



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Townsend Harris High School

High School 525

**149-11 Melbourne Avenue
Queens
NY 11367**

Principal: Thomas Cunningham

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Reviewer: Barry King

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Townsend Harris High School educates nearly 1100 students from Grade 9 through Grade 12. It has a high demand for places and selects students with very high achievements in their previous schools. Girls outnumber boys by over two to one. Over 40% of students are from white or Asian backgrounds, which is much higher than the City average. The proportions from Black and Hispanic ethnic groups are each under 10% of the school's population, which is much smaller than average. No student is an English language learner. The special education enrolment is in low single figures each year. The school does not receive Title 1 funding. Approximately a third of students are eligible for free lunches. Many students travel considerable distances across the City but attendance is exceptionally and consistently high. It was 97% in the past year.

The school has a strong focus on academic performance, with an emphasis on the humanities. It adheres to the principles of the ancient Greek Ephebic oath, which states that 'I shall not leave my city any less but rather greater and better than I found it'. This leads it to place high value on ethical behavior and the students' contribution to the community. The school operates with below average funding per student compared with other schools in the City but is supported by contributions from alumni and others.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Exceptionally high expectations are set by the school and are shared by the students.
- Clearly defined values related to personal endeavor and social contribution unite the school community in a sense of common purpose.
- The school is a well ordered and caring environment in which students feel safe and can learn effectively.
- Teachers demonstrate enormous commitment, and have high levels of scholarly expertise that enables them to challenge the school's very able students.
- The curriculum is carefully matched to the needs and aspirations of the students.
- The school has extensive and highly popular out-of-class activities, including a well regarded requirement for community service.
- Assessment of students' performance is regular, diagnostic and exceptionally well recorded, and triggers rapid intervention when individual students are not doing well enough.
- The principals' vision for the school and his collaborative working style has created a well embedded culture of reflection and improvement among staff.
- The school is very well supported by the parental community and alumni.
- The students have an excellent preparation for entering college after they graduate.

What the school needs to improve

- Extend the use of information technology to support teaching and learning.
- Use lesson observations and other forms of professional development to consolidate and extend the teaching styles that engage students actively in their learning.
- Ensure that students and classes have clear and well understood learning and assessment goals against which their progress can be assessed.
- Ensure the goals in the Comprehensive Education Plan are translated into measurable objectives against which the success of the school's actions can be measured.
- Survey students and parents to ensure that the expected levels of work and commitment do not lead to excessive pressure upon the students.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a well developed school with many outstanding features.

The achievement of the students has been exceptionally and consistently high for many years by all measures. All students do very well and underachievement is rare. The school's performance is comfortably in excess of that for similar schools. The students' time in the school is an excellent preparation for college after graduation, and it is normal for 100% to qualify for entry to four-year courses.

These outstanding academic outcomes are the result of a climate of exceedingly high expectations, expert teaching and a curriculum that is well tailored to the needs of the students. This includes access to higher level courses, both within school and at other institutions. Students are expected to work very hard, which they willingly do. Their success also results from continuous and careful monitoring of their performance and the use of data to identify any need for support and then to provide this swiftly. This process does not involve setting and sharing specific goals with students as closely as it might, something the school recognizes.

The school contributes significantly to the all-round personal development of the students through a wide range of out-of-class activities and a social service requirement. The growth in confidence of the students, as shown in their engaging and fluent conversation with adults, is another important outcome for them.

The school is very well led by a principal who has given it a clear sense of direction and created an atmosphere in the school where staff can enjoy their work and improve their already effective practice. The school is not resting on its laurels but is constantly looking for ways to move forward. Its strong focus on writing, which is an outstanding feature of the school, is currently accompanied by strategies to improve the use of information technology in teaching and in making the teaching styles involve the students more actively in the classroom. These are the right priorities.

All those involved with the school are proud of its accomplishments. This includes the parents, who offer much support to it. They are delighted that their children live such exciting and fulfilling lives at the school, and are so well motivated, but also wonder whether the drive for success is at times a little too remorseless.

The school is a beacon to its community and to other schools, and has a very strong capacity to maintain its excellence.

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.

The school's relentless commitment to the highest standards is very well supported by a thorough diagnosis of each student's progress in academic work and social engagement. The progress of each student is evaluated through extensive assessment of assignments and periodic tests. The performance of the school is compared rigorously against other similar schools in the City and that comparison is very favorable. Data is placed upon a powerful commercial database that enables the school to analyze the performance of every student, class and group. When an individual departs from the extremely high standards expected by the school, this is quickly communicated to students and parents, with suggestions for a program of action to get the student back on track. The student's well-being is also monitored closely, through periodic sessions with the school's counseling staff and the close attention of a caring and supportive staff. The quality of the school's monitoring is strong for the great majority of students who thrive in the school but no less so for those who, for whatever reason, find the pace of life in the school difficult to cope with. The school is alert to ensure that every student benefits from what it can offer. This philosophy was summed up by one parent who said 'my child is important here'.

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.

The school has very high expectations for all students. It is this culture of 'excellence expected, not demanded' that promotes the learning more than specific long-term goals for each student. It is one that has worked extremely well, as its outstanding record testifies. The principal accurately describes the school as 'a community driven to provide high quality education'.

The school's culture of achievement reaches to the students, who are highly self-motivated to do their best. They admit that they are 'pushed to the limits' but believe they have learned valuable skills for life in managing their time to balance the pressures that their commitments place upon them. They are well supported by the teachers' assessment of their work, which indicates the steps students must take to improve. Test scores below the high levels expected trigger immediate interventions and support programs are swiftly devised for students. The analysis of the scores at the end of the last marking period resulted in 298 students being targeted for additional support and ensured the highest possible standards for all. Faculty staff collaborate together to compare class results with each other to analyze what went well and what might have been better. Neither classes nor individuals have specific goals, as opposed to general expectations, which would further assist the measurement of progress towards agreed targets and the signing off of improvement.

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 curriculum is well matched to the aspirations of these high achieving students. The school’s focus on the humanities is supported by a strong emphasis on writing that produces high levels of literacy as seen in the outstanding results of their tests in English language arts. This emphasis is not at the expense of a wider education, with all students required to learn physics, chemistry and biology. The schedule is well designed and students’ electives are well matched to their preferences. All older students study for some of their time at neighboring Queen’s College, gaining an early introduction into university-level work. Students on support programs have extra work tailored to their learning needs. Special education students are sensitively provided for. The school’s program extends into a very wide range of out-of-class activities that the students enjoy and frequently excel in. The spirit of the Ephebic code runs through the school, not least in the requirement to perform community service, which the students come to see as an important contribution to their overall education.

The teaching makes high intellectual demands upon the students, which they thrive upon despite the large class sizes. Teachers are committed to ensuring that students succeed and to communicating the joy of learning, something that is highly valued by the students. In the words of one of them, ‘teachers are passionate about what they teach’. The school has invested much effort in developing teaching styles that encourage students take a more active part in lessons and this has resulted in an acceleration of their learning. There is much good practice using the techniques the school has been promoting, though pockets remain where change has been slower and further improvement is still required.

The budget is augmented by fund raising and is used carefully to provide resources to support teaching, based on surveys of what departments need. An example is the recent acquisition of a genetics laboratory. The use of information and communication technology in teaching and learning is growing but is not yet a regular part of classroom activity. The staff have to share much of the equipment, which is not effective. The school recognizes the value of this technology in promoting learning and is engaged in a program of extensive enlargement of these facilities over the next year.

The school is highly successful in aligning its program to promote the academic and personal development of the students. The students are very proud of their school and demonstrate this daily by their remarkably high levels of attendance. When students do not appear, there is an outreach program that ensures there is a rapid response to find out why and deal with any problems.

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 school’s high level of challenge to the students’ takes place in a well run and caring learning environment that supports them well and encourages all staff, whatever their role, to give of their best. Everyone counts, and the effort of each is appreciated. At the heart of this thriving school is the principal, whose clear vision and collaborative and

approachable style have created the conditions for reflection, innovation and professional development to thrive. The school has an impressive record but there is no sense of complacency and it is determined to move forward. In this climate of high expectations, individuals are held to account for what they do but also trusted to get on with their jobs.

The professional development of staff has been a major focus, as the school successfully revises the learning culture in classrooms to make them more interactive places. The staff attend courses and work shops when there is need to extend their mastery over subject matter, but the process of adapting teaching styles is mainly accomplished within the school through an extensive process of lesson observations and other forms of sharing best professional practice. These comprise full length observations and 'walk-throughs'. In both cases, clear feedback is given and teachers learn what went well and what might be better. This is then followed by subsequent observations. The staff see this process as constructive and supportive and the result is that teaching is steadily improving.

Students have a sense of partnership in what the school does and believe that they are listened to. For example, one student said, 'our voice counts'. Parents are very supportive of the school and a number have a high level of engagement. They feel that the school communicates with them well. The school has enduring and beneficial links with its alumni. Strong partnerships exist with organizations outside the school, notably Queen's College, where all its older students attend, and also other providers of specialist courses.

The maintenance of the school's outstanding performance on so many fronts, and the learning culture that pervades the whole institution, is evidence of a strong capacity for continued success.

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 well developed.

The school has well established routines for assessing the progress of students throughout their time in the school. This includes three marking periods during which all subjects are tested, scheduled sensitively to manage the pressure on students. This provides comprehensive information that is entered on the school's database, which charts the progress of all students. Intervention strategies ensue when students fall in any way short of the school's high expectations of them. This might, for example, mean extra classes for some students. Success is also recognized and rewarded, for example through the principal's 'Honor Roll'. After tests, class teachers compare with each other how things have gone, and whether adjustments to practice or the testing arrangements are necessary. On a more frequent basis, students' work is assessed and monitored outside the formal tests. Taken together, the arrangements mean that students' performance is closely watched and responses to any dips in performance are rapid.

The school's Comprehensive Education Plan was produced after collaborative effort and the school's priorities run through it well. Its constant drive for improvement is clear. A number of goals in the plan are specific and measurable, and will allow the success of the school's plans to be measured, though this not true of all.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Townsend Harris High School (HS 525)	∅	✓	+
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