



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Essence School

Intermediate School 311

**590 Sheffield Avenue
Brooklyn
NY 11207**

Principal: Gail Gaines

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Reviewer: Terry Turner

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Essence School has recently become an empowerment school and takes students from grade 6 to grade 8. Empowerment schools have more flexibility to make key decisions and control the resources for their school community. Empowerment schools are free to develop or purchase professional development services, choose which schools to affiliate with, and benefit from reduced reporting and paperwork requirements.

The school has 228 students, slightly fewer than in the previous school year. Around 76% are Black and approximately 19% are Hispanic. Eighty per cent of students are eligible for Title 1 funding, which is higher than the average for similar schools and City schools. Less than 10% are special education students and none are in a self-contained class. A small number are from other ethnic origins. Only four students are English language learners. The level of attendance is approximately 94%, which is slightly above the levels found in similar and City schools.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school is increasingly building the capacity for sustained improvement through its many initiatives.
- The principal is well supported by an enthusiastic, talented and dedicated staff that shares her hopes and aspirations.
- The school promotes an inclusive culture in which students feel valued, respected and supported in their academic and personal development.
- The school has a well-developed approach to data collection and analysis as a way of identifying what needs to be improved.
- A strong sense of teamwork has been engendered and teachers feel well supported.
- The principal and her support team have a very good understanding of the quality of instruction based on extensive classroom visits.
- Displays of work throughout corridors and classrooms celebrate many of the students' achievements.
- The school has high expectations of students' academic achievements and well being and these are clearly communicated to both parents and students.
- Scheduling decisions are guided by the need to raise student achievements while providing a well-rounded education.
- The principal is an outstanding educator who provides first-class leadership.

What the school needs to improve

- Strive to make even better use of all available data in order to enhance the performance and progress of each student.
- Continue to seek further ways of differentiating instruction so that all students are appropriately challenged.
- Provide more enrichment opportunities for students at level 4 or above so that they can achieve their full potential.
- Restructure staff development strategies to make better use of curriculum leaders' time.
- Build into the evaluation process more frequent opportunities to establish the extent to which identified goals are being met.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a proficient school.

The principal is an inspirational leader who has galvanized the staff in seeking to provide the best education for all students in the school. Her vision, ingenuity, common sense and clear thinking make her an outstanding educator.

The school has many positive attributes and is well regarded by parents and the wider community. It is adept at gathering and analyzing data, particularly in terms of narratives and portfolios. It is now seeking to interpret data more rigorously and make even better use of the findings. The school makes the best use of the limited space available. For example mini libraries in classrooms are a substitute for the absence of a central library and resource area. The school makes prudent use of all available resources and the curriculum provides students with a rich and varied program. The exception to this is the absence of physical activities due to lack of space and facilities.

Teachers work collaboratively to set appropriate goals for students, especially those who are in danger of falling behind. The school sets and demands high expectations of all students. Parents recognize this and fully support the school's goals and any actions that it takes. Many parents play a full and active part in the life of the school. Teachers strive to make instruction interesting and enjoyable. They are seeking to find even better ways of matching work to students' individual needs and challenging those who are achieving above grade level. Many teachers have now embraced new technologies and are using them to good effect.

How well the school meets New York City's evaluation criteria

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.

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

The school makes very good use of the data provided by the New York City Department of Education and supplements this information with data generated from within the school. A particular strength is the school's ability to gather and use qualitative data. These are obtained through conversations with students, the assessment of project work and the extensive narratives produced by students at the beginning and end of each school year. The narratives are full, frank and honest and encapsulate what students believe to be their strengths and weaknesses, and what actions they themselves plan to take. Teachers make good use of these narratives to plan their work and endeavor to address individual students' needs. The work produced by students adorns classrooms and hallways and provides further evidence of their most recent performance, particularly in art. Well-researched and diligently kept portfolios provide further evidence of progress over time.

Exhaustive information is amassed on students at each grade level. Designated teachers who have oversight of students within each grade work closely with teachers to assess the performance and progress of each student. Special education students and English

language learners are well supported through the resource room and also in general education classes. The school also has extensive knowledge of each of the ethnic groups within the school and this too is well documented.

The school is acutely aware of any deviations in performance and noticed recently that a number of students were being distracted from their work. As an experiment, single sex teaching groups have been introduced in grade 8. This initiative is being carefully monitored and so far both students and teachers remark on its success.

Data is well used to compare this school's performance with that of similar schools and also with its own past performance. These comparisons include non-academic data, like suspensions and stability, performance in different subjects and within different groups.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student's next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student's learning.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school is proficient in setting goals for each student, classroom and grade level in order to sustain immediate and long-term improvement. Staff work well collaboratively to ensure that goals and plans also focus on the school as a whole. Parents are delighted with the school's inclusive policy of accepting students irrespective of the level at which they are working. The overall aim is to ensure that each student moves up at least one level during their three years in school and that no student will transfer at the end of grade 8 still functioning at level 1 in English language arts and mathematics. Carefully conceived plans are in place to meet this aim.

The school focuses on improving the performance of those in greatest need of improvement. For example, students in special education and English language learners are given wide-ranging support in general education classes. Parents confirm that children who are having difficulty understanding a particular concept or mastering an intrinsic skill are given additional help both in and out of school. Parents cited numerous examples of students being required to stay behind until work had been completed. Those students who are in danger of being held over are also given additional support.

High expectations in all aspects of school life are communicated to students and parents. Parents see the education of their children as a covenant between home and school and information about students' progress or changes in circumstances are exchanged routinely and regularly. The school is already communicating electronically with some parents and making increasing use of its website.

The aspiration is that education will be realized through the family and the community. To underpin this, the school has a designated 'Family Lodge'. This is well resourced, welcoming and used extensively by the whole school community. All partners are focused on providing a fruitful and worthwhile experience for all students in the school.

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity and resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.

This area of the school’s work is proficient.

The school provides an appropriate curriculum that generates meaningful data for all of its students. The mandated curriculum is prudently supplemented by a range of elective activities that are available for one hour each week in project time. The curriculum supports the school’s high expectations and improvement plans. Teachers are generally successful in providing differentiated instruction, but recognize that more work needs to be done before this goal is fully realized.

All resources are judiciously linked to students’ outcomes, for example staff are assigned efficiently and effectively. Where staff need help, for example, in understanding how to interpret data, outside help is sought. When technologies are not meeting current needs, for example in processing data, solutions are found like providing a new server.

The school reviews data in order to make the best use of staff time. For example, the school used a combined history and social studies project of a trip across the United States to enhance students’ skills in English language arts. On their made up journey students learned about all aspects of American life including politics and music. They wrote interesting and informative postcards home describing their findings and experiences.

Instructional programs actively engage students. For example, students contribute willingly to debates about the Cold War, actively research information on the Chinese revolution, produce interesting collages on the theme of dragons, and endeavor to communicate in a foreign language. That said, higher achieving students are not always challenged to engage in higher order thinking skills. While much of the current work is currently differentiated by outcome, teachers are beginning to match tasks more appropriately to students’ individual needs.

Students and staff are respectful of each other. Students’ academic and personal needs are well catered to by a very devoted and caring staff. Parents acknowledge this and play their part in supporting the school in its ideals and aspirations. Attendance figures are relatively high and student absences are not considered to be a big issue in the school.

Quality Statement 4 - Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school’s collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.

This area of the school’s work is proficient with well-developed features.

The selection of teachers is predicated on their high expectations of students’ performance and progress, and their commitment to make judicious use of all available data.

Professional development decisions improve the outcome for all students. For example, support for teachers in using modern technologies has increased students’ use of the Internet, word processing, spreadsheets and Power Point presentations. However, curriculum leaders currently only have a limited impact on professional development.

Teachers are provided with opportunities to observe other colleagues in order to improve their own practice. A sense of teamwork prevails throughout the school with curriculum leaders providing valuable insights into what went well and what might be improved.

The school's philosophy is encapsulated in a remark made by the principal. 'We have to educate these children well because one day we will all be dependent upon them'. This determination to succeed underpins all that the school stands for. The leadership qualities of the principal and her ability to effect positive change are immense. Under the watchful eye of more experienced practitioners, young teachers are allowed to develop and grow to the benefit of students in their care.

Parents provide excellent service to the school. Many take part in a variety of activities, which range from preparing materials in school to accompanying students on trips. Innovative use is made of other services and agencies, for example one company provided a group of employees for a day to talk to students about such activities as scuba diving and pod casting. The school runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis because procedures are well understood and communications are clear.

Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerated learning.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school has developed a system of self-review that is now well established. Comparisons are made of student progress within and across classrooms. The narratives produced by staff and students at the end of the school year provide a valuable insight into what went well and where improvements might be necessary. Programs are revised or amended as necessary. For example a teacher discovering that students did not have a good grasp of South America incorporated this topic into her program of study so that her students would not be disadvantaged.

The progress of students towards their individual goals is monitored effectively at the end of each marking period. The Comprehensive Education Plan provides a clear outline of the over-arching goals that the school must achieve. A key goal for the current year is to increase the proportion of students who will attain levels 3 or 4 in English language arts and mathematics. The school has not built into its evaluation process opportunities to establish, at defined intervals, the extent to which this and other goals are being met.

The school is proficient in revising plans in order to meet its stated goals. For example, a current goal in the Comprehensive Education Plan is to increase the use of modern technologies. This did not happen as planned or as anticipated at first and certain adjustments had to be made, for example bringing in an outside consultant. The school is now much closer to achieving this goal. There are some excellent examples of students using the Internet for research purposes; word processing for projects; spreadsheets to display information and Power Point for presentations. The school is also developing an informative website.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: The Essence School (IS 311)	∅	✓	+
Quality Score		X	

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.	∅	✓	+
1.1 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> each student, classroom, grade level, 			X
1.2 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ethnic groups, English language learners, special education students* 			X
1.3 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> all other categories of interest to the school* 			X
1.4 Performance and progress are measured based on comparisons with similar schools, with the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grade levels, academic subject areas, ethnic groups, and other groupings of interest within the school.			X
Overall score for Quality Statement 1			X

* These criteria are partially aspirational as of now because schools do not have routine access to all of this data. The NYC DOE plans to provide schools with enhanced access to the necessary data in 2007.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student's next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student's learning.	∅	✓	+
2.1 Using data, school leaders and faculty engage in a collaborative process to set demanding, objectively measurable goals for immediate and long-range improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals.		X	
2.2 Goals and plans focus on the school as a whole and on each student, classroom, grade level, academic subject, and group of students whose performance or progress has been identified by the school as a particular focus area.		X	
2.3 Particular attention is given to improving the performance and progress of students in greatest need of improvement.			X
2.4 High expectations are conveyed to students and parents/caregivers. Students and their parents/caregivers are regularly invited to provide information about each student's performance and how to improve. This information is central to setting challenging goals and developing, evaluating, and revising plans.			X
2.5 Goals and plans for improving student performance and progress drive the activity of all members of the school community: leaders, staff, students, parents, and other partners.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 2		X	

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity, resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.	∅	✓	+
3.1 The school selects the curriculum based on how well it aligns with or implements the mandated curriculum and on the curriculum's capacity to generate meaningful interim data about progress towards goals and to support the school's high expectations and improvement plans.			X
3.2 Teachers are accountable for improving instruction and student outcomes. They plan and differentiate their instruction based on the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.		X	
3.3 Budgeting decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.			X
3.4 Staffing decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.			X
3.5 Scheduling decisions about the use of teacher and student time are guided by the needs that emerge from examining student data and by the focused plan the school develops to improve student outcomes.		X	
3.6 Instructional programs actively engage students.		X	
3.7 Staff know and respect students and respond to their academic needs, as well as their personal needs that affect academic performance. Each student knows and trusts an adult on the staff who is concerned about him or her.			X
3.8 Student attendance and engagement are high priorities. High rates and patterns of absences trigger immediate intervention.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 3		X	
Quality Statement 4 – Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.	∅	✓	+
4.1 Leaders, faculty, and staff are selected based on their high expectations for student performance and progress and based on their commitment and capacity to use data, compare outcomes within and across classrooms and schools and develop and revise plans and methods to improve performance and progress.		X	
4.2 Professional development decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes. Professional development is designed to help leaders, faculty, and staff use data, self- and peer-assessments, and collaboration with peers to achieve goals for improved school and student outcomes. Professional development and self- and peer-evaluation are aligned and overlap.		X	
4.3 The principal frequently observes classroom teaching and has a considered strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction. Teachers frequently observe and support each other's classroom instruction with the goal of improving student outcomes.			X
4.4 Planning, evaluation of results, and revision of plans takes place in teams. Leaders and faculty inform each other of their goals and results, candidly evaluate themselves and each other, and use what is learned to drive improvement.			X
4.5 The principal is respected and has capacity to effect change.			X
4.6 The school runs smoothly. Procedures are clear, communicated to all, and are generally followed.			X
4.7 The school aligns youth development and support services around stated academic goals. Partnerships with outside bodies are routinely used to achieve academic goals.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 4		X	
Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.	∅	✓	+
5.1 All school plans and other interventions include frequent interim goals and diagnostic assessments of progress designed to reveal in objectively measurable ways whether the plan is being effectively implemented and reaching stated goals.		X	
5.2 Comparisons of student progress within and across classrooms and schools are used in making interim diagnostic assessments and measuring the progress of plans and interventions.		X	
5.3 Information generated by periodic assessments and diagnostic measures of progress and comparisons is used to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals. Interim and final goals are modified when data objectively demonstrate that revision is required.		X	
5.4 Each plan's interim and final outcomes drive successive phases of goal setting and improvement planning, and each successive phase is characterized by agile and flexible realignment of practices and resources to improve student academic outcomes.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 5		X	