



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Bronx Academy of Letters

High School 551

339 Morris Avenue

Bronx

NY 10451

Principal: Joan Sullivan

Dates of review: April 19 - 20, 2007

Reviewer: Cheryl Baker

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

The Bronx Academy of Letters is an empowerment high school serving 310 students in grades 9 through 12. Approximately 11% of students have special education needs and 8% are English language learners. The predominant second language is Spanish. The population is 58% Hispanic, 37% Black, 3% Asian, and 2% are from other backgrounds. Attendance averages above 93%, higher than the City. The school is Title I eligible with the proportion of qualifying students exceeding that of schools across the City.

The school will add a sixth grade class in September 2007 as it fulfills its plan to create a middle school component by 2009. As an empowerment school, Bronx Academy of Letters benefits from reduced paperwork as well as enjoying greater freedom in making decisions about expenditures and professional development.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school values scholarship and academic excellence and communicates high performance expectations to students and parents.
- The school routinely generates and analyzes the available quantitative and qualitative data in order to inform decisions relative to all aspects of the school.
- Teachers are empowered to participate in collaborative leadership and shared decision making through grade level, departmental and advisory teams.
- The school's climate is shaped by the 'school as library' model which infuses print material into the hallways, classrooms and the central reading room.
- Students are afforded extensive opportunities to explore the literary workplace, higher education, and enrichment offerings in athletics and the arts.
- The school has developed highly selective practices with respect to staff selection resulting in a stable and cohesive teaching force.
- Curriculum planning and the delivery of instruction are highly structured and monitored with regularity.
- The school has established strong relationships with outside bodies which support its development through consultation and extensive fundraising.
- The school's attendance policies and practices are well developed.
- Students' academic achievement and attendance exceed that of their peers.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue to explore mechanisms for streamlining the analysis and distribution of data to support its routine and regular use in planning for instruction and interventions.
- Provide professional development in techniques for the differentiation of instruction based on individual students' learning needs and teaching reading across the curriculum.
- Continue to develop and monitor specialized programs to meet the needs of students most in need of improvement.
- Devise mechanisms to track the decisions and actions of all school teams so as to ensure continuity of focus and practice as the school continues to grow.

Part 3: Main findings

Overall Evaluation

This is a well-developed school.

The Bronx Academy of Letters is the manifestation of the vision of the principal who founded the school in 2003, with assistance from the Urban Assembly and an independent advisory council. The advisory council, comprised of mainly of individuals representing the worlds of finance, law and publishing has raised over three million dollars in discretionary funds for the school. With a team of highly intelligent and well educated teachers, the principal has created an institution of learning that is data driven, goal oriented, and academically challenging. Students, teachers and parents are empowered to share in the school's development and contribute to its success. Goals and plans are well understood and are regularly reviewed and revised as data emerge in response to the school's continued evolution towards a comprehensive middle and high school complex.

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 uses all available data and generates its own in order to understand all aspects of the school. The results of these assessments, together with the school's two periodic assessment tools are regularly analyzed to understand the progress and learning needs of individual students, classrooms, grade levels, academic subject areas, ethnic groups and other categories of interest. Additionally, the school has rigorous practices in place with respect to the monitoring and analysis of attendance, disciplinary referrals and incident data. Anecdotal data such as logs of parent contacts, records of students' participation in enrichment and college readiness activities and records of students' advisory engagement add to the deep understanding the school has of all of its students. The school routinely disaggregates data to analyze the relationships among various data and produces charts, graphs and reports describing discrete areas of need and progress.

The performance of the school's ethnic groups has been tracked since its inception, showing little disparity thus far. Gender is a particular category of interest as females represent approximately two thirds of the population. Males are a particular focus during recruitment. Their greater number of discipline referrals and slightly lower academic achievement is addressed individually and within the advisory curriculum as it evolves to address specific identified needs.

The progress of special education students and English language learners is further monitored through the assessments mandated by their respective instructional programs and their individual learning plans. Additional interim assessments are administered to English language learners to provide more regular measures of their progress to inform program placement changes. The pass rate and credit accumulation of these students, while lower than their peers by approximately 10%, is higher than the average of similar and City schools.

The school has performed rigorous comparisons of its progress over time, especially with respect to the pass rates of cohorts, grades and advisory groups. The schools' membership in the Urban Assembly network provides another source of comparison, where the school's academic achievement and attendance continue to show relative improvement. The development of a web-based data warehouse is an ambition for the 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 well developed.

The Comprehensive Education Plan, developed in collaboration with the school leadership team, and the principal's performance review reflects the analysis of student performance and survey data. The school's primary goals are reflective of data, which are well understood by all constituencies and have manifested themselves in concrete and observable actions throughout the school year. For example, the school's website has been developed to support communication, student leadership is now representative of the advisory structure and training, assessments and resources have been added to support the goal of improving reading skills.

In support of the school's middle school initiative, an implementation plan has been developed which specifies the actions, responsible parties, priority needs, resources and timelines for the school's opening in September 2007. Goal setting is also practiced by advisors, academic departments, grade teams and teachers who set goals for improvement relative to their specific areas of responsibility. The principal, in regular consultation with these constituencies, reviews progress towards goal achievement.

For students whose progress has been identified as a particular focus area, such as those reading below grade level, the school has structures in place to plan programs and interventions to address these needs. Wilson reading and Read 180 programs are designed to help these students. Remedial courses in mathematics have been designed to address skill deficits among incoming freshmen. Special education students and English language learners receive specialized instruction in small groups within the general education classroom and through push-in and pull-out instruction, as specified by their individual education plans or informed by assessment data.

Unique to the school is its advisory program which organizes students into grade level groups of approximately fifteen that meet daily with a teacher assigned to take responsibility for guiding their academic, social and emotional growth over their high school career. Administrators, students, parents and teachers point to this structure as the conduit for all information, interventions and communication about students. Parents and students have high praise for the advisors in their personal support and encouragement of students, their regular communication with parents and their constant reinforcement of the school's college-bound culture.

The school's graduation requirements exceed those of the City and all communications express high expectations for student achievement and the tacit assumption that students will continue their education after high school. To foster this goal, the school takes all freshmen and sophomores on historical and college visitation trips to cities such as Boston

and Washington DC to acculturate students to the college experience. To date, well over half of the members of the school's first graduating class have achieved college acceptance, most with full scholarships.

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 school's curriculum is developed by teachers and is informed by State standards and Regents test item analysis. The curriculum for each course is described in a common format which describes the overall goals specifies the materials, activities, assessments and other particulars. Where more than one teacher teaches a course, collaboration ensures common delivery. Course binders including the curriculum, daily lesson plans and samples of student work are passed on to subsequent teachers when assignments change. The requirement that lesson plans be produced for each class and copied so that students and visitors receive the plan upon entering the room ensures accountability for teaching and provides evidence of high expectations and planning for the differentiation of instruction. The principal, through regular consultation, holds teachers accountable for discipline referrals, grades, pass rates and examination performance. Differentiation in the school is done largely by program placement, activity, instructional grouping and assessment modification. Differentiation for included special education students and English language learners remains a challenge.

The principal and her administrative team base budget, staffing and scheduling decisions on their discrete understanding of all aspects of the school. Private funding sources have supplemented the school's allocation allowing for improvements to the school that far exceed the capabilities of many institutions. For instance, the school purchased and staffed the Read 180 program to address reading deficits, hired a consulting firm to support the vertical alignment of curriculum across the middle and high schools, purchased state-of-the-art science curriculum to support the introduction of additional Regents courses, purchased 250 computers to support literacy and research, and funded the automation of the 'school as library' initiative. Staffing was hired to provide remedial reading support, provide more instruction for English language learners and increase Advanced Placement offerings. Teachers' and students' schedules were change mid-year in response to data that emerged from the periodic assessments suggesting that some students' deficits needed to be met in different instructional settings.

The school is fortunate to have abundant technology which is routinely used in instruction and supports active learning which engages students in research, data analysis and writing. The school's focus on literature and writing is borne out in a rich array of writing workshops provide by published authors, a number of publishing opportunities for student authors and the proliferation of print material in the hallways and classrooms that students are encouraged to explore at will. Students report that their classes are challenging and interesting and they appreciate the high expectations their teachers hold for them. Those approaching graduation point to their college acceptance rate as evidence of the school's success in preparing them for their next step. Students feel known and nurtured through the advisory structure and all could point to numerous staff members in whom they could confide. Their engagement in their education is evidenced by the school's attendance rate, currently 93.5%, which has increased annually and which is higher than the City average. Daily attendance meetings held by the principal and triage of attendance-related

activities by teachers, advisors and attendance personnel creates the capacity to act immediately to address absenteeism.

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 administration's belief that the strength of any school lies in its teachers underpins the school's highly selective hiring practices which include all constituencies, including the Urban Assembly and the school's advisory board. Candidates often number in the hundreds for one position and undergo a thorough scrutiny of their credentials, their attitudes towards taking responsibility for student advising, four or more rounds of interviews and the demonstration of several model lessons including their use of assessments to evaluate learning. The school has retained over 91% of its staff. The quality of instruction is monitored by the principal through daily classroom visits and a minimum of four formal evaluations each year. Formal and informal evaluations result in feedback regarding instruction that is informative and instructive. Teachers' schedules are such that intervisitations can and do take place regularly and are indicative of the collaborative sharing of best practices among the staff.

Professional development is further supported through three weekly grade team meetings, weekly department meetings, half-day planning sessions held once each marking period, three City-wide professional development days and opportunities for training outside of school. The overall focus of these sessions has been on curricular issues and looking at student work, in addition to managerial issues.

Grade level, department and advisory teams also provide overlapping and differentiated structures for collaboration and shared decision making. Members of these teams meet to analyze statistical and anecdotal data and address all aspects of schooling and student support and provide guidance to the administration in determining the school's direction. The principal, in turn regularly monitors the activities of these teams based upon their stated goals.

Her leadership and management skills are admired by teachers, students and parents, all of whom point to her vision for the school as a significant factor that has contributed to its success and capacity to continue to grow and improve. School procedures and practices are clearly articulated and documented leading to a smoothly functioning organization that is scholarly, purposeful and calm.

Students are the beneficiaries of extensive extracurricular enrichment activities in publishing, arts, athletics, and student government. They are afforded opportunities for internships and community service activities at publishing houses, cultural institutions, community organizations and universities. Fifteen percent have traveled abroad through school-sponsored trips. All of these activities support their academic and social growth and their participation is encouraged, monitored and evaluated.

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.

School plans such as the Comprehensive Education Plan and the principal's performance review express annual goals for student and institutional improvement as do goals of departments, teams, teachers and advisories. However, the routine monitoring of the success of actions undertaken to attain stated goals demonstrates a commitment to measure the effectiveness of the plans. The school leadership team takes an active role in measuring progress based on the data as it emerges and has undertaken to change specified actions when warranted. For example, the Comprehensive Education Plan called for the addition of a college counselor who was hired. However, when data revealed the need to reconfigure the programs of some English language learners, this individual, who possessed the requisite licensure, was reassigned to address this need. Similar flexible realignment of resources and personnel took place to bring more clearly defined direction to special education programming after results of periodic assessments revealed the need to reassign some of these students and provide professional support to teachers.

Comparisons of student progress within and across classrooms is routine and integrated in the activities of the administrative team who track attendance data against monthly improvement goals and monitor cohort data as new assessment results emerge. This information is shared with grade level, department and advisory teams who craft instructional or behavioral interventions and adjustments. These measures of progress are further informed by the analysis of marking period grades, homework completion, and teacher made tests. Comparisons across Urban Assembly schools help the administration to measure and share the school's success and to learn from network partners.

The school has adopted two periodic assessment tools, one that sheds light specifically on students' reading levels and skills and another that provides diagnostic information about English language arts and mathematics. The results of these assessments and the comparison of data across assessments for individual students has provided diagnostic information that has led to the adoption of the Read 180 and Wilson reading programs for immediate intervention with struggling readers. Adjustments to students' pull-out schedules resulted as well. Mathematics results led to the reassignment of some students from algebra to pre-algebra in order to address identified weaknesses.

The school prides itself on its routine practice of self-reflection and its willingness to address deficits and make changes as needed, even when program adjustments are complicated and call for some teachers and students to undergo temporary periods of adjustment. The school is fortunate in that it possesses both the capacity to identify needs and the flexibility to realign practices and resources to improve student outcomes.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Bronx Academy of Letters (HS 551)	∅	✓	+
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