



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Academy and Athletic Excellence School

Middle School 256

**154 West 93 Street
New York
NY 10025**

Principal: Cheryl Rosen

Dates of review: December 12 – 13, 2006

Reviewer: Anne Murrell

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

Middle School 256 is located in the borough of Manhattan and is a grade 6 through 8 school. Its population of 169 students is made up of 63% Black, 31.6% Hispanic, 2.7% White and 2.7% Asian and other students.

There are 9.5% special education students and a very small proportion of English language learners, both figures below similar and City school averages. The school is Title 1 eligible. Attendance has greatly improved recently and is at present 94%, which is above that of similar and City schools. The number of suspensions more than halved in 2006, but this figure is still higher than in similarly sized schools.

The core of the school's academic program is modeled on the America's Choice Design curriculum and is modified to meet the needs of the wide range of achievement levels within grades.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Leadership is open, caring and effective.
- There is a strong sense of community in the school and everyone is held to be of equal importance.
- Particular emphasis is given to improving the performance and progress of students in greatest need of support.
- The principal has a good overview of the strengths and areas for development and what needs to be done next to improve further.
- A wide range of data is collected and analyzed so the school has secure information about each student's knowledge and skills.
- There is much collaborative teamwork to discuss and agree decisions about how to improve performance and progress.
- Teachers know and respect the students, and so the students trust the staff.
- Professional development is effectively improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- Parents are kept well informed about their children's academic and personal achievements.

What the school needs to improve

- Improve the differentiation of instruction and learning by more clearly and consistently planning for individual and group tasks in all lessons.
- Provide more practical 'hands on' learning to interest and motivate all students in all classes.
- Maintain the improvement in student attendance.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a proficient school.

Over the past four years the whole culture of the school has changed. There is now a strong sense of community among everyone involved in the school. The students' academic levels of achievement have been slower to improve. The principal is focused on using the wide range of data now available on the performance of each student to raise the levels of achievement and to increase progress. There is a dedicated and, for the most part, knowledgeable and experienced staff and all are working in unison to meet agreed goals. The leaders and faculty work well in teams to collate and discuss the data about the students, and this has led to changes in the organization of classes with the goal to increase the students' learning. However, there is still inconsistency of practice at the classroom level and the students have too few opportunities to do practical tasks and learn through a 'hands on' approach. The students show that they are motivated to learn and this has increased as a consequence of knowing their own learning goals. The parents are kept well informed about how their children are progressing and what they need to do to achieve the next level of learning.

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 school collects a considerable amount of data that gives a constantly updated picture of the performance and progress of each student, at classroom and grade level in tested subjects. This data is derived from the many tests and assessments used to measure progress over the course of the school year. Particularly useful is the Grow Report that shows whether each student has made enough progress over the year based on a comparison of performance in State tests. Although it arrives late in the year, it is very informative to the school and parents and is helpful to the school in planning for the following school year. The school breaks down class profiles in English language arts and mathematics to compare levels with previous scores and with Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) results. This too is an extremely useful tool to identify the strengths and areas for development in the students' learning. Ongoing quizzes and comprehension tests give current information about the students' performance in English language arts and mathematics. In addition, the Accelerated Reader Program gives the students and teachers a clear view of how well the student is progressing in reading and what the next learning stage should be. The school compares each year's achievement to its own past performance and to similar and City schools.

Much emphasis is placed on analyzing the attainment and progress of special education students and English language learners. Analysis and comparisons of the performance of gender and ethnic groups is completed when the school receives its report card. As this is usually late arriving in school, it does not usefully help the school planning for the improvement in performance and progress for students in these 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 administration and faculty plan collaboratively the school’s long- and short-term goals and make decisions about the best way to organize teaching and learning to promote improvement in performance. School data is used effectively to reorganize the classrooms and teaching staff so that the best use is made of all resources. For example, the decision to create three smaller classes for the 8th grade students and to form three differentiated groups for mathematics lessons is having a beneficial effect on teaching and learning and on the progress of the students. The students move across the groups according to their gains in knowledge and skills, as indicated by data from the frequent assessments. During retreats every June and August, members of staff look closely at this data and decide the next steps in teaching and learning.

The planning of programs to support the learning of special education students and English language learners towards their goals is given particular focus. All the special education students have their own individual education programs in which the goals set are very clear and precise, and achievable within the agreed time limits. Alongside the professionals, parents and students are involved in setting these goals and the students’ progress is frequently checked throughout the year. Very specific and effective teaching is offered to the small group of English language learners to accelerate their progress in gaining English language skills.

The school keeps parents well informed about their children’s attainment and progress. The parent report produced by the State is a particularly useful document which clearly explains the student’s scores, gives a breakdown of the strengths and weaknesses within subjects, and lists ways that the parents can support their children’s education. The teachers have appropriate expectations of the students, based on the wide range of data available to them. These are shared with the students and the parents and are the basis of the students’ learning 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 proficient.

The core of the academic program is modeled on the America’s Choice School Design. This means that all the students follow the same curriculum, but the work is adapted to the appropriate level according to the learning groups. Planning for teaching and learning generally differentiates instruction according to information from student data and the school’s expectations. For example, most teachers target conferencing activities and group students by performance level for group work. However, this is not consistent in all classes. There are examples of interesting and appropriate work that engage the students fully in their learning, but this is not consistently the case across the school. There is limited evidence of practical ‘hands-on’ work either in operation or on display. The students themselves expressed a desire for more work of this nature.

Budgeting, scheduling and staffing decisions are driven by the needs of students and teachers as indicated by data from test results and the monitoring of teachers' performance. In this school, teachers are placed above other resources and this policy has led, for example, to smaller classes and teacher support for special education and English language learners. It also enables extra intervention and enrichment programs before, during and after school hours.

Teachers know the students well, respect their views and respond well to their academic and personal needs. The students like the teachers and say that they are helpful and many try to make learning fun. The students know what their goals are and what they need to do to improve their learning. They also appreciate the fact that teachers will help them when they are struggling with their work, supported in a positive way so that they always feel as if they are succeeding. Students are confident that they can talk to the counselor in the school about anything that is worrying them. Due to rigorous systems to monitor all absences, attendance has improved considerably over the past three years, and since the start of this semester it has reached its highest level to date.

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 some well-developed areas.

The selection of staff is based on what is most needed in the school, and is conducted through interviews, which sometimes include demonstration lessons. Particular requirements are licensed qualifications, appropriate experience in teaching, the ability to adhere strictly to school conventions, and the right personality to work well as a team member. Overall, this process works well and has provided the school with good, knowledgeable teachers who are reflective about their work.

Much of the important planning, evaluation of results and decision-making are done as a result of effective teamwork, and communication is good. Professional development and its delivery are to some extent decided by the America's Choice School Design program. Other training decisions are made by the school's professional development team according to the priorities of the whole staff, grades and the needs of individual teachers. Effective training has been given to individual teachers identified as needing to improve their instruction. The coaches play an important role in providing good quality professional development on a daily basis, including working alongside in the classroom and giving demonstrations of good practice.

The principal has a high profile in the school. She visits classrooms daily, observing teaching and learning both formally and informally. Formal visits occur three times a year and result in a comprehensive written, and verbal, feedback on strengths and weakness in the teaching and learning. Professional development needs may be determined on the basis of any findings in the visits to classes. The principal has a very good overview of the strengths and areas of development of the staff and likes to have direct communication with the teachers. From her use of computer data, she is very well-informed about the academic achievements of each student in the school and frequently discusses with teachers and coaches what should be the next steps in learning. Much of her time is given to talking with students and discussing their work with them. Parents appreciate this caring approach. The school is a generally well-organized and calm place and although there are some students who sometimes misbehave, these are dealt with effectively and consistently. Nearly all students conduct themselves well.

The school has many partnerships with outside bodies, and community affiliations enhance the school's academic, arts, athletic, and social programs. The 'Reach the World' project, for instance, has stimulated the students' interest in the voyage of the ship The Makulu and the many places it has visited.

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.

All members of staff have a copy of the school's Comprehensive Education Plan. The process of working on it each year is seen by the principal to be a most important form of professional development. It is regularly updated in collaboration with leaders, faculty and staff, and forces all to reflect and look forward. Goals are re-written to match the changing and varying needs of students and teachers, for instance, the reorganization of classes in order to make them smaller and to cater to three levels of attainment in mathematics. Comparisons are made between the progress that students make in each class and across each grade. A recent preliminary test in advance of the State and City tests showed considerable discrepancy between the results achieved by the students in different classes. The mathematics coach immediately identified this and put in place a plan to address it, including holding discussions with the teachers concerned and identifying further professional development activities.

To find out how they are achieving in reading, the students use the accelerated reader quiz frequently and confidently. The Princeton Review site is in process of being investigated by coaches and teachers. This is not only so that they understand how to use the site, but also in order to instruct the students in how to find out for themselves what they have achieved and what they needed to do to improve their work. The information is used to constantly revise goals and programs.

Although there is much collection of data and setting of goals for teachers and students, to date there is limited evidence that all of this is having a major impact on the levels achieved by the students. Since much of this information has only been available recently, there is still much more for the school to do.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Academic and Athletic Excellence School (MS256)	∅	✓	+
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 knows and respect students and responds 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	