



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Bronx Writing Academy

Middle School 323

**270 East 167 Street
Bronx
NY 10456**

Principal: Nick Marinacci

Dates of review: April 23 – 24, 2007

Reviewer: Andy McClean

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The school is located in the South Bronx. It serves students from grades 6 through 8. There are 563 students enrolled including 18% English language learners and 10% special education students. Less than 1% of students are White, 55% Black, 42% Hispanic and 2% Asian and other ethnic groups. Eighty-two percent of students are eligible for Title 1 funding. This is higher than the average for both City and similar schools. Attendance is 88%, which is below the average of both City and similar schools. The school has been in existence in its present status for the last three years.

This is an empowerment school. Empowerment schools have more flexibility to make key decisions and control the resources for their school community. They are free to develop or purchase professional development services, choose which schools to affiliate with and benefit from reduced reporting and paperwork requirements. The school is currently engaged in a research project to design its own periodic assessment materials.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- There is strong collegial leadership by the principal who is well supported by an able administration.
- The principal's understanding of all available data has led to the accurate identification of what challenges need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- There is a determination among all staff to include students in all activities and to enable them to achieve their full potential.
- There are sound systems to evaluate actions and make necessary adjustments in order to secure improvement.
- There is commitment from all staff to undertaking professional development linked to individual and school,-wide needs.
- Technology is used well to improve students' investigational and writing skills.
- Literacy rich classrooms, where books are relevant to students' lives, are in evidence throughout the building.
- The targeting of students whose promotion is in doubt, through regular data analysis, is a key feature of instruction.
- A safe learning environment has been created for all students.

What the school needs to improve

- Evaluate recent measures to improve the teaching of English language arts, with a specific focus on promoting writing skills in all content areas.
- Establish greater consistency in evaluating the progress of individuals, classes and grades throughout the school.
- Spread innovative instructional methods, already in existence in school, through establishing greater consistency in planning for differentiated learning.
- Ensure higher performing students receive the same levels of support and challenge as all other students.
- Further analyze data and extend systems to improve student attendance and combat tardiness.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a proficient school.

The school provides all students with a stimulating and safe learning environment. Classrooms are print rich in keeping with the school's main purpose to raise levels of literacy. This is evidenced by the amount of reading material relevant to students' lives seen in all classes. The collegial style of leadership, promoted by an approachable principal, is making a difference in raising achievement. This is shown by the willingness of all staff to ensure that the teaching of reading and for English language learners is also a major priority in school. Teachers have embraced the use of technology to provide engaging instruction. However, instructional practice is inconsistent and not all staff have adopted the best instructional practices present in certain areas of the curriculum. Professional development programs are well structured and geared towards the school's primary goals, with a concentration upon improving standards in English language arts.

Members of staff know their students very well. The school uses data to target specific students whose promotion is in doubt. Data is used effectively to update and change plans when such statistics show that instruction is not improving performance. Within classes, rules of behavior are displayed and teachers implement them, in conjunction with reward systems, to ensure effective instruction can take place. Students demonstrate respect and trust in a principal who seeks to be available whenever possible. Many initiatives are relatively new. As yet, evaluation of these initiatives and their impact upon student progress are still to be consolidated, particularly in English language arts. Specific barriers to learning have been identified and action plans to address them put in place. The principal's determination to bring about success, together with the enthusiastic commitment of a team of reflective teachers, shows a capacity for improvement.

The school is making good progress in using the designated periodic assessment materials to generate data. This is having a significant impact upon the specific group that has been chosen to be studied, which are the 7th grade mathematics students. As a result of using these materials, in addition to interviews with individual students and changes to instructional programs, student attitudes have improved and progress has increased.

How well the school meets New York City's evaluation criteria

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school uses test data and its own school generated data to determine the course of action in both the short and long term for individuals, classes and grade levels. A particularly well-developed feature of the school's use of data is its identification of approximately 35% of students whose promotion is in doubt. Each student's progress is regularly monitored and instructional programs modified leading to improved performance.

The school leadership team actively uses data to determine next steps, with particular emphasis upon the progress made by English language learners and special education

students. Teachers ensure that work is matched to the level of each student's understanding and progress is monitored on a regular basis. Teachers do not track the progress of higher performing students to ensure that they receive the right level of challenge.

The use of technology by the principal and teachers in all departments enables access to a range of up-to-date performance data. This is refined to show the differences in performance of ethnic groups, English language learners and special education students. As a result of this filtering process, teachers in certain subjects have a good understanding of the particular needs of each student. This level of understanding is most advanced in mathematics. The school has proficient systems to compare its performance with similar schools and uses current standards of performance to identify trends in the school's performance in the recent past.

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.

School goals, are based solidly upon the interpretation of current data and by reviewing what grades, specific classes and individuals have achieved in the recent past. The principal, in conjunction with other administrators, has used test data to outline to everyone major areas for development. Systems of communication, particularly a tri-weekly newsletter to all staff from the principal, are effective. Regular reference is made to data in identifying progress towards goals and in flagging those areas where not enough progress has been made, for example in English language arts and attendance.

Goals are revised in the light of emerging data. A realization that all students needed specific instruction in how to read and comprehend the tasks that were being set, resulted in creating plans to improve students' understanding of how to interpret text. Changes in curriculum and instruction in response to data is evident across all classes, departments and grades, where opportunities to improve speaking and listening skills have been emphasized in teachers' planning. Coaches and grade leaders meet with their colleagues on a regular basis, both formally and informally, to adjust instructional programs. A particular goal, deduced from analysis of test data for English language learners, has resulted in specific intervention programs which are regularly monitored and evaluated. Data is used to support students identified as being at risk of not being promoted to the next grade. This is then communicated to individual teachers who are expected to take responsibility for specific changes in instruction.

Student progress is measured regularly and conferencing between teachers, students and parents at parent teacher conferences is a well-established procedure. Through the regular analysis of both external tests and assessment information, both students and parents are kept informed of what challenges face the student, what the school's expectations of them are, and how teachers will assist them in their learning. This is particularly evident in setting goals and targets for students in mathematics. Good communications enable the school to inform parents of specific goals, such as how they can assist their children in reading. The school conveys high expectations for students' academic, personal and social development to both students and parents.

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 concentrates upon ensuring the best possible provision of a wide and stimulating curriculum that is aligned to standards. There is a great emphasis on literacy and a drive to publish as many pieces of student writing as possible, with regular poetry and prose booklets being produced by the school itself. All members of staff scrutinize the effectiveness of academic programs with reference to both external and internal data.

Teachers are held accountable for students' progress or lack of it. They are supported in this by leaders who seek to assist and mentor the less experienced members of staff. Teachers do not yet to provide the right level of challenge for high performing students through differentiation. As a result, not all students are actively engaged. Teachers are quick to intervene if disruptive behavior threatens and students respect teachers' reasons for providing a safe and calm learning environment. This has resulted in greater student engagement in a large number of classes.

Students have many opportunities to use technology as a means to extend their writing and presentation skills. This is particularly valuable for English language learners. An outstanding technology newsletter is produced to communicate with staff and students to celebrate progress made in this area. The principal has made financial decisions based upon data. An example of this is the employment of more teachers in specific areas, such as English language arts. Data has shown that some after-school programs are not impacting upon student performance. As a result, money is being used to employ extra staff in crucial areas for development.

Relationships are based on mutual respect, and teachers understand the challenges each student faces. Students trust their teachers and know that they are there to help them. Student attendance figures and patterns are regularly scrutinized. Systems to deal with absence are well developed and regularly reviewed. However, the school has not been entirely successful in dealing with persistent absence and tardiness.

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 hires staff based on subject expertise, flexibility and willingness to respond to challenge. He has, in a short time, and with a relatively inexperienced staff, created a climate where high expectations are the rule. This is based on teachers having access to up-to-date and comprehensive data and being aware of their own personal responsibilities in improving student achievement. The principal has established a climate of mutual trust as a basis for managing change.

Professional development has been designed to address those areas which data has indicated are in greatest need of improvement. The openness of all staff to learn from each other is strong and indicates capacity to move the school forward. As a result of well-targeted professional development, teachers have a clear understanding of some of the challenges the school faces. Professional honesty and a desire to learn from each other's successes and mistakes are widespread throughout school. The principal, with the support of fellow administrators, has created a team spirit where regular lesson observations are seen as opportunities to learn, although there is more work to do in this area. Lead teachers in mathematics, English language arts and other subjects are reflective about current practice and use every opportunity to communicate with colleagues the need to look closely at the progress of underperforming students. The principal

ensures that where change has been necessary, teachers understand the reasons for this. He is respected for honesty in his dealings with staff and students alike. New members of staff are enthusiastic about their welcome and support from mentors and school improvement.

The school runs smoothly and is a calm and student-centered community, where all feel safe and valued. Behavioral challenges still exist, but systems such as the Big Brother, Big Sister program have been established to promote good behavior. Links with community organizations are used well to provide students with enrichment programs. These are effective in motivating students and preparing them for the adult world. Many links exist with local arts and sports groups which assist in widening students' horizons.

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.

Plans for the school's development are clearly outlined within its Comprehensive Education Plan and in other more focused documents. Goals are regularly revisited and evaluated. These have been produced collaboratively and show a precise analysis of the school's immediate challenges. A wide range of City and State data has been used to draw up specific action plans for major areas of concern such as all aspects of English language arts and services for English language learners. Many of these plans, together with evidence of changes made to adjust instructional programs, are still in their infancy.

The school has established satisfactory systems to compare the respective progress made by individuals and groups. A good example of specific targeting of an underperforming group is the identification of those students whose promotion is in doubt. The faculty, with strong leadership, is aware of the need to carry out further evaluation of recent initiatives to improve instruction order to accelerate student learning and increased levels of engagement, particularly for those students who are performing at or above the standard.

Teachers have a healthy respect for each other and are in the process of establishing ways in which they can learn from each other. As a result of comparing student progress and changes to instructional programs, the school has revised its plans accordingly. It is in the process of using these comparisons and evaluations to strengthen its systems to make more timely adjustments to the curriculum and instruction. The principal has developed proficient systems for all staff to analyze academic outcomes. These are the major influence in the school's ability to identify which plans and goals are appropriate at the school's current stage of development. As yet, these systems are able to produce data to enable teachers to monitor student progress, but the overall evaluation of progress, or lack of it, is not at present in place across the whole school.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Bronx Writing Academy (MS 323)	∅	✓	+
Quality Score		X	

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.	∅	✓	+
1.1 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • each student, classroom, grade level, 		X	
1.2 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ethnic groups, English language learners, special education students* 		X	
1.3 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all other categories of interest to the school* 		X	
1.4 Performance and progress are measured based on comparisons with similar schools, with the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grade levels, academic subject areas, ethnic groups, and other groupings of interest within the school.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 1		X	
* These criteria are partially aspirational as of now because schools do not have routine access to all of this data. The NYC DOE plans to provide schools with enhanced access to the necessary data in 2007.			

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student's next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student's learning.	∅	✓	+
2.1 Using data, school leaders and faculty engage in a collaborative process to set demanding, objectively measurable goals for immediate and long-range improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals.		X	
2.2 Goals and plans focus on the school as a whole and on each student, classroom, grade level, academic subject, and group of students whose performance or progress has been identified by the school as a particular focus area.		X	
2.3 Particular attention is given to improving the performance and progress of students in greatest need of improvement.		X	
2.4 High expectations are conveyed to students and parents/caregivers. Students and their parents/caregivers are regularly invited to provide information about each student's performance and how to improve. This information is central to setting challenging goals and developing, evaluating, and revising plans.		X	
2.5 Goals and plans for improving student performance and progress drive the activity of all members of the school community: leaders, staff, students, parents, and other partners.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 2		X	

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity, resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.	∅	✓	+
3.1 The school selects the curriculum based on how well it aligns with or implements the mandated curriculum and on the curriculum's capacity to generate meaningful interim data about progress towards goals and to support the school's high expectations and improvement plans.		X	
3.2 Teachers are accountable for improving instruction and student outcomes. They plan and differentiate their instruction based on the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.		X	
3.3 Budgeting decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.		X	
3.4 Staffing decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.		X	
3.5 Scheduling decisions about the use of teacher and student time are guided by the needs that emerge from examining student data and by the focused plan the school develops to improve student outcomes.		X	
3.6 Instructional programs actively engage students.		X	
3.7 Staff knows and respect students and responds to their academic needs, as well as their personal needs that affect academic performance. Each student knows and trusts an adult on the staff who is concerned about him or her.			X
3.8 Student attendance and engagement are high priorities. High rates and patterns of absences trigger immediate intervention.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 3		X	
Quality Statement 4 – Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.	∅	✓	+
4.1 Leaders, faculty, and staff are selected based on their high expectations for student performance and progress and based on their commitment and capacity to use data, compare outcomes within and across classrooms and schools and develop and revise plans and methods to improve performance and progress.		X	
4.2 Professional development decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes. Professional development is designed to help leaders, faculty, and staff use data, self- and peer-assessments, and collaboration with peers to achieve goals for improved school and student outcomes. Professional development and self- and peer-evaluation are aligned and overlap.		X	
4.3 The principal frequently observes classroom teaching and has a considered strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction. Teachers frequently observe and support each other's classroom instruction with the goal of improving student outcomes.		X	
4.4 Planning, evaluation of results, and revision of plans takes place in teams. Leaders and faculty inform each other of their goals and results, candidly evaluate themselves and each other, and use what is learned to drive improvement.		X	
4.5 The principal is respected and has capacity to effect change.			X
4.6 The school runs smoothly. Procedures are clear, communicated to all, and are generally followed.		X	
4.7 The school aligns youth development and support services around stated academic goals. Partnerships with outside bodies are routinely used to achieve academic goals.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 4		X	
Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.	∅	✓	+
5.1 All school plans and other interventions include frequent interim goals and diagnostic assessments of progress designed to reveal in objectively measurable ways whether the plan is being effectively implemented and reaching stated goals.		X	
5.2 Comparisons of student progress within and across classrooms and schools are used in making interim diagnostic assessments and measuring the progress of plans and interventions.		X	
5.3 Information generated by periodic assessments and diagnostic measures of progress and comparisons is used to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals. Interim and final goals are modified when data objectively demonstrate that revision is required.		X	
5.4 Each plan's interim and final outcomes drive successive phases of goal setting and improvement planning, and each successive phase is characterized by agile and flexible realignment of practices and resources to improve student academic outcomes.		X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 5		X	