



A Queens Renewal School Serving Only English Language Learners Achieves Big Academic Gains

By Greg Anrig, Senior Fellow in the Office of New York City's First Deputy Mayor

Nearly all ninth graders enrolling at Pan American International High School in Elmhurst, Queens, speak no English and come from a family who only recently arrived in the United States—primarily from Central and South America as well as the Dominican Republic. Some of them stopped attending school years earlier to work instead. Assistant Principal Leslie Aquino says, “We often get students who are sixteen years old and haven’t been to school in their home country since about the second grade.”

With that unusually challenging population of students, Pan American consistently struggled with low graduation rates, poor test results, persistent disciplinary problems, and high absenteeism. In 2014, the New York City Department of Education designated it as a Renewal School, providing additional support in order to improve

its student outcomes. The next year, a new principal, George Badia, took the helm at Pan American.

In the two short years since Badia arrived, his leadership in managing the resources provided by the Renewal School program has produced results. On both the Common Core English and Algebra Regents tests in 2015-6, Pan American's seniors scored about six percentage points higher than similar students in other schools. School surveys and the Spring 2016 School Quality Review showed Pan American exceeding targets on virtually every benchmark. For example, the most recent student and teacher surveys found:

- **81%** of students say that teachers notice when they are upset or having emotional difficulty—much higher than the citywide rate of 48%.
- **92%** of students say that they learn a lot from feedback on their work, compared to 65% of the city.
- **93%** of students know what their teacher wants them to learn in class, compared to 80% citywide.
- **93%** of teachers say that the principal communicates a clear vision for the school, compared to the citywide rate of 82%.
- **96%** of teachers say that they trust each other, compared to 83% citywide.

Moreover, in 2015-16, 96.4% of Pan American students are earning at least 10 credits in their first year, compared to 82.6% in their comparison group; 55.9% of students are taking advanced courses, compared to 27.9% in the ; and attendance has increased from 88% in 2012-13 to 91% in 2015-16, outperforming the city average of 89%. The graduation



Guino Gonzalez and Leslie Aquino

rate soared from 50% in 2014 to 81% in 2016.¹

Those numbers reflect a sense of purpose and energy that is evident to anyone who visits Pan American’s content-rich classes. Many students stay until 6:30, when the school closes its doors, and teachers, administrators, parents, and students all speak with enthusiasm about each other and their environment. In Alexa Tanglis’ 9th and 10th grade science class, excited students huddle at the front of the classroom listening to her questions about cell division. They simultaneously respond by holding up cards that her free “pickler” phone app can instantly identify as right or wrong — drawing cheers and occasional groans. That immediate feedback to both Tanglis and her students enables them to quickly recognize what they don’t know so they can adapt accordingly, while actively engaging the kids in the learning process.

In Dana Lee’s 11th and 12th grade intensive reading class, groups of students work together annotating short reading passages and then explaining to other students how they went about determining the correct answers to multiple choice questions. The school’s administrators and teachers have found annotation to be an especially effective strategy for developing the reading skills of students who need to learn English on an extremely tight timeline. Many of their team meetings focus on ways to refine their approaches to teaching annotation based on their observations of student performance.

Earl Johnson kicks off his 9th and 10th grade Social Studies class on the Middle Ages by explaining how pairs of students will each focus on researching a term like “Black Death” or “knights” using a graphic organizer to support language acquisition called the Frayer model. That approach, which the students have become familiar with in other classes as well, includes filling boxes with both English and Spanish definitions, sentences using the term, synonyms, and a paragraph from a text source with a citation about the topic. As the teams work on the rubric, Johnson circulates through

¹ Part of the graduation rate increase may be attributable to a “variance” granted to Pan American under state law that allowed the school to substitute portfolio assessments for three Regents exams, while still requiring passing scores on math and English tests.

the room and asks questions of each pair. The students are engaged throughout the 57-minute period.

Pan American’s transformation to such a positive dynamic and culture hinges on the leadership of Principal Badia. When asked to name the single trait that makes Badia so effective, administrators and teachers consistently say “transparency.” Assistant Principal Aquino, who Badia hired shortly after he started, says, “From the first day I met George, he was very clear about the trajectory he wanted for the school and his non-negotiables. But he’s also very compromising and will meet you halfway. He knows the big picture and has really good ideas about how to move the school, but at the same time he wants to hear from different people and different points of view.”



Badia’s top priority when he became principal was increasing the school’s long struggling graduation rate. He recalls: “When I first came in, we had more than 30 seniors who weren’t going to pass the Regents math test. So I met one by one with each of them and talked about the extra math support we were going to provide to enable them to get to the level they needed to be at. We used time after school and on Saturdays to offer those opportunities with particular staff members assigned to each student.”

By extending that same clarity, positivity, and team-based approach to the range of challenges confronting Pan American, in combination with the strategic use of the resources available from the Renewal program, Badia led a successful transformation that other educators can learn from. This report highlights how he and his colleagues addressed each of the elements of the Department of Education’s Framework for Great Schools: effective school leadership; a supportive environment; collaborative teachers; rigorous instruction; strong family-community ties; and trust.



Effective School Leadership and a Supportive Environment

At last year’s graduation ceremony, a student named John spoke tearfully about how Principal Badia had saved his life. When Badia started at Pan American, John was far behind in his course work and showed up at school infrequently. His father had passed away and he felt that he needed to try to work to support his family rather than take classes. He also was battling depression.

Badia had John come with his mother into his office and listened as the stone-faced young man repeated that he no longer wanted to continue with school. But Badia would have none of it. He says, “I did not accept his decision because I knew that

deep down he wanted to finish school, but the dynamics in his home were forcing him to feel trapped into dropping out.” After that meeting, John intermittently returned to school but then stopped coming again. Badia went to his home to visit again, and when it was becoming clear John was suicidal, Badia and his team arranged with the nearby hospital to intervene. After receiving treatment, John returned to school and, with intensive support from administrators and teachers, succeeded in attaining a diploma and is now attending college.



Assistant Principal Aquino, who was in Badia’s office during the initial meeting with John and his mother, says that encounter is typical of how Badia is able to connect with even the most troubled students. She says: “When George interacts with students who you can’t seem to break through with, he persists until he finds out the root cause of the problem. He deeply believes that ‘if you just give me a few minutes with them, I’m going to get at what’s really going on.’ And that connection has made a significant difference for our most challenging students. It’s not that they don’t want to come to school. It’s that they have legitimate trauma or reasons for why they’re struggling. Sometimes just having that conversation with George gives them that freedom to let it out, whatever their main issues are. And then they don’t

feel so uncomfortable about being here. They find out, 'Now somebody at the school knows what's really going on in my life.'"

Badia's recognition that the school's past difficulties in graduating students had at least as much to do with the social and emotional challenges confronting students as with academic shortcomings drives his focus on forging deeper connections with each child. His willingness to personally leave the school for house calls with chronically absent students and their families also sets an example for his staff that they, too, should make extra efforts to form personal bonds with students to more effectively educate them.

At the same time, Badia and his team have dedicated a significant portion of the resources available through the Renewal School program, which includes forming partnerships with local non-profit service providers following the city's Community School model, for social and emotional support to students. Badia hired additional guidance counselors and a substance abuse counselor, and engaged the CCNY Child Center of New York to deliver intensive services on site for students who are experiencing especially severe anxiety, including suicide ideation.

The anti-immigration policies out of Washington, D.C. greatly exacerbated the stresses confronting Pan American's students and families. Badia acted aggressively to alleviate those fears, in part by partnering with a legal association that has come to the school several times to provide full days of legal support for parents related to immigration issues. The school also communicated regularly with parents to reassure them while also conveying that the school is the safest place for their children. Aquino says, "Right after the election, we had a lot of students who were really, really afraid to come to school. That was particularly true for our lowest



Alexa Tanglis

functioning students who haven't spent much time in school systems—even in their home country. But our message has consistently been that the safest place for you to be is here. It is still scary for many. If we hear that a student or family member is worried without saying anything to us, we will even reach out to their neighbors to ask them to help us make our parents and students feel safe."

Each weekday at Pan American, a large share of the students choose to remain at the school until the doors close around 6:15 or 6:30 in the evening. The Renewal School program incorporates extended learning time that Badia used to lengthen each class, followed by a 4 to 6 after-school program that includes tutoring, clubs, and arts. Aquino says, "It really is a long day for them, but I still have to kick a lot of students out when the time comes because they don't want to go."

Collaborative Teachers and Rigorous Instruction

Pan American is one of 18 schools connected to the International network, which began in 1985 with the creation of a high school exclusively for English Language Learners on the campus of LaGuardia Community College in Queens. Part of the educational model promoted by that network is to group together ninth graders with 10th graders, as well as 11th and 12th graders. That approach has proven to help expedite the adoption of English skills for the younger students in each grouping as they pick up vocabulary and grammar from their older peers. The International school model also encourages teachers to work collaboratively while focusing classroom activity on completing specified projects.

When Badia arrived at Pan American after working for years in other schools in the International network, he observed that the teachers were not collaborating as intensively and purposefully in ways that he had helped to instill in his previous positions. So a central focus of his was to guide his teachers toward working more rigorously together in analyzing student data and adjusting their teaching practices.

Badia describes the transformation he sought in classroom: **“When I came here, teachers were dominating too much of the class time. Now we have moved toward student-centered instruction, with activities that involve students in discussion and doing hand’s-on projects. We devoted a lot of professional development to clearly defining constructive projects that are aligned with the Common Core. And we had to change the mindset of teachers who were skeptical about our students being able to handle certain challenging activities. Yes, they are ELLS, but they can do the work.”**



Early in Badia’s 29-year career in education, not long after he began teaching high school-level Native Language Arts and Global History, he became responsible for developing state compliance reports that involved analyzing student transcripts to assess their accumulation of credits. Since then he has remained passionate about analyzing student data. Large color-coded spreadsheets showing test scores and other grades for each student, sorted by class, cover the wall opposite his desk. Similar spreadsheets adorn the school’s main lobby so students can also keep track of how they are doing in relation to their peers. The teachers at Pan American, with the guidance of Badia and his assistant principals, have also become adept at using data to identify the specific areas where each student needs additional support.

One example of using data more effectively, supported by Renewal School resources, was the school's adoption of an inquiry system for analyzing results of student math assessments. Badia says, "What is especially powerful is that the math team connects how their own instruction relates to the scores in different categories and then works together to make their own decisions about what they can do to improve their instruction. After making those adjustments, then they can see from the next round of exams which changes worked and which didn't. It's an ongoing process for improvement and it's the main reason why math scores that were very low have jumped almost 30 percentage points."

Dana Lee, who is in her third year teaching at Pan American and leads the 11th and 12th grade English as a Second Language team, says she and her colleagues have become big believers in the value of data to improve educational outcome for students: "Data is the foundation of instructional design—or at least it should be. If you create instruction that's subjective based on what you intuitively think you know about our students, it's not really based on anything concrete. All of the data we use—from pre-assessment to instruction to mid-unit to post assessment—measures growth. That helps us see whether our students are learning and helps us judge what we are doing that's working and what we need to change."

Another transformation under Principal Badia that the staff believes to be central to improvements at the school is the "Saturday Academy," which meets from 8:30 to 12:30 and focuses on ESL and math. **Although the school previously offered tutoring on Saturday mornings, Badia has communicated that he expects students who are struggling to come in for a sixth day of work. In contrast to 20 to 30 students showing up at the school on Saturday mornings in the past, now attendance at the academy is between 120 and 180 each week.**

How do teachers feel about the higher expectations that Badia has for them? Kristin Donnelly, who has taught upper grade Social Studies at Pan American since 2012, says: "Thinking back to the past, I don't think there was a lack of teachers wanting to

invest the time that we do now. It's more that if you don't ask people to do something, they don't know what they can accomplish. So when you make the expectation explicit—guys, I really need our staff to stay here after school and on Saturdays to help the kids if you can—then people will rise to the occasion. Just as with the kids, if you let them know—hey, we want to help you, but you will be more likely to succeed if you stay after school and come in on Saturdays—then they will. And it's not like you *have* to put in the extra time. It's just one of the things that will help us reach our goals. And most of us do put in the extra time, and the payoff for our kids and for us has been really satisfying.”

Two years ago, Pan American received approval to substitute rigorous Project-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs) aligned with the Common Core for three Regents exams as graduation requirements. Teams of teachers worked closely together to design PBATs, which they believe have helped to further engage the students in school work. Lee says, “Instead of taking the biology Regents, now our science teacher brought our kids to the park and analyzed water samples to assess the level of pollution, wrote an in-depth research paper, and presented their findings to panels of teachers, parents, and other students. So they still get the academic rigor from the work but they also are building presentation and other valuable skills.”

Strong Family-Community Ties and Trust

Before becoming a Renewal School, Pan American had been plagued by high rates of absenteeism combined with significant disciplinary problems. Juana Adames, who has been the parent coordinator at the school for nine years, recalls how the climate used to be: “We had a lot of challenges with how the students behaved. It seemed like every Friday we had to go around the corner outside to break up big fights. There were lots of fights, though not too often inside the school.”

This past year, Badia designated one of his guidance counselors to be a “restorative circles coordinator” to continue to shift the school’s response to disciplinary issues

away from punitive measures like suspensions toward a process that engages students in reflecting on how they should be accountable for mistakes they made. Assistant Principal Guido Gonzalez says, **“The mindset of most teachers here used to be that pretty much any infraction required a suspension: If I can’t deal with a kid [snaps fingers], I’m going to send him out. But what George and I started to get people to do is to talk with the student and listen closely, and the training we have done with the restorative circles has demonstrated that there’s a much more positive way to do deal with these situations. It’s an approach that directly confronted the culture that was here.** By replacing the dean—who was responsible for punitive decisions—with another guidance counselor, George sent a strong signal about the shift he wanted to make.”

In addition, twice a week all of the students participate in sessions dedicated to promoting social and emotional wellness where they have opportunities to share the sources of stress they are experiencing. By all accounts, those meetings have helped to strengthen relationships as students and teachers learn more about each other.

As these changes have unfolded, fights and suspensions have dissipated as students have come to trust school personnel and each other to a greater degree. Aquino says, **“We definitely have a lot more eyes on the ground now with kids knowing they can come to us. The students will tell us if they think there’s going to be an incident—they’re very quick to come to the office and say there are rumors that something’s going to happen. We can prevent problems because the communication has opened up with the students.”**

Looking purely at numbers, it would appear that Pan American has actually had an increase in disciplinary issues this year. But what is actually happening is that administrators are more methodically monitoring and documenting minor infractions like cell phone usage and wearing hats inside, as well as the responses to those infractions through the restorative process. Aquino says, “We are keeping closer track of everything so we can continue to focus on further improving the school

climate. But there's no question that the severity of infractions has lessened a lot this year."



Badia considers extensive outreach to parents to be another crucial explanation for the school's progress. He meets

every morning with parent coordinator Juana Adames to review attendance reports and identify which parents should be brought in to discuss why a student has been absent. Adames sits in the office next to Badia's so that he can be sure to check in with parents who might be dropping by to visit her. The flow of parents further increased when the school began offering English classes for adults four days a week. Badia says, "Our doors are revolving doors for parents—they are here all the time. In all my years of being around schools I have never seen a parent coordinator who is so engaging and hands' on with parents as Juana. We want them here and they feel comfortable here."

Conclusion

Badia continues to burst with ideas for new initiatives that he has in the works, including a Career and Technical Education program in computer coding, web design and robotics; a Learning Partners collaboration with Thomas Edison High School; and a bridge program for graduates who are admitted to college to help ensure they enroll and remain in college.

In short, Pan American International High School is demonstrating what renewal looks like.