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New Visions for Public Schools: Using Data to Engage Families

**Barbara Taveras, New Visions for Public Schools
Caissa Douwes, New Visions for Public Schools
Karen Johnson, BASE High School**

**With the assistance of
Diana Lee, Harvard Family Research Project
Margaret Caspe, Consultant**

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**For questions or comments about this paper,
email hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu**

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Harvard Family Research Project · Harvard Graduate School of Education · 3 Garden Street · Cambridge, MA · 02138
www.hfrp.org · Email: hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu · Tel: 617-495-9108 · Fax: 617-495-8594

The U. S. Department of Education has adopted using data for school improvement as one of its major education reform priorities. However, as states, districts, and schools develop new approaches to track academic progress, both accessing and understanding data are often out of reach for average parents. While school leaders and teachers have begun to share and analyze student data, parents are too often left out of the conversation. This is unfortunate, because data use presents a great opportunity for parents to become involved in their children's education with a focus squarely on student achievement.

Caissa Douwes and Barbara Taveras from New Visions for Public Schools (www.newvisions.org) and Karen Johnson from BASE High School in New York City share how high schools in New York City have begun to engage families in students' academic success and college readiness by supporting parents in understanding achievement data. This case study makes clear that supporting parents in grasping and utilizing this information is a shared responsibility among schools, families, and students.

New Visions: From High School Graduation to College Readiness

New Visions for Public Schools (New Visions) was founded in 1989 and is dedicated to improving the quality of education in New York City public schools. In 2002, operating under the core belief that working relationships between schools, families, and communities contribute to student achievement, New Visions spearheaded the small schools movement in New York City. Through the New Century High School Initiative, New Visions has created a network of 99 small public schools. These 99 schools bring together nonprofits, communities, and educators with a common goal of improving student academic performance and graduation rates.

During the course of its work, New Visions shifted its focus from on-time high school graduation to college readiness. New Vision's initial goals were that 80% of seniors in New Century High Schools would receive a diploma and that each student would maintain an annual attendance rate of 92% or higher. The first cohort of schools came close to meeting its graduation rate target. However, after gathering post-secondary data from the first cohort of graduating seniors, New Visions realized that students need more than just the minimum graduation requirements in order to enter and succeed in college, or to compete for a job that pays more than the minimum wage. Thus, New Visions raised the bar to a new goal of 80% of students graduating from high school *and* entering and succeeding in college.

In 2007, the New York City Department of Education organized different systems of school supports for the City's public schools, and New Visions was selected to be a Partnership Support Organization (PSO) responsible for working with 76 public schools (mostly high schools) and accountable for the academic success of approximately 36,000 students.

Transforming Parent Involvement: From Event-driven to Outcome-oriented

Historically, approaches to engaging families have been event-driven and not always designed to involve families in a consistent and intentional way to improve student achievement. New Visions believes that at home, parents need to be able to monitor the academic progress of their child, as well as have access to school- and community-level resources to help each student meet his or her academic goals. Similarly, schools need to develop the capacity to provide families with timely, action-oriented student performance data. This includes information such as how students are progressing toward graduation and post-secondary education benchmarks, as well as their grades, attendance, and homework assignments. For this to happen, teachers and other school staff need to clearly communicate academic expectations and post-secondary education goals. Moreover, parents and schools must work together within roles that are clearly defined. New Visions staff began asking themselves a variety of questions based on these beliefs:

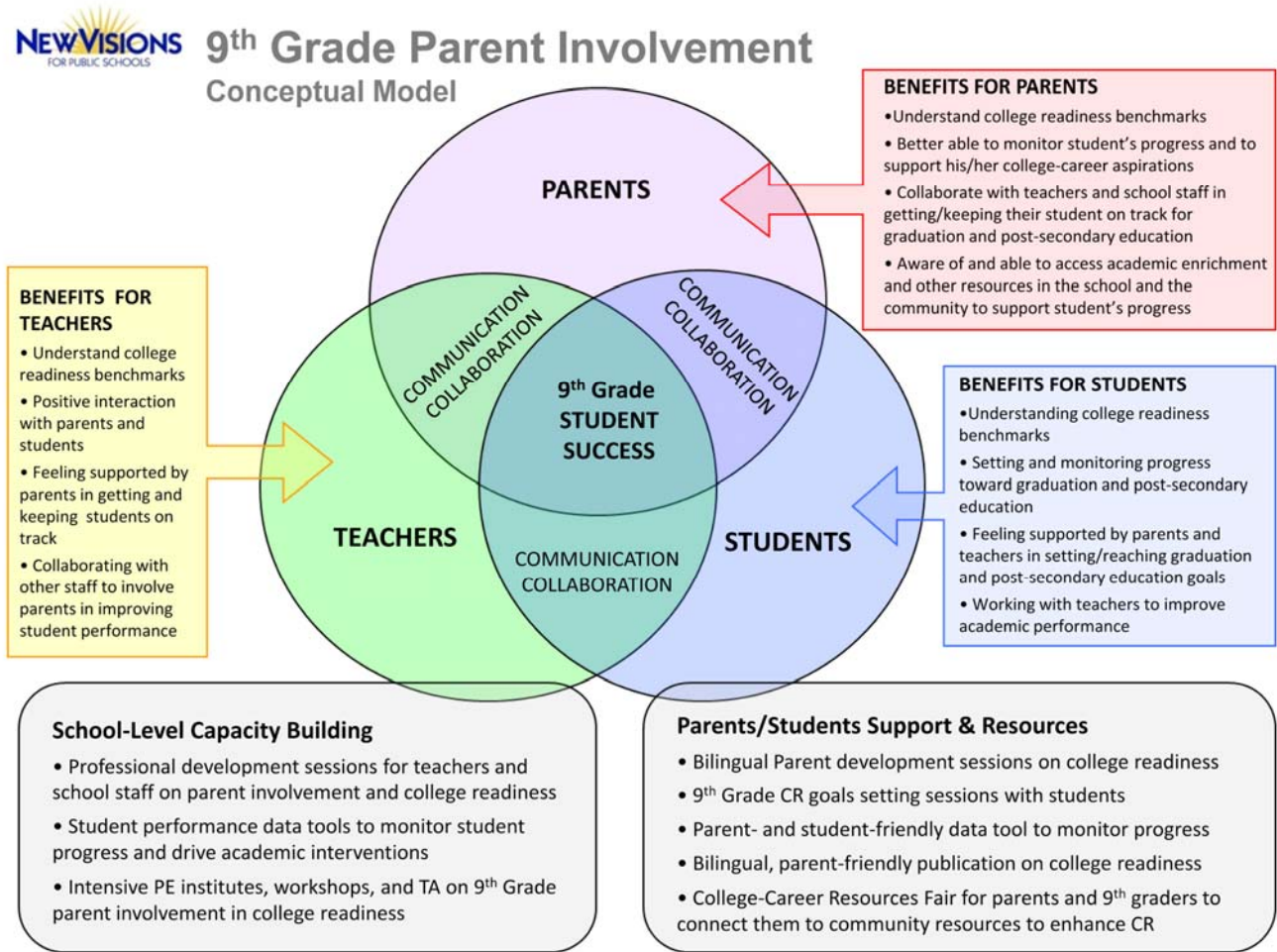
- What information and data can and should teachers provide parents, and how can this information best be presented?
- Can teachers and school staff co-create with families mechanisms and processes to communicate and collaborate to improve student achievement?
- What resources should the school have beyond learning in the classroom to support student success (e.g., out-of-school time opportunities in community)?

New Visions decided to focus its new parent involvement efforts on ninth-grade students and families through the creation of the 9th Grade Parent Involvement in College Readiness initiative (see Figure 1). New Visions chose ninth grade as the target grade for a variety of reasons. First, most students who either drop out or do not graduate from high school on time are retained in their freshman year of high school.ⁱ Moreover, parent involvement tends to drop off in the middle grades. Orienting and supporting ninth-grade students and parents at this important transition point provides an opportunity for purposeful parent engagement.

Through the 9th Grade Parent Involvement in College Readiness initiative, New Visions sought to create a foundation for purposeful parent involvement in its PSO schools. The main strategy to achieve this goal was the creation of both school- and student-level performance data tools and four core ninth-grade college readiness benchmarks. These benchmarks for each student included

- attendance rates of 92% over the course of the year
- course grades of 80% or higher
- completion of eleven or more credits by the end of the year
- passing one or two New York State Regents' exams with a score of at least 75%

Figure 1. New Visions 9th Grade Parent Involvement in College Readiness Conceptual Model



These benchmarks were widely disseminated to school staff, parents and students through a parent-friendly publication, *Is Your 9th Grader on Track to College?*, and the New Visions “Aiming Higher” parent and train-the-trainer workshops.

Developing Actionable Tools: Student Data Help Parents Focus on Student Achievement

It is difficult to engage parents in conversations about improving student achievement if they have not been given appropriate information and tools to assess their student’s academic progress. Parents, students, and teachers must be on the same page about what college readiness is and what each parent needs to do to get students on a path to success. Thus, a critical component of the parent involvement work done at New Visions involves building school capacity to increase the use of student data in a meaningful way.

In 2007, New Visions co-designed and tested with parent coordinators and parents in a select number of schools the college readiness information and tools it now disseminates to parents of ninth graders. What began as an effort to make complex student data useful to school administrators and teachers led to insights on how this data could be expanded to another important constituency: parents.

1. ***The School Data Snapshot:*** New Visions first developed and shared with school staff the “School Data Snapshot” (see Figure 2) a simple, four-color student achievement tracking tool: blue for college-ready, green for on track to graduation, yellow for almost on track, and red for off track. The Snapshot allows for a quick look at attendance, course pass rates, Regents’ exam passing rates, and credit accumulation rates by student cohorts. Simplifying the data into colors opened up among school staff a flurry of conversations that before this time were clouded by the need to analyze numbers. New Visions quickly understood that the conversations around data could be expanded from the administrative realm into the classroom and the home so that teachers, students, and parents could all use data to drive instructional change.

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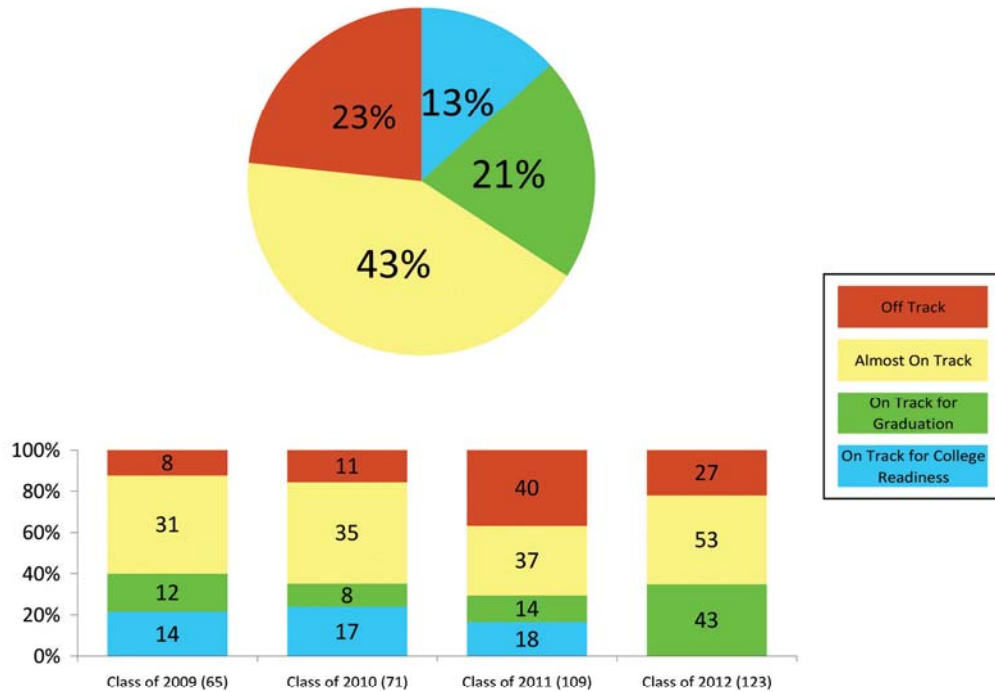
2. ***The College Readiness Tracker:*** The College Readiness Tracker (see Figure 3) was developed as a way for all stake-holders, and especially parents, to quickly and easily determine individual students’ progress in various areas of academic performance. New Visions uses this tool to consistently reinforce and remind parents and teachers of the intended ninth grade benchmarks. The trackers are often mailed with report cards, or distributed at parent–teacher conferences. For the 2010–2011 school year, parents will also be able to access the tracker electronically.

One example of student data as a shared responsibility is the Bronx Latin School’s use of the college readiness tracker. Two weeks before the 2010 winter parent–teacher conferences, New Vision’s staff and the school’s ninth grade level team (comprised of ninth grade teachers, the guidance counselor and the principal) conducted a workshop on college readiness for all ninth graders and used the tracker tool to develop their goals for the term. The principal then scheduled a New Visions parent workshop for the night of the parent–teacher conference so that the parents of ninth graders could attend the workshop before meeting with teachers. To ensure that everyone heard the same information, teachers as well as students attended the workshop scheduled on the parent–teacher conference night. Teachers then met parents individually and used the tool to give each parent a comprehensive snapshot of his or her teen’s progress before sharing the more detailed information in the report card.

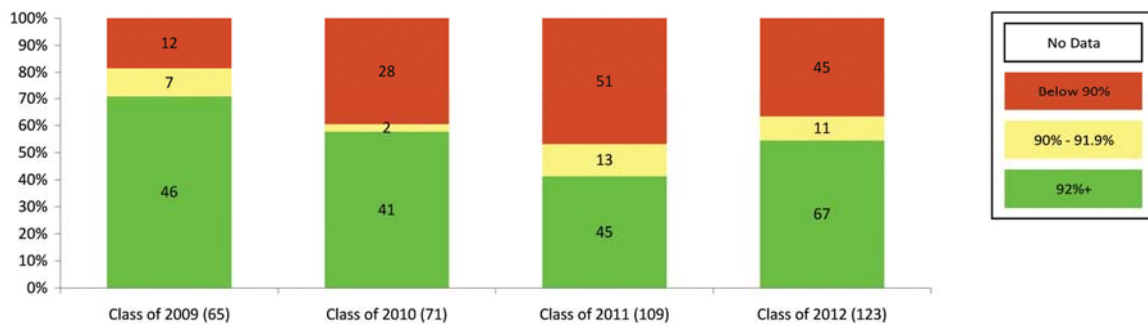
Figure 2. The School Data Snapshot

Sample School Overview

368 High School Students on Register



Attendance '08-'09: First Semester



All data current as of 2/13/2009

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Figure 2 Notes. The pie chart shows the percentage of all students in all classes who fall into the four tracking categories (off track, almost on track, on track for graduation, and on track for college readiness). The bar chart below it breaks down this information by particular class in both percentages and raw numbers of students. The attendance chart on the bottom shows attendance rates by class in both percentage and raw numbers of students.

Figure 3. The College Readiness Tracker

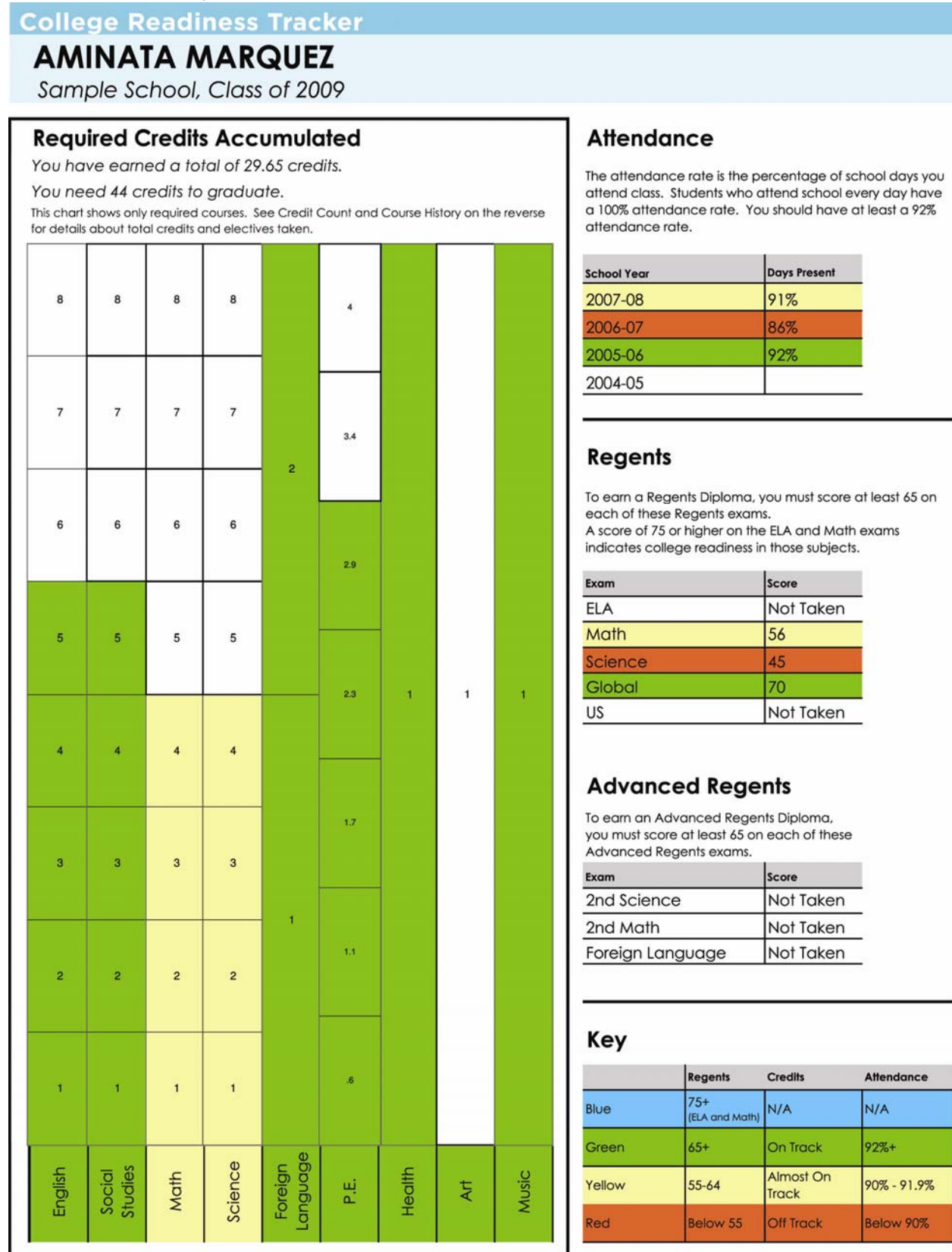


Figure 3 Notes. The large chart on the left shows the total number of credits that students need to graduate broken down by subject area (English, Social Studies, Math, etc.). The color shading system allows parents to know immediately whether or not students are on track, and the total number of credits they have completed and in which subject areas. For example, Aminata Marquez only has 4 of 8 credits in Math and Science and is therefore only “almost on track” in those areas. The boxes on the right summarize this information along with attendance and Regents’ test scores.

In addition to training in using performance data, New Visions provides technical assistance to parent coordinators and other school staff to help them align the school’s parent involvement efforts with college readiness goals. In New York City, parent coordinators are full-time staff members whose main role is to form connections with parents and engage them in meaningful ways. New Visions holds two day-long parent involvement institutes for parent coordinators in the spring and fall of each school year. Institutes focus on supporting parent coordinators in working with teachers, guidance counselors, and their school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) around college readiness, connecting coordinators with one another, and discussing new parent involvement research and strategies. Institute workshops center on effective outreach and engagement strategies for involving parents who speak different languages.

The onus for understanding student data does not fall solely on the shoulders of students, parents, or teachers; rather, it is a shared responsibility among all parties.

Putting it All Together: BASE High School as a Model for 9th Grade Parent Involvement in College Readiness

Brooklyn Academy of Science and the Environment (BASE) High School is a public high school located in the Prospect Heights area of Brooklyn, New York. In 2009, BASE had a student population of approximately 450 students, with a 79% poverty rate, which qualifies it as a Title I school. Housed on a large campus with three other small schools, BASE seeks to integrate the resources of Prospect Park and Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, its main community partners, to offer academic excellence and rigor to help its students become active learners in their communities. For the past two and a half years, BASE has worked with New Visions to achieve its college readiness and parent involvement goals. Specifically, these goals are that by 2013, 80% of students will graduate with a Regents’ or Advanced Regents’ diploma, students will maintain a 92% attendance rate or higher, and 80% of parents will be engaged in the school’s college readiness process.

Leading transformational change.

In the 2007–2008 school year, the New York City Department of Education published its annual School Quality Review that characterized BASE students as lacking a sense of “urgency” in their high school education. The report went on to characterize students as not “college ready.” Veronica Peterson, the principal of BASE, was bothered by these findings and decided to take

action. Resolving to intentionally create a culture of college readiness, in January 2008 Principal Peterson called representatives from all the constituencies in her school—including teachers, support staff, partners, students, and parents—to an all-day Saturday meeting which focused on how BASE could begin to develop a culture of college readiness. With facilitation from New Visions, the group developed a shared definition of college readiness, ideas for how to create a college preparatory culture at the school centered on high academic expectations, expectations for rigor in teaching and learning, and the role each constituency could play in the process.

Coordinating the initiative: the parent coordinator.

Like many other NYC public schools, BASE has a Parent Coordinator whose main role is to connect with parents and engage them in meaningful ways in the academic life of their student and the school. The BASE Parent Coordinator is Karen Johnson. Trained in the “Parenting Journey” curriculum, a 12-week workshop guide designed by the Family Center in Boston,ⁱⁱ the parent coordinator had already been working to build a supportive parent community. The Parenting Journey curriculum allows participating parents to start developing a relationship with the school built on trust and understanding,ⁱⁱⁱ and allows the school insight into the family environment. The training helped Johnson strategize about how to best engage BASE parents with their student’s education.

In partnership with New Visions, Johnson has been focusing her work as Parent Coordinator exclusively on engaging parents around the issues of college awareness and college readiness. BASE and New Visions have found that the college readiness framework has helped to bring together teachers, parents, and students around achieving the common goals of improving academic achievement and increasing the graduation and college enrollment rates of BASE students.

Designing innovation: the Freshman Academy.

The purpose of the Freshman Academy, created in 2009 by Karen Johnson, is to introduce ninth-grade students and their parents to the “Four Pillars for College and Career Readiness,”—the same four benchmarks outlined in the *Is Your 9th Grader on Track to College?* publication—and to motivate them to monitor progress toward the benchmarks of 92% daily attendance, a grade of 80% or higher in every course, completion of at least eleven credits and the passing of one Regents’ exam by the end of ninth grade. The Freshman Academy also strives to build a strong sense of community among BASE freshman and parents based on high academic expectations, student performance data, goal setting, and action plans. An induction ceremony takes place in the early Fall, during which ninth graders and their parents sign a contract committing to working towards the four pillars. Students and parents take an oath during a candle-lighting ceremony to support each other in reaching these goals.

Parents also have opportunities to become involved in the BASE college readiness initiative through becoming parent leaders. The freshman class is divided into four cohorts, each with a

teacher/advisor, three student leaders, and three parent leaders. Parent leaders for each cohort are responsible for contacting all cohort parents to keep them abreast of school-wide events, important dates, parent workshops, and, most importantly, their cohort data. Parent leaders are also tasked with supporting each other in overcoming barriers toward the success of students in their cohort. Each cohort's student leader helps guide his or her peers towards greater academic achievement using shared and individualized data. The teacher/advisor meets with the cohort of students at least once a week to focus students on their attendance and academic achievement through a variety of activities based in part on the curriculum of Roads to Success (a college-readiness program introduced to BASE by New Visions). To assist the students in getting on the pathway towards college, New Visions conducted college readiness sessions with each ninth-grade cohort to help them understand the benchmarks, set goals using their own student data, and create a plan to achieve performance goals.

Along with each of these opportunities, a variety of workshops and social events are also offered to parents throughout the school year. Two of the most important include the Snap Grades and ARIS workshops. During the Snap Grades workshop, parents learn how to use an online grade book that allows them to see grades and attendance on a daily basis. This system also provides real-time alerts via e-mail. The ARIS workshop is provided to help parents navigate the Achievement Report Innovation System (ARIS), a student performance database developed for parents by the New York City Department of Education.

Engaging stakeholders.

As relationship-building with parents—structured around college readiness—grew, the need became apparent to connect this work to existing parent involvement structures such as the Parent Association (PA)/PTA and the School Leadership Team. The first group of parents who graduated from Parenting Journey all became officers in the PA. In addition, other school-based structures emerged as essential partners in connecting parent involvement to student achievement. Although each group at first had separate agendas, by bringing them together under the umbrella goal of college readiness, BASE was able to create a web of supports for students to build and sustain capacity for college readiness goals in the school. These structures include

- ***Inquiry Team:*** A group of teachers who focus on improving the achievement of underperforming students (the bottom one-third of students in the school) by examining performance data on a regular basis and using the data to drive academic interventions.
- ***School Committee:*** Comprised of the principal, a teacher from each subject, the parent coordinator, the school's community partners, and student representatives, the committee meets regularly to discuss pressing school-wide issues.
- ***PA/PTA and School Leadership Team:*** Both bodies engage parents, meet regularly, and define areas of concern and goals for the school community.

- **Grade Level Teams:** Comprised of teachers from a given grade, the committee meets to examine cohort data and identify students that might be having difficulty.
- **Guidance Counselors:** Staff members who counsel and guide students in grades 9 and 10 and grades 11 and 12.
- **Data Specialist/Programmer:** A math teacher who enters the student data and works with New Visions to examine and present the data in a clear way to teachers, students, and parents.
- **Attendance Teacher:** A music teacher who is in charge of tracking daily student attendance. The attendance teacher finds students who are considered “long-term absences” through creative and unique ways (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, home visits).

Conclusion

As using data to improve student achievement becomes an increasingly important aspect of education reform, it is critical that parents become integral partners in this process. The New Visions case presented here shows how families, schools, and students can come together to use the power of data to support student achievement. By supporting families in understanding student data, utilizing performance tools, and learning about specific college readiness benchmarks, New Visions creates concrete, practical, easily-accessed ways for parents to become involved in their students’ education. Moreover, by acknowledging that family involvement roles are always co-created, New Visions works with schools to develop the capacity to provide families with student performance data in timely action-oriented ways. The case of BASE high school serves as a reminder that families and schools must share the responsibility for this meaningful work to be successful. Put differently, a commitment to parent involvement must extend over time not as a one-stop workshop, but as a concrete multi-party effort over the course of years and with opportunities for the entire school community to learn and grow together.

For more information contact:

Barbara Taveras
 Director, Community Engagement
 New Visions for Public Schools
 Tel: 212-645-5110

Karen Johnson,
 Parent Coordinator
 BASE High School
 Tel: (718) 230-6363

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ⁱ Allensworth, E. & Easton, J. Q. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*. Consortium on Chicago School Research. Available at:

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ⁱⁱThe Family Center. Online at: <http://www.thefamilycenterinc.org/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.