



Impact 2012 Participant Roundtable

August 14, 2009

BayCES gathered an informal group of teachers and principals who participated in the first year of the Impact 2012 Initiative to hear about how the program impacted their teaching, their school, and their students. Impact 2012 uses a “focal student” strategy to allow urban educators to gain a deep and effective understanding of their student’s far-below-grade-level learning gaps and what to do about them.

Participants

Matin Abdel-Qawi, Principal, East Oakland School of the Arts (EOSA)

Suneal Kolluri, ELA Teacher, Life Academy

Nancy Lai, ELA Teacher, EXCEL High School

Yetunde Reeves, Principal, EXCEL High School

Jill Thomas, ELA Teacher, Life Academy

Preston Thomas, Principal, Life Academy

Kim Young, ELA Teacher, Life Academy

Edited Transcript

How have you benefitted from Impact 2012 in the first year?

J. Thomas: I've been at Life Academy for five years and this project was the first time my department met as a team with concrete and productive goals. We've always met on a regular basis, but we tended to get caught up in day-to-day issues. It was a great advantage having a coach who knows and understands our work but is not enmeshed in the daily business of the school. He kept us focused on our learning goals.

Young: We made a lot of progress in looking at student work and using assessment data. It has always been a challenge to figure out the next steps – when you look at a student work that has so many mistakes, where do you start?

Kolluri: I had been frustrated a long time because my students walked into my Humanities class not really being able to read and at the end of the year they would walk out not able to read. I always wanted to do

something about this but didn't know what, and I wouldn't have pushed myself to learn how to teach reading and fit it in without Impact 2012.

P. Thomas: We've been involved with BayCES a long time and grew out of Fremont high school in the small schools movement and there is a certain ceiling that I believe we have reached. There has been a lot of improvement in achievement test scores for elementary students in Oakland, but not high school, and in high school there are a lot of challenges around these gaps that have built up over the years and once they hit high school, it becomes tremendously high-stakes, with the CAHSEE exam, the gateway to college, it is a transformative time for a lot of students.

The project has changed professional dialogue and placed it solidly on student learning.

Now we are talking about what's going to drive us to the next level. There is a lot of urgency among teachers around developing lessons and what to teach next, but less time has been made available for assessments and getting at the real learning gaps. I think what we've seen this year across departments is much more conscious discussion around student

learning gaps. Not necessarily answers for all that right now, because in all honesty the project has raised a lot of questions around how to fill in the gaps that have existed since second or third grade. But it has changed the dialogue around student learning and placed it solidly on real learning. It was initially a project for math and English but in a small school you can't not influence other departments, so it has caught on in science and elsewhere. We are really looking forward to continuing the dialogue and the work next year.

How exactly does it influence other departments?

P. Thomas: Particularly in small schools - we have only 16 teaching staff, and half were in Impact 2012. So you have to figure out how to support the others. If this project is good for English and math, it is good for the others. It focuses the whole school on drilling down to these basic skill gaps, and that also requires a high level of trust, because you are really making yourself vulnerable as a teacher when you say that I've been working with this student for 6 months and capitalization is still an issue. The reaction can be "Why haven't you fixed that yet?" So that's where the

coaching comes in, to support productive discussion, and I think we laid the foundation in the first year.

J. Thomas: I just want to add that looking at student work has always been a stated priority of our team meetings but it is always the first thing that is eliminated when you are running out of time because there are so many things that come up when you are running a school, so many crises that have to be dealt with immediately. But when you have someone come in from the outside who is dedicated to helping us look at student work, you are able to focus on it, which I think should be at the heart of professional development as a staff.

P. Thomas: It's also interesting that teachers have entered into discussions with focal students that I don't think these high school students have ever had before. I don't think they have ever owned their learning in the way that we started seeing last year.

Lai: For me, what 2012 has done for our school has shifted the focus onto the power of literacy. In high school education credentialing programs you are typically told that students need meta-cognitive skills: predicting reading, critical thinking, making connections, that kind of thing. But I think that in many urban schools as in Oakland, where two-thirds of our kids are reading below the 9th grade level as juniors and seniors, we hit a wall where you taught a student how to predict but that's still not translating onto their standardized test scores.

So we found in 2012 that the reading skills that they need to access texts come prior to the meta-cognitive work, such as decoding, fluency issues. This led to a lot of conversation about reading and a huge change in culture, where math teachers are complaining about students reading books in their classes, and I saw one of my students walking down the street, outside of school, reading a book! This is not typical behavior for an urban student. That's been really powerful, hearing responses from my students about being proud of their reading, reading much better and more often, and that makes me really proud of our seniors who are getting ready to go to college.

Reeves: What Nancy is leaving out is that when we get our state test data, it doesn't tell you where the skill gaps really are. You just see the performance levels and every year you go, OK, a third of our students are still at this level but what does that really mean? So we've started a focused reading approach where we say OK, this student is reading at a

7th grade level, let's get him books at that level so they can read more and improve. We've invested a lot of money in novels so students who haven't grown up with reading in their household would have skill level-appropriate reading. I've really appreciated how English teachers have worked on this, and dedicated themselves to working on lunch breaks with focal students, as Nancy did. OK, you can say that's one teacher and one student, how do we scale that up and make it more systematic? We've done that in math, we hired a math substitute for 3-4 months to pull students outside of elective classes to work on the gaps that we identified through this project, working three times a week with some students just on their skill gaps, and crunching the data we were using to assess them. So this was a behind-the-scenes intervention that regular teachers don't have time for, so we're doing that again next year in math, and looking at how we can do the same kind of thing with English so that those teachers can get targeted support.

Lai: I think the first year of Impact 2012 was spent on buy-in, understanding the process of assessment, and I think next year will be about systematizing it in the school and bringing in all the staff and providers on campus to focus on how to drill down on the right sub-skills. So after school tutoring will not just be about homework help but focused on sub-skills.

Reeves: I'm also excited about next year where we will be focusing on English but bringing in other departments like math and science so the project does not feel like something that is on the side.

Focal students allow you to key into your whole class, look at them all with a much clearer lens.

One of the concerns has been that a teacher has only so much time, how does differentiating lessons for one or a few students help the whole class or even the whole school, and it sounds like you've developed strong ways of doing that.

Reeves: I think in our case it was really timely because in the second semester last year we were doing some whole-school learning about differentiation, how do you teach to different levels of ability in one classroom. So we did things like giving students a choice of assignment, some may want to do a power-point because that's their skill set, others will write a paper. We're continuing those discussions but now looking at

grading and how we're going to link grades to lesson objectives and differentiation.

Young: I don't know if anybody stuck only to their focal students, because you start learning and using them to understand your entire classroom, it's not just one student and one gap, others are going to have that gap, too. You are able to use these five focal students to really key into your classroom, look at them all with a much clearer lens, to focus your teaching in a systematic way. Differentiation really became important for us in the second semester too – especially in English, you have to be a skilled craftsmen to manage a class where students are at many different levels.

Lai: My work with one focal student at lunch centered around her decoding skills, and that led to an understanding that my seniors don't read the sheer volume of material they need to improve their skills. Whether you are a 12th grader reading at a 12th grade level or at a 4th grade level, you should be reading a million words a year to improve, but they weren't reading anywhere near that. So that change my curriculum for one period and had my students read 5 books in 10 weeks, some students 7 or 8 books, and I conferenced with the students on their different books – which was much more exhausting than direct instruction by the way. So I would have students who said they had never read a whole book, ever, and they would be reading a low skill, high interest series. When I had to do standards level work talking about plot and theme, I would have to tailor that to all the different books students were reading.



Excel High School English Teacher Nancy Lai working with a focal student at lunchtime on phonics.

P Thomas: I really like that idea of using a substitute to do pull outs. You start to realize that there is this vast majority of kids on campus who need that level of intensive intervention. Just think about a high school student reading at a 2nd grade level, there are lots of them in our schools, and no one has taken care of this all the years they've been in school. The testing data does not tell you, you really have to figure out yourself what they need. For instance, sitting in on Algebra sessions, I never realized how important factoring is, and why can't you factor? Because you can't multiply, and then you realize how important it is to memorize multiplication tables, so now we can work on that with these kids after school. But honestly, I'm not sure if the resources exist now to deal with all the skill gaps. It falls on teachers' backs, or you hire some tutors from Cal. It puts a lot of pressure on administrators to figure out how to get the resources to deal with these gaps because without them they are never going to be able to read *Beloved*.

Kolluri: The focal student idea works. I came from a charter school that focused a lot on benchmark exams but we'd look at the results for a class of 32 students and have to figure out from that what the class needed. I don't think that is sensible when you need to look at nuanced skill gaps to get at what is really lacking for these kids. So looking at four students made it possible to see the gaps and to apply what you are doing about them to the whole class.

Matin: For the most part our challenges and some of our responses are no different. But we're doing some things with reading next year based on what we did last year with Impact 2012 that have got us very excited. We have done a lot of assessment of our students' reading. We needed to know very clearly why our students weren't succeeding. Through 2012 we

It's changed the way we talk to students.

developed a battery of assessments to determine where students were and where they needed help in reading and how to respond. Most high school teachers are not prepared to teach reading, that's not what they come prepared to do. We assessed every single student in reading, and how we have shared data throughout the school

so a science teacher will know, "This is why Brother Joey can't understand the lesson, he doesn't know how to read or pronounce certain types of words so he can't understand the textbook."

Next year we are developing a few, I hesitate to use the word “interventions” because that doesn’t sound very warm to our students, it sounds like another case of “something is wrong with you so we’re going to jab you with this thing,” but we’ve created four sections of a course just to help students with reading. It’s an additional course, not competing with the standards-based courses or benchmarks. It meets five days a week to focus on the things we are learning through 2012, and that’s where we hope the gains will be made. We’ll have a similar class for math, a math lab, working on the prerequisites you need to be successful in Algebra, a curriculum and a space for 9th grade students.

Does this also add to regular courses or take away from them?

Matin: It intentionally takes away class time from things we might have done. In the past we’ve done what other schools do, jamming 9th grade students with a ton of academic courses early in their high school career, and then lightening the load as they go so seniors are taking only a few courses and heading out from school early to go to work. What we’ve done is flip that paradigm to give 9th graders more support and less heavy academics, when they are most vulnerable, struggling with the transition, to make sure they get their footing. Mostly 9th graders, some 10th grade, and a few juniors and seniors. So they get English and a support class, math and a support class, and the introduction to high school is a smoother transition. Yes, they won’t be able to work jobs as seniors because they’ll be taking their AP classes then, but they’ll be more qualified for them. All that has come as a result of the work we’ve done with Impact 2012.

Reeves: We had that same experience, where we gave 9th graders double English, double math, more electives, as opposed to science and foreign languages, etc. Looking at data from last two years, we had more 9th graders moving on to 10th grade, and fewer held back because they had failed everything. But we found that there was still a stigma about the support classes, “I’m not smart,” so this year we are going to make them more engaging. For our math lab it is using fantasy football and basketball, helping with Algebra skills and following their favorite teams. And the science teacher developed a forensics class, like the TV show CSI. So the students will flip between the Algebra lab and the forensics classes, and we expect to fill a lot of those skill gaps in there.

P Thomas: I’d like to add something about the stigmatization of the intervention classes. Those kids have been sitting in classes all their

career not knowing what is going on. They are lost. They recognize it but they won't admit it. If it's done properly, if you inform the students, then some of the things they're struggling with will resonate with them. "Yeah, you're right, I can't do that."

As long as you build in those support structures, they know they need to learn how to read, they know this is part of the ticket to success down the road. And I think it's changed the way we talk to students. I think about one student who didn't want to even take the assessment. But we tagged teamed, a couple of us talked to him, he's my advisee so I pulled him aside in the hallway, and he agreed. And we found out all kinds of things about his learning issues that we would never have known without that initial dialogue with him. It changed his attitude, he started reading books, you could see him engaging more. The intervention really changes the flavor of interaction. I agree that the term "intervention" sounds like they are recovering from an illness, but if you want to help get them learn and ultimately get to college – it's what they want. They want their parents to see them graduate from high school, it's huge.

Young: And it automatically throws the teacher into that role of "teacher as coach," which I really appreciated. In all our fancy credentialing programs, I don't know if I've ever had a conversation in my whole year at Stanford about how to talk to students about what they know and don't know. Because it's a tricky, hard thing to do. We're working behind the scenes to make the most engaging, rigorous lesson plans we can, but I don't think ever before I've talked about how to approach a student and let them know, "Hey, this is something that you're not very strong at, but that doesn't mean you can't get strong, so let's talk about how we can work together to make sure you're able to do this."

I remember at one of the Impact 2012 seminars someone had a metaphor about shooting three-point shots. Sometimes if you're shooting baskets and you're not good at that, your coach will pull you aside and make you practice, practice, practice three-pointers until you finally build that skill some more. That really resonated a lot with me, you *have* to be able to talk to students about and get them engaged in their learning process. They can't just be passive containers. So it forces some awkward but really important conversations.

Reeves: We struggled a lot around the question of do we want to tell students their reading level. For years at Excel we have publically posted CST and attendance data and some students have been really

embarrassed. “What? I’m an honor roll student but I’m ‘far below basic’?” And that created a buzz for us around the CST. We purchased a new reading program last year and it was powerful to hear students saying things like “Wow, I read at a 7th grade level.” Not as a putdown, they were telling their peers their own reading levels. They had to stop and acknowledge that they were reading at that grade level. One student took the assessment in my office and got that result – “Huh, I’m at a 7th grade level.” “Yeah, that what it says,” I said. And then we had a discussion about how the more you read the better you get, and this 7th grade level is not a life sentence, you just need to read more and build your vocabulary and fluency. So they respond to that. “I don’t want to be at a 3rd grade level, I need to read more!” That was an informal conversation with me, but I heard students talking to each other. “Man, I’m at the 3rd grade!” “Tch, you better read more – here, read this!”

When you select the focal students, is there any stigma to being selected? How is that presented to the students?

J. Thomas: I actually had a lot of fear about telling focal students so I didn’t tell them for a while. I appreciated the coaching support to have those conversations with students because my approach has always been to be very supportive of students and not put them down and I was worried about how to tell them without creating an issue.

Young: My students were pretty excited to be focal students. They responded very well and it was never a social issue, at least in my classroom. I think that before I was pretty open and honest with my students, not quite teacher-as-coach but on my way, so it reinforced a lot of things I was trying to accomplish in my teaching. My coach did a lot to support this, I was always a teacher who is willing to try new or risky things, but with a lot of support it went well. I felt really good about the instructional decisions I was making.

P. Thomas: It’s interesting, I think the way a lot of students have got into this situation is by being quiet, or finding some compensating mechanism so that people don’t know. But then all of a sudden, when they are being paid close attention, they like it, they’ve never been the kid who gets all the attention, and they were excited to be a focal student.

Kolluri: My students also felt special, and a little more open and willing to ask questions. Students who may not have asked many questions before

started doing it more when they were focal students, there was a new comfort level because they knew they were special to you in some way. I let them know that they were teaching me too, they were helping me figure out what I could do better. They felt like a teammate, not like I was trying to fix them and their problems, we were doing this together.

What were your challenges working as a coach this past year?

Davis: The greatest challenge for the English teachers, myself included in terms of my own background, who were never trained in teaching literacy and reading in secondary schools, was getting into that whole universe of skills that lie below what you normally teach in high school, like literary analysis and writing papers. Teachers like Nancy were extremely motivated and had long felt that literacy was a problem they wanted to address and so she dove in and did a huge amount of work. Other teachers didn't necessarily start there, "I didn't sign up to teach this, I don't have time to learn this," and so on. That was a challenge for some teachers but they did find their way into the project. They did the assessments and landed on a problem such as reading comprehension that they decided to work on and learn more about. What I'm excited about in the coming year is the cross-disciplinary nature of the Inquiry Teams, having different perspectives on particular focal students, and having more transfer of learning about the kinds of assessments we need to do to get a good handle on the particular challenges of our students. It will be interesting to see how teachers outside English support the focus on literacy – in the science classroom, social studies, etc.

P. Thomas: What's really interesting about the project as a whole is that it's counter to everything we are seeing in initiatives coming down from the state level. Drilling down to look at individual students and the real work of teaching to actual gaps, this is not the directive you get from above or an area of much investment. And so it takes an organization like BayCES coming in and working with schools to make it happen.

Davis: Coming out of the pressure to teach to grade-level standards on the one hand and the realization of just how far below grade level so many of the students are on the other, there is a pressure to drop the level of teaching to where the students are and stay there. But you have to find that balance between teaching the grade-level standard skills, the critical thinking skills, and finding out how to help them access those skills and be strategic about filling gaps as an on-ramp to those grade-level standards.

You can't give up and decide that since they are so far behind you are going to baby them or dumb it down for them.

Lai: I can best sum it up like this: I find that my students have as deep an understanding of grade-level skills like simile and metaphor as anyone else, but then they can't demonstrate this understanding on the benchmark exam because they can't understand the reading selection because of poor literacy skills.

Do you think the other students in classes benefitted from the work you did with focal students?

Lai: I think it impacted every single student in my classroom. Not because I was able to get into specific skill gaps with all of them, but it transformed my entire curriculum to really focus on literacy and reading comprehension. I had every senior complete a reflection on their reading and it was an astoundingly positive response. I had 17-year-old senior profusely thanking me for making them read more. I typically throw away student work at the end of the year but I kept all of those.

BayCES honed in on the most important element of teaching: checking for understanding.

Kolluri: I think the project is really valuable because it forces formative assessment.

Whereas before teachers would give assignments, collect them, and then check it off – they did it – now we are in class with a clipboard, looking at student work and checking for understanding. We talk to students about what they are and are not understanding and the next lesson we develop responds to that for the whole class. And whatever the four focal students are struggling with, much of the rest of the class probably is too. And this is maybe the most important element of teaching: checking whether or not students are learning what is being taught and adjusting your instruction to make sure they do understand it. BayCES really honed in on that. As a teacher I wasn't doing that before nearly as well as I'm doing it now, and that benefits all of my students.

Young: It brought our department together and forced us to work together and look at student work. I've done professional development at my school for a few years now and it's true that looking at student work was usually the first thing dropped from the agenda because it can be

intimidating to bring an assignment you designed in front of your colleagues for their critique. But Impact 2012 gave us the space for a dialogue about what we're working on and struggling with and learn from each other without judgment because it was all based in trying to help this group of focal students. There was an amazing level of collaboration in our department and we were already a high-functioning team.

J. Thomas: I think the bigger impact was on my teaching as a whole. I believe that as a whole, my students improved. The four focal students also improved, the two boys more than the two girls. I think the girls might improve more next year. I've taught one of the girl's older siblings in the past and one of her older sisters didn't graduate. I told her that I selected her as a focal student because I see some of the same issues in her that were in her siblings that prevented them from succeeding and I wanted to help her get past them to succeed. I don't know if that message has sunk in yet. I teach 9th grade and I have to remind myself, we might see the changes until next year, because they're developing so much, sometimes you just have to wait and see.

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