lisante and Nick Marinacci for believing in JSK, JSK students, and making this dream a reality

Thank you to the JSK family- you are the most special people in the world

Much respect to The Chicago Crew- we are in awe of the work that you do