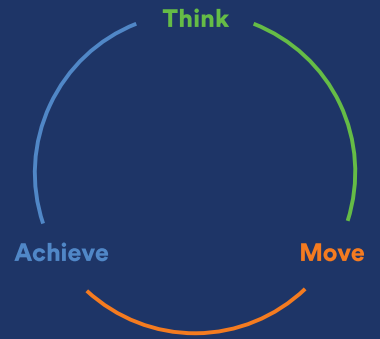


# PE WORKS

STORIES OF CHANGE  
SPRING 2020



I.S. 462 CORNERSTONE ACADEMY FOR SOCIAL ACTION, BRONX



**PE Works Stories of Change** feature principals and staff who are making changes so that PE is a meaningful part of each child's school experience. Their work marks the beginning of developing a physically literate, health-centered generation of New York City students.



Department of Education

Office of School Wellness Programs

## PE Sparks Academic Path

When Mr. Jonathan Alicea started his career as a certified PE teacher at Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) Middle School in Fall 2018, he already knew how physical education could change lives. A product of New York City public schools, Mr. Alicea competed on his high school wrestling team, an experience that motivated him to go college. After earning a degree in physical education with a K-12 NYS teaching certification, he came full circle, returning to New York City to teach others.

Because CASA shares a building and common spaces like the gym with other District 11 and District 75 schools, Mr. Alicea faced a



Instructional coach Kelli-Ann Henry (left) and PE teacher Jonathan Alicea.

challenge familiar to many New York City PE teachers. On days when he couldn't reserve the gym, the only dedicated space he had for PE was a multi-purpose room on the fourth floor. Some teachers might only see the limitations of the situation. But Mr. Alicea embraced the challenge.

Helping him to meet this challenge was Kelli-Ann Henry, a PE instructional coach from the DOE's Office of School Wellness Programs. Supported by PE Works, instructional coaching provides one-on-one training that helps teachers set goals, plan lessons, and enhance student engagement and learning through observation and feedback.

## Coaching the Coach

Mr. Alicea bonded quickly with the 250 students at CASA. He became known for arriving early and shaking hands with students in the auditorium before school. He also volunteered for lunch duty and recess where he joined the middle schoolers playing basketball. "That was my way of getting to know them better outside the classroom setting," he said. "I knew how passionate they were about the sport and how much better they were at it than I was, and I was completely okay with that. My main goal was to start a relationship and build respect with the students so that could be transitioned into the classroom for a fun and safe learning environment."

In PE class, Mr. Alicea started the school year by placing two poster-sized papers on the multi-purpose room wall, one that said "Expect-

tations for Students” and one that said “Expectations for the Teacher.” He told students that he didn’t like rules, but he liked the word “expectations.” By creating expectations together, Mr. Alicea and his students built a fair learning environment. For the teacher, students listed “listen and respect each student equally.” They also suggested “minimize yelling and whistle blowing.”

To begin the PE Instructional Coaching cycle, Ms. Henry visited Mr. Alicea’s sixth-grade class, and afterward met with Mr. Alicea. During the meeting, Ms. Henry and Mr. Alicea discussed highlights of the lesson and areas of growth. When Ms. Henry asked, “What will your students say they learned in your class today?” Mr. Alicea realized that his goals for the coaching cycle should focus on creating clear learning objectives. They agreed to meet every Friday to work on Mr. Alicea’s instructional goals. Through their collaboration, Mr. Alicea became more adept at communicating clear lesson objectives, including through classroom discussion and “thinking questions” that he asks prior to warm-up activities.

## **Building Community in PE Spaces**

A multi-purpose room isn’t ideal for tradition-

al PE activities like softball or soccer. But it’s perfect for community-building games that help students develop social emotional learning skills. During the coaching cycle, Ms. Henry and Mr. Alicea reviewed the New York City K-12 Physical Education Scope and Sequence, a comprehensive curricular guide developed as part of PE Works. Mr. Alicea decided to introduce into his instruction the five social emotional learning competencies described in the

Scope and Sequence: self-awareness, social-awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship skills.

In one of the lessons, Mr. Alicea focused on self-management through a game called Ultimate Gateway. When they entered the multi-purpose room, students started the

warm-up right away by walking or jogging. Mr. Alicea proposed a question for them to consider while doing laps to the high-energy music: What skills do they need to solve a problem? When the music stopped, students went to the nearest chart paper to jot down their ideas. Students brought those papers and gathered in a semi-circle to share their ideas. During the discussion, Mr. Alicea connected the dots by asking students why self-management is important when trying to solve a problem.

“By creating expectations together, Mr. Alicea and his students built a fair learning environment.”





Students practicing as part of CASA's after-school wrestling program, started by PE teacher Jonathan Alicea.

It was a great set up for Ultimate Gateway, in which students figured out a secret pattern by navigating brightly colored circles on the floor to reach the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper used nonverbal signals, like making an “X” with their arms, to let teammates know when they made a move that didn’t match the pattern. After giving the groups a few minutes to get started, Mr. Alicea checked in: “How did it feel if you didn’t complete your challenge yet? What are you going to do differently next time?”

Mr. Alicea then upped the challenge. In addition to the gatekeeper who only communicated non-verbally, teammates couldn’t talk, either, once a student was on the colored spots. For the second round, all coaching and strategy needed to occur before taking the first step.

Students discovered that they were successful in solving the game’s challenges when they regulated their emotions and thoughts. Ultimate Gateway was certainly a thinking game, a challenge to team communication, and it kept the kids up and moving.

## Putting the “Student” in Student-Athlete

Since wrestling was the key to Mr. Alicea’s development as a student-athlete, it was natural for him to bring a wrestling program to CASA. Mr. Alicea attended the High School of Law, Advocacy, and Community Justice in Manhattan, where a chance encounter with the wrestling coach, Mr. Eric Klein, led him to join the team. Mr. Alicea was seeking informa-

tion about the school's chess club. Coach Klein didn't know anything about that. But noticing Mr. Alicea's strong arms and compact frame, Coach Klein encouraged him to give wrestling a try.

By his junior year, Mr. Alicea realized he wanted to continue wrestling in college. No one in his immediate family had gone to college. Luckily, Coach Klein was also a guidance counselor, so he helped Mr. Alicea focus on his grades. He also helped Mr. Alicea with the application process, including SUNY's Educational Opportunity Program for first-generation college students. Ultimately, Mr. Alicea's college experience at The College at Brockport – SUNY included both wrestling and earning a degree in education.

At CASA, he started a co-ed afterschool wrestling team with the non-profit Beat the Streets. Thirteen students joined, including two girls. Soon the team started to win matches and even medals. Mr. Alicea celebrated more than wrestling wins; when students made honor roll, he bought them lunch to mark their academic achievements. One sixth-grade student had an 84 average when he joined the team. By the end of the year, he raised his average to a 93.

An eighth-grader who joined the team had been known for his strength but needed a positive way to channel it. Nicolas was a natural, Mr. Alicea said, and he also worked hard, and not just on the mat. With only a few months of wrestling practice, Nicolas beat kids who had



CASA launched its co-ed after-school wrestling program with Beat the Streets, a New York City youth organization.

been wrestling for years. He made the honor roll for the first time ever and won the City champ title.

Nicolas and two other CASA students received invitations to join Beat the Streets' elite program, which practices every Saturday at Columbia University with Harvard and Columbia wrestlers as coaches.

Wrestling helped Nicolas exceed expectations. As a first-year teacher, Mr. Alicea also exceeded expectations, in both the eyes of his students and colleagues. In May 2019, he won the United Federation of Teachers' New Teacher of the Year award for District 11. At the awards ceremony, Mr. Alicea thanked his students, his colleagues, and his mentor Mr. Klein,

who came to the celebration and continues to serve as a guidance counselor and wrestling coach. He also expressed his gratitude for the support PE Works gave him through Ms. Henry. It "couldn't have happened without you," he told her via text, "helping to change the culture of PE in the building and striving for me to do better and better each week."

## What is PE Works?

PE Works is Mayor Bill de Blasio's unprecedented multiyear investment to revitalize physical education (PE) for every student in NYC public schools. Prior to 2015, the quantity and quality of PE varied from school to school, and very few elementary schools met State PE requirements with certified PE teachers. Building on an eight-district pilot in 2015-16, the New York City Department of Education set out to revitalize PE Citywide in 2016-17 with funding and support in three areas: investing in teachers, building PE into school environments, and developing communities that are proud of PE.

## RESOURCES

**New York City K-12 Physical Education Scope and Sequence documents:** This comprehensive curricular resource is [available on We-TeachNYC \(opens in new window\)](#).

**PE Instructional Coaching:** K-12 PE teachers can strengthen their practice with personalized instructional support (On hold in 2020-2021). Check the [Office of School Wellness Programs Professional Learning Catalog \(opens in new window\)](#).

**Beat the Streets** runs wrestling programs and training centers for New York City youth. For more information, [visit www.btsnyc.org \(opens in new window\)](http://www.btsnyc.org).