



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Aspire Preparatory School

**Middle School 322
2441 Wallace Avenue
Bronx
NY 10467**

Principal: Steven Cobb

Dates of review: May 24 - 25, 2007

Reviewer: Alvin Jeffs

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

Aspire is a small, new middle school located in the northern part of the Bronx. It opened in September 2006 and currently has only the 6th grade, a cohort of 200 students.

Of these, 7% are special education students with individual education plans and 13% are English language learners. The ethnic make-up of the school is rich, with 45% Hispanic students, 30% Black, 13% Asian and 11% White students.

Of the 200 students, 76% have Title 1 eligibility, significantly higher than similar schools and the New York City average.

The school shares the building with two other middle schools. It occupies most of one floor of the building and shares playground, dining and gym facilities.

At 94%, attendance is high in comparison with similar schools and City schools in general.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- An outstanding principal has provided staff with an exciting vision, backed with appropriate resources and advice.
- Intensive work on literacy skills has shown good results in the school's first year.
- Good support is in place for special education students and students for whom English is not their first language.
- The school is proficient at collecting and analyzing data.
- The development of literacy skills across the whole curriculum is a strength of the school.
- Good procedures are in place to ensure that the existing high level of attendance continues.
- Students say they receive good personal advice and support.
- Class teachers and students have a mutual respect which contributes to interesting and productive lessons.
- A well focused professional development program has assisted in the development of a reflective and collaborative teaching force.
- Procedures have been put in place that are beginning to improve safety and order within this building.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue to develop the skills of a few staff in classroom management and all staff in differentiated lesson planning.
- Further refine the school's analysis of performance data for all sub-groups.
- Continue to address security issues relating to the exterior of the building.
- Develop school planning to include clear targets linked to objectively measurable goals and individual staff responsibilities.
- Enlarge the network of contacts that enhance the curriculum and provide additional support.
- Review the curriculum to ensure that sufficient attention is paid to those arts and performance subjects that enhance the development of social and emotional maturity.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a proficient school.

An outstanding principal has accomplished something very remarkable at Aspire. In ten months, since August 2006 when his teaching team first met, he has developed a school that is proficient in most aspects of its working.

The school has a sophisticated system for data collection and there are very good examples of analysis of this data to create programs and rubrics that are relevant to the students it serves. However, aspects of goal setting and planning are not yet developed.

It has developed a strong core-based curriculum which has assisted in 72% of students making one or more level progress within the ten months of attending Aspire. The concentration on English language arts and mathematics has meant that the curriculum has been aligned to support these subjects and this has been strengthened by a strong concentration on literacy and communication within all lessons. This raises the question as to whether there is an imbalance within the curriculum, marginalizing some subjects, such as music and dance, which have the potential to contribute to the emotional and social maturity that the school is keen to develop.

Professional development has been well focused and sustained. Classroom management remains an area for development for a few staff and differentiating lesson plans for most.

Although over 50% of staff are new to teaching, all teachers have developed an excellent working relationship and a coherence in their wish to share, advise and learn. While the principal describes one of the school's qualities as "hopeless optimism," it is a testament to the very hard work and commitment that this school is already leading other similar schools in both its attendance rates and the progress made by its students.

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 principal had been able to appoint a staff team before August 2006 and that meant teachers developed a clear approach to setting baselines for students before their first day. In the absence of current data, the school used 4th grade information to decide the likely levels of new students. It quickly supplemented this with internal assessments within the core subjects and with regard to writing, which records showed was a weakness. By the end of the first week, staff had a clear idea of how classes needed to be re-configured, saw which students were in need of particular help and identified those who had special education needs.

As the year progressed there were four assessment points for reviewing progress. The achievement data was shared with students and parents and made public on bulletin boards to further encourage progress. At each analysis point action was taken to fine tune

the structures in place. Alterations were made to the mathematics and social studies plans and an English as a second language teacher was appointed.

Care has been taken to monitor the achievements of many sub-groups related to gender and ethnicity, with a particular focus on the small but significant group of Albanian students. Close attention was paid to the progress of special education students and those for whom English was a second language. This has remained a focus as the barriers presented by learning difficulties and first language issues are significant. There has also been a strong focus on those students whose potential for the highest grades is already evident.

Care has been taken to look at students and gauge progress against earlier data from elementary schools. Comparison with similar schools is not strong, but the principal is developing close links with other new schools to make comparisons that are more rigorous in the coming year.

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.

The success of early team-building has meant that there is close collaboration in all aspects of the school’s work, from mentoring new teachers to case conference discussions. All meetings are informed by data and this makes the outcomes relevant to students. However, not enough attention is currently paid to the sharpness of the plans resulting from meetings to ensure action that can be measured.

Lesson planning is developing well with increasing emphasis on grouping within lessons to support weaker students and challenge those who are moving faster. Not enough attention is paid to individual needs within lessons and individual students’ targets. Although developing, these targets are not sharp enough to ensure the most focused response from teachers and students.

The focus on students with problems, in counseling and in an academic sense, is good. Case conferences build on very detailed and sensitive reports and bring together the academic staff, the social worker and, now, the parent coordinator. The outcomes are fully agreed and acted upon, but it is both the strength and weakness of this successful small school that outcomes are often kept at an informal level

The school’s three targets “Learn, Lead, Persevere” underlie all discussions with students and parents. There are regular student-teacher conferences in most, but not all, classes, resulting, overall, in a lack of high expectation. There is some disagreement amongst parents as to whether there are enough opportunities to meet staff, but all agree that when they occur, the staff commitment and openness is impressive at all levels. They are able to share samples of work, assessment data and targets.

Aspire clearly seeks success for all students. This is evident in conversation with staff. The commitment is strong, but the outcomes do not contain clear targets linked to individual staff responsibilities and clear targets.

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 Aspire curriculum has a strong central core of English language arts and mathematics, which has been further strengthened by academic support service work. This is supplemented by science and social studies, alternating between one term and another. There is also a strong emphasis on gym, which comprises half of the afternoon program. Over and above this, the school emphasizes its ‘hidden curriculum’, mainly focusing on the celebration of the wide range of ethnic groupings within the school. There are fewer opportunities for art, music and dance than students and parents would like. This raises the question as to whether the balance between ‘academic’ and ‘creative’ subjects will allow the school to develop the social and emotional maturity it seeks.

Relations between teachers and students are good. Staff know them well and parents are pleased with the detailed knowledge that teachers have. Students say that they can go to adults for advice on curriculum work or personal problems and receive it. This good relationship also means that students are engaged well in most lessons and make comments such as “our teacher makes math fun and I am learning much better.” Teachers feel accountable for improving instruction. They look carefully at data to highlight needs within the curriculum and give extra time to students to ensure the best possible progress. However, although lessons are interesting and productive, instruction is not clearly focused on individual needs within classes.

Resources are mobilized to ensure the most effective service to students. Thus, double lessons have been established to encourage in-depth work within core subjects. The budget has been used well to recruit an English as a second language teacher and special education support. Money has also been identified to employ external consultants to supply prompt and regular data that will further enhance the school’s ability to analyze progress.

Attendance is a high priority. There are good, prompt procedures to check same-day absences and the parent coordinator, social worker and principal make regular home visits to establish if problems exist. The high level of overall attendance is a cause of celebration this year and a significant improvement on the start of the year.

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 everyone who deals with him. He has given the staff a vision of independent learning backed with financial and material resources to implement the curriculum that is necessary. He follows a policy of “hard and heavy hiring”, seeking staff who “work for the kids, not for me”. This has been successful, with a very high level of collaboration and respect permeating teaching throughout the school. He has been active in classroom observations. He provides detailed written and verbal feedback that staff have found useful. The success is reflected in staff’s enthusiasm for inter-visitation to share good practice and answer specific classroom problems.

Visitations and observations are supported by effective professional development programs. The emphasis this year has been on curriculum development, although senior teachers have paired up with new staff to support classroom management and consistency in behavior policies. The school is clear that modeling and classroom support is a high priority and, to this end, money has been identified to recruit part-time coaches in the core subjects.

On a day-to-day basis, the school runs smoothly. The principal has put in place rigorous procedures for arrival and dismissal to ensure the safety of students. There is clearly a focus on high expectations for behavior within Aspire, seen by general movement and interactions. However, not all parents feel that the school is paying enough attention to student safety within the immediate environment.

At present the school has comparatively poor links with external agencies. It links well with the YMCA and has good access to the school-based support team within the building. At the present time, the school does not have a sufficiently strong network of contacts to support both its curriculum and its responses to students with problems.

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.

As a new school, Aspire has not had to put in place a Comprehensive Education Plan, relying largely on the new school proposal and the principal's performance review documentation. This should not hide the fact that the staff set clear goals at the start of the year and have monitored performance regularly throughout. Thus, at the second quarter the school was clear that high proportions of students were likely to fail in English language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. Following the review of data, action took place to address this and resources were found, for example, to support science and technology. Two months later, at the third quarter review, the figures for students likely to fail had dropped, particularly in mathematics.

The school is currently awaiting its fourth quarter results. The principal is aware that this data needs to be disaggregated, to understand how effective the additional support has been for all students and for special education students within the collaborative teaching class and students who have received English as a second language support. Money is held in contingency for developments highlighted by the analysis of data at the regular reviews.

There is a planning and review cycle and action has followed each review. Action follows the planning and review cycle, however, a targeted and budgeted action plan for 2007-08, with deadlines and responsibilities is not yet in place. Staff is preparing for this, but the speed of development, the new school proposal and the anecdotal nature of the principal's review mean it is not there yet.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Aspire Preparatory School (HS 322)	∅	✓	+
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	