

# Our Vision - Renewed

*Spring 2023*

## Foreword

More than four years ago, a new leadership team for Coney Island Prep drafted a vision for our school for the next ten years. It has been a helpful anchor and roadmap for us as we tried to lead our schools through shared values to a shared mission.

Indeed, that vision document – the first of its kind at Coney Island to be shared so broadly – informed so much of our strategy and approach. At the time, our school had not yet celebrated its ten year anniversary. We were contemplating what it would look like for alums like El Edmeade to return to our school as emerging teachers and operational leaders. We wrote then: **The future of Coney Island Prep is the kids. We know we are doing our job if our kids come back to take their rightful place as the leaders of this community.** What seems so obvious or natural to us now, took work - and vision - to achieve.

And there were other ways of being and leading, that also took root. Our last Vision was especially clear on how we are expected to lead: **Our team is built on a belief in authentic leadership: that when one's individual values, principles, and heart are aligned with our organizational pillars, we experience a greater sense of connectedness to each other, and meaningfulness in the work.**

As we once again look forward, and set out to renew our Vision for a new leadership team, there is a lot of work that we got right. **But we also have a lot of unfinished business.** Next year, CIP will turn fifteen years old. Now is the time for us to nurture roots of excellence, so our growth stems from an unshakable foundation. - *Leslie-Bernard Joseph, CEO*



## Teaching and Learning in an Uncertain World

What our last Vision could not have contemplated was the tremendous interruption and reorganizing of our work and world at the hands of a global pandemic. **What is missing most from our Vision now, is the same level of clarity and vivid descriptions of what our vision for academic excellence looks like at Coney Island Prep – for now and the next several years to come.**

If you had to imagine what your vision for academic excellence for what our scholars looked like today, or seven years from now in 2030, where would you start? That's our hope with this Vision Renewed.



We know where we would start. There were so many moments growing up when we knew, and could feel the world was shifting around me – that what we thought we knew was possible was being shattered in an instant.

These pivotal moments were not always a complete shock or jolt. Instead, it was a leap forward from several

somewhat familiar experiences – but combined to create something that was either awe-inspiring, or terrifyingly new.

Here are few moments when we knew the world was changing:

- In high school, you may have collected CDs. We had those zip-up binders with sleeves of 4 CDs to a side. Six-CD changers were a *huge* deal. The minor changes in downloading music or burning CDs were not a leap forward from how we experienced music — until we saw the first iPod and had to wrap my head around thousands of songs in a device smaller than a wallet. Similarly, we remember the first time we slid our fingers on the glass of an iPhone. Suddenly technology meant the world could be upended in an instant. And it's happening again with artificial intelligence.
- On February 26, 2012 - Trayvon Martin was murdered and my president said it could have been his son. A few months later we would hear “Black Lives Matter” for the first time, ushering a

decade of activism that defined how we talk about life and work and community in our country. Living history became a real thing, and having to respond to it was also real.

- And finally, we remember SARS, mad cow, swine flu and the banking crash, but nothing is quite seared in my memory like the week in March when COVID became real. How vulnerable and interconnected we are, how small and fragile the world is. It makes me feel like the next disaster – likely to be a climate one – will be scarier than ever.

We write all of this to say – it is our responsibility and charge to prepare our beautiful, vulnerable, diverse babies for a world that is unknowable. It is our job to make them the best of us.

**Schools are unique because they are future engines. We hold families' and communities' hopes and dreams and aspirations for hours each day. That means we have tremendous power to shape what's possible in the future – if only we can imagine something outside of what only seems possible right now.**

## A Vision for CIP Rooted in Academic Excellence



We are once again on the precipice of a world that is unknowable. Knowing this is on our immediate horizon, we cannot just prepare scholars for an uncritical bar of college readiness. We need to be more imaginative, more clear, more descriptive, and more specific about what we mean by the type of academic excellence that truly prepares our scholars for college and career success.

1. We have to prepare our scholars to be the kinds of leaders who are first and foremost, intellectually curious, critical thinkers and adept problem solvers. They have a genuine interest in exploring the unknown, and lack fear in taking on new challenges or problems they haven't seen before. As problem solvers, they possess sufficient hard skills – and proficiency – from multiple disciplines and multiple intelligences, allowing them to stack their own individual strengths in new ways. They see distinctions between academic subjects as fluid, and make sense of the world by making connections. They think, communicate, and create from an interdisciplinary lens. We need to redefine academic excellence in all subjects, and in STEM especially, as rigorous problem-solving – mathematical, exploratory, and algorithmic thinking – that allows scholars to tackle new problems with an embrace of productive struggle. To us, this kind of thinking, learning, and problem solving is what creates *actual intelligence*.

Put differently, we want our scholars to be leveraging their actual intelligence to drive the new age of artificial intelligence when fighting for climate justice. Or we want our scholars to code the next game-changing app, combining a uniquely Brooklyn-bred hustler's entrepreneurial spirit with a deep knowledge of algorithmic thinking, complex math, love of data and science, and any other skill they've explored in our classrooms or after-school clubs. We know the world is changing in unforeseeable and perhaps scary ways. Teaching and learning has to prepare scholars to not just survive, but thrive in and shape that world.



2. We need our scholars to academically understand what is at stake in the moral and ethical dilemmas of their time. The point and purpose of instruction should be to help grow thoughtful decision-makers, citizens who listen as keenly and empathetically as they can defend and advocate their own points of view. We need to redefine academic excellence in our humanities courses as connecting critical thinking



and questioning to explore the bounds of what is real, what is artificial intelligence, and what is disinformation or “fake news”. We need to define academic excellence as not reading to understand, but reading and writing to connect, question, and create.

Put differently, we want our scholars to be the next Lin-Manuel Miranda. We want to develop the kinds of curious geniuses who will read Robert Chernow’s *Alexander Hamilton* for fun - and see the possibilities in not only re-telling history, but writing music from and for the perspective of marginalized groups. We want students who can read and write well-enough to rap history.

We need new writers who can tell compelling stories, new journalists who can ask the right questions, and new advocates to change minds. We want our scholars to not talk about fake news and at the same time, tell us not to talk about Bruno.

3. We have to expose our scholars to the breadth and diversity of the arts, world language and other elective exposure opportunities. If so-called core academic subjects are the skeletal system and vital organs of learning – the basic structures on which all learning is built, then our elective subjects are what bind it all together. These critical creative disciplines are the connective muscle fibers, tissues, blood, nervous and immune systems, that help kids “put it all together.” We need a vision of academic excellence that explicitly leverages non “core” academic subjects to help students make interdisciplinary connections with academic content. We have to help students literally see themselves in the work, and understand how to express themselves and their bodies in the work with creativity.



4. Finally, our scholars must understand who they are, where they come from, and understand their own hero's journey in the context of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Character education is part of our mission. It is not an accessory, but an essential component to our scholars' ability to achieve lifelong success. Student voice must be woven into academic traditions and rites of passage at our school so that students practice the skills of leadership and use their

voice throughout their education at Coney Island Prep.

It is a determining factor in students' ability to turn academic preparedness into college persistence, meaningful choice, and productive life outcomes. We must define academic excellence and success as success in social emotional learning and character development.

## Our Team

Our kids, families, and the community have put an incredible amount of trust in us. We have a responsibility to hold ourselves to the highest standard.

First, it is imperative that we operate as one. For better and for worse, our stakeholders will see us as a unit. Parents and community members will see “the school;” staff will see “leadership or WHALEs.” We are each other’s first team. It is important that we take care to collaborate, problem-solve, and make decisions together. We are going to have to depend on each other, believe in each other, and hold each other accountable. We have to have each other’s back and revel in the success of others. Show up for each other. We have to put the success of Coney Island Prep and our team above our individual silos, direct reports, and even our career. It’s important that we are all in for each other.

Second, we have to model our core values. Leaders must “talk the talk” and “walk the walk.” People will scrutinize our words and monitor our actions. Our ability to fulfill any of our commitments and execute on our mission is highly correlated by what we say and what we do. We can’t just speak about or celebrate Ownership, Urgency, Humility, Commitment, Data, and Levity. We have to constantly model what it should look like in practice.

Third, we understand diversity, equity, and inclusion as a critical driver of our work with scholars, families, and staff. Our commitment to DEI is as essential as our mission: its principles clarify and illuminate who we are, what we do, and how we operate. Put differently, Coney Island Prep’s mission and our team’s mission can only be fully understood in the context of DEI. Our Diversity Statement guides who we are and who we serve; our Equity Statement outlines what we do and why we serve; our Inclusion Statement guides how we operate.

Fourth, we operate and make decisions under the principle of “kids first, our people second.” We have to make decisions with our kids in mind first. This means that the right decisions are ones that (i.) are most likely to get our scholars closer to achieving our mission and their goals, or (ii.) that will have the most positive impact in the long term. Sometimes these decisions will be clear. Often, they will be complex and gray. In putting kids first, we should be mindful of the temptation to cut corners or do what is easiest for adults. Recognizing that we adults are ultimately here to serve our

scholars, it is critical that we not use our power or authority to serve ourselves. If we as leaders model this and hold others to the same – it is more likely that our staff and teams will operate close to the same standard.

We are mindful of the tension between putting kids first and valuing our staff, particularly when it comes to sustainability. We should not and cannot jeopardize our ability to serve kids and families in the long term by making a scholar's interests absolute. We understand that balance is important. But we also know that there are other organizations or districts that believe in putting teachers first. We have to know who we are, and what we believe. We believe in kids first.

Still, we treat teachers and staff like platinum, understanding that none of this is possible without their commitment. Where we can make decisions that improve the quality of experience, development, happiness, and work of our teachers and staff, without any negative impact on scholars – we do it.

We can begin to model and demonstrate this by being good at the basics. We should stop and speak with kids every chance we get, even if it's just to greet them. We should greet our staff and learn their names, regardless of title or position.

Fifth, in decision-making we always strive to understand the impact of any systems, policies, or approach on the real, lived experiences of teachers, staff, kids, and families. This means we take the voices of others seriously, humbly seek out feedback, and thoughtfully study before instituting change. Equity requires that we recognize our relative privilege in the organization and operate to understand and meet the needs of others.

Lastly, we never take ourselves too seriously. We are not a title or position. As often as possible, we should listen as much as we speak, connect with people at every level of the organization, and maintain the sense of closeness and community that makes Coney Island Prep special.

## Our Operations

For the purpose of this document, Operations at Coney Island Prep includes those systems, resources, facilities, infrastructure, teams and staff that do not have direct academic impact on our scholars. Operations enables everything we do, from ensuring our buildings are open and allowing teachers to focus on instruction, to supporting schools with a central network staff that oversees finance, human resources, recruitment, family engagement, external relations and fundraising, and more. Ops is how we ensure schools are set up to achieve our mission, and how we power our organization. In addition to embodying our organizational pillars, our approach to operations must also reflect another core belief: how much we value our scholars, families, and staff.

How we operate effectively defines how we treat others, including families and staff, and ultimately reveals how we value them. Consider the experience of boarding an airplane. First class travelers, those with more means who pay for a more expensive ticket, receive better service. They board first, their seats are more spacious and comfortable, they receive better food, more beverages, and more hospitality. Or consider the experience of ordering a ride-sharing car: there are affordable options and luxury ones, with distinctive service expectations at different price points. But this experience isn't confined to travel. We experience it daily: some supermarkets have better produce, some movie theaters have more comfortable seats, some apartment complexes have more amenities. But what happens when some neighborhoods have better schools, or some housing developments no longer receive heat and hot water?

We believe how we operate reflects how much we value our stakeholders. We have intentionally sought to build a college preparatory school in a predominantly low-income community. **Our operations will always signal that we believe our families and staff are worthy of a first-class experience, a first-class education, a first-class facility, and first-class resources. Put differently, our operations are a reflection of our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion for scholars, families, and staff.** We value all and empower, especially those from historically marginalized groups; maximize potential; and create spaces where individuals are welcomed and seen.

**We are committed to operational excellence. We have an uncompromising standard for how we serve.**

Four key pillars drive our operational commitments:

- *Safe* – Above all, we ensure our scholars, families, and staff are safe. This must be true within our buildings and when within our care.



- • *Clean and beautiful* – Our schools, classrooms, offices, and facilities are clean and beautiful. Everything has a place, and everything is in its place. We have never seen an exceptional academic learning environment where the classroom floors were dirty and littered with papers or pencils. We have never been served exceptionally well by any place where the entryway, lobby, or waiting area was anything less than exceptional.
- • *Welcoming* – We welcome stakeholders with service that demonstrates our commitment to inclusivity. You feel welcomed when you are comfortable, at home, warm, and cared for. We strive to make this true of our environment, especially for the scholars and staff who we expect will call CIP home for several years at a time.
- • *Efficient, Deliberate* – We operate efficiently to maximize our resources and our impact. We recognize that our resources are finite and we have been entrusted with ensuring Coney Island Prep will serve for decades to come. We strive to make teaching better and easier. As a result, we operate to ensure the efficient and sustainable management of our resources, and deliberate impact on student achievement.

We might consider our operational commitments an extension of pillars like Ownership, Urgency, and Humility, or a reflection of putting kids first. But its real significance is that it is the most salient example of how much we value others. Our society sends countless implicit messages about who has worth and who does not, who deserves excellence and who does not, who should succeed and who should not. It is important to understand that scholars, staff, and families experience our expectations from the moment they encounter us. If we believe our stakeholders are special, we need to operate as such.