

## K-12 Case Study 4: District 13, New York City

District 13 was the first district to complete a district-wide implementation of the Balanced Curriculum since Red Bank. District 13 is in Brooklyn, New York. When implementing Balanced Curriculum in the late 1990s, the district-wide implementation focused on K to 8 schools, with 21 schools serving mostly poor and minority students. The District had also adopted the School Development Program and had begun implementation.

**Design:** We conducted a natural experiment to implement the Balanced Curriculum process at the district level in District 13. Natural experiments have an intervention and control group, like any other experiment (Morrison, Smith, & Dow-Ehrensberg, 1995). Natural experiments, however, occur in real world settings so their results are more likely to reflect actual effects of the intervention as well as capturing the implementation challenges related to the intervention (Leigh & Ryan, 2008; Doherty et al 2012).

**Sample:** Of the 21 schools in the district, 14 schools were targeted as ready to implement the intervention. Seven schools received the intervention and seven schools did not, with just over 8,000 students affected.

**Results:** Among the seven schools that implemented the process, improvement occurred across grade levels (Squires & Bullock, 1999). In the intervention group, 7% more of the implementing school's students were above grade level in 1997 than in 1996. This contrasts with seven other schools in the same district that did not implement the Balanced Curriculum intervention. The control group had 6% fewer of their students score above grade level as compared with the previous year. The difference between the control and intervention groups was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Importantly, all schools had implemented the School Development Program during the same period. The effects of the Balanced Curriculum intervention were independent of the implementation of the School Development Program.

**Implementation Lessons:** Here are the four most important lessons learned:

1. **Improved student achievement is associated with implementation of a balanced and aligned curriculum.** This finding links improved achievement with curriculum development and implementation, an association not often found in the educational literature about improving schools or dealing with standards. The study clearly points out that if the aligned and balanced curriculum is implemented, then student achievement is likely to improve. Implementation is the key aspect of a successful curriculum that improves student achievement. While staff development is important, staff development, in and of itself, is not enough. Staff development provides the information and begins building commitment, but asking teachers to reorganize how they are using time through implementing a curriculum takes more than staff development. That's where our second major finding comes into play.
2. **Improved student achievement is associated with principals' monitoring of the implementation of the balanced and aligned curriculum.** For the top seven improving schools, all had high monitoring principals except two who fell into the medium monitoring category. Principals need to be the curriculum leaders of the school, and improved instruction is likely to follow.

### **K-12 Case Study 4: District 13, New York City (continued)**

- 3. Curriculum implementation is more likely to happen when teams work together.** In District 13, the implementation of the School Development Program (SDP)--where teams coming together are a key part of program implementation--provided necessary pre-requisite institutional learning for building teams to implement the balanced and aligned curriculum. Those schools who used teams succeeded more than those who did not use teams. Principals need to recognize that teams can help spread the responsibility, something consistently reinforced in the literature since the District 13 case study.
- 4. Resource allocation that reflects organizational readiness for implementation can assist schools in implementing a balanced and aligned curriculum.** The central office in District 13 played an important role with implementation of the Balanced Curriculum approach. District 13 decided on the importance of a balanced and aligned curriculum by allocating resources for its development, and for staff development that continued over the first year of implementation. To facilitate implementation, they created four tiers for resource allocation to facilitate implementation: Tier I (self-directed), Tier II (moving to self-directed), Tier III (semi-structured guidance), and Tier IV (highly structured guidance). Through the Tier structure, organizationally tailored help could be obtained from the central office and monitoring of the schools carried out. District 13 provided financial resources to help schools with materials or the purchase of teacher time to implement the curriculum. This key factor helped ensure that the implementation of the intervention reflected the culture and organizational readiness for change of each school. And results were impressive! Those on Tier IV received the most help and most made gains. All Tier I (self-directed) schools made achievement gains with much less support from central office. Our conclusion: When help is appropriately structured from central office, improved results may follow.

The District 13 case study demonstrates that creating and implementing a curriculum that demonstrably enhances student achievement is rooted in the quality of its implementation processes. It also highlights the importance of organizational readiness for change as well as tailoring implementation to the needs of each school, based on the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers and leaders. The four lessons learned from the district-wide implementation informed replication of the intervention for the next decade, when over 20 districts across the United States adopted the Balanced Curriculum approach.

## **References**

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### **Please cite this case study as:**

Squires, D.A. (2018). *A Balanced Curriculum – K-12 Case Study 3: District 13, New York City*. New York: ABC Education Consultants, LLC.



