



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



# **Quality Review Report**

**The Forward School of Creative Writing**

**Middle School 287  
3710 Barnes Avenue  
Bronx  
NY 10467**

**Principal: Terry Ballard**

**Dates of review: November 3 and 6, 2006  
Reviewer: Peter Lewis & Martyn Groucutt**

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## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

The Forward School of Creative Writing was one of 3 schools formed as part of the restructuring of a phasing out middle school, whose 8th grade still occupies part of the building.

The school opened in 2005 with 100 6th grade students and now has some 234 students in 6th and 7th grade who, increasingly, are joining the school from outside the immediate area. Just over half the students are Black. Of the remainder, just over a quarter are Hispanic with a very small proportion of White and Asian students. There is a very small proportion of English language learners, and a slightly larger proportion, 7%, of special education students. This year attendance has been consistently over 90%, approximately average for similar and City-wide middle schools.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The school has established a broad curriculum which successfully motivates students.
- Great strides have been made from a very low starting point in improving the tone of the school.
- The principal has a clear vision for the school's development which with increasing success is being communicated to staff.
- The school is successful in improving the learning of its students who have identified learning difficulties.
- At its best, teaching is well-focused and demonstrates high expectations of students which has a positive impact on their learning.

### What the school needs to improve

- Raise the standards achieved by all students and particularly those of higher attainment.
- Improve teachers' use of assessment information so that lessons are more precisely matched to the learning needs of all students.
- Involve students more in their learning by setting clear targets for their achievement and advising students on what they need to do in order to succeed.
- Improve the overall quality of instruction so that it consistently demonstrates agreed best practice features and is monitored in relation to students' learning.
- Improve behavior and student attitude within and between classes.
- Identify key, achievable priorities for the school's development and, within these, measurable steps by which the school can track the progress that is being made towards identified goals.

## Part 3: Main findings

### Overall Evaluation

#### **This is a proficient school.**

The Forward School of Creative Writing is a school that has secured improvements in behavior and in student learning in the short time since its opening. Success is reflected in the attendance rate – it is a school that students enjoy attending. Considerable effort has gone into establishing a good climate for learning and, although the school acknowledges that much more remains to be done, the school now presents as a much safer environment which has the capacity for continued improvement.

The principal and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the school and have consistently high expectations for their students, reflected in the improving academic outcomes. There is a positive culture and the curriculum encourages personal development and collective responsibility through performance, best reflected in the Friday evening “Friday Café” where students perform for fellow students, parents and family, and the community.

The principal has a good understanding of how the school is doing and of those areas where improvement is required and recognizes that the challenge remains of making full use of data and focused planning in securing improvement. The school also knows that it needs to focus more closely on the actions that are required to further improve student achievement, and on its strategies for planning actions and monitoring their effectiveness.

### 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 undeveloped, with proficient features.**

The school’s focus for development since its opening a year ago, has firmly been placed on setting a clear baseline in terms of establishing student safety, improving behavior and so establishing a climate in which learning can take place through the implantation of its own particular vision for creative writing. In this it has achieved much success.

A range of formal and informal data is used to monitor the progress of individual students. In mathematics this is further supported by the effective use of a Princeton Review consultant, who has worked with the school in putting together data that shows evidence of rising standards. Appropriate use is made of test information in monitoring the progress that students make, so that the school is able to compare students’ progress across the two grades, and in relation to similar schools. However, this information is not yet interpreted sufficiently to enable the school to identify and compare patterns of achievement between subjects or to make use of the data in planning action to address differences in achievement between, for example, boys and girls across subjects. It is this need to use the data to show progress of different groups, subjects and strands (the name given to the different performance groupings) that is not yet fully in place. The use of portfolio evidence can also be further developed.

The school compares its performance with the other two new schools on the campus, with the principals meeting weekly to collaborate effectively. In this context it is able to demonstrate progress. Although it is only in its second year it is able to demonstrate a reduction in the number of students performing at level 1 from 19.1% to 9.1% alongside an increase in those performing at level 3 from 26% to 33%.

While systems enable the school to identify students who are under-performing, the school recognizes that there is a need to build teachers' understanding of and confidence in using data. Currently this is variable, because of the differences in the teaching experience of the teachers.

The progress made by special education students and those who have been heldover is carefully tracked which enables the school to ensure that they make good progress in relation to their targets. Students with higher attainment generally undertake the same tasks as their peers, though there are plans for this group to be prepared for the Regents English language arts and mathematics A exams before leaving for high school.

**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 school is only in its second year, but it has put in place a range of assessment information to begin to assist it in planning work for its students and in setting goals for their achievement. The whole-school goals that are set, particularly in mathematics and English language arts, are appropriately challenging overall and particularly in relation to the very low starting points of many of the students. However, because these systems have been so recently introduced, there remains too wide a range in the effectiveness with which teachers use this information to set high expectations for their students and ensure rapid progress.

Special education students are given clear targets which are matched by teaching and content and so meet students' needs. Individual education plans identify the small steps needed to ensure progress. The school also takes the view that heldover students can be taught effectively alongside this group of students in a collaborative teaching environment, with specialist support to maximize the progress of both populations.

The principal and faculty work together in a collaborative way that not only ensures that the largely project based approach to the curriculum provides content coverage, but that opportunities to promote the creative writing focus of the school are maximized across all curriculum areas.

High expectations of work and of students' engagement are seen in the best instruction and the school has made a good start in communicating these to parents. Parents and families are encouraged to support their children through attending the Friday evening "Friday Café" where students perform the work they have been undertaking during the week. Individual staff, for example in art and mathematics, are developing excellent strategies for promoting students' writing through their subjects, and bulletin boards around the school display examples of students work, set alongside rubrics setting out requirements for effective work. However, sometimes these rubrics are too small to catch the eye and reinforce learning.

**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 curriculum is planned in line with the mandated curriculum and extended to reflect the school’s emphasis on creativity. In the best instruction, teachers plan activities that are relevant to their students’ attainment, including clear steps towards the planned objectives. Students who experience difficulties are well supported through a well focused range of activities. In general, however, the regular use of data in planning differentiated instruction is an area for development being addressed by nominating two teachers to attend District training and turn-keying learning to other teachers.

The principal has worked hard to set high expectations in respect of relationships, student safety and attitudes to learning. Staff generally show respect for students, providing good models, reflected in the much student behavior. The emphasis on academic success is reflected in the concentration which characterizes the work of many students. However, the behavior of a minority still suggests a disengagement from effective education. At present instruction is not maximizing the use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning, which would support academic challenge for the most gifted, while reinforcing the learning for those progressing at a slower pace. That said, those students in greatest need receive good additional support.

The principal has been creative in the way in which she has deployed staff. The budget is carefully managed, but aligned more to the planned curriculum developments than to needs identified through analysis of performance data. Scheduling allows teachers to plan in teams and there is a high degree of collaboration between staff members.

The school has appropriate systems in place to respond to attendance issues. Particularly effective is the computer based system that records attendance, allowing parents to be notified of absence or tardiness immediately, but which can also be used for checking on homework tasks and test scores. Attendance is good on the whole, in large part because students enjoy attending school.

**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 majority of the school’s staff are new to the school and to the profession. In part, this is a consequence of the school’s growth as it builds towards full capacity, in part the result of the principal’s clear determination to ensure good quality instruction from teachers who share her vision. They share her commitment to creating an effective school that has creative writing and performance at its heart.

The principal undertakes formal and informal classroom observation, always giving written feed-back to teachers. Teachers also undertake intervisitations to look at each others professional practice. Professional development opportunities are beginning to be targeted around the school’s improving systems of evaluating the quality of its provision for students and the principal has supported teachers in attending sessions out of school and at weekends. This reflects teachers’ commitment to developing their classroom skills.

Guidance to staff has been compiled in the form of a collaboratively developed handbook and the use of external coaches to provide subject and organizational advice. The recent appointment of an advisory assistant principal has considerable potential in helping to embed systems and strategies that have been developed. At present, the outcome of some of these initiatives remains inconsistent, while others are too recent for any impact to be seen in practice.

Planning is undertaken in teams and the principal has established a range of systems that enable the school to run smoothly, providing structures within which students and staff can operate. The achievement of academic goals and proficiency in performance is supported by community partners. These include the Negro Ensemble Company, supporting effective performance, and City College who include this as the only middle school in a writing project that seeks to publish student's poetry. In addition the YMCA provide after school activities for the three new schools on the campus.

**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 undeveloped.**

The Comprehensive Education Plan is a collaboratively produced document, involving administration, faculty and parents. Its current priorities could be more specific in establishing goals that are measurable over time, which would improve its effectiveness as a planning and development tool.

Student data is increasingly used in establishing whole school goals and in assessing the degree to which improvement has been secured. The school has accurately identified inconsistencies in the degree to which this information has been used across grades both in identifying areas that require improvement and in modifying goals.

Planning for whole-school improvement is comprehensive and includes a wide range of data from tests, other assessments and both formal and informal evaluations of teachers' and students' work. The school has yet to refine this planning to include measurable targets for improvement over an achievable range of priorities. At the same time, planning fails to define the desired changes, how they will be identified, or the planned improvements in student learning that will accrue

Teachers have begun to show flexibility in their ability to amend programs and instruction if evidence is showing that student outcomes were not as expected (for example, the switch to poetry rather than studying biography in English teaching). This then opened up new and exciting developments elsewhere across the curriculum, including the study of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and the writing and recording of music around the characters. However, because whole school objectives are not yet tightly enough defined there is room for improvement in the way in which original planning is flexibly amended over the course of the year to best meet identified student need and the likelihood of original targets being met and this remains an area for development

## Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

<b>SCHOOL NAME: The Forward School of Creative Writing (MS 287)</b>	∅	✓	+
<b>Quality Score</b>		<b>X</b>	

<b>Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.</b>	∅	✓	+
1.1 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• each student, classroom, grade level,</li> </ul>		<b>X</b>	
1.2 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ethnic groups, English Language Learners, special education students*</li> </ul>		<b>X</b>	
1.3 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all other categories of interest to the school*</li> </ul>	<b>X</b>		
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.	<b>X</b>		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 1</b>	<b>X</b>		

\* These criteria are partially aspirational as of now because schools do not have routine access to all of this data. The NYC DOE plans to provide schools with enhanced access to the necessary data in 2007.

<b>Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student's next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student's learning.</b>	∅	✓	+
2.1 Using data, school leaders and faculty engage in a collaborative process to set demanding, objectively measurable goals for immediate and long-range improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals.	<b>X</b>		
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.	<b>X</b>		
2.3 Particular attention is given to improving the performance and progress of students in greatest need of improvement.		<b>X</b>	
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.		<b>X</b>	
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.		<b>X</b>	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 2</b>		<b>X</b>	

<b>Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity, resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.</b>	Ø	✓	+
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	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 3</b>		X	
<b>Quality Statement 4 – Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.</b>	Ø	✓	+
4.1 Leaders, faculty, and staff are selected based on their high expectations for student performance and progress and based on their commitment and capacity to use data, compare outcomes within and across classrooms and schools and develop and revise plans and methods to improve performance and progress.	X		
4.2 Professional development decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes. Professional development is designed to help leaders, faculty, and staff use data, self- and peer-assessments, and collaboration with peers to achieve goals for improved school and student outcomes. Professional development and self- and peer-evaluation are aligned and overlap.	X		
4.3 The principal frequently observes classroom teaching and has a considered strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction. Teachers frequently observe and support each other's classroom instruction with the goal of improving student outcomes.		X	
4.4 Planning, evaluation of results, and revision of plans takes place in teams. Leaders and faculty inform each other of their goals and results, candidly evaluate themselves and each other, and use what is learned to drive improvement.		X	
4.5 The principal is respected and has capacity to effect change.		X	
4.6 The school runs smoothly. Procedures are clear, communicated to all, and are generally followed.		X	
4.7 The school aligns youth development and support services around stated academic goals. Partnerships with outside bodies are routinely used to achieve academic goals.		X	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 4</b>		X	
<b>Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.</b>	Ø	✓	+
5.1 All school plans and other interventions include frequent interim goals and diagnostic assessments of progress designed to reveal in objectively measurable ways whether the plan is being effectively implemented and reaching stated goals.	X		
5.2 Comparisons of student progress within and across classrooms and schools are used in making interim diagnostic assessments and measuring the progress of plans and interventions.	X		
5.3 Information generated by periodic assessments and diagnostic measures of progress and comparisons is used to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals. Interim and final goals are modified when data objectively demonstrate that revision is required.	X		
5.4 Each plan's interim and final outcomes drive successive phases of goal setting and improvement planning, and each successive phase is characterized by agile and flexible realignment of practices and resources to improve student academic outcomes.	X		
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 5</b>	X		