



# Cahn

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PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

## Mentoring Matters

FELLOW: Sundy Chazares

ALLY: Shalini RajPaul

Simmons Career Acceleration Academy

1202 W. Grant Street, Plant City, FL 33563

[www.hillsboroughschools.org/simmons](http://www.hillsboroughschools.org/simmons)

[Cleto.Chazares@hcps.net](mailto:Cleto.Chazares@hcps.net)

[Shalini.Rajpaul@hcps.net](mailto:Shalini.Rajpaul@hcps.net)

2022-2023 Cohort

## ABSTRACT

What do indicators mean? In an automobile, the indicators mean that your car needs mechanical attention. Failure to address the issue will either leave you stranded or worse, you may need to purchase a new car. On a professional evaluation, indicators show an area that you must work on or pay attention to. Yet on a student's profile, indicators give us key pieces of data that a particular student will either be successful in school or struggle academically and potentially drop out of school. The faculty and staff at our school pride themselves on working hard with these students to mitigate their unique challenges and provide creative instructional opportunities to overcome their fragmented belief of not being able to graduate from high school.

The focus of our project was two tiered: establishing a robust mentorship program that will capacitate students with maintaining academic focus, self-advocacy, healthier relationships, enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, developing higher educational and career-oriented aspirations, and improving overall behavior in and outside of school. The second aspect of our focus, which connects directly to the mentorship, was to establish a fluid student performance tracking system that can monitor student progress so that we are able to intervene in real time instead of the end of the semester.

## INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn project focused on the importance of mentorship and how this initiative can be utilized to further enhance the existing components within the culture of our school. For the last four years, we have been keeping track of specific indicators that elevate the concern for our students and erupts a sense of urgency on how to reduce or eliminate these indicators such as: attendance, behavior, and course performance (course failure in core ELA or Math and Level 1 in Statewide Assessments in ELA or Math), as well as other measures not listed but play a part in the crushing compilation of hardships such as broken home issues. We have successfully identified the correlation between students with three or more indicators and their lack of focus and effort in their overall instructional performance. In addition, these are the same students that struggle with keeping a job, advocating for themselves, maintaining healthy relationships with their peers, and setting them up for a chain of failures at work and in their adult lives.

Simmons Career Acceleration Academy is located on the Southwest corner of the city of Plant City, Florida, serving high school students from three main feeder high schools (Durant, Plant City and Strawberry Crest), as well as surrounding areas. We are a thriving agricultural community known as the Strawberry Capital of the World and in the middle of the fastest growing region in the state for housing, as well as large businesses commonly known as the I-4 corridor. Our student body is made up of 222 students, consisting of 57% Hispanic, 29% White, 11% Black, 1% Asian & 1% Multiracial. 15.20% of our student population is identified as Exceptional Education Students, 9.94% are 504 eligible, 1.17% are ELL, 2.92% are gifted, and 87.13% are eligible to receive free and/or reduced lunch.

The Mission Statement of Simmons Career Acceleration Academy is to provide an education that enables each student to excel as a successful and productive member of society.

Simmons Career Acceleration Academy is a high performing alternative setting institution that fosters creative thinking, outside-the-box solutions, and pushes students to forge ahead with their career aspirations. Our school has been rated “Commendable,” which is

equivalent to “A”, by the Florida Department of Education for the past five consecutive years. We have expanded our course selection to provide more class variety while being instructionally creative. We offer Agriculture, Culinary Arts, Journalism, Music, PE, as well as dual enrollment for selected students and the opportunity for students to earn either their 18 or 24 credit diplomas. Our district considers us the “blueprint” for how schools like ours should be run and duplicated. Our instructional hybrid approach provides students with the opportunity to recover classes that they have previously failed, as well as being able to take face-to-face classes, especially those classes that have an end-of-course exam or are attached to Reading and Algebra 1, which are the required graduation benchmarks.

While our school lacks specific resources such as an active PTA, fundraising opportunities and athletics, we have managed to establish strong partnerships with the City of Plant City, Chamber of Commerce, Future Career Academy, Plant City Mayor and Commissioners. These connections help provide opportunities and experiences that our students would not have, such as employability skills, actual job interviews, attending career fairs that allow them to explore career paths, provide school supplies, and contribute to project specific funds that allow us to meet the needs of underprivileged students with clothing, hygiene items, school supplies and shoes. In addition, local companies utilize our catering services and on a regular basis, offer donations to our Career and Technical Programs, as well as donations for seniors to be able to attend Grad Bash or other local field trips. Our feeder high schools welcome our students and through agreements with the district, allow our students to play sports and attend prom at what would have been their neighborhood school. These partnerships have strengthened our students’ belief that by coming to Simmons Career Acceleration Academy, they don’t necessarily give up on all the traditional experiences that they would have by attending a traditional high school.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Having monitored data for the past four years (attendance, behavior, free and/or reduced lunch eligibility, eligible 504, ELL, SWD, core class and course assessment failures), we were able to identify the problem of practice. The one link that makes a clear connection between all our data is the lack of mentorship opportunities from which our students can benefit. Mentors can offer guidance and support that, in turn, create healthy relationships and foster trust. The mentorship initiative is not to replace what some students may have at home but to enhance whatever support they may already have. The cold reality to the previous statement is that the majority of our students lack mentors outside of school and these may be the only supports that the student may have both at home and at school. Equally important is the urgency to institute a more robust teacher accountability system.

The three main indicators such as attendance, behavior and course performance that have labeled our students as being “at risk” are directly correlated to low self-esteem, lack of interest in school, development of life and social skills, creation of school and social networks, and establishing support systems that offer broad guidance with life and career goals. The second link that connects everything to students’ academic growth and success is the need for accountability from the students and staff. Our teachers receive plenty of data via the way of progress monitoring, with PM1 (baseline data), PM2 (Midyear data) and PM 3 (Statewide grades 3-10 Reading). The data is further broken down to show each student’s areas of weakness. We recognize that for each student to have a fighting chance at passing required courses and meeting the graduation requirements, we must get them to come to school, connect with a mentor, and have the mentor serve as the “person in their corner.” We also recognize that we must have difficult conversations with teachers regarding their test scores and data. We can track data and have accurate numbers all year long, but until the teachers are made to be accountable for their own data, students may come to school but still not receive the proper interventions to grow instructionally.

Because we will continue to subscribe to our hybrid approach, teachers that are teaching face to face will become more deliberate with the usage of their student tracking data and what adaptations are needed to maintain momentum and collaborate with the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) as to their instructional delivery needs. On the other hand, teachers that oversee an Edgenuity lab (online platform) will utilize course tracking sheets to monitor student course progress and completion. Our two-year data (2021-2022 and 2022-2023) shows that 38.7% of our student population comes to our school with two or more indicators, and 42.7% have at least one indicator meaning that 81.3% of our total student population has been identified as being “at risk”! Yet our graduation rate remains steady at 87% based on students that spend at least two years with us and not including 5-year seniors.

The project allowed my team to identify the two items that we need to focus on specifically – providing mentorship for our students and deliberately holding teachers accountable with their usage of their data and how to effectively push students’ academic performance. Our hybrid approach grants us the flexibility to not micromanage instructional delivery and provides teachers the opportunity and the freedom to be creative with their instructional delivery with the focus being on tracking student academic success. The caveat to this approach is that teachers need to reflect on their personal student data and collaborate with administration as to what they need to accomplish positive results. We will also have collaborative training with a focus on best practices and Q & A for both face-to-face classes and how to monitor course completion in the Edgenuity lab.

We have come a long way from 2010 when we successfully transitioned from the Performance-based Diploma to Standard High School Diplomas. We transitioned from a somewhat relaxed instructional rigor to higher expectations with overall student success. Each year, we focus on a particular piece of our school culture to continue to strengthen the current academic expectations. We have learned that for our school to continue to be successful, we must continue to think outside the box and continue to provide our teachers full autonomy on how they deliver instruction and how they utilize student tracking data, so long as student success remains at the forefront. Students on the other hand, will have a mentor that will

advise and guide them to focus on school while nurturing a strong relationship with that adult “in their corner.”

## METHODS

We took time to review data that included Industry Certifications, Edgenuity completion courses, Florida Standards Assessment, PM1, PM2 and PM3, as well as pass/fail from all the face-to-face classes. Our guidance counselor utilizes a class tracking system that enables each student to have a document that they can rely on as to what classes they have yet to take. By implementing the data tracking sheets for all face-to-face classes and Edgenuity, it will provide all our teachers with a guiding tool and a visual artifact that will be useful when conversing with students and their mentors about the student’s progress or lack thereof. The mentoring program, mainly driven by the success coach, social worker, guidance counselor and administration, will pair students with two or more indicators (predetermined by data collected by the district) with a mentor that will guide and advocate on behalf of the student.

## RESULTS

Out of the 90 students that graduated during the 2022-2023 school year, 41 of them had two or more indicators. Midway through the 2022-2023 academic school year, 25 out of the 41 were placed on academic probation.

We put a plan in place which included a mandatory meeting with the parents/guardians and Lunch & Learn where they received individualized attention and weekly tracking sheets. The purpose for the tracking sheets was to monitor attendance and academic progress on their recovery classes. We also monitored academic effort in their face-to-face classes. By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> nine weeks, 23 out 25 had increased their GPA, were passing all their classes, and had passed or were close to passing their ELA and Math benchmark (graduation requirements).

Perhaps most impressive of the 2022-2023 academic school year is the fact that we had 45 underclassmen that had two or more indicators including poor attendance, behavior issues and needing the ELA and Math benchmark. While we just began our 2023-2024 school year, I'm proud to report that we have "0" with two or more indicators. The interventions that we have put in place along with the mentorship component have brought changes to the culture of the school and a positive overall academic performance from the students.

Here are some key comparisons.

Attendance    2022-2023 (84.7%)    2023-2024 (91.4%)

Ethnic breakdown	2022-23	2023-24
Hispanic	60.2%	58%
White	27.1%	30%
Black	9.4%	8%
Subgroups	3.3%	4%

Eligible 504	13%	11.54%
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ELL	2.7%	3.21%
FRL	89.7%	67.95%
Gifted	1%	1.92%
SWD	19.3%	16.67%

## REFLECTION

### Cleto “Sundy” Chazares – Fellow

The Cahn Fellowship experience has been fulfilling for me personally and professionally. Bringing together a large group of educators that have been forged in different parts of the country and bringing their own unique experiences created a rich and environmentally professional setting that allowed all of us to learn and grow. I don't know if every Fellow walked away with a sense of reinvigoration about the profession, but I did!

The old saying, “history repeats itself” stayed in my mind. As I walked through the battlefields of the Peach Orchard, Little Round Top, Cemetery Hill, Culp Hill, and Pickett's Charge, I pondered how the soldiers and generals must have felt to be face-to-face with uncertainty and fear while trying to defend what they believed. People died for a cause and after the grieving and recovering process, the feeling of unity brought us together as one nation. The end of the Civil War was 1865. Then a little over 100 years later, we lived another dark chapter in our nation's history during the Civil Rights Era that centered around three very divisive issues: gun violence, race, and gender. The cultural, social, and political divisions threatened our nation much like the ideology of the Civil War. Fast forward to 2023 (55 years later from 1968), and we have another apocalyptic event centered on gun violence, race, and gender! I cannot help but think that we will continue to endure tragic events rooted in issues that have not been resolved. These issues are not a Democrat or Republican problem, this is an American problem that needs to be fixed. The quote from John F. Kennedy still reverberates today, “Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”

Through the course of the program, I was able to reflect on my personal and professional practice, my passion for what I do, and my leadership style. The interactions with other principals and allies provided me with insights on how differently our nation continues to

struggle with challenges in our educational settings and how these talented leaders have found a way to successfully thrive in these challenging environments.

My Ally, Mrs. Rajpaul, is the person that I had envisioned her to be and have come to know her at a personal level. She is a strong systems thinker and pushes the “equal opportunity” for all students. She was fundamental with my staying focused, on track, and discussing the approach to difficult conversations. She has been a member of my staff since 2014. Over the years, she has been a key member of our Instructional Leadership Team, National SAM (School Administrator Manager) Innovation Project member, and Team Lead (quasi department head). She leads with compassion and is passionate about providing every student with the tools to learn. She makes herself available to all students and regularly brings topics to the bus ramp for our afternoon discussions while on bus duty. She will be assisting me with the introduction of the project to our faculty and staff. She presented the project to all stakeholders and successfully assisted the School Improvement Chair in embedding it into our School Improvement Plan.

The presenters provided valuable insights and provided the platform to push our thinking beyond the area of comfort. Often our professional decisions are influenced by the inner struggle rooted in our inability to grasp the constant moving target and shifting of tectonic political divisiveness. How, where, and when we grew up and experiences that marked us also have a lot to do with how we handle leadership decisions, respond to crises, understand our thinking preferences, theory of action for school change, and effective feedback. I can share with the Cahn Fellows team, colleagues, and presenters that I feel blessed to have been exposed to discrimination, exclusion, and being shunned. Then by the same token, I was given an opportunity to succeed by an unlikely hero, a southern white lady who had everything to lose and nothing to gain. She challenged my critical thinking, self-forgiveness and addressed difficult topics that pushed my thinking beyond my comfort zone. The Cahn Fellow experience has reaffirmed what we are doing at our school. It has provided a refinement opportunity on how to hold our teachers accountable by using student data. At the same time, it has helped us to establish a mentorship program that will allow us to address the disconnect between students coming to school and how to handle the issues that are impeding them.

## REFLECTION

Shalini Rajpaul -Ally

Being a part of this year's Cahn Fellows Program has been very rewarding, and I am thankful and grateful for the opportunity. I have enjoyed listening to and learning from my peers from various parts of the country. It is a reminder that some things work well in some schools, but those same things may not work in others depending on several different areas that make up the "makeup" of a school. My understanding has been expanded through this experience, and it has allowed me to reflect on being an effective educator in my school and district. I have enjoyed sharing these experiences with my colleagues at my school and passed on my knowledge from various trainings and experiences.

Culture and climate at my school is the specific area in which I found my knowledge and experiences impacted the most. My school fosters an open-door policy for all stakeholders, encouraging students, staff, and families to ask questions and share concerns. Our staff provides an energy on our campus that encourages and provides a positive climate; students and staff feel welcomed when they set foot on our campus, and the positive climate follows them throughout their day.

The Cahn Fellows Program has encouraged me to take on an even more active role within our district and all the responsibilities attached by moving to an assistant principal position. This program has given me confidence in the next steps I will need to take to move into this role. The Cahn Fellows Program has given me an opportunity to see various challenges and successes, allowing me to learn from the experiences of others. Numerous resources provided by this training will be essential in helping to improve my leadership skills as an educator. I feel comfortable and confident to reach out to Peers I have met in this program over the last year if I need guidance or advice from any situations that may arise. Nelson Mandela's

famous quote “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” can be applied to all individuals, even the students at my school. Our students come from different backgrounds and income levels, and for most of them, our school is their last chance to earn a high school diploma. I believe in building relationships with my students, listening to their needs, and showing them that they play a vital role in our society. I work to empower my students to take on responsibilities that will help them in future endeavors.

My passion for being an educator started at an early age, when I was always the teacher when my siblings and I “played school.” I followed that vision into the education profession. While I attended school in a very challenging part of Bronx, NY, I had several teachers and peers that influenced me to become an educator. I felt, as an educator, that I would be most effective working in lower income schools, as I can personally relate more to my students and show them that they can achieve any goal they set, despite the “limitations.” It isn’t always about teaching the students math but teaching them life skills that will help them as they continue their journeys through life. As I reflect on this amazing journey, I can't help but feel grateful for the opportunity to participate in something so inspiring and motivating. Being amongst like-minded educators who share the passion and desires I have in this profession has helped to rejuvenate my passion and ignites the flames that burn in me for education. I have learned an immeasurable amount from my Peers and the Cahn facilitators and am thankful for this opportunity.