



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

**The Choir Academy of Harlem
Middle School / High School 469
2005 Madison Avenue
New York
NY 10035**

Principal: Ashanti Chimurenga

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Reviewer: Florence Olajide

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Choir Academy of Harlem is a performing arts school, which has an enrollment of 489 students covering grades 5 through 12. Eighty-five percent of students are Black, 14% are Hispanic and 1% are from other ethnic backgrounds. Five percent are special education students and 2% of the students are English language learners. All students are eligible for Title 1 funding. This is a substantially higher proportion when compared to similar or City schools. Attendance at 89% is slightly higher than similar schools and the City average.

The school is an empowerment school which gives it more flexibility to make key decisions and control the resources for its school community. Empowerment schools are free to develop or purchase professional development services, choose which schools to affiliate with, and benefit from reduced reporting and paperwork requirements.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The principal provides strong leadership and expresses a firm and open belief in every student's ability to succeed.
- The principal has successfully led the school through a process of reconciliation, which has helped to build new bridges and establish more positive relationships between all members of the school community.
- A raft of new programs and activities have served as a rallying point for staff and students, and helped to foster a new beginning and team spirit.
- The administration supports staff, is open to new ideas and encourages staff to be innovative.
- By creating an open and welcoming atmosphere, the principal and her team have won the confidence of parents who are beginning to have some hope in a brighter future for the school.
- The school has used its data effectively to make appropriate organizational and instructional changes in order to improve outcomes for students.
- The school provides middle school staff with extensive professional development opportunities in order to accelerate the necessary improvements to instructional practice.
- The school has improved and broadened its curriculum in order to make it relevant and attractive to students who do not necessarily have an aptitude for the performing arts.

What the school needs to improve

- Improve students' engagement by ensuring that the quality of instruction is of the best and that learning activities are practical, relevant and interesting to students.
- Ensure that learning activities are matched carefully to students' needs and aptitudes so that all of them, including English language learners, special education and higher achieving students can make good progress.
- Complete the process of reviewing the impact of this year's work and use this information and available data to define appropriate and measurable whole-school goals.
- Ensure that whole-school goals are disaggregated into short-term goals for grades, classes and students, to be achieved within specified timescales, and linked to appropriate evaluation strategies.
- Ensure that all staff have high expectations of students and involve students in setting challenging personal goals for improvement.
- Extend professional development to include regular support for high school teachers and monitor instructional practice more regularly to assess its impact.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a proficient school.

The Choir Academy of Harlem is a performing arts school, which was originally the product of a partnership between the Boys Choir of Harlem, a non-profit organization and the Choir Academy of Harlem, a Department of Education middle and high school. The choir was a world-renowned singing group who engaged in regular high profile public performances worldwide. Through the relationship, the school provided students with a college preparatory education and comprehensive music instruction from grade 4 through to grade 12. Between 2000 and 2005, the school suffered from lack of stability with several repeated changes of administration. This was accompanied by low student achievement. In January 2006, the relationship between the two partners broke down irretrievably. This led to an eventual split in September 2006 when a new principal and administration team were hired to move the school forward.

Over the past year, the new administration's main goal has been to rebuild the fractured relationships throughout the school and help the school establish a new identity and sense of purpose. Although this has been a difficult task, under the strong leadership of the principal, the school has made good strides in the right direction. With her clear vision and strong determination, she has won the respect of all members of the school community. Consequently, united under her leadership, staff, students and parents are working together to create a more positive school environment. In describing the impact of one such collaborative activity, a student explained that, 'everyone worked together to do it in a family spirit and this shows that all is not lost'.

The school has used its data to make some immediate and effective changes to the curriculum and the way students are organized for instructional purposes. This has helped to focus teachers and students on learning and provides a vital focal point for moving the school forward. An extensive professional development program is being implemented to improve instructional practice and students' performance, particularly in the middle school, which is the area most in need of immediate improvement. Nevertheless, many of the newly implemented practices and procedures are not yet firmly established and not all staff implement school policies and procedures consistently and effectively across the school.

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.

As an empowerment school, staff use the periodic assessment, the Princeton Review, effectively to provide data on the progress of individual students, classes and grades. The assessments are administered three times a year to measure students' performance over time. Staff use other assessment tools including teacher-made tests to measure students' performance in reading and mathematics. The school collects this data and uses it to

compare students' overall performance to previous performance and to the performance of similar and City schools. It also uses the data to good effect when comparing the progress and achievement of individual students, classes and grades in different subjects across the school.

The school analyses its data in relation to the performance of students who are English language learners, those from different ethnic backgrounds and special education students. It also looks at the patterns of achievement of groups that are of specific interest to the school such as boys and girls. It does not yet disaggregate data for higher achieving students. It makes effective use of the information gathered from data analysis to make important decisions about the curriculum, resource management and professional development in order to improve students' performance.

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 undeveloped.

Following her appointment, and needing to act quickly to restore stability to the school, the principal defined the school's focus for the year based on her perception of what was needed. As such, staff, students and parents were not engaged in a collaborative process of identifying whole-school goals. Nonetheless, the principal shared these goals and her vision with all members of the school community and gained their support. These goals have driven the activities of staff this year. While they reflect the school's needs, most of them do not include measurable outcomes for students, nor are they broken down into short-term goals to be achieved within reasonable timescales. Therefore, although all members of the school community know what the goals are, their understanding of the specific expectations of individuals, classes and grades and in relation to these goals is less clear. The school has a clearer focus on students in greatest need of improvement. Both the principal and students are aware that some teachers have low expectations of students and this has a significant impact on their performance. The principal has therefore engaged teachers in much professional dialogue about improving students' achievement. At the moment, students are not set specific individual goals. Nonetheless, teachers have begun to make expectations clearer by sharing the performance criteria at each grade level with students.

Through the year, the school has modified its goals to reflect students' needs. Based on the data, the school is giving priority to improving student's overall performance in the middle school, and to raising achievement in mathematics, reading and writing in all grades. The school has worked hard at improving the partnership with parents who are provided with useful information about students' progress through activities such as open house days and parents' dinners.

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

This area of the school’s work is proficient.

The school has introduced several new curriculum programs to improve student’s engagement and to cater for the needs of those who are not particularly inclined towards the performing arts. Students can now choose between a business or performing arts track. Some programs such as Mathematics Navigator have been implemented to address weaknesses highlighted by the data. The school ensures that these programs are aligned with the mandated curriculum and that they are able to generate meaningful data about student’s progress.

Although students say they like the new programs, many have lost their enthusiasm and often portray indifferent attitudes to learning. They are therefore more difficult to engage in lessons. Most of them chose the school for its performing arts program and the loss of the boys’ choir and the lack of a vibrant alternative music program has left them without motivation. Students feel this loss intensely as illustrated by one student’s poignant remark that, ‘for people so young, we shouldn’t be so sad’. Although, increasing student engagement is the focus of recent professional development, many teachers still struggle to achieve the right match between instructional activities and students’ abilities, interests and needs and teach in arid classrooms. Despite this, relationships between staff and students are positive. Students say that most of the staff respect and care about them, although some do not treat them with the same level of consideration.

The school has made effective use of its data to make pertinent budgetary, staffing and scheduling decisions. These have included regrouping students into more appropriate instructional groups and providing students with additional tutoring in small groups to boost their performance. The school makes attendance a high priority. It rewards good attendance and follows up absences promptly by contacting parents. All students are met and greeted by senior staff as they enter the school. This reinforces the message that attendance is important and that every student counts.

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.

The principal is highly respected by all members of the school community. She has galvanized all members into positive action designed to move the school forward. She fosters a team spirit among staff by welcoming their ideas and encouraging them to be more creative. Students describe her as someone who gives them a reason to come to school and parents call her their ‘miracle’. Staff are selected based on their high expectations for students’ performance and progress and their ability to use data, and the two newly hired assistant principals bring much needed experience to the school. The school runs smoothly and leaders are clear in their expectation of staff and students.

One of this year’s main goals has been to provide staff with good support through a relevant professional development program. The school has therefore engaged the services of external consultants who have worked with staff on issues pertinent to the school as revealed by data. For example, there has been a strong focus on improving

teachers' instructional practice in English language arts and mathematics. Teachers have also been provided with professional development geared towards helping them to implement the new curriculum programs effectively. However, much of the professional development program has centered on the middle school and there is no consistently planned or regular program for high school teachers. Mentors from among more experienced staff have provided new teachers with useful support. Staff have good opportunities to observe and learn from each other through common planning and preparation times and inter-class visitations. Some have also visited teachers in other schools. Although the principal and other leaders have observed classroom teaching, this has not been done frequently enough to ensure consistently good instructional practice.

Leaders have not yet evaluated the impact of changes made this year, in order to formulate goals and improvement plans for the next one. However, there are advanced plans to do this and staff are scheduled to evaluate all aspects of the school's work through eight different committees. They plan to look at data, including students' pass rates, in order to identify any patterns of underperformance.

The school has effective partnerships with a range of community-based organizations which support its work. For example, the youth development and support service has provided training on conflict resolution and New York University has led aspects of the professional development program.

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.

Presently, the school's plans do not include interim goals. The school conducts frequent diagnostic assessments of student's progress. However, these are not specifically linked to the goals, which have not been defined in objectively measurable ways. As such, there are no specific parameters for assessing how effectively the school's plan is being implemented or whether it is accomplishing its stated objectives. Nonetheless, the school currently uses its data to compare achievement across different student groups and to inform decisions about redirecting resources to improve underperformance. In grade 8, for example, students are being provided with additional support through Saturday school.

The school is about to embark on a process of reviewing and evaluating previous performance in order to define new goals and objectives for the coming academic year. It has taken steps to make this a collaborative process among all staff, although the role of parents and students in this process is unclear. The school has already identified improvements needed to instructional practice and curriculum programs that can be used to improve students' engagement. In addition, there are plans to improve the scheduling in the coming year based on the deficiencies currently identified. Planned changes include the introduction of a double period in English language arts across all grades, which will provide students with more opportunities for writing. There are also plans to introduce single gender classes in the core subjects across the school, to address the current lower performance of boys compared to girls. An extensive summer school program will be used to address the needs of students who are currently lagging behind their peers.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

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| SCHOOL NAME: Choir Academy of Harlem School (MS/HS 469) | ∅ | ✓ | + |
| Quality Score | | X | |

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| 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 | |