



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

The Center School

Public School 243

**270 West 70th Street
New York
NY 10023**

Principal: Elaine Schwartz

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Reviewer: Charles Lupton

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Center School is a middle school serving 204 students in grades 5 through 8. Ethnically, the school has 51% White, 23% Black, 17% Hispanic and 8% Asian students with English the main language spoken. The school has one English language learner and 11% are special education students. The school does not receive Title 1 funding. The student attendance rate is 97%, a figure that is well above the City average and that for similar schools.

The Center School has a very distinctive organizational structure in which most classes are taught in flexible heterogeneous groups, containing students from each grade. Students select their own classes. The exceptions to this are mathematics and Latin classes in which grades are taught separately, English language arts in grade 5 and the advanced placement English language arts and mathematics classes for grade 8.

In 2006, the school received a national Blue Ribbon Award in recognition of its success in closing the achievement gap for ethnic minorities. This built upon a similar award in 2005 from the American Cities Foundation.

This is an empowerment school. 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 requirements.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The principal is held in exceptionally high regard by every member of the school community and collegially leads the school with quiet fervor.
- The staff are highly dedicated and work very hard to ensure the best education they can for the students.
- The school class structure with students from different grades in the same class is highly effective.
- The students take significant responsibility for their own learning within a very supportive 'family atmosphere'.
- The very strong, teacher advisor system of support is fundamental to the continuing development of all students, including those identified by the school as in need.
- The goal of the school is to respond to the needs of all students irrespective of ethnicity or background and it successfully helps all students to achieve very well, a fact that is recognized nationally.
- The reporting system is thorough, conveys an accurate assessment of student progress and provides constructive development points and student feedback.
- The school has a strong, varied curriculum that is geared to enhance student skills and their application to each subject area.
- Teachers are responsible for their own curriculum development and are very enthusiastic about the flexibility they have to teach subjects of personal interest.
- Instructional programs actively engage and challenge all the students very effectively, facilitating higher order thinking.

What the school needs to improve

- Further develop the utilization of quantitative data to clearly demonstrate the school's achievements to impact on staffing and budgetary decisions.
- When planning for school improvement, set detailed, objectively measurable goals for interim and long-term success within defined timescales.
- Further develop the use of disaggregated, quantitative data to increase the schools understanding of the performance of groups of students.
- Consider ways to share scheduling responsibilities between more members of staff.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a well-developed school.

The Center School is a vibrant place where very good, adolescent-centered learning takes place within an organizational structure that facilitates student choice and develops each student holistically. One student described the school as a place where ‘everyone is friends and gets on, with very good academics’. The school is very good at promoting high level thinking for all its students, all of whom take significant responsibility for their own learning and behavior and achieve very well.

The school uses data well to maintain a clear understanding of the performance of each student and disaggregates data to demonstrate its effectiveness in addressing the needs of ethnic minority students. New data systems to track students in need are good and are impacting positively.

Instruction is of very high quality and actively engages all students despite the age range in many classes. The staff are highly committed to the school and work very hard individually and collaboratively to maintain the school’s principles and put them into practice to actively support learning, both social and academic, at every opportunity.

School planning is effective although it does not contain clearly, objectively measurable short and long-term measures of success or defined timelines for implementation.

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.

Utilizing data from City and State tests, the Princeton review, Grow reports and both qualitative and quantitative teacher assessments, the school has a very clear understanding of the performance and progress of each student. The teachers and the principal all know the strengths, weaknesses and instructional needs of all the students. This is achieved through the use of data, informed discussion and because all the teachers teach a wide range of subjects facilitating holistic knowledge about individual students. Despite the complex organizational structure, the school has a clear understanding of the relative performance of each grade, particularly in English language arts and mathematics and for the classes in these subjects. However, as students select their own classes for other subjects, it is not possible for the administration to have a clear understanding for these.

Using data, the school is very effective in identifying and constantly monitoring the needs of special education students and those identified by the school for particular interest, for example, students in need of academic support, and high achieving mathematicians and English language arts students. The school is recognized nationally for closing the achievement gap for ethnic minority students and can clearly demonstrate its success in

this area. However, it does not update this data regularly, relying on its very effective instruction to ensure there is equality.

The school is very aware of its comparative progress relative to its own past performance and with other schools. It also has a clear appreciation of how well each element of the school is performing and has performed over time. For example, State assessment data often indicates a decline in student performance in 5th grade as the students adapt to the school and its alternative organization but by the end of 8th grade, the school performance is among the best in the City.

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 well developed.

All student homework assignments are checked by the teachers, graded using a system that aligns with State standards and contain clear developmental points to improve student work. This, coupled with a demanding curriculum geared to individual need, results in very high expectations for the students, ensuring all students clearly understand how well they are doing and how to get better. The reporting systems, popular with parents, are also very effective at conveying a clear picture of student progress, next learning steps, curriculum coverage and student feedback on their own learning, further enhancing high expectations of performance.

The over-arching school goal is to improve all students’ performance irrespective of ethnicity or background and to guide students through early adolescence. The school is highly effective in achieving this as the goal truly drives the activity of the whole school community. To achieve this, and other goals, the school has a clear focus on each constituent part of the organization, including groups of students, those with identified need and academic subject areas. For example, to improve student performance, the school believes that students should have some choice in learning what most interests them for some subjects, effectively raising interest and involvement. To achieve this, each trimester, each student selects one out of nine areas of study in social studies. The following trimester, new choices are made and the class compositions will change. The same curriculum will be taught but will be adapted to improve it and to respond to the changing requirements of the new heterogeneous class. This arrangement also ensures that students receive instruction from a wide variety of teachers for the same subject. This is not true for literature and mathematics when teachers remain constant, ensuring continuity for these subjects.

The school functions in a democratic, collaborative manner with all staff contributing to developing plans. All plans clearly focus on immediate and long-term improvement. For example, the curriculum is developed annually but altered in response to circumstance and need, resulting in interesting, stimulating instruction. While data does demonstrate the success of the planning process and plans are completed in an effective and timely manner, they do not contain clear, objectively measurable targets for completion or precise goals.

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 well developed.

The teachers at this school are very versatile, each teaching a range of subjects including mathematics, English language arts, social studies and art. Instruction is based upon good skill acquisition that is then applied to separate subject areas thus increasing cross curricular integration. Within mandated guidance, and working in collaborative teams to ensure curricular comparability, the teachers each develop their own highly effective instructional programs that interest them and the students. For example, over four years, students will receive twelve different science courses covering topics such as ichthyology and evolution. In addition to the mandated curriculum, the school offers enrichment courses to support students in need and to develop rounded people. For example, each student takes courses in theatre studies to support personal development through increased awareness of 'self'. Latin is taught as it is the stem of most western languages, teaching grammar and preparing students to learn other languages at high school. Approximately 95% of students pass.

All budgeting, and staffing decisions are firmly based upon driving instructional improvement with as much of the budget as possible being utilized to maintain small class size very effectively, resulting in excellent student to teacher ratios. Decisions are clearly based upon detailed knowledge of the school's needs as revealed by a variety of data sources, including lesson observation and detailed, on-going discussion with all parties. However, decisions are not routinely informed through the use of quantitative data other than for special education students and those in greatest need. The very complex scheduling of teachers and classes is achieved highly effectively and results in small class size, flexible groupings and very good student choice. However, this intricate planning process is currently achieved by the principal alone. Although the principal is sure that other members of staff could achieve this task, no succession planning is in place to ensure this.

Instructional programs actively engage all students, even when there are four grades in one class. This is indicative of the skills of the teachers who provide differentiated instruction in a variety of ways including explicit differences in expectation, alternative source information and levels of guidance. The school is successful in extending higher achieving students within heterogeneous settings and through careful student placement into English language arts and mathematics classes concomitant with their ability. For example, there are three 8th grade mathematics classes one of which prepares students for 9th grade Regents tests. Teachers are held firmly to account by the principal, each other, the students and by their own professionalism.

The very effective teacher advisory system in which each teacher is responsible for about eleven students is fundamental to ensuring all students progress and are held accountable for their own learning. This system also means that each student is known, understood and has someone to turn to for support. At 97%, the school is effective at maintaining good attendance.

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 well developed.

The principal is held in exceptionally high esteem and has developed the school over 25 years. She remains passionate about the school and its founding principles which are inculcated throughout the school. The current minimum teacher tenure is six years resulting in a school that runs very smoothly with clear, understood procedures. Each member of staff supports each other in planning and evaluation very effectively through discussion, frequent team teaching, observation and open, constructive dialogue and sharing of data. The principal frequently observes instruction and provides detailed, informative feedback that she follows through, resulting in high quality instruction throughout the school.

Teachers are appointed according to their intelligence, flexibility and sense of humor. If possible, teachers will be Urban Fellows or have had student placement in the school. If new teachers do not have data skills, they will receive training to learn this skill quickly. Professional development is well focused on the needs of the school which is frequently used by outside agencies for their own development. Although the school is good at using its data, one current focus for professional development is to further improve the interpretation of data to result in a better understanding of student progress and instruction.

The school enjoys many partnerships with outside agencies that are used very effectively to support the school's goals and instruction. For example, the art curriculum is skillfully enhanced through positive liaisons with local museums and galleries where detailed appreciation of a very wide variety of art, artifacts and artists enrich the curriculum.

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.

Despite its achievements, the Center School is not complacent and is always considering ways to continue to improve without losing its core identity. Successive planning phases build upon prior success and are flexibly adaptive to changing requirements. For example, the increased emphasis on the use of data to drive school improvement is included in the current Comprehensive Education Plan. In its planning, the school does not specifically refer to each subject area as it is universally understood that each area is under continuous review and development. There is strong evidence to confirm this. For example, some new courses are being developed annually and, each semester, adapted to meet the needs of particular students. This is effective in meeting the needs of all students.

Through direct comparison of student outcomes, the advisory structure and the detailed knowledge each teacher has of students in a range of settings, student progress within and across the school is very detailed and well understood. This results in very good school awareness of the progress of plans and interventions and means the school is in a consistently strong position to adapt its plans and interventions when the need arises.

However, the direct link between school plans and interim quantitative data is not clear. Plans are put into practice and are completed effectively. However, they do not contain clear timelines for completion, interim goals or objective measures of success. The principal is aware of this.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: The Center School (PS 243)	∅	✓	+
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	