



Common Core Case Study
ACHIEVEMENT FIRST
BUSHWICK MIDDLE SCHOOL
October 2014

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

MARGARET MEAD



Achievement **First**



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BACKGROUND

The National Charter School Resource Center, funded through the U.S. Department of Education, gathers, develops, and makes accessible a wide range of high-quality resources to support the charter school sector; enables successful planning, authorization, implementation, and continuation of high-quality charter schools; and increases the national understanding of the charter school model.

COMMON CORE CASE STUDY SERIES

Implementation of the Common Core State Standards will significantly impact the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and resources of charter schools.

Charter school leaders and staff need exemplars and resources to assist with Common Core implementation that offer a wide array of examples targeted specifically toward the diverse student populations they serve. To meet this need, Safal Partners worked with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to profile three examples of successful implementation of Common Core State Standards in charter schools around the country: [Alain Locke Charter School](#), [Summit Preparatory Charter High School](#), and [Achievement First Bushwick Middle School](#).

In addition to the case study series, the National Charter School Resource Center has developed a resource list [add link here when document is uploaded to the NCSRC website] for charter schools looking for assistance in implementing the Common Core standards and assessments resources. The list offers a wide array of resources in the areas of leadership, talent management, ELA, math, serving English Learners and parent engagement. State charter support organizations can also serve as a resource to charter schools in this area. Visit the NCSRC [State Connections](#) page for more information about state charter support organizations. This is not an exhaustive resource list and we encourage you to submit additional resources to info@safalpartners.com for consideration.

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENT FIRST

Achievement First (AF) is a growing network of nonprofit, college preparatory, Grades K–12 public charter schools in Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island. The mission of AF is to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity for all of America’s children. Established in 2003 by the founders of Amistad Academy, a public charter school in New Haven, CT, AF has grown into a network that includes 25 public charter schools in five cities.

AF is focused on continuing to close the achievement gap and serving as an example for other public charter schools and traditional public school districts. AF’s approach consists of [a set of basic principles](#) that they believe demonstrate an ability to enable all students to succeed at the highest levels. These principals are listed below:

- More time spent learning
- Regular use of interim assessments
- Integration of performance data in planning
- Recruitment and development of talented teachers and leaders
- Intensive intervention for struggling students
- Disciplined and joyful school culture

Overview of AF Bushwick Middle School

AF Bushwick Middle School (AF Bushwick MS) opened in 2007. The campus is located in Brooklyn, New York, and serves just over 370 students. The school serves students in Grades 5–8. In 2013, 87 percent of students qualified for free and reduced meals, and 99 percent are African American or Hispanic.

For two consecutive years, AF Bushwick MS scored in the top 15 percent of all city schools in the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Progress Reports. In 2013, the NYCDOE highlighted AF Bushwick MS as one of eight city schools with high-need populations that excel at preparing students for college and careers. AF Bushwick MS earned special credit for closing the achievement gap and making outstanding gains with students who have disabilities. Tables 1 and 2 provide achievement data in reading and mathematics for the general population as well as for students with disabilities (SWD) and those who received free or reduced lunch (FRL).

Achievement First fully embraces the Common Core! The Common Core does what forward-thinking educators have been screaming about for years—increase rigor, focus on critical thinking, align a curriculum from K–12 to college-ready standards, focus on fewer standards in more depth.

– Doug McCurry, Co-CEO and Superintendent, Achievement First

Table 1. Achievement Data in Reading

New York	Reading								
	Bushwick						New York Average		
	Overall		SWD		FRL		Overall	SWD	FRL
2010	34.2%	392	11.4%	35	31.3%	297	53.7%	15.1%	39.2%
2011	47.2%	472	14.3%	49	45.3%	351	53.3%	13.9%	38.9%
2012	58.8%	488	16.0%	50	57.8%	410	55.2%	14.5%	40.4%

Source: <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/databasedownload.php>

Table 2. Achievement Data in Mathematics

New York	Mathematics								
	Bushwick						New York Average		
	Overall		SWD		FRL		Overall	SWD	FRL
2010	72.8%	393	36.1%	36	69.8%	298	60.7%	23.9%	46.3%
2011	82.6%	470	55.1%	49	80.8%	349	62.7%	25.1%	48.5%
2012	92.7%	490	72.0%	50	92.2%	412	63.9%	26.1%	49.4%

Source: <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/databasedownload.php>

SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY FOCUS AREAS

This case study provides information on the following focus areas that have been identified as key areas for consideration in the shift to implementing the Common Core State College and Career Readiness Standards (Common Core State Standards).

1. Instructional Shift and Strategic Use of Data and Targeted Interventions

This section focuses on how the transition to Common Core State Standards encouraged AF leadership and staff to continue a shift toward a more rigorous curriculum and instructional strategies. In English language arts (ELA), the shift focused primarily on the use of more rigorous text and text-dependent questioning. In mathematics, the shift focused on restructuring classes to increase conceptual understanding.

2. Talent

This section focuses on the changes made to the AF talent management system. AF has refined their system to better support teachers and school leaders in light of the increased demands of implementing the Common Core State Standards with fidelity.

3. Strong School Culture

This section focuses on the cultural shifts for students that AF staff believes are necessary to achieve the Common Core State Standards. The cultural shift for students needed to emphasize grit, curiosity, and perseverance to motivate students. To this end, AF Bushwick MS continues to find creative ways to recognize and reward achievement related to positive behavior.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The move to the Common Core State Standards has afforded several opportunities and taught several lessons to the AF network and AF Bushwick MS. AF leaders believe that the new Common Core includes the right curriculum shifts, allowing schools to improve by moving toward authentic learning, critical thinking, and intellectual engagement. The Common Core State Standards also provide a framework to evaluate previous curricular materials and instructional practices. After an analysis of the materials and practices, AF determined that the old assessments were not rigorous enough. AF identified the following focus areas for school year (SY) 2014–15 to continue to strengthen its program and align it to the Common Core State Standards:

- Continue to identify and support interventions for students who are behind
- Develop more novel mathematics problems that require students to use critical thinking skills to solve
- Identify more nonfiction texts
- Leverage technology to support teaching and learning
- Identify ways to increase student motivation.

To monitor the transition, AF developed a report card which sets academic and organizational targets and assesses how they have done against those to determine whether they are on track or not to meeting their goals. The report card includes interim assessment data to determine scholar¹ growth (and teacher growth) as well as to determine which strategies are working and which are not. AF also holds bi-monthly board meetings during which members receive a report on the interim measures of both achievement and operational health at the school level (attendance, suspensions, attrition, etc.). In addition to engaging the board on plan outcomes, AF holds weekly meetings with the regional superintendents to give an update on progress against goals and input metrics that drive success of our output measures.

¹ AF refers to their students as scholars.

FOCUS AREA I: INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS AND STRATEGIC USE OF DATA AND TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

Instructional Shifts to Support Common Core State Standards Transition—English Language Arts

The ELA instruction at AF Bushwick MS began to shift following a renewal visit from evaluators from the State University of New York, AF Bushwick MS’ authorizer. The report indicated that the ELA texts were not rigorous enough.

After receiving the report and knowing that the Common Core State Standards were being developed to increase the rigor and cognitive demand on students, AF leadership researched both charter and traditional public schools that were making significant gains in using rigorous text with their students. In 2011, AF leaders visited a charter school in the Uncommon Schools network in Rochester, New York to review curricular materials, observe instruction and meet with a variety of stakeholders at the school to determine what practices could be replicated at AF schools to strengthen the rigor of the academic program. AF leaders returned with strategies to implement at AF Bushwick MS and, if successful, to share with the rest of the AF network. A shift that resulted from that visit was the increased use of rigorous texts across the curriculum. Strategically using leveled readers and ability groups supplemented this shift. This shift built on the four key lesson types used in the ELA lessons, which seek to build scholar skills, knowledge, mindsets, and habits. Table 3 provides an overview of the AF lesson types.

Table 3: AF Fundamentals of Instruction—Lesson Plan Types

Lesson Type	Overview of Lesson Type
Close Reading	During these lessons, scholars will work through layers of meaning (literal comprehension, analysis and making inferences, and thematic understanding) through multiple readings, ultimately building deep and independent thinking. The aim for all close reading lessons is the same: Scholars will be able to closely read a text and demonstrate deep understanding through paraphrasing (literal comprehension), responding to inferential questions (analysis), and analyzing themes through response or debate (theme). At its core, close reading requires students to grapple, and this should occur in all close reading lessons in every unit.
Reading Workout— Tutorial Development Questionnaires (TDQs)	Scholars will frequently engage in “reading workout” lessons, which serve to both ensure miles-on-the-page and rich, text-based thinking about rigorous, text-dependent questions. At the end of these lessons, scholars will ultimately answer one juicy TDQ—called a “culminating TDQ”—about what they have just read. Over the course of the lesson, scholars answer smaller TDQs—called “scaffolding TDQs”—that (a) offer access points for scholars to think deeply about, engage with,

Lesson Type	Overview of Lesson Type
	and understand the text and (b) build the necessary thinking and understanding to answer the culminating TDQ. The aim varies from class to class, but students should always be able to effectively respond to the question and then engage with a culminating TDQ.
Reading to Learn	Scholars will occasionally engage in lessons that build the word knowledge necessary to understand the core text and build the relevant knowledge-based schema about it. The knowledge should help deepen scholars’ access and understanding of the core text. During such lessons, scholars will read texts (frequently informational ones) that require them to acquire the necessary information to access and understand the core text and concepts. The aim varies from class to class, but it should be clear what knowledge the scholars should be able to demonstrate by the end of class through a short assessment.
Skill Acquisition, with Power Aims	Scholars will occasionally engage in lessons in which the purpose is to acquire and practice a skill aligned with the Common Core State Standards and the demands of the text. The selected skill should deepen scholar access and understanding of the text. During these lessons, scholars will learn and practice a skill with gradually increasing independence. Ultimately, scholars will be able to demonstrate mastery and transfer of the skill. The aim varies from class to class but is heavily rooted in the language of the Common Core to (a) prevent myopic instruction and (b) dictate the skill that scholars should be able to demonstrate by the end of class through a short assessment.

AF leaders believe that by selecting great texts and purposefully weaving these lesson types together within units—with an eye on the demands of the text and the needs of the scholars—teachers of literature courses will encourage deep examination of texts, bringing together multiple texts to build a schema of knowledge and a love of reading.

Instructional Shifts to Support Common Core State Standards Transition: Mathematics

AF leaders believe that for students to thrive in the world they will face after college, they must understand mathematics, be able to reason mathematically, and recall appropriate tools and algorithms as needed. As a result of the Common Core State Standards, AF identified the need to shift instructional practices so that there was a stronger balance between analytical thinking and fluency with numbers. The restructured mathematics classes support students in understanding concepts, building fluency, and solving problems at a rigorous but developmentally appropriate level. The classes also focus not only on getting the right answer but also on showing critical thinking and conceptual work. AF provides 100 minutes of math daily – 60 minute core block and 40 minutes review block. In addition, students can participate in homework and afterschool clubs. For students who are struggling, additional small group

instruction is provided regularly depending on the need of the student. The core goals of the AF mathematics program include:

1. **Focus:** Focus on appropriate standards, narrow the scope of lesson content, and increase time and energy spent on mathematics. Table 4 shows the focus of each grade.

Table 4: AF Mathematics Program Goals—Focus on Standards

Grade	Focus Areas in Support of Rich Instruction and Expectations of Fluency and Conceptual Understanding
K–2	Addition and subtraction—concepts, skills, problem solving, and place value
3–5	Multiplication and division of whole numbers and fractions—concepts, skills, and problem solving
6	Ratios and proportional reasoning; early expressions and equations
7	Ratios and proportional reasoning; arithmetic of rational numbers
8	Linear algebra; linear functions

2. **Coherence:** Ensure coherence across grades and link to major topics, connect the learning within grades so that students can build new understanding on foundations they have built in previous years.
3. **Rigor:** In major topics, pursue conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and application. The Common Core State Standards require a balance of these areas in problem solving situations.

To achieve these goals, AF uses the following instructional methods:

- Teacher planning and preparation
- Quality oral and written answers to standards-aligned questions
- Student accountability
- Different types of practice
- Automatic interventions based on predetermined thresholds of academic performance.

Strategic Use of Data and Targeted Interventions

Every six weeks, AF teachers give interim assessments (IAs) that measure whether students have actually mastered the material. These results are then uploaded to AF’s custom-built assessment system. Teachers and principals spend a “data day” after each IA to review the individual assessments and together create data-driven instructional plans that target whole-class, small-group, and one-on-one instruction to address any gaps in student learning. There is designated time during the school day, after school, and on Saturdays for small-group and individual tutoring for select students. Both AF teachers and students believe that they need to do whatever it takes to make sure all

students learn. To that end, AF offers several supports and interventions. For example, AF facilitates a book club that offers opportunities for guided and independent reading; there are also phonics blocks and after-school tutoring. Table 5 provides an overview of the mathematics interventions AF staff use to support struggling students.

Table 5: AF Mathematics Intervention Overview

Intervention	How It Works
Accountability	Students are pulled after a class is taught because their work did not meet the expectation. They are held accountable for completing top-quality work.
Preteach or Reteach	Students are pulled before or after the class is taught (the same day or previous day) and are pretaught (or retaught) the material or the prerequisites for the material.
Fluency	Students are pulled to work on developing fluency with mathematics facts and operations. When this occurs, students should be given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of material with immediate feedback to ensure accuracy with computation.
Significantly Below Grade Level	Conceptual understanding is a part of the mathematics block, and students with significant conceptual deficits who are well below grade level should receive additional practice. It is important to use a visual, languageless, or minimal-language program (e.g., Khan Academy, Learn Zillion, ST Math).

The transition to the Common Core State Standards provided AF with the opportunity to revisit their ELA and math curriculum and instructional practices. In ELA, AF focused primarily on the rigor of text and ensuring they supported students to meet the increased demand. The focus in math was on the increase in conceptual understanding as well as understanding that there can be multiple ways to solve a math problem. The standards also allowed them to address issues related to students who were struggling through an expanded intervention protocol.

FOCUS AREA II: TALENT

The transition to the Common Core State Standards required quality teachers and leaders. AF has always had a comprehensive talent management system to recruit, develop, recognize, and retain a team of teachers and school leaders with all new AF teachers participate in nearly four weeks of professional development. In addition, AF schools release early on Fridays to provide two additional hours every week of staff meeting and learning time. All AF teachers have a coach (principal, dean, or lead teacher) who meets with them at least once every two weeks to provide individual coaching and support. With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, AF continued to enhance and strengthen this system by shifting roles and responsibilities when appropriate as well as creating additional opportunities for professional development to support teachers as new curricular materials and instructional practices were introduced.

When I grow up, I'm going to be a teacher to help educate children the same way that I am being educated.

MESSIAH GORDON
Student, Achievement First Amistad High



Team Teaching and Learning

One way the AF network supports teacher development is through their Team Teaching and Learning. Team Teaching and Learning consists of AF leadership, principals, content specialists, and master teachers. To transition to the Common Core State Standards, AF expanded the responsibilities of the team to determine not only *what* to teach in each grade and content area but also *how* to teach it. Team Teaching and Learning developed proficiency profiles for each grade and content area, which tells teachers what students should be able to do as well as what students need to know. In addition, the team developed Fundamentals of Instruction [link to document will be added] documents that provide teachers with examples of *how* to teach concepts. These documents clarified the approach to lesson design and execution for AF schools by delineating lesson types and articulating the relationships between different lesson types. Table 3 provides an overview of the lesson types.

Coaching

Coaches receive extensive training on the Common Core State Standards. Each teacher is assigned a coach. Coaches support lesson planning, conduct observations, and provide

feedback. Coaches use an observation database to track past observations, feedback, and updates. Appropriate frequency and high-quality feedback are key to coaching at AF.

Observations

Coaches use the [AF Essentials Observation Rubric](#) to conduct their observations. The rubric, developed by AF, is designed to measure the ten essentials of great instruction that AF has identified as well as the overall effect of a lesson on student achievement outcomes. Since the transition to the Common Core State Standards, these ten essentials, organized by domain, serve as a guide to support the instructional practices necessary to achieve the demands of the new standards. There are four key domains of instruction:

- Domain 1: Clear and High Bar for Student Achievement
- Domain 2: Design and Delivery of an Effective Lesson
- Domain 3: Classroom Culture
- Domain 4: Guaranteed Achievement for All Scholars

TEN ESSENTIALS OF GREAT INSTRUCTION

1. Great Aims
2. Assessment of Aims
3. Academic Rigor
4. Core Instruction of the Aim
5. Independent Work Time
6. Scholar Engagement
7. Classroom Culture
8. Cumulative Review
9. Differentiation
10. Overall Outcome: Scholar Learning

AF breaks these domains down into [10 essentials of great instruction](#). Some of the essentials have been broken down into subessentials to define a category more clearly.

Days of Practice

In 2013–14, AF implemented a new professional development component called Days of Practice to allow more opportunities for teachers who teach the same grade and content area to work collaboratively to strengthen alignment of lessons to the Common Core State Standards. During these teacher-led meetings, teachers review student work and use the results of this analysis to develop upcoming lessons.

FOCUS AREA III: STRONG SCHOOL CULTURE

Another key shift toward implementing the Common Core State Standards addresses student culture. AF staff believes that the new standards and assessments require a cultural shift for students. This shift should emphasize grit, curiosity, and perseverance to motivate students to push beyond their comfort zone. To accomplish this, AF re-enforces the role of their core values, which were developed prior to the Common Core State Standards to inform and guide them in all aspects of what they do—from the classroom to the Network Support office—and helps to create a positive, achievement-oriented school culture. The [AF core values](#) are listed below.

No excuses

AF sets ambitious, clearly measurable goals to provide all students with an outstanding education. If AF falls short of these goals, they are willing to change the way they do things in order to achieve excellence for their students.

People matter, mightily

The number one factor impacting student achievement is teacher quality. AF aggressively recruits talent and heavily invests in people so that they can make a real difference in the lives of students.

Excellence is a habit

AF relentlessly pursues excellence and never settles for mediocrity from students or team members.

Sweat the small stuff

AF believes that details are the difference between mediocre and magnificent.

Team and family

This work is a team sport; everyone shares in AF's successes while celebrating the unique strengths and differences of each person and school.

First things first

The needs of students always come first.

Whatever it takes

AF goes the extra mile to make a difference in the life of every student.

Many minds, one mission

Together with parents, partners and supporters, AF works to improve the communities in which we work.

Everything with integrity

The REACH values (Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship and Hard Work) drive the words and actions of all members of the Achievement First team.

AF Bushwick MS also focuses on teamwork, consistency, and character development to assist students in making the cultural shift necessary to master the Common Core State Standards and life skills. To support character development, AF Bushwick MS developed a systems playbook that provides staff with guidance on how to acknowledge and reinforce positive student behavior through merits. Table 7 provides an overview of AF merits and accolades.

Table 7: AF Common Vision Playbook²

Merits and Accolades	
Value	Description
Caring	Consistently treating others with courtesy and empathy; going out of one's way to treat others well
Teamwork	Supporting peers in group endeavors in and out of the classroom and demonstrating the ability to work well with others in a group or in the larger community
Integrity	Demonstrating a belief in the core values of the school through actions; owning one's mistakes and calling attention to breaches in the culture of the school community
Zest	Showing enthusiasm for learning, engagement throughout arduous tasks, and curiosity about the world through words and actions
Discipline	Consistently meeting deadlines or expectations despite distractions or challenges; being dedicated to success; giving thorough attention to detail
Grit	Persevering through hardships, either in terms of academics or character
Achievement	Showing strong performance on an individual task/assessment or making significant improvement over time
Eloquence	Using vocabulary, questioning, and responses to questioning eloquently or making exceptional contributions to discussions or seminars (oral or written)
Gratitude	Taking the time and effort to express thanks to others in the community

In order for students to meet the increased demands of the Common Core State Standards, AF believes in the role that student culture can play in providing a character roadmap that defines the traits that can assist them in their development. AF believes that it is not enough to change the curricular and instructional methods without

²

providing students with the 'soft' skills necessary to achieve the high expectations that the new standards demand.

CONCLUSION

The shift to the Common Core State Standards has had wide-ranging impact on the entire school. AF leveraged this shift to strengthen existing systems and structures as well as to refine curriculum and instructional practices. The transition provided the opportunity for AF to continue a shift toward a more rigorous and engaging curriculum. These curricular revisions have led to more authentic learning, critical thinking and intellectual engagement of students. In addition to the revisions to the curriculum, AF strengthened the school culture to reinforce the soft skills necessary for students to meet the increased rigor. The shift also enhanced the AF's talent management system which supports teachers and school leaders to handle the increased demands of meeting a higher bar.

By providing a framework to evaluate and reassess the curriculum, the talent management system and the school culture, the transition to the Common Core standards will support AF in meeting its mission to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity for all of America's children.

RESOURCES

Focus Area I: Instructional Shifts and Strategic Use of Data and Targeted Intervention

Achievement First (2013). English Language Arts Fundamentals of Instruction.
Achievement First (2013). English Language Arts Program Overview.
Achievement First (2013). History Fundamentals of Instruction.
Achievement First (2013). History Program Overview.
Achievement First (2013). Math Fundamentals of Instruction.
Achievement First (2013). Math Program Overview.

Focus Area II: Focus on Talent

Achievement First (2013). Cycle of Highly Effective Teaching.
[http://www.achievementfirst.org/fileadmin/af/home/our_approach/Achievement First Cycle of Effective Teaching 090827.pdf](http://www.achievementfirst.org/fileadmin/af/home/our_approach/Achievement_First_Cycle_of_Effective_Teaching_090827.pdf)
Achievement First (2013). Essentials Observation Rubric.
[http://tntp.org/assets/tools/AF Essentials Observation Rubric 2011-2012 TSLT 1.12.pdf](http://tntp.org/assets/tools/AF_Essentials_Observation_Rubric_2011-2012_TSLT_1.12.pdf)
Achievement First Bushwick Middle School (2013). Staff Expectations.

Focus Area III: Strong School Culture

Achievement First Bushwick Middle School (2013). Common Vision Playbook.

INTERVIEWEES

The following individuals were interviewed as part of this case study:

- Amy D'Angelo, *Regional Superintendent, Achievement First*
- Michael Rosskamm, *Middle Academy Principal, Achievement First Bushwick MS*
- Nilda Solomon, *7th Grade Teacher, Achievement First Bushwick MS*