



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

**Rachel Carson High School
of Coastal Studies**

**High School 344
521 West Avenue
Brooklyn
NY 11224**

Principal: Edward Wilensky

Dates of review: January 8 - 9, 2007

Reviewer: Linda Murgatroyd

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Rachel Carson High School of Coastal Studies is a small high school which opened in September 2005. It currently serves 183 students in grades 9 and 10, although it will eventually grow to an enrolment of 450 to 500 students in grades 9 through 12.

Black students make up 35.5% of the total, Hispanic 29.5%, White 27.3%, with smaller proportions of students from other groups making up the remainder. There are 12 special education students (almost 7%) and only 9 English language learners (almost 5%). The predominant languages of these students are Spanish, Urdu and Russian. Attendance has been below the City average, but is improving. It currently stands at approximately 84%. All students are Title 1 eligible.

Since it opened, the school has been through a period of turbulence. It has had a number of principals and acting principals. The current principal started in the position in December 2006, and the assistant principal and the majority of teachers have been in the school only since September 2006.

The school is housed on a site mainly occupied by an intermediate school. The limited space available restricts the curriculum and the range of extra-curricular activities, for example access to sports facilities. There is uncertainty about how the school can continue to grow to its full capacity on the present site.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The partnership between the new principal and his assistant has, in a very short time, been successful in establishing systems for school management.
- Staff work collaboratively with a high level of commitment to the school and to raising student achievement.
- Students appreciate the fact that they are well known to staff and are confident of their support.
- They work hard, behave very well and are loyal to their school.
- The partnership with the New York Aquarium is very productive in promoting the school's specialization as a school of coastal studies.
- School staff, well supported by the parent teacher association, work hard to build parental cooperation and confidence in the school.
- There is effective support for students in most need of help.
- Staff, students and parents are confident that the school is now ready to improve further.

What the school needs to improve

- Generate, gather and analyze data on the performance of groups of students and use it to set goals for their achievement.
- Develop teachers' use of data, particularly in planning differentiated work to meet students' needs more closely.
- Plan and implement a program of professional development based on teachers' needs and linked to whole-school priorities.
- Resolve the choice of additional curriculum subjects for next year, so that appropriate staffing can be sought and materials ordered.
- Establish, through a collaborative process, short and medium term priorities for school improvement, set these out in a clear action plan with measurable targets, and share the plan with all staff so that they understand their role in meeting school goals.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is an undeveloped school.

After a very troubled history, the school is beginning to settle and establish a positive climate for learning. The new principal and assistant principal have made a good start in setting up management systems. Many staff are new this year, and show a real commitment to the school's development. Parents are now supportive of the school, and students are optimistic about the school's future. Staff know students well, and there is a mutually supportive culture which promotes good relationships between staff and students.

Despite the positive start, there is much to do to get the school onto a good footing. The use of data, like many other aspects of the school, is at an early stage. The next step is for the administration to determine the most important priorities, and establish clear plans to achieve these. The building presents serious limitations on the curriculum and the range of experiences usually expected by high school students. While this is outside the power of the administration to resolve, it is recognized by all connected with the school as an important issue to address.

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 undeveloped.

The collection and use of data in the school is at an early stage. Partly because it has only been in existence for 16 months, and has little objective performance data from external tests, and partly because of the turbulent history and the lack of continuity between principals and acting principals, very few formal systems are in place for collection and analysis of data.

Teachers know their students well, and are aware of the progress of individuals on a day-to-day basis. There is frequent discussion between teachers about the performance, behavior and personal development of students. Teachers administer teacher designed tests to check the skills and understanding students have learned as a result of their teaching, and use these to make decisions about what needs to be re-emphasized. The school has adopted the Kaplan assessment program to provide a baseline of students' skills, although some teachers are not yet convinced that it provides an accurate enough picture of achievement to be of use.

Although the administration looks at the performance of its various groups, for example, by ethnicity and gender, this information is not yet used to set specific goals. There is little performance data over time or comparison with other schools, because the school is so new. The administration scrutinizes test results in those subject areas where groups of students are taught by different teachers, to compare outcomes and to ascertain the

reasons for differences. Teachers themselves share this information, as part of their discussions about the effectiveness of teaching strategies.

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 staff team in this school is very small, and they work together very well, with a high level of commitment to the school and its students. There is an extremely positive culture of mutual support among teachers, and information about teaching strategies as well as students’ progress and outcomes is shared constantly. Although teachers are aware of the performance of their students, the information is not yet used to set specific goals and targets. Teachers provide tutoring for individual students in their own time. Feedback on students’ work is effective, and most students understand what they need to do to improve and reach higher standards.

The data shows that many students enter the school with comparatively low levels of achievement in English language arts and mathematics. The school has begun to address this issue, partly through the effective support of the special education teacher, who is also the guidance counselor. This system, only possible in such a small school, ensures that there is continuity in the support to students. This teacher keeps up-to-date detailed records of each student’s credit accumulation, which are shared with students, parents and staff so that all are aware of what each student needs to do to graduate. English language learners are provided with the appropriate support. The progress of students with individual education plans is carefully monitored, and information about accommodations or difficulties is shared with all teachers, so that they are aware of the support their students require. Because of effective instruction and attention to detail, students generally make good progress. For example, 84% of students achieved passing grades in the 2006 living environment Regents examination.

Despite the troubles the school has undergone, staff maintain high expectations of their students, appreciated by students and parents. Teachers communicate regularly with parents by telephone and email to ensure that they are kept well informed about their children’s progress. The school staff work hard to get and keep the support of parents, very strongly assisted by members of the small but active parent teacher association and the parent coordinator. This has not been an easy task because of the school’s history, but support is beginning to build and more parents than before are now happy with the school. A number of parents and students made an active choice of the school because of its specialization, and have stayed loyal through the school’s past difficulties.

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 undeveloped with some proficient features.

Because of the school’s small size and new status, the curriculum is at present somewhat limited. The curriculum and extra-curricular activities are also limited by the building, which

lacks a range of facilities, including for science subjects, especially important given the school's specialization, and for sports. The school is particularly successful at ensuring that the specialization of the school, coastal studies, is a recurrent theme running across subject areas. This is reinforced by displays in classrooms and hallways depicting marine life and coastal geography. It is well supported by the very productive partnership with the nearby New York Aquarium, visited on a regular basis by all staff and students to enhance learning opportunities. Some questions about the curriculum remain unresolved, although the administration is aware that they require urgent attention. For example, because of uncertainty about student enrolment for next academic year and thus staffing numbers, it is difficult to plan the range of new courses to be made available for students as the school expands to grade 11.

The new administration has begun a system of discussions with teachers about the performance of their students, but this is in the early stages. Teachers are accountable to each other as they discuss their students' performance and share strategies. Although data is used to plan what needs to be reinforced, there is as yet little use of data to plan differentiated instruction to ensure that learning is closely targeted at the level of each student.

The small budget is very carefully managed, and the best possible use is made of existing facilities to compensate for its limitations and the restrictions the building places on teaching areas. At this stage in the school's life, decisions about resources and staffing are not linked to performance data, but are nevertheless made in the best interest of students' achievement. Staff are carefully assigned to subject areas and teaching groups to make the best of their strengths.

Throughout the school, students work hard and show commitment to their studies. In this small school, relationships between staff and students are very positive, and every student is well known to a range of staff. Students are confident that there is support for them in their academic work and for personal issues. Procedures to promote good attendance are effective, and attendance is already above the City average for high schools. As the school achieves more stability and students recognize that they have a positive future in it, attendance is improving.

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 undeveloped with some proficient features.

The new principal, in his short time in the school, has forged an effective partnership with the assistant principal, and together they have made a positive start in establishing a number of new systems for managing the school. There is considerable optimism among staff, students and parents about the capacity of the new administration to lead the school in its development and growth. The school is orderly, with students acting responsibly and moving calmly between classrooms.

Up until now, there have been no opportunities to appoint staff, but this will be an ongoing situation as the school grows to capacity. The administration has a clear view of the type of staff the school will need as it grows, and the principal and assistant principal are mindful of the need to try to maintain the very positive staff relationships which are essential to the school's supportive culture as the staff team expands.

At present, professional development is not aligned to student performance, but rather addresses immediate priorities. The introduction of Kaplan assessment has been a focus, but has not been effective in convincing teachers of its usefulness. Teachers and the guidance counselor have the opportunity to attend external courses and conferences, but this arrangement is rather ad hoc, responsive to general perceived need rather than part of a planned program.

The principal and assistant principal visit classes informally on a regular basis, and know teachers' strengths and areas for development. As yet, there is not an established system of observations as required. Some formal observations were previously carried out but not recorded, so there is no cumulative record of teachers' performance. Teachers have opportunities to visit each others' classrooms. The most significant professional development comes from the supportive way in which teachers work together, constantly discussing strategies and students' progress.

Effective use is made of a range of agencies to support students who need additional help. Many of these, such as social workers and educational psychologists, are shared with the co-located school, one positive sign of a developing partnership. The school also makes use of a number of other community-based organizations, and a group of students recently represented the school at the National Ocean Science Summit in Washington DC. The most significant is the link with the New York Aquarium, mentioned above. This is an essential element of the school's character as a school of coastal studies, and plays an important part in the motivation of students and teachers.

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 undeveloped.

At an individual student level, staff are responsive to information and make adjustments to their teaching as assessment reveals strengths and areas for development. However, at a whole-school level, planning is at an early stage. The Comprehensive Education Plan was drawn up by a previous administration, and rightly addresses the need to heal a school in crisis and to refocus the school on instruction. The action plans within the overall plan are more statements of intent than thought out plans, and lack measurable goals or useful information about how goals might be achieved, revised or monitored. Since it was written, the school has moved on, but there remains a huge amount to do make up for lost time. The current priority is to establish new short term goals to identify the most urgent issues and carry the school forward for the rest of the academic year.

It is also important that the decisions about the planned curriculum for next year are made, so that staffing needs can be addressed. Now that questions about the possible closure of the school seem to have been shelved, it is important that the school's accommodation needs are addressed, so that the administration can plan the growth of the school with some measure of confidence. This is, of course, out of the control of the administration, but, in collaboration with the parent teacher association, it continues to pursue the issue as a matter of urgency.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

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| SCHOOL NAME: Rachel Carson High School of Coastal Studies (HS 344) | ∅ | ✓ | + |
| 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.

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| 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 | |

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| 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 | | |