

New York City

Sloan Award Winner Uses Pearson's PowerSchool® to Connect with Students



Nicola Vitale, Banana Kelly High School

Challenge

Born into a family of vocational teachers, Nicola Vitale was taught to be curious. And yet, as a high school student, Vitale believed that school—learning—could be so much better. After earning a physics degree from the State University of New York (SUNY) Albany and working as a carpenter building theater sets, Vitale decided to become a teacher. He joined the faculty of New York City's Banana Kelly High School (BKHS) in fall 2000.

"I was teaching physics, but some students weren't ready for physics," Vitale said. "I realized we needed to start earlier than 11th and 12th grades."

BKHS, named for the South Bronx neighborhood revolving around the crescent-shaped Kelly Street, is lauded by parents and former students for its small size—465 students—and caring faculty. The school, created in 1997, has an enrollment that is 65 percent Latino and 30 percent African-American, according to school statistics. Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell grew up in the Banana Kelly neighborhood, which is regarded as a model for revitalization.

Many BKHS students arrive with very little experience with science, Vitale said. "Some of them came from middle schools where science is taught only 40 minutes a week." Dry mathematics classes had already given some ninth graders an aversion for the subject.

At the same time Vitale was dealing with curriculum issues, he and other BKHS teachers were struggling to keep their students informed about their grades. Vitale kept detailed spreadsheets tracking students' assignments and tests and would frequently report to students how they were faring academically. But the spreadsheets were cumbersome and time consuming for a new teacher like Vitale.

Solution

BKHS administrators decided in 2003 to purchase Pearson's PowerSchool, a web-based application that gives teachers, administrators, students, and parents access to the most current student information via the Internet. Now students and parents could log into the Internet at school, home or work to see real-time information about student assignments, attendance and even behavior in school.

"It demystifies the whole grading process," Vitale said. "Instead of asking, 'Why did I get a certain grade?', they can see that it's because they didn't turn in three homeworks."

PowerSchool, the leading and fastest-growing student information system (SIS) today, also provides real benefits for teachers and administrators. Teachers can easily input information and print out personalized reports for students and parents. Guidance counselors track student behavior for daily guidance meetings and regular restorative justice sessions. The quick access allows counselors to follow up with students, teachers, and parents before disciplinary issues get out of hand.

Administrators can use PowerSchool to tap into a range of up-to-date information, which is helpful when a parent calls or stops into the school, said Principal Joshua Laub. "I have a much clearer understanding of what is in everybody's grade book at that particular time," he said.

As a real-world example of PowerSchool’s capabilities, when the NYC Department of Education’s computer system crashed in 2003, BKHS was one of few schools in the 1,600-school district that could print report cards because of PowerSchool’s electronic grade book capabilities.

To help his students with math and science, Vitale talked Laub into launching an integrated math and science course for high school freshmen. Vitale decided to take students out of the classroom to study water quality on the Bronx River because the school doesn’t have a lot of laboratory space or equipment. The program involved observing, measuring, and accurately interpreting results—all vital concepts in math and science.

Benefits

The payoff for Vitale in developing the mixed math and science course was two fold.

First, he saw students become more engaged in subjects they had written off as “boring” or “hard.” Students enrolled in Vitale’s classes scored higher on standardized math and science tests in the year following the integrated course. “More of them now consider math or science as something they could do in college or as a career,” Vitale said.

The second payoff for Vitale came in November 2009, when the Fund for the City of New York and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation named Vitale and six other NYC teachers as winners of the first-annual Awards for Excellence in Teaching Science and Mathematics. The award recognizes dedicated teachers who have achieved results and who have inspired students to pursue careers in science and mathematics. Recipients of the award each received \$5,000 for themselves and \$2,500 to strengthen each school’s math and science programs.

“I was a little bit surprised,” Vitale said of the honor. “When I saw the other teachers selected, it really started to hit me how prestigious the award was.”

Pearson is proud to have helped teachers like Nicola Vitale make a difference in the lives of their students.

We congratulate him in receiving one of the first-annual Awards for Excellence.

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