

Leveraging New Data Sources for Improvement

A Case Study from Khalil Gibran International Academy

As coronavirus spread and New York City shut down, all New Yorkers have all had to rethink some basic assumptions, educators included. When schools are in session, classroom teachers can easily observe whether students are engaging, and everyone understands what attendance means; remote learning requires different assumptions, new data, and new ways of working. New Visions for Public Schools and forward-looking partner schools have been tackling this challenge in recent weeks. Schools weren't designed for this context, but they can become *better designed* over time. This case study provides a window into what this looks like at one school, and distills lessons for other schools.

Context

As schools have shifted to remote learning, [Google Classroom](#) has become nearly ubiquitous in New York City's schools. Google Classroom captures data about student engagement, but the way it makes the data available is not user friendly or actionable for educators. For the past seven years, New Visions has been developing student planning tools that simplify access to comprehensive and essential student information for teachers, guidance counselors, and school/district administrators. The [New Visions Data Portal](#) currently provides up-to-date information on student demographics, academic progress, supports, and student plans, and is available to every high school in New York City. New Visions makes regular improvements to the Portal, based on our close partnership with a large network of New York City public schools.

The definition of "student engagement" in Google Classroom that New Visions and partner schools developed is fairly simple: a student "engages" on any day in which she submits an assignment in Google Classroom. This is a basic definition of engagement and a lower bar than any of our ambitions for remote instruction, but it follows the approach that New Visions has used in all our data work: to rapidly provide visibility into key student and educator behaviors and decisions that influence student success, then use that information to refine measures and improve practice in partnership with educators working in schools every day.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA) is a small high school in downtown Brooklyn, serving just under 200 students in grades 9-12. Carl Manalo became principal of KGIA in 2019, after six years as principal at the Queens High School for Information, Research, and Technology (QIRT). When New Visions asked for partners to develop new features in the New Visions Data Portal that would use Google Classroom submissions to measure student engagement, Principal Manalo did what he's always done in his partnership with New Visions: he raised his hand. The case described below is based on activity that took place in mid to late April.

Case

Once Google Classroom engagement data became available to Principal Manalo, he and the team at KGIA worked with their New Visions Continuous Improvement Coach and set out to use the data to improve engagement at KGIA. To look at and make sense of this new data, Principal Manalo repurposed an existing team, the Senior Success Team. Ensuring that seniors remained engaged all the way through to graduation is of paramount importance, and had been the focus of the team, but took on new urgency as they looked at the data and saw that school-wide engagement was barely above 50 percent. This meant that on an average day during the early days of remote learning, only half of the students at KGIA were turning in an assignment. To set a data-informed goal, the Senior Success Team looked at the engagement rates for students who were succeeding academically before closure and noticed that they were engaging at rates of 60 percent or higher. The team set this as an interim goal.

Being able to see individual student engagement makes conversations among adults meaningful, Principal Manalo said, and allows KGIA educators to talk in specifics, not abstractions. It allows staff to identify things they want to change—a group of students who were not engaging, for example—and then test whether actions they took in response made a difference over several days. If so, move forward; if not, tweak the approach.

KGIA set this goal before the week that used to be spring break in New York City public schools, and used the spring break week to focus on engagement. The approach they tried was not a profound innovation: they looked at students whose engagement rates were low, did targeted outreach to understand why students weren't engaging and to reinforce the importance of completing work, and then measured the results based on changes in engagement rates. This approach of identifying an issue, developing and quickly testing a solution by tracking data, and then making tweaks based on what's being learned, is at the heart of continuous improvement.

So what did they see? Over a recent three-day period, the school saw improvement in engagement rates across all student cohorts, with school-wide engagement rates rising from 55 percent to 62 percent. Seeing an uptick of several percent is huge and has invested increasing numbers of staff in using these data, Principal Manalo reflected. Staff can reach students whose faces they now see on computer screens rather than in the hallway, but to whom they feel no less responsibility.

Generalizable Lessons

The path that KGIA took to improve engagement in a remote learning world won't work for every school, but that's not the point. There are specific lessons to draw from the way they worked, that pop up again and again in the continuous improvement work New Visions does with schools. Briefly:

1. *Make important data visible.* The predicate for all of this work is having *some* meaningful data available. Turning in assignments on a daily basis is not perfect data, but it's much better than nothing. Once those data are visible, it's possible to use them to guide decisions and action.
2. *Set data-informed goals.* "Student engagement" during remote learning is a novel metric for most

schools, and it was for KGIA too. That didn't stop them from using data they could see to set a goal. They looked at students who they had a reasonable suspicion were engaging in ways they wanted, and said, let's work to get all our students there.

3. *Set reasonable goals.* KGIA set a reasonable and achievable improvement goal: moving several percentage points in daily engagement, over a short period of time. It's big enough to be measurable, and small enough to be achievable and testable quickly.
4. *Be resourceful.* The engagement features in the Data Portal are brand-new (an [MVP](#), in technology development parlance). It didn't show day over day improvement in engagement rates, so Principal Manalo took screen shots of the engagement rate each day in order to track progress. The features will catch up, but KGIA didn't let the absence of some features stop them.
5. *Celebrate quick wins.* Tracking data on a daily basis let KGIA make reasonable inferences about whether their actions were making a difference. When they saw improvement in the metric that mattered to them, they took a moment to celebrate hard work and improvement! That's always important, but it's critical during these challenging days. Mission accomplished? Not forever, but for now!
6. *Push out ownership.* Quick wins are important for a second reason: they invest people in the success of the broader endeavor. Principal Manalo incisively observed that once teachers could see the impact of their actions on something that mattered to them—whether students were remaining engaged—they wanted to improve even more. The data discussions that started in the Senior Success Team are now part of department team meetings, and all departments in the school are involved.
7. *Learn fast and codify.* As KGIA educators got more invested and fluent in their data, they realized that they were using Google Classroom differently. Some were treating "[Do Nows](#)" as assignments in Google Classroom. When students didn't complete them, their assignment completion rates looked artificially low. Do Nows are important, but for KGIA they aren't actually assignments, and seeing the data helped them realize they were treating them as such. This realization let them norm on practice, while at the same time improving the quality of their data.
8. *Repeat.* Each quick win is a win, but it isn't mission accomplished. Real, lasting improvement requires lots of these small experiments, accumulating into sizable gains for students and durable changes in practice at KGIA (and hopefully, over time, in other schools wrestling with similar challenges who can learn from the KGIA example).

Conclusions

It's unquestionably true that our public schools were not designed for the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. That observation can either be descriptive or predictive, though. Speaking at the University of Cape Town, Bobby Kennedy reflected on the ability of small actions to change the world. He [proclaimed](#), "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

The team at KGIA is sending forth ripples, working to change how their school works, in creative and disciplined and student-centered ways. The changes they're making are critical now, but they'll also

change how the school works moving forward. Principal Manalo predicts that many of the teachers that have started using Google Classroom during this crisis will continue to do so once the crisis is past, and teachers that were using it before will use it in different ways. Gaining visibility into which classes are engaging students allows the school team to identify and learn from effective practices happening inside their school, using data for improvement rather than accountability.

We're honest about ourselves and our data, said Principal Manalo, and we're figuring it out together.

New Visions thanks Principal Carl Manalo for sharing the story of the team at Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA). The case study above emerged from a serendipitous connection, and a short follow-up conversation. New Visions has done our best to accurately convey KGIA's story; errors and omissions are ours.

Are you a school with a story to tell? Email us at info@newvisions.org.