

# Quality Review Report

## 2008-2009

**New Heights Academy Charter School**

**84M335**

**1818 Amsterdam Avenue  
New York, NY 10031**

**Board Chair: Jennifer Davis**

**Dates of review: March 12, 2009**

**Lead Reviewers: Jeannemarie Hendershot, Aamir Raza,  
Chris Hawkins**

**&**

**Peter Lewis (Cambridge Education)**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

New Heights Academy (NHA) is a middle/high school with 465 students in grades 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11. The school population comprises 88% Hispanic and 12% African American students. The student body includes 17.8% English language learners and 12.5% special education students. Boys account for 48% of the students enrolled and girls account for 52%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 94%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 88% eligibility.

Accommodation is in a rented building that has seen service as a warehouse and a church. This has necessitated considerable planning to design and implement modifications. As part of the school's continuing expansion, plans are in place to add grade 8 and grade 12 next year to bring the school to capacity.

### Overall Evaluation

NHA is a successful school that is deservedly popular with its students and their parents. Achievement across the school is high, although the school acknowledges that even more remains to be done to ensure students' academic success. Through focused assessment, evaluation and review, the school accurately identifies students' needs and successfully ensures that these are met. As a result, the majority of students make rapid progress from their different starting points. Staff shares the principal's high expectations and passion for their students' success. Throughout the school, leaders and staff collaborate well in collating and analyzing student data, in making use of the information in identifying where students need to improve, and in tracking the progress made by all students. Because of the regularity and accuracy with which this information is utilized in evaluating students' learning, interventions are effective in addressing any slowing of progress, should it occur. In the same way, planning for whole school improvement derives from a good range of student data, and from the comprehensive monitoring systems that the school has developed. Formal and informal observations of the effectiveness of teaching, undertaken by the principal and other senior staff, for example, are well informed and accurate. Leaders collaborate well with the staff in using this range of information in planning whole school developments as well as in focusing professional development to the individual needs of the school and of teachers. As a result, school development, particularly in relation to the development of teachers' skills in assessment and planning, has moved rapidly.

The school has planned and modified its curriculum well in relation to State requirements, so that teachers know what needs to be learned and when, for all their students. The development of rubrics informs the sequence of learning effectively, and has set the stage for improvements, rightly identified by the school, in teachers' use of data in planning lessons more closely aligned to students' differentiated needs. However, because of the effectiveness of support and intervention services, as well as the stimulating way in which many lessons are planned, students are supported in becoming enthusiastic learners. While parents are enthusiastic about the high expectations the school has of their children, the school does not formally set or communicate the precise goals for learning, or the required steps towards success, so that they are not fully able to track their children's progress.

### What the school does well

- Good levels of collaboration between the board, school leaders and teachers ensure that developments are well planned and are applied consistently.
- The principal's clear vision and exceptionally high expectations of herself, staff and students are well communicated and have had a positive impact on learning through the school.
- The school has developed good systems of monitoring that help the school in identifying what works well, where improvement is required and in planning appropriate action.
- The curriculum is broad and well planned and has a positive impact on students' motivation and learning.
- Leaders and teachers are successful in their commitment to developing students as confident, mature individuals who collaborate well.

### Areas of concern

- Continue the development of goal setting at class level and with individual students, so that they and their teachers know when they are on track toward achieving success.
- Review the degree to which college readiness is supported, particularly in relation to the structures surrounding intervention services and planning for the introduction of grades 8 and 12 next year.
- Ensure that there is greater consistency in the way in which teachers plan lessons to meet the different needs of all students.
- Set objectives for learning that are directly related to the required standards across subjects, and communicate these more clearly to students and their parents.

## Part 3: Main Findings

### How well the school meets Office of Charter School's (OCS) evaluation criteria

**Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do and to monitor the student's progress over time.**

#### **This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The school collects, analyzes and uses a wide range of student assessment data to help it understand patterns in achievement. Leaders are particularly good at using the information gained in identifying strengths and weaknesses in student learning and in planning modifications and interventions to secure improvement. The success of these strategies is demonstrated in the high rates of progress made by most students. The introduction of interim assessments this year has considerable potential to accelerate this process further, and has already become apparent in the middle school. Although high school students have only recently taken their first interim assessment, clear plans are in place to ensure that the information is used to inform teachers' planning and to refine the assessments themselves. Even though this is effective throughout the middle years, teachers acknowledge that further refinement is required in order to bring the assessments fully in line with Regents requirements.

Across the school, there is a good understanding of the progress and performance of different students, particularly in English language arts, math and science. Supervisors of assessment and instruction meet regularly with teachers to review student assessment data and are accurate in their evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. These meetings have achieved early success in raising teacher awareness of differences in student achievement and the consequent need to plan lessons and programs to meet these specific needs. For example, leaders are making effective use of data in identifying trends in specific performance indicators. Administrators identify good progress with teachers, and faculty has begun to use the data and information to lead towards the setting of individual student goals.

**Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.**

#### **This area of the school's work is proficient.**

Goals for the school's strategic development are clear and are drawn from comprehensive analysis of the school's work and student achievement. Leaders and teachers collaborate well in identifying areas for improvement. As a result, there is a good level of understanding of planned change, and of the school's next steps in development. The school's growth to this point has been carefully staged, with a strong focus on developing strategies for understanding student achievement and planning actions to address identified deficiencies. Leaders in the school have sensibly taken the decision to widen participation in strategic planning and, to this end, have established a strategic planning team with the clear focus of identifying 'what we do well and what we need to improve'. As a result, teachers feel closely associated with the school's development, and take ownership of identified improvements.

Students know that they have goals, although currently, these are predominantly set for grade and course requirements. Although students are aware of their goals in broad terms, they are uncertain of the steps that they need to take in reaching them. A measure of the school's good planning and staging of development is that, as a precursor to the further development of individualized goal setting, it has placed a strong emphasis on the development of rubrics. The principal acknowledges that there is still inconsistency in the use that teachers make of these and, consequently, has developed clear plans for further improvement that include making use of students' outcomes at the end of the previous year in predicting their achievement at the end of the next. At present, while regular communications with parents facilitates a good exchange of information, parents are insufficiently aware of how well their children are expected to achieve. Nonetheless, students are proud of the fact that they know what is expected of them in different subjects, and the measures that they need to take in securing success. This reflects the high expectations that are a strong feature of the school and that are highly valued by parents.

**Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students' learning goals.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

Throughout its growth and development, the school has focused closely on establishing coherent and aligned curriculum plans. It is rightly proud of the fact that, having undertaken curriculum planning prior to the start of the academic year, teachers and leaders are able to concentrate more closely on evaluating the plans' effectiveness. The principal has ensured that information derived from data analysis informs curriculum development and modification. Established structures support continuity of learning throughout the curriculum. Strategies such as looping between grades 5 and 6, for example, ensure that teachers know their students and their needs well. At the same time, the introduction of team teaching between math and science and between English and social studies has ensured collaboration in planning as well as that evident at class level. Students report that they are much more enthusiastic in these styles of lesson, although data is not yet available to indicate the impact on their learning outcomes.

Relationships between the adults and the students; and between the students themselves are warm and trusting. Students know that their teachers regard their learning as important and respond with concentration and good levels of motivation. While the majority of lessons make effective use of one or more strategies of differentiation in meeting the varying needs of students, this is not yet fully embedded in all classes or subject areas. Part of the reason for this is that learning objectives are seldom precisely set, which means that teachers do not focus sufficiently on the activities to be undertaken by different groups in order to achieve those objectives. At the same time, the school acknowledges that discussion between teachers and students is often superficial, with emphasis generally being placed on securing a 'right' answer rather than probing students' knowledge and understanding.

**Quality Statement 4 - Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school's goals for accelerating student learning.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The school has developed a good quality professional development plan that draws information from a variety of sources, including comparative data and accurate observations undertaken by the principal and instructional supervisors. An additional strength lies in the school's modification of its plan, following review of the impact of last years' work, and has led to a streamlining of its focus into two overarching goals. Teachers value the closer focus on the related areas of 'reaching all learners' and 'increasing academic rigor' in allowing them to concentrate on specifics directly related to their practice. Evidence from observations suggests that this strategy has been effective in securing improvement. Regular review of the outcomes of these observations ensures that leaders consider the impact of the improvement priorities identified in the Comprehensive Educational Plan.

Collaboration is a strong feature of the school and is developing further. School leaders work alongside teachers in developing regular collaborative planning meetings and intervisitations. Teachers are strongly motivated by opportunities to share successful strategies with their colleagues. A powerful sense of collegiality pervades the school and this has a positive impact on teachers' shared commitment and on the school's development. Meetings make good use of a wide range of information, including data relating to students' social and emotional development, and thus include guidance and social work staff. This is a particularly crucial consideration, given the challenging circumstances of many of the students and their families.

**Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating each student's progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The school systems for monitoring its effectiveness are firmly embedded, are used well in modifying plans in light of regularly updated information, and thus make a positive difference to the outcomes for teachers and students. Through the review of student data and in-house assessments, alongside the outcomes of the school's well-focused monitoring, school leaders have an accurate picture of the school's developing effectiveness. The continuing commitment to improvement is demonstrated by the introduction of a more focused approach to classroom observation with a clear emphasis on the review of learning, while the strong link between the professional development plan and data analysis enables support to be targeted precisely. The focused scheduling of senior staff assists considerably in this. As a result, and because of clear communications backed up by the consistent focus of regular meetings, there is a good understanding of the school's vision among leaders, staff and parents.

The school makes good use of its regular monitoring of lessons and of student achievement in identifying where interventions or program modifications are required. Quarterly interim testing, introduced this year, has enabled leaders and teachers to focus more closely on particular aspects of student progress in order to identify need more precisely. In this way, the school has developed an effective understanding, not only of teachers' strengths, development needs and progress, but also of the features of instruction and the curriculum that have the most positive impact on student learning. Following the development of rubrics that clarify learning steps, the school is well placed to move to its next goal of setting individual and differentiated student goals in relation to their achievement at the start of each year.

**Quality Statement 6 - Monitor Effectiveness: The Charter School Board is proactive and diligent in monitoring its effectiveness and in undertaking its administrative responsibilities.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The Board is responsible for the overall direction and fiscal well-being of the school. As such, the Board has the authority and duty to adopt policies and by-laws that are necessary to meet its statutory responsibilities and produce optimal academic results. Those administrative and daily operational responsibilities need to be delegated to principals, senior management/administrators, and board appointed officers to manage the school within the established policies. The principal /senior administrators, and board appointed officers should then be held accountable for performance.

The NHA board is providing good oversight to the school and holding the school leader accountable through annual reviews and ongoing discussions regarding student outcomes. The board has also developed avenues to obtain direct feedback on the educational program by hiring Cambridge Education that submits a school quality report directly to the NHA board. The board receives information via Executive Director's reports and by requesting financial (YTD Expenses, Cash Flow, Budget, Variance Analysis) and other data driven (dashboard, scores, summaries, internal measures) information as it relates to the programs offered by the school. The school's auditors present the audit findings of the financial report to the board of trustees at a board meeting.

Over several months, the school board and its finance committee worked closely with Civic Builders to address the school's facility needs. The board has identified two key positions that need to be filled on the board of trustees: an educator and a legal expert. Usually, the board recruits members working closely with the Volunteer Consulting Group and has developed job descriptions and expectations for the positions.

The board also held a retreat for members to refocus on the school's priorities and identify critical goals for upcoming school year. School's board members attend most board development related workshops conducted by Office of Charter Schools or other charter advocacy organizations. The board encourages staff development and has permitted the school's Executive Director to be enrolled in an executive leadership program at a leading institution. Near program completion, the school's Executive Director is expected to develop a strategic plan focused on the New Heights Charter School. The board cited charter renewal, meeting new students' needs, and keeping school fiscally prudent as its priorities. As for accomplishments, the board feels good about having created a school culture where teachers and students love to show up and contribute, having made progress on how to be an effective board and provide balanced oversight, and the level of engagement displayed by school board members.

The board plans to conduct an annual evaluation of the Executive Director at the end of the school year.

**Quality Statement 7 - Maintain Financial Viability: The Charter School and its Board maintain financial viability and control over the course of the academic year.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

A charter school shall be able to operate with an annual budget that reflects the expected revenue and expenses for the fiscal year. Since the revenue stream for charter

schools tends to be based upon the number of students served (per pupil revenue) and the State and Federal grant (Title I funding, etc.) funding, a continued and growing negative net balance poses a threat to school's stability and the ability to fulfill its short and long-term financial obligations. In the end, it is worth noting that a school may implement and practice the best internal controls (procurement, check signing, balanced budget, etc.) and could still end up in a difficult financial condition.

The NHA board has been proactive in contracting an audit firm and has produced the school's financial statements in reasonable period. The school maintains necessary financial documents to facilitate decision making at all levels. The unaudited balance sheet as of January '09 casts a solid financial position of the school with liquid assets totaling over \$1 million. The school has current liabilities of \$773,307 and is in a good position to meet its short-term financial obligations. The statement of activities as of January '09 does not pose any particular concerns. The school provided the annual site visit team with a cash flow analysis projecting out until June '10. According to the cash flow projection, the school is expected to finish the '10 fiscal year with a sizable surplus of over \$2 million.

During the visit, the school officials were interviewed on the procurement process and check signing process, and three randomly selected paid invoices were inspected, and fingerprinting documents were inspected. The school is following its adopted financial policies and has adopted sound internal controls. A right balance of segregation of duties is in place among fiscal and operational staff. Paid invoices had the right purchase order approvals, order and receiving of goods, presence of packing slips and invoices along with proof of payment with proper signatories. The school has tagged its assets for inventory purposes.

Please note that although a school may implement good internal controls (not applicable in this case), it is the ongoing financial information (cash flow, balance sheet, statement of activities, board approved budget), that determines the fiscal health of a school and keeps it solvent in the near future and beyond.

## Office of Charter Schools Quality Criteria 2008-2009

**School name: New Heights Academy**

**Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze**

<b>information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do, and to monitor the student's progress over time.</b>				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty have...</i>	△	➤	✓	+
1.1 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of each student, classroom, grade level?				X
1.2 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of special education students?				X
1.3 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of English language learners?				X
1.4 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of ethnic groups, gender groups and all other categories of interest to the school?				X
1.5 a measurement of performance and progress based on the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grades and subject areas?				X
1.6 training, management systems and structures that support teachers in the use of school data to inform planning and instruction and to track the progress of students?			X	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 1</b>				<b>X</b>
<b>Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.</b>				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty...</i>	△	➤	✓	+
2.1 use collaborative and data-informed processes to set measurable, actionable and differentiated learning goals in core subjects for individual students and groupings of students and develop differentiated plans and timeframes for reaching these goals?			X	
2.2 use collaborative and data-informed processes to develop the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP)?				X
2.3 ensure that the achievement of learning goals, and the implementation of plans and timeframes for reaching these goals, is the central focus of school leaders, faculty, students and families?			X	
2.4 involve students in developing their learning goals and plans and in taking their next learning steps?		X		
2.5 convey consistently high expectations to students and their parents/carers?				X
2.6 invite and enable parents/caregivers to provide useful information to teachers and the school about the learning needs and capacities of their children?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 2</b>				<b>X</b>

### DEFINITIONS

“**Analyze**” or “**analysis**” includes, but is not limited to, comparisons of:

- 2 the current and past outcomes of . . . individual students, administrative groupings and sub-groups of students and the school itself in core subjects;
- 3 the outcomes of different classrooms and sub-groups in the same grades and core subjects; and
- 4 the school's Progress Report and other outcomes to those of peer/other schools

“**Assessment results**” include student outcomes on summative assessments (e.g., state ELA, math, science and social studies tests, NYSESLAT, Regents Exams, and Performance Based Assessment Tasks) and formative assessments aligned to the school's curriculum (including Periodic, DY0, and teacher-developed Classroom Assessments).

“**Data-informed processes**” include analysis of Progress Report, Quality Review, Learning Environment Survey, Inquiry Team findings, assessment results and attendance data

“**Organizational decisions or strategies**” refer to a school's use of budget and resources, staffing, planning, scheduling, grade structure, departments and teacher teams and other aspects of the school's structure and organization that can affect student outcomes.

“**Sub-groups of students**” include special education students, English Language Learners, the other NCLB sub-groups, boys, girls, and other groups significant to the school.

<b>Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students' learning goals.</b>				
<i>To what extent do school leaders...</i>	△	➤	✓	+
3.1 select core curricular approaches that facilitate and provide meaningful interim data and hold teachers accountable for the progress and learning of the students in their charge?			X	

3.2	provide a broad and engaging curriculum to enhance learning both within and outside the school day and hold teachers for making instruction interesting and compelling?				X
3.3	hold teachers accountable for creating a positive, safe and inclusive learning environment?				X
3.4	ensure that teachers use school, classroom and student data to plan for and provide differentiated instruction that meets the specific needs of all the students in their charge?		X		
3.5	ensure that there is an environment of mutual trust and respect between all staff and students to support personal and academic development?				X
3.6	ensure that there are effective and consistently applied procedures to encourage and monitor student attendance and tardiness and report actual attendance data?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 3</b>					<b>X</b>
<b>Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals for accelerating student learning.</b>					
<i>To what extent do school leaders...</i>		△	▷	✓	+
4.1	use frequent observations of classroom teaching by the principal and other available information to develop a differentiated strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction?				X
4.2	make professional development decisions strategically, based on data, to help meet the improvement goals of students and teachers?			X	
4.3	provide frequent opportunities for teachers to observe each other's classroom instruction and to meet together in teams to plan, share effective practices, and evaluate one another's instruction in an open and reflective professional environment?				X
4.4	develop effective procedures for the induction and support of teachers who are new to the profession or the school?				X
4.5	align youth development, guidance/advising, other student support services and partnerships with outside entities around stated academic and personal development goals?				X
4.6	consistently implement clear procedures that enable the school to run smoothly, encourage effective learning and effectively address discipline-related incidents?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 4</b>					<b>X</b>
<b>Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating each student’s progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.</b>					
<i>To what extent do...</i>		△	▷	✓	+
5.1	the school's plans for improving student outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?			X	
5.2	the school's plans for improving teacher outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?				X
5.3	teachers and faculty use periodic assessments and other diagnostic tools to measure the effectiveness of plans and interventions for individual and groups of students in key areas?			X	
5.4	teachers and school leaders use the information generated by periodic assessments and other progress measures to revise plans immediately and make strategic decisions to modify practices in order to reach stated goals?				X
5.5	school leaders and staff use each plan's interim and final outcomes to drive the next stage of goal setting and improvement planning?				X
5.6	the principal and school community have a clear vision for the future development of the school and implement procedures and systems to effect change?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 5</b>					<b>X</b>

<b>Quality Statement 6 – Monitor Effectiveness: The Charter School Board is proactive and diligent in monitoring its effectiveness and in undertaking its administrative responsibilities.</b>					
<i>To what extent does the Board.....</i>		△	▷	✓	+
6.1	ensure effective, broad outreach to create a student body that is representative of the school's Community School District?			X	
6.2	manage any conflict of interest within the governing body and throughout the school?				X
6.3	hold EMOs, CMOs and school leadership accountable in their positions?			X	

6.4	ensure that teachers are provided with high quality professional development opportunities to further build on their professional expertise?				X
6.5	respond to parent, staff and student concerns/complaints?				X
6.6	provide ongoing training for board members so that they are able to fulfill the duties of their positions?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 6</b>					<b>X</b>

**Quality Statement 7 – Maintain Financial Viability: The Charter School and its Board maintain financial viability and control over the course of the academic year.**

<i>To what extent do the school and its Board.....</i>		△	➤	✓	+
7.1	ensure that an independent auditor is appointed to undertake an annual financial audit, which is submitted to the OCS along with any other relevant documentation?			X	
7.2	comply with the adoption of an annual budget for the upcoming school year, which is submitted to the OCS for review?			X	
7.3	maintain an accurate balance sheet, statement of activities, year-to-date expense report and statement of cash flow?			X	
7.4	implement procedures that provide adequate internal control measures to detect and prevent financial fraud, such as bank reconciliation, revenue recognition and travel reimbursement?				X
7.5	align financial decision making to analysis and evaluation of student achievement data?				X
7.6	focus budget decisions on the priorities for school development and improvement?				X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 7</b>					<b>X</b>

**Quality Review Scoring Key**

△	Underdeveloped	➤	Underdeveloped with Proficient Features	✓	Proficient	+	Well Developed
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**Charter School Compliance Checklist**

Does the Board and the school . . .	YES	NO	In process
1. have a documented policy for suspensions and expulsions?	X		
2. maintain up to date and compliant with IDEA Regulations for IEPs?	X		
3. send newsletters and other parent communications home in the predominant languages of the school community?	X		
4. implement a comprehensive special education program that complies with applicable governing laws?	X		
5. implement a comprehensive program for English Language Learners that complies with federal law?	X		
6. publish a schedule of regular board meetings that is easily accessible to the general public?	X		
7. ensure that accurate minutes from Board meetings are maintained and published?	X		
8. ensure that proposed contracts with EMOs and CMOs are submitted punctually to the OCS for review?		n/a	
9. maintain a functioning parent organization?	X		
10. ensure that parents are informed of the time and location of Board meetings that are open to the public?	X		