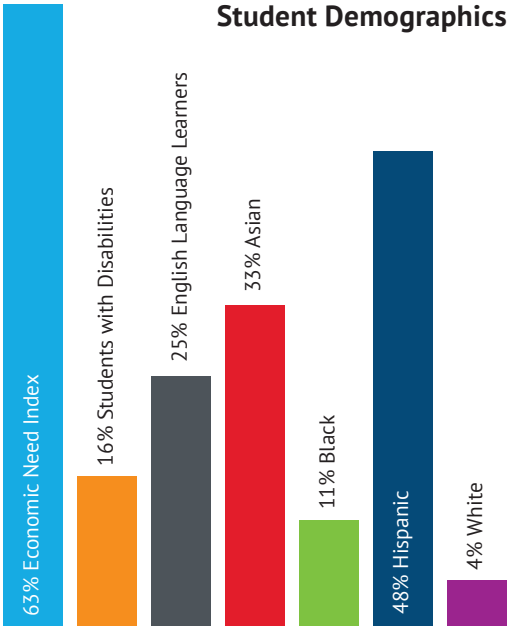
Case Study: Neighborhood High School

Neighborhood High School in Queens serves approximately 1600 students in 9th–12th grades. The surrounding neighborhood has a large population of Latinx families, and an increasing number of immigrants from Bangladesh, all leading to a student population that is increasingly made up of students with English as a New Language/ENLs.

Over a period of several years, the school's valedictorians and most of the top 10% of the class consistently matriculated into local two-year community colleges. After years of struggling with low attendance, poor academic progress, and safety issues related to weapons in the school, in 2014–15 the school became part of the NYC Renewal school turnaround program.

As part of this program, Neighborhood High School had a change in administration and had to implement a range of accountability measures. It also partnered with a local community-based organization to bring additional resources, including a mental health clinic on the campus, a wide range of afterschool programs, and a full-time on-site college advisor paid for by the CBO. Thus, at the beginning of its engagement with CARA in January of 2017, the school was undergoing significant change in a range of areas that offered both obstacles and hope. On the one hand, there were new resources to support students and staff; on the other hand, as a **Renewal school**, there was pressure to meet a set of compliance measures, few of which were focused on nuanced post-secondary outcomes.

School Profile



At an initial meeting, both the new CBO-funded counselor, Joseph, and the existing counselor, Diane, expressed excitement about the work and about having a partner; however, they faced several challenges as their partnership began. First, neither were highly trained or well networked in the college access field. Second, while Joseph and Diane's knowledge and skills complemented each other, they had no systems of communication or regular meeting time so their efforts were not coordinated. The work for the first year, then, would be establishing systems that would support a coordinated and distributed approach to college counseling between Diane, Joseph, and the guidance department.

They both noted that, while they were determined to help more students apply to college, they were concerned that the cultural values of many students' families required students to stay close to home and thus limited their ability to encourage students to enroll in more competitive options or go away to college. Things also got off to a bumpy start between the CBO and the school—for example, the CBO used classrooms for afterschool programs and left them a mess; school staff failed to attend professional development sessions organized by the CBO or to send students to the mental health clinic. Luckily, the assistant principal of guidance, Richard, stepped in quickly to remediate, which allowed both groups to move past the issues.

> **"I don't think it's necessary for everybody to be involved at the forefront of the work. But I do think it is important for everybody to have some sense and awareness of the work that's going on, and some opportunity to participate in the work, even if it's something as small as a few times a year when I do student conferencing and I have a conversation with kids around their post-secondary planning. Because it keeps teachers aware that this is what the school's culture is, this is what the messaging is that we're trying to push out to students."**

INITIAL ASSETS AND CHALLENGES

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

> No curriculum prior to beginning work with CARA.

> No school-based trips.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

> None prior to beginning work with CARA.

> The staff expressed disappointment in the lack of engagement from parents and believed this was a large contributing factor to their students' post-secondary outcomes.

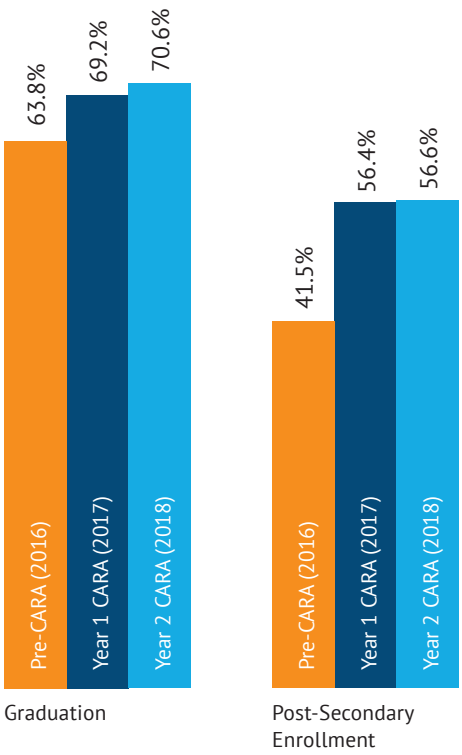
Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

> One counselor for a senior class of almost 400 on-track-to-graduate students who had been moved into this role from guidance several years earlier, without any additional training.

> School counselors and several other staff members had attended training at Goddard Riverside's Options Institute.

> Several of these guidance counselors (but not all) offered small, informal sessions on issues related to post-secondary planning.

Graduation and Post-Secondary Data



"It's not a one person show—it relies on all of us, even the college access teachers, knowing which kids need help, when I need to send someone to [the CBO-based counselor], when he's available … Their door is always open, and my door is always open for them to come in, especially if there are important messages, where the kids need to receive urgent information from them, about deadlines, about scholarships, those kinds of things."

FIRST YEAR PLAN

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

Pilot four sections (serving 25% of the class) of a credit-bearing "college access" course, taught by a group of social studies teachers (including the department head) using CARA curriculum.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

Regular meetings of teachers of the college access class over the course of the spring semester to adjust the scope and sequence. Supported by professional development on content topics from the CARA coach.

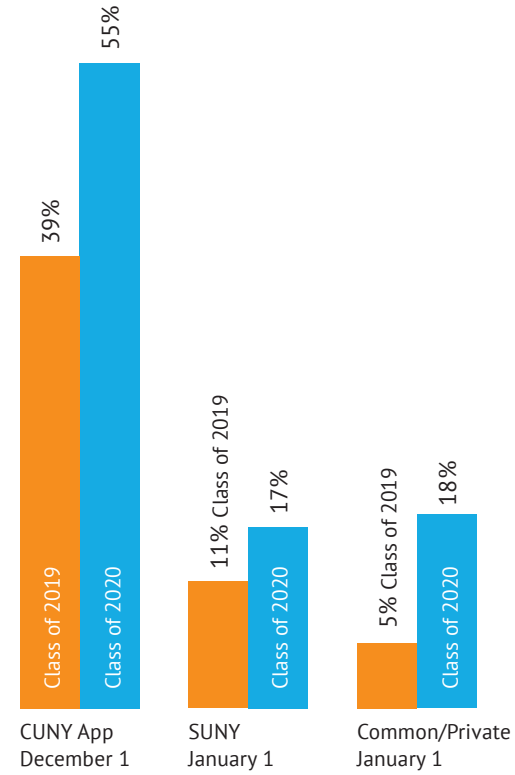
Plan for fall professional development with whole staff on college access for first-generation students.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Addition of new counselor, Joseph, funded by the CBO—young and new to the work (currently in graduate school for counseling).

Begin discussions with CARA to add peer leadership in the fall, through the College Bridge program.

"Information is not just staying in the college office, it's everywhere. Teachers know ... they come into the college office—they see what's going on. You have staff that are always asking, where did that student get accepted to? They're asking the students directly—did you hear back from this school, you've got this—did you check in with [the counselor], did you check in with [the CBO-based counselor], did you check in with the Bridge Coach?"



YEAR ONE SPRING: JANUARY–JUNE 2017

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

11th Grade Pilot: Classes began in February, with 100 of 400 juniors in four sections which met five days a week.

As the teachers became more confident, classes improved, students were more engaged and informed about the college process, and word began spreading to other students. Richard, the assistant principal, began getting requests from students to add the access course to their schedules, and if the student was in good academic standing, he obliged; however, as these classes grew in size, the larger number of students created new challenges, given the exploratory and reflective nature of the CARA lessons. Nothing was simple.

As the team looked toward the fall, they planned to add extra sections of the junior class the following year in order to reach more students, and thought about how to adapt the CARA curriculum map given what they had learned in the pilot year.

They also drew an important larger lesson: students needed more support to get through the actual college process in their senior year. Thus, they also began to plan for a second major addition to the school's structure: a 12th grade application class in the fall for a large group of seniors.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

Even within this small team, it became clear that there were a range of viewpoints: as they looked at the school's post-secondary data, not everyone had the same reaction. The assistant principal of guidance, Richard, and the counseling team were concerned about the high rates of enrollment at two-year colleges, but many of the teachers who had been assigned to access classes wondered aloud whether the school should be focusing more on vocational and trade schools. This teaching staff, who were predominately white and had been teaching for fifteen to twenty years, were unsure of the college for all mission now being articulated by the school. They repeatedly expressed a fear of "pushing college" on students who could not afford it, would not work hard enough, or whose parents would not allow them to attend.

Some challenging conversations ensued. The counseling team, for their part, noted that the staff demographics did not match up with the student body they served and identified this as a challenge. They pointed out that suburban schools were not necessarily suggesting vocational options for students and this allowed the conversation of the group to shift, with more willingness on the part of the teachers to discuss realistic expectations, look at differences between colleges, and reflect on their own college journeys. Important questions were raised about how to navigate those students whose families were less willing—or completely unwilling—to let them go away, especially those who had more recently come to the United States.

They increasingly focused on content-driven professional development that grounded the access teachers and the guidance team in the landscape of CUNY, SUNY, and opportunity programs. The teachers learned how to support students to make college lists, and take financial information into consideration when doing so. The team was also open to pushing their thinking and knowledge about college access and agreed that whole staff and small team professional development would be a priority within the next year.

YEAR ONE SPRING: JANUARY–JUNE 2017 *>>> continued*

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Diane and Joseph began meeting regularly, came up with a coordinated system to track students, and started to work in real partnership with one another. With the time to meet, it became clear that in many ways they were a good team—Joseph was doing things Diane did not have time for, such as networking with admissions, bringing students on trips on breaks, and working with POSSE. They were still challenged by how to collect important components of the application work and did not always honor their weekly meetings but they were making progress.

Junior seminar quickly generated an impact on the college office: juniors began to go to the college counselor with questions and for one-on-one support. The heightened sense of student engagement led the College Inquiry team to focus in on what was happening to that year's seniors, in particular looking at their FAFSA completion rates. While some of the other indicators looked okay—of the 514 seniors, 375 were on track to graduate and 404 took the SAT once—by mid-February only fifty students had completed the FAFSA. They quickly realized that this fact likely explained the limited enrollment in four-year colleges, and college in general, for past graduates.

Unwilling to let another year go by before addressing this situation, the APs, counselors, and APPS teachers agreed to collaborate in an emergency FAFSA plan for 12th graders. Richard led the planning and agreed to change programming for a week. First, two professional development sessions were scheduled, one for counselors and one for access class teachers. Then, using social studies class periods and rotating seniors through the college office and computer lab, every senior spent a class period working on FAFSA. Other senior teachers pitched in to help as well, and a much higher percentage of students completed their FAFSA than in previous years.

The counseling staff and the access teachers also began to tackle work with juniors. They facilitated their first spring financial aid night in June for the parents of the junior class. They utilized a guest speaker and had a separate room for Spanish and Bengali speaking families respectively, and were pleasantly surprised with the attendance.

"The culture of having kids have higher expectations than just getting a diploma is something I think everyone can attest to .... The culture of the school has shifted over the past few years. It's headed where we need to be, and heading in a positive direction which can only get better."

YEAR ONE FALL: SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2017

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

12th Grade Pilot: The same teachers who had taught 11th grade classes moved to teach the 12th grade classes, so they would know the gaps students were entering with and what to review.

Richard reported that once again he was getting increasing requests from seniors to be added to an access class: he obliged when possible, but the existing classes still were not serving all seniors, or even a majority.

Nevertheless, with students once again clamoring to get into the class, the school had irrefutable evidence: their students were hungry for support with post-secondary planning.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

The team teaching the access course—now working with the same students in their senior year—continued to meet throughout the fall to develop their content knowledge, with a focus on financial aid, opportunity programs, and application completion.

The school devoted a citywide professional development day in November to whole staff work around college access. Meeting with the entire staff in the school library over the course of the day, the CARA coach facilitated a range of discussions about college going for first-generation students, exploring the assumptions staff themselves had about college, and how those assumptions lined up with the messages students received about college. Diane and Joseph facilitated a concurrent staff training around writing letters of recommendation.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Beginning in September, the college office had a further set of resources added: three College Bridge Coaches, whose salaries were paid for by the CBO. While the extra hands on deck were a positive step, the additional coordination they required also presented some challenges.

First, the Bridge program brought a new tracking system, but Diane continued to use her own, which was not aligned with the new one.

Second, it was unclear which one of them should be supervising the Bridge Coaches and ensuring that they attended training; and Joseph struggled with trusting the Bridge Coaches enough to delegate meaningful tasks to them.

All of this led to a great deal of confusion about which tasks had been completed by which student, and led to tension between Diane and Joseph.

More resources were creating new problems in another way: the senior college access classes were helping increase the traffic in the college office because students without a class were seeing their peers completing parts of the application and did not want to miss out. As the fall went on, the main challenge that emerged was supporting these students. Diane and Joseph figured out where the students who were not in a class were grouped, and Diane began to push into those classes to reach the students and support them through the steps of the college process.

Their resources had increased, but so had their work. The upside: more and more students at the school were being engaged and assisted in applying for college.

YEAR TWO SPRING: JANUARY–JUNE 2018

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

11th & 12th Grade: The teachers who taught 12th grade access classes pivoted back to working with juniors—now a new group—with additional sections added in order to serve more students, though still only about half of the grade. And seeing how much of the college process remained unfinished by the end of January— even as they got better at teaching the fall class—Richard, the assistant principal, contemplated adding a full-year 12th grade class the following year.

9th & 10th Grade: The school had planned to add lessons in 9th and 10th grade in the fall, but had failed to clearly identify a space or set of teachers. In the spring, one to two college lessons were added to 10th grade career exploration classes, but the early awareness work did not get off the ground in any systematic way.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

Development for the teachers of college access classes—mostly from the history department, but a few others who had also been given access classes in their programs—continued during whole staff professional development days, ensuring that staff had the content they needed to teach the classes effectively.

In early June, the CARA coach led a professional development session focused on the steps of applying to and matriculating into college, helping the staff to understand further the complexity of the process. Perhaps even more importantly, Diane and Joseph shared data on where the school's 12th graders were planning to go in the fall, celebrating the school's growing accomplishments in this area.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Throughout the spring semester, Diane and Joseph continued meeting with the CARA Bridge Coaches to knit together the counseling team. They worked to establish a more coordinated system that incorporated the coaches, clarified their use of tracking systems, and utilized the help of 11th and 12th grade counselors to support parent night and to support students and families through the critical issues they were facing. As the Bridge Coaches began to hit their stride, the contributions they had to make as young people became increasingly clear.

As the year drew to a close, there was a lot to celebrate: graduating seniors had significant increases in FAFSA completion and four-year and private school applications, yielding more EOP and HEOP placements for the graduating class of seniors. And in the counseling office, Diane and Joseph planned ahead for next year's college office systems and added a fourth Bridge Coach to the team. They were hitting a groove.

> **"The college access classes became so helpful—they are the glue that keeps us together ....They're making a difference, a great difference."**

YEAR TWO FALL: SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2018

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

12th Grade: Additional teachers joined to teach college access classes, including special sections for ENLs.

9th-11th Grades: The school had an existing "Are You Green?" campaign—added when it became a Renewal school—where classes were strategically suspended at the end of each marking period, and the whole staff met individually with 9th–11th grade students to review their report cards and progress toward graduation.

In both spring and fall (three times per semester), a post- secondary element was added to these conferences, using the large data sets they had developed to share information with students in relation to their future planning. Expanding students' horizons, these meetings now included PSAT score review and Regents score alignment with CUNY entrance requirements.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

The school continued to reserve and use whole staff professional development time to keep college access front and center with staff. In particular, the three citywide professional development days (when teachers were working, but students were not in attendance) were used throughout the year to continue to push staff engagement with—and knowledge about—the topic. A November professional development session focused on stereotypes teachers had about the public city and state higher education systems, exploring and correcting misinformation and building shared understandings about the range of options for their students.

Increasingly the school invited teachers to give suggestions to continue to move the work forward, yielding involvement from several staff members not previously engaged (their ideas included: sharing college information over school monitors; hosting other college-related events). Overall, staff engagement around post-secondary access increased noticeably, with many appearing more in touch with the challenges their students were facing in the process. Several teachers commented that they had worked at the school for fifteen years and had never seen an initiative like this.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

September's back to school parent night included a college component for the first time; the school also organized a college fair at the school for the first time, and brought a group of students to a SUNY college fair, utilizing CARA lessons in 12th grade classes to prepare for and debrief the visit. The counseling team also made an extensive effort to ensure that every senior would have individual support for the post-secondary planning process. They split this work, with Joseph and the Bridge Coaches focusing on supporting students who were in access classes, and Diane working separately with seniors who, for scheduling or other reasons, were not programmed into one of these classes.

Frustratingly, the newly introduced CUNY application made this work harder than ever. Before they could even fill out the application, students ran into numerous issues with accessing the new portal and unanticipated browser glitches. The team pulled together in the face of these challenges, reaching out frequently to their CUNY representatives, but it was hard to feel like they were making progress, despite all of their hard work and well-laid plans.

YEAR THREE SPRING: JANUARY–JUNE 2019

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

12th Grade: The school was not able to add a spring class for seniors, despite the amount of work that they realized students still needed support with. However, they created space inside economics classes for college work to get done.

11th Grade: Heading into their third year, the school had a solid curriculum plan in place for spring of junior year. They were now able to run nine sections of access classes (with thirty students each), approximately 90% of the class. This included several sections specifically for ENLs.

9th & 10th Grade: Creating a sustainable space for lessons in 9th and 10th grades was continuing to prove extremely challenging. Several lessons were done in the spring in a few 9th grade ELA classes and in a 10th grade career class that served a subset of the students.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

Richard began to convene a "post-secondary team" that met weekly, made up of the social studies department head, one of the access teachers, Diane and Joseph, the Bridge Coaches, and the teacher running the career office. This group continued to think about how to expand their work into new areas and include new groups.

In the spring "Are You Green?" conferencing, they pulled each senior aside in front of a green screen to shoot a quick video about their post-secondary plans. These were then handed over to students in the virtual enterprise pathway and made into a video that was shown at a staff meeting, and at the school's final community meeting of the year. This continued and consistent messaging to faculty, building it into meetings and into everyone's work in different ways, was paying off in larger shifts in culture.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Given how slowly the application process had gone in the fall, the work of getting students through applications and FAFSA continued into spring, and really, straight through to the end of the year. Luckily, the school was prepared for this, and through economics classes, Diane, Joseph, and the Bridge Coaches worked with the 12th grade checklist of tasks to ensure that every student completed every step of the process, pulling out those that still had college tasks to complete, particularly financial aid ones.

This year, they also looped in counselors in the Career Connections office, who were helping students with IEPs through the ACCES-VR process. Thus, the college completion checklist was transformed to include all post-secondary options, in order to help all students at the school feel part of the process. The CBO supporting the school joined this effort.

They also expanded their peer-to-peer work in new ways, getting alums to come back to speak to other students and staff, and using 12th graders to lead the spring conferences with 10th graders.

Excitingly, all four of the schools' College Bridge Coaches would return for a third year the next fall. Now deeply embedded into the team, they were increasingly confident in their expertise, and helped staff see the potential in the school's students.

YEAR THREE FALL: SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2019

Creating Instructional Space for College Access Work in Grades 9–12

12th Grade: All seniors on track to graduate and with room in their schedule were enrolled in access classes: approximately 85% or all but ninety students; the rest of class was served by outreach from the college office and access teachers via email.

9th & 10th Grade: Richard was frustrated by the school's failure to implement a plan for 9th and 10th grade lessons. However, his ability to continue to push this work forward was being compromised by huge cuts to the school budget; several staff positions had been lost, and the principal asked him to hand off oversight of the college work to the social studies department head and turn his attention elsewhere. Instead of being able to bring additional resources to bear to solve the problem, he was working with fewer resources.

Brainstorming with the CARA coach, they came up with a plan to start small in 9th and 10th grade English classes, drawing on staff who Richard knew were already concerned and engaged with thinking about post-secondary access with and for their students.

Positioning and Equipping Staff to Do College Access Work

In November, the CARA coach met with a small group of 9th and 10th grade English teachers, who talked about their own experiences with post-secondary access and how it was similar to and different from their students' journeys; they then chose lessons and committed to teaching one per month in their classes for the rest of the year. Richard committed to meeting with them monthly, and planned for the coach to come back in January to meet with the group again to make adjustments to the curriculum plan. It was not ideal, but it was a start.

Providing Individualized Expert College Counseling

Fall had a bumpy start for the counseling team. They had felt so good at the end of the last year; but Richard's transition away from leading the work and a new person coming in had scrambled the equilibrium they had arrived at. The social studies department head had different ideas about communication between the team members and the flow of work, leaving the rest of the team frustrated and angry. It seemed like their progress was so often hijacked by some change.

Realizing this, Richard looped back in, working with the social studies department head on leadership, and bringing the team back together in more productive ways. By the end of December, things seemed back on track: their college application rates went up significantly from the previous year, and some amazing news arrived: one of their students was accepted early to Harvard, with a full ride. It was the first Ivy League acceptance ever at the school.

"College talk—that's something I think the Bridge Coaches have really done well this year. Talking about their own experiences, honestly a lot of our seniors this year respond really well with the Bridge Coaches. The Bridge Coaches are amazing."