

CivicStrategies

35 Corporate Drive, 4th Floor
Burlington, MA 01803
Tel: (617) 630-9898
Fax: (617) 965-3855
wbloomfield@civicstrategies.org

**SUMMARY OF MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS:
NEW YORK CITY VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING
PROJECT
September 1998 – August 2000**

“The Civic Strategies School Improvement Model consists of three sensible steps that center on diagnosis and buy-in, development of school-specific plans, and carrying out school-specific tailored professional development activities. The model is in line with much of the latest thinking in the education/school reform literature.”

“The amount of visible change has varied widely from school to school, but our research documents that substantial change has resulted in many of the twenty vocational high schools...There are enough examples of momentum being created after Civic Strategies has come into a school to lead us to believe that the past two years has clearly demonstrated the potential for this kind of approach to begin to make a difference.”

*Katherine Hughes, Ph.D. & Lawrence Bailis, Ph.D
Project Documenters
Teachers College, Columbia University*

“You and your team [Civic Strategies] never declared a school’s needs outside of your contractual obligations. You met each challenge and worked to overcome it...Principals, teachers, superintendents, chief executives and other central support staff came together with union leaders...to define need and develop new approaches.”

Senior Board of Education Official

"As you no doubt remember, it was the [school name] team that first expressed much skepticism [about] your organization [Civic Strategies] and the impact you might have on our educational programs. Today, these same people are involved in staff development, have adopted new teaching strategies, and are anxious to get involved in professional development activities... Thank you from all of us as you have certainly had a very positive impact on myself, my staff, and the students."

Vocational High School Principal

INTRODUCTION

Vocational schools are being held accountable for providing young people with the latest skills that today's technologically advanced industries now require, and the academic know-how necessary for success in the 21st century workplace as well. In 1998, after an extensive RFP process, The New York City Board of Education selected Civic Strategies to develop and implement an intensive two-year professional development effort that would support central office, borough, and school staff in revitalizing the mission of the 20 vocational high schools, improving students' academic achievement, and upgrading the quality of academic and occupational programs in the 20 vocational high schools. The project was funded by the Board of Education and with private grants from New York City foundations.

Based on the needs identified by the New York City Board of Education the strategy for improving the vocational and technical high schools focused on three priorities –

1. School-wide infrastructure and leadership

By and large, the majority of the vocational and technical high schools did not have the leadership/management infrastructure in place to plan or implement critical school improvement and administrative changes, or standards-based educational practices. Civic Strategies worked with administrators and faculty to align ambitious school performance goals with pragmatic management, accountability, communication, and teaching/learning processes.

2. Curriculum integration

In 1998-1999, the overwhelming majority of faculty and APs viewed curriculum integration as an intrusion on their time – not a way to increase student interest and learning. Using standards as the impetus for change, teachers/APs were introduced to project-based learning and cross-curricular planning as applied learning tools that increase student achievement and can unite the staff in a common direction.

3. Internal and external constituent building

Principals, superintendents, deputy superintendents, central staff, and union leaders agreed that meeting regularly to discuss concerns, issues, and priorities and creating common goals and strategies needed to occur. At the suggestion of central administration Civic Strategies organized regular briefings/opportunities for different stakeholders to engage in an ongoing dialogue, collaborate, and solve problems together as colleagues, not adversaries. Civic Strategies also worked with building leaders interested in building industry and community relationships as part of their school's long-term change agenda.

A senior administrator at the Board commented, "You understood that we had tried on several occasions to implement meaningful change, but to no avail... You understood that our staff had to see the need to change their methodology prior to your beginning to show them how such change could be implemented... Your forward-looking conceptualization of need and strategy made you the right organization"

Civic Strategies began by working with the schools to: 1) build-up the capacity and skills of school administrators to manage and lead more effectively; 2) introduce vocational/academic faculty and supervisors to effective and proven curriculum and instructional methodology; support its implementation, and, 3) hold everyone's "feet to the fire" to put effective leadership/administrative practices and teaching methods into place in classrooms and shops on a daily basis in the schools.

To meet the unique and diverse needs of the schools, Civic Strategies made use of a combination of sound organizational and professional development methodology, including formal and informal professional development, leadership retreats, group strategy and team planning, one-on-one consulting and skill building, group coaching, and on-site/desk-based follow-up with administrators, staff, and faculty to insure task completion. As a matter of course, school-based and system-based professional development goals and activities were determined in collaboration with principals, the high school superintendents, and central administration.

After just two years, there are visible and measurable results. Rigorous improvement and redesign strategies and action plans are in place in most schools, much needed management and structural changes are underway and administrators are better prepared to make strategic and pragmatic organizational decisions to lead and manage their buildings, more effective teaching and active learning methods are becoming the norm, and observable results in staff productivity and student performance can be seen in most of the 20 schools as measured by revised management practices, curricular changes,

new instructional strategies, improved Regents' results in several schools, more classroom participation among students, and new relationships with external stakeholders.¹

The subtle and not so subtle changes taking place in the schools are also being noticed. A deputy superintendent commented that several visitors to vocational/technical schools in his borough said that they see a "purposefulness of organization" in those buildings, and it is clear that staff is focused and have a clear direction – not so in other high schools.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

For two years, Civic Strategies has provided administrators and faculty with comprehensive and intensive professional development, coaching and consultation, and ongoing follow-up to better enable them to develop and implement rigorous school improvement action plans. To date, the major outcomes include the following:

- **All 20 vocational high schools initiated a school-wide standards-driven school reform agenda.** Within a very short time, most principals have altered their leadership approach by encouraging APs and faculty to communicate more openly and honestly, identify and solve problems as a team, and promote cross-department instruction and curriculum integration, all in support of the system's goals to improve student achievement. Civic Strategies assisted approximately half the schools in thinking through, upgrading, and writing their CEPs as an ongoing management tool.² One principal indicated, "a standards environment has permeated the building" as a result of the support.

¹ While Civic Strategies was one component in the sweeping educational changes that the NYC Board of Education began in the late '90s, it was the only effort focused on vocational/technical high schools. Based on observable changes in the vocational and technical high schools over the past two years and third-party feedback from participants/observers, the evidence suggests that a causal chain exists between Civic Strategies' professional development approach and documented school improvements in leadership/management, mission/goal/action alignment, teaching and learning, vocational programs, Regents results, and external partnerships with schools.

² Based on leadership and school history, the quality of the planning, implementation and commitment of staff the results varied from school-to-school. But, for the first time, all vocational and technical high schools were held accountable for initiating school improvement strategies and action steps, were supported, and were expected to succeed.

- **“Hard” achievement indicators are beginning to show first-stage improvements in some schools.** Regents results were better than expected in several schools (e.g., a BASIS school gained 15 points on the ELA Regents, a Bronx school increased their pass rate for juniors from 42% in 1999 to 72% in 2000 – including 5 graduates with honors versus none in previous years, a Brooklyn school doubled their 9th grade pass rate in math), high school graduation rates improved (e.g., a Bronx school graduated every senior – a historical first), and freshman applications for certain schools increased. Another BASIS principal commented, “Every indicator [was] raised, including attendance.”
- **Eighty-five percent of the schools developed new curriculum approaches, departmental structures, and instructional strategies to assist students in passing Regents examinations.** In most schools, new curriculum/instructional methods were implemented. For example, Civic Strategies assisted groups of teachers and entire departments in developing new curricula in vocational (construction technology, electronics, food service management, graphic arts) and academic (math, ELA, science) subjects. A Bronx principal indicated that Civic Strategies helped administrators and teachers redesign a science department, expand triple-period blocks, reduce class size, and increase AP classes, all of which contributed to raising student achievement. A Brooklyn principal wrote that teachers “have developed a greater proficiency in integrating problem-solving applications in their lessons as well as in their unit tests.”
- **Curriculum integration among academic and vocational teachers increased by 48% to 82% on average as faculty learned and were supported in using new instructional methodology.** Civic Strategies developed and supported six research-based approaches for project-based learning, articulation, and cross-curricular integration that schools put into action by piloting a variety of project-based learning activities. Academic and vocational teachers and students worked across the curriculum in science, math, cosmetology, ELA, health, food management, construction, business, electronics, technology, among others. The success of a cosmetology project in one school has led to the decision to establish school wide senior projects this year.
- **Administrative teamwork and productivity increased among principals and APs by 44% to 78% on average** when administrators re-defined their roles as school leaders/cabinet members and learned more effective and consistent

administrative and management practices to engage, motivate, and support staff while still holding them accountable for results.³ A Queens principal said “Civic Strategies helped create a most successful cooperative team.”

- More than 750 teachers and 125 administrators (cumulatively the number is 6,000/1,000) in the twenty vocational/technical high schools were involved in ongoing (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) professional development led by Civic Strategies. Over 900 custom-designed PDAs (Professional Development Applications) helped improve the capacity of vocational educators to meet high standards.** PDA activities included formal and informal staff training, problem identification and developing solution options, conflict resolution, team building, curriculum review and program redesign, upgrading instruction, redefining guidance services, improving internal communication, one on one/group coaching, strategic consultation and engaging employers and other external partners. PDAs took place during the school day, after-school, and on Saturdays. Engaging building staff in defining problems and solutions in the first year paid off in the added commitment of key administrators, faculty, and UFT Chapter Leaders. In year two more teachers and administrators agreed to or asked to participate in PDAs after-school and on Saturday without “per session” dollars.

The following table highlights the percentage of PDA activities by borough, based on the major PDA priorities (leadership/management infrastructure, curriculum integration and instruction, guidance and other services). Almost half of all PDAs were devoted to teaching and learning strategies, just under one-third of PDA effort was spent on building-level leadership/management, and twenty-percent was focused on improving guidance services and other school goals.

ESTIMATE OF SCHOOL-BASED PDA ACTIVITY RATES BY SUPERINTENDENCY: SEPTEMBER 1999-AUGUST 2000

PDA PRIORITIES (# of Voc. Schools)	ALT. (2)	BASIS (5)	BRNX. (4)	BRKLN. (2)	MANH. (5)	QUEENS (3)	TOTAL (21)
Leader/mgt. Infrastr.		9.0%	14.0%	-	3.0%	5.0%	32.0%

³ In the other schools, despite recommendations and advice, administrators were unwilling to accept help to resolve management and leadership issues that were clearly areas of need.

	1.0%						
Curriculum/Instruct..	4.0%	12.0%	18.0%	3.0%	5.0%	6.0%	48.0%
Guidance/Other*	2.0%	4.0%	7.0%	1.0%	4.0%	2.0%	20.0%
Total % of PDA Activities	7.0%	25.0%	39.0%	4.0%	12.0%	13.0%	100.0%

N=657 PDAs (Each PDA is approx. 4 hours which includes prep, on-site support/training, and follow-up. Approximately 2,628 contact hours of professional development occurred with teachers and administrators).

* Other also includes internal & external constituency building, e.g., staff/faculty communication, library access/services, business/college partners, etc.

- **In approximately one-third of the schools, guidance counselors and librarians redesigned their tradition roles with faculty and students.** New approaches and procedures were developed to more fully integrate guidance (College and Career Center design) and library services (surveying staff and students), and the use of technology in accelerating the changes underway in the classroom.
- **Nationally recognized partners were introduced and connected to schools to upgrade academic and vocational curriculum and instruction.** Civic Strategies introduced national partners to schools and assisted others in making connections with different organizations, e.g. Cisco Academies, the Consortium of Mathematics and Its Application, Cornell University, The Corporation for Business, Work, and Learning, The National Academy of Finance, New American High Schools, and Tech Prep.
- **Outreach to business and industry was connected to Standards, the CEP, and overall student achievement.** In the majority of schools, employer involvement is being tied directly to overall CEP goals rather than an add-on. Through collaboration with the NYC School To Work Alliance, Civic Strategies worked with each school to determine the best way to increase employer involvement with students and faculty. The Alliance collected baseline data on all the schools and recommended school-specific action steps for the 2000-2001 school year.

- **The Bronx Vocational and Technical High Schools established a borough consortium** to share professional development resources and expertise, and to participate in Civic Strategies PDAs as colleagues in improving student results and staff performance. The consortium held four weekend/overnight sessions at IBM's Conference Center with Civic Strategies and will continue next year.
- **High School Superintendents and their Deputies collaborated with Civic Strategies to define professional development priorities, performance expectations and benchmarks at the school and borough level, and a citywide rubric** to assess schools progress on improving leadership/management, vocational/academic curriculum integration, and internal/external constituency building. The rubric is based on the New York State PASS document and was piloted in The Bronx. Deputy Superintendents worked closely with Civic Strategies to set mutual goals and ensure that school-level goals were fully aligned with system priorities for improving student achievement. Civic Strategies was asked to participate in several borough PASS visits, SURR Reviews, and to facilitate Redesign meetings. Note: Deputy Superintendents have requested that Civic Strategies develop a professional development series for deputies and recommend other ways to collaborate as a group.
- **UFT and CSA leaders actively supported the Vocational and Technical High School Restructuring Project and participated in key events and decisions.** Union officials fully supported the project and publicly requested that Civic Strategies "continue its work with vocational high schools for the coming year [2000-2001]." When problems occurred, union leaders collaborated with Civic Strategies to quickly resolve them in the best interests of the project. Civic Strategies also worked closely with Teachers Centers in the schools to support mutual professional development goals.
- **Over 100 central office, borough, and building administrators, and union officials throughout the city were engaged in ad hoc task and study groups on a regular basis** to "bridge the divide" between departments and central/borough/school administrators, develop ideas and strategies, and to identify, solve, and share solutions to improve vocational and technical education in NYC to: 1) draft guidelines for a Best Practices publication to be launched in 2000-2001; 2) initiate a middle grades articulation process to improve knowledge and communication between middle schools and

vocational/technical high schools; 3) visit nationally-recognized vocational schools to gather data and information useful to NYC schools; 4) review career/vocational standards and curriculum needs in light of changing industry standards. In addition, principals met regularly to share concerns and solutions, get advice, make recommendations, and have a professional dialogue with colleagues and invited experts at The Principals Roundtable. Principals indicated that the Roundtable enabled them to feel like a professional team and provided a sense of collegiality that was missing in the past. The Principals Roundtable met approximately every eight weeks. Note: As a result, several principals requested more frequent discussions around management and leadership. As a pilot, Civic Strategies facilitated a well-received Leadership Study Group with The Bronx Consortium.

- **New York City foundations committed \$300,000 in support of Civic Strategies' work in Vocational and Technical High Schools.** Civic Strategies worked with the School-To-Career Office and the Board's Office of Development to raise private funds to provide schools with more services. Goldman Sachs, The Commonwealth Fund, and Deutsche Bank hosted events. Grants have been received from Deutsche Bank, The Clark Foundation, The Hearst Foundation, and The Dreyfus Foundation. Civic Strategies continues to seek additional support.

The following quotes from vocational high school principals reflect their thinking about their experiences after two years:

“New Yorkers in general seem to be extremely skeptical when it comes to advice or assistance from “outsiders.” This, however, is not the case with Civic strategies. They have brought [us] with common bonds together and provided an unprejudiced look at how we could collaborate to do things better.”

“The school has moved forward in the last two years.” Civic Strategies helped me in “setting a framework for redesigning departments by thinking through the process, from [the] vision to implementation steps.”

“My ELA and math stats [Regents results] went up to 71%. The work that Civic Strategies did is associated with the improvement... [Civic Strategies provided] sustained and non-threatening support [and] people [are] talking positively and working together from different disciplines, particularly the math and shop classes.”

“Civic Strategies [suggested] that I step back and let my staff help me. I agreed and started delegating more.”

“Whenever I was up against a problem [Civic Strategies] would send support or help in looking at a strategic approach to whatever needed attention or help me [motivate] a cabinet member or a department.”

“Civic Strategies saved me and helped me get through the year without losing it.”

“I believe the most positive professional development experience with Civic Strategies was the rapport [they were] able to establish with the teachers. The learning experience was rewarding, and the teachers were shown how different strategies could be used to solve similar problems. This helped the teachers break away from routine algorithms, and enabled them to learn how to teach to facilitate the various learning styles of the students...The teachers are more open about the assistance they need, and are eager to seek assistance...Based on the results that we have seen in the students’ outcomes to date, we feel that there should be significant improvement in student achievement.”

Given the history of school reform in large school systems across the country, it is encouraging and surprising to be able to report concrete results in just two years. While we are clearly pleased that substantive progress has taken place at the building and borough level in a reasonably short period of time, deeper and sustainable school wide change requires more than two years. More must be done to capitalize on the initial improvements and the momentum that has already begun to change the system.

We look forward to being part of that continuing story in the coming years.