



# **The New York City Department of Education**



# **Quality Review Report**

**ACORN High School for Social Justice**

**High School 498**

**1396 Broadway  
Brooklyn  
NY 11221**

**Principal: Joseph Parker**

**Dates of review: April 18 – 19, 2007**

**Reviewer: Philip A. Composto**

# Content of the report

## **Part 1: The School Context**

Information about the school

## **Part 2: Overview**

What the school does well

What the school needs to improve

## **Part 3: Main Findings**

Overall evaluation

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

## **Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

The ACORN High School for Social Justice in Brooklyn serves 801 students in four grades, 9 through 12. According to the most recent data, the student population is 74% Black and 23% Hispanic with 3% from other ethnic backgrounds. There are approximately 6% special education students and 3% English Language Learner students. The school is eligible for Title 1 funding. Most recent figures indicate that a large proportion of students enter the school at level I or level 2. The school's attendance, at 75.4% in 2005, was lower than similar and City schools.

The school has had three principals in the last four years. The current principal is in his second year as the educational leader. Teachers are substantially less experienced than in other schools, with most having been at the school for less than three years. Approximately 80% of the teachers have less than five years' teaching experience overall. There has been a history of high faculty turnover.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The new principal has brought stability to a school that has been through many changes.
- The principal and his administration share a clear vision focused on the expectations of high achievement for all students.
- The assistant principals are a diverse and knowledgeable team who work together well with the principal.
- The school provides many after school activities and has a strong partnership with the Association of Community Organization for Reform Now (ACORN).
- The use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning is effective.
- There is a strong drive to achieve academic excellence and improvement.
- The staff are highly involved in ensuring that the school is a safe and secure place to learn.
- Students value the support and guidance given to them by the staff, recognizing that everyone, whatever their ability, is integrated effectively into school life.
- The teachers know they are accountable for student learning and as such work hard.
- Leadership of the school is thoughtfully focused on diversifying the curriculum to benefit the students.

### What the school needs to improve

- Develop classroom assessment processes and the use of the subsequent data this provides so that it becomes an integral part of teaching and learning, and improves the setting of individual performance goals to be shared with students and parents.
- Improve strategies for dealing with lateness and relating attendance to academic achievement.
- Encourage instructional differentiation in classes so that teachers use data to address more specifically the individual learning needs of each student.
- Further develop the ongoing professional development program for teachers.
- Improve strategies to encourage parents to be partners in their children's education.
- Develop ways in which students' leadership skills can be used to support, guide and mentor peers.

## Part 3: Main findings

### Overall Evaluation

**This is an undeveloped school with proficient features.**

Since the arrival of the current principal just over a year ago, great strides have been made towards creating a learning environment that is calm, safe and well ordered. In this work, he has been effectively supported by staff and the assistant principals. Students and parents appreciate the improvements to their school, but recognize that there is still some way to go before the school is functioning at the level everyone aspires to.

The major aspects that are undeveloped in the school are firstly, the lack of comprehensive use of data to better understand individual student's achievement, and secondly, poor levels of attendance. The school's leaders have plans in place to improve the use of data by all teachers and these are accurately targeted on improving instruction and raising achievement in the future. Work is already underway to address the poor attendance, but the impact of this is only limited at present.

### 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 proficient.**

The principal, and assistant principals make good use of City, State and ongoing school tests and assessment data to continually check on overall student achievement and progress. Through their data analysis, the leadership are able to identify students that will benefit from additional English language arts and mathematics instruction in the after school program. The progress of special education students and English language learners is carefully tracked. The graduation rate and credits earned by students are used to monitor progress and performance so that those at risk of not graduating can be identified and targeted for additional support.

Some departments have begun to analyze results of internal and external tests to gain a more accurate picture of the areas needing improvement, but there is little use of this information to compare the performance of students across teaching groups. The English language arts teachers and assistant principal meet regularly to review benchmark assessments created collaboratively. The use of teacher assessments to track the ongoing progress of students, however, is still limited in most classes and is recognized as in need of development. Nevertheless, there is a strong drive to achieve academic excellence and improvement. The school is beginning to compare its performance with previous results and with those of similar schools. The analysis of the relative performance of sub groups such as gender and ethnicity is not yet securely in place. The principal and staff recognize that there is a clear need to improve data analysis skills and to use data more purposefully to grade and inform their instruction and long term curriculum planning.

**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.**

Over the summer, the principal, assistant principals and teachers collaborated to set short and long term goals for students. The principal and assistant principals use the scholarship report thoughtfully. This enables them to show how individual students performed, and then to work with staff in looking at strengths and areas for improvement. Data about school progress and credit accumulation has been used appropriately to establish priorities for the curriculum and adjustments to the schedule. This has resulted in a stronger focus on developing basic skills. As a result, the school has created double periods for English language arts and mathematics to improve the essential skill levels. The school continues to recognize the need to look more closely at a wider range of data to analyze particular areas of strengths and weaknesses in knowledge, skills and understanding. Although data has been used constructively to inform intervention strategies for targeted students, the weaknesses in class based data gathering limit the ability for instructional activity to accelerate learning for all classes and individuals. The teachers do not yet know enough about students’ ongoing academic needs and progress over time. The leadership recognizes that greater attention must be paid to the needs of individual students through a closer analysis of each one’s areas of strength and weakness. Staff also want to develop more specific learning targets linked to those skills and concepts that are in need of improvement.

The high expectations of the administration are regularly shared with students, parents and staff. Only a small number of parents are closely involved in their children’s education, however. Students themselves are keen for increased parent involvement. Parent Teacher Association evening meetings are held monthly. Special student events take place at these meeting to encourage parent attendance, but so far this has not proved very effective. Teachers recognize that achieving greater involvement from parents would greatly help students by, for example, ensuring that homework is completed more consistently. The school asks all members of the school community to focus on driving up student performance and progress as a key activity.

**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.**

The curriculum is mainly determined by the State and City testing requirements. In some content areas, there has not been sufficient flexibility to adopt courses which are more appropriate for the needs of the students, based on the teachers’ knowledge of their capabilities and interests. The higher aspirations that are now being instilled in students, however, are resulting in many starting to take full advantage of after school Regents preparation. An honors program is also being established. To challenge higher achieving youngsters, a calculus and advanced English class is offered. The budget has been appropriately targeted so that the school is well equipped and well resourced. The teachers are pleased with the improving access they have to technology to support their instruction and are using it well. More powerful developments are planned to continue to expand the use of technology further. The staffing allocation and scheduling

arrangements are suitably aligned to the needs of the students. Funds have also been allocated for professional development, which is a priority for the school.

The teachers know they are accountable for student learning and as such work hard. There is little evidence of differentiated activities in class, however. Instruction tends to be based around whole class activities. Consequently, some students find the work is too easy, while others struggle to complete a task or even to take part in class. All students are keen to have a voice in the development of their school. They are perceptive in their insights as to what works and what does not and want to be listened to. Senior students do have some opportunities to express their views but would value easier and more frequent access to the administration to raise issues and resolve problems. Students value the support and guidance given to them by the staff and would feel comfortable about approaching adults in time of need. They feel safe and secure. Professional periods are used appropriately to help meet goals for improving outcomes, for example, college advisement, peer mediation, and year book club. Opportunities to use the students' leadership skills to support, guide and mentor peers are, however, limited.

Poor attendance remains a major issue for the school despite the efforts of the specially designated staff support team that works hard to improve attendance. Many students are held back by their failure to attend school regularly. The attendance figures have declined, with the rate this year to date of 67.8%, far below the school's target.

**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 proficient features.**

Teachers express confidence in the leadership of the school. The principal and the assistant principals use appropriate recruitment procedures to select staff who are committed to teaching, knowledgeable and are willing to 'go the extra mile'. The principal has established a good rapport with parents, students and staff. His efforts to date have resulted in a well-ordered school and show that he has the skills and competence to secure further change.

The principal and the assistant principals remain determined in their commitment to move the school forward and have made professional development a high priority, but the impact of this commitment has yet to be realized in higher results being achieved by the students. A substantial number of the teachers still require support and professional development opportunities in areas such as classroom management, differentiation of instruction, pedagogy and the use of data. Several steps have been taken to initiate and strengthen staff development activity in these areas. For example, teachers have attended retreats on technology and data analysis, and while there is some evidence that these developments are beginning to inform teachers' practice, there is limited evidence to date that this work is raising standards. The formal and informal classroom observations undertaken by the principal and assistant principal focus accurately on how to enhance students' learning. As yet, however, there is no system for collecting data to evaluate the impact of professional development initiatives on teaching and learning or the overall effectiveness of individual teachers.

Teachers do meet to look at data and plan together. Mathematics teachers meet twice monthly to develop units of study, for example. These collaborations are welcomed as a beginning to more effective teamwork. The teachers recognize that they need to increase

the time they spend sharing practice and collaborating if they are to improve and develop their skills. They also correctly acknowledge that for this to be truly effective, structures need to be formalized with the clear guidance and supervision from the leadership consistently acted upon. The school has strong links with the Association of Community Organization for Reform Now, who provide much valued academic tutoring after school. This successful partnership is strengthening the wider curriculum and engaging students in a way that encourages them to seek success. Links with other organizations are limited at present, but the school is keen to broaden these in the future.

**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.**

Analysis of student needs is now moving steadily in the direction of focusing on individual rather than group needs. Information gathered from the scholarship and Regents reports is increasingly being used to create clarity on individual progress. Analysis has also informed changes to intervention programs and amendments to the curriculum. The school recognizes, however, the need to develop clearer systems that enable the curriculum to be fine tuned to individual needs.

The school has drawn up a detailed action plan which rests at the core of all that the school seeks to achieve. The plan clearly outlines how student needs are to be met, including dates to review accomplishments. Approximately every two months teachers are asked to volunteer to go on retreat with administrators to analyze scholarship reports. However, because the impact of this work has been limited, the leadership recognizes that it is now time to involve all staff and the wider school community in playing a far more active role in evaluating and reviewing the plan. The principal understands the need to build the capacity of teachers to make best use of data and in doing so, to increase their individual accountability. He wants all staff to have a strong awareness that the contribution of every member of the school community in the larger scheme and views for high achievement is a key component for the academic success of each student.

## Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

<b>SCHOOL NAME: ACORN High School for Social Justice (HS498)</b>	∅	✓	+
<b>Quality Score</b>	X		

<b>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.</b>	∅	✓	+
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"> <li>• each student, classroom, grade level,</li> </ul>		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"> <li>• ethnic groups, English language learners, special education students*</li> </ul>		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"> <li>• all other categories of interest to the school*</li> </ul>		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		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 1</b>		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.

<b>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.</b>	∅	✓	+
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		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 2</b>		X	

<b>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.</b>	∅	✓	+
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 knows 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		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 3</b>	X		
<b>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.</b>	∅	✓	+
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		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 4</b>	X		
<b>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.</b>	∅	✓	+
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	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 5</b>		X	