



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

The Acorn School for Social Justice

High School 498

**1396 Broadway
Brooklyn
NY 11221**

Principal: Karen Watts

Dates of review: May 22 – 23, 2008

Lead Reviewer: Maggie Hollingsworth

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

Progress made since the last review

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 Acorn School for Social Justice is a high school with 550 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 80% Black and 20% Hispanic students. The student body includes 5% English language learners and 18% special education students. Boys account for 50% of the students enrolled and girls account for 50%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2006-2007 was 68.7%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 80% eligibility.

The executive principal joined the school on February 1, 2008.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The principal's clear vision and single-minded focus on improvement have led to a swift turnaround in the school's climate and culture.
- Clear and unequivocal short, medium and long term plans with well defined goals are keeping the school on track for steady improvement.
- The school uses data very effectively to analyze student progress and decide whether its plans for students are working.
- The principal and administrators regularly check the school's progress and make adjustments quickly to make sure goals are being met.
- Staff and students have adapted well to new routines and structures which have improved discipline and enabled the school to run smoothly.
- The students' self esteem is rising because the school expects more of them and provides them many opportunities to improve their performance.
- The newly extended range of extracurricular activities is fostering the interest of students and motivating them to engage better with school.
- There are excellent procedures for monitoring and following up absence and tardiness which have led to a steep rise in attendance.
- The provision of common planning periods has been instrumental in developing teachers' skills to understand and use data to drive instruction.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue to develop teachers' skills and confidence in using technology to record and analyze scholarship data.
- Ensure that activities in all lessons fully engage and motivate students.
- Ensure that all students receive good advice and guidance about how to succeed in their academic programs.
- Further improve communication with parents to ensure that they understand the implications of the school's many new initiatives.

Part 3: Main Findings

Progress made since the last review

The school has made good progress in addressing the issues identified in the previous Quality Review report.

Overall Evaluation

This school is well developed.

Since the new principal joined the school, there have been many changes to the school's structures and systems. These have ensured that the school is a safe place and that students attend regularly. The school now has clear goals for whole-school improvement and short, medium and longer-term action plans to make sure that the goals are achieved. In drawing up these plans the principal listened and responded to the concerns of parents, students, teachers and the local community. As a result, the school has a much clearer focus on academic achievement, a more interesting curriculum and many more opportunities for activities outside school hours. The administration checks frequently whether the school is achieving its goals overall and has good systems to ensure that students also keep on track to make continuing gains. The school uses and analyzes data very well to check on student progress and to identify what students need to do next to improve, although the process of target setting for individual students is less well developed. The school has been seeking additional ways to push pass rates up for those students in most need of improvement. For example, the inquiry team has been focusing on a group of students at risk of failing their global history Regents test and trying out strategies to accelerate their progress and help them reach passing level. A new schedule has given staff more time to collaborate and, as a result, lesson planning and instructional styles have changed for the better. One student commented 'Wow! A big turnaround!'

There are, however, things that the school still needs to improve. For example, although many teachers use technology extensively, there are still some who lack this confidence. While there are many lessons that have students on the edge of their seats with interest, not all of them have the same impact. Some students and parents also need more guidance to ensure that students understand the best way to manage their schedule to get the highest number of credits from the program.

The school has made good progress in addressing the issues raised in the last Quality Review. There have been marked improvements in classroom assessment and its use to inform instruction. Attendance is much higher because there are very good systems for following up absence and lateness. There is a focused program of professional development which has enabled teachers to learn different methods of differentiating work for students, although this is not yet firmly established in classroom practice. There is a growing range of opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and for parents to play a large part in their children's education, although the school has some work to do in ensuring parents are fully familiar with the school's new initiatives.

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 the student's progress over time.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The school makes very good use of computerized testing systems to provide an up-to-date analysis of what students have understood and what they need to review. This helps teachers plan their lessons to better meet student needs. By providing each teacher with a personal laptop computer, the principal has enabled on-line data to be readily accessible and made it easy for staff to update their records. The school is seeing good results from its training to help staff use data. Most teachers now routinely use computers to analyze test results and identify gaps in students' knowledge. Because they work closely in departmental teams with teachers who already have the skills, others are developing this confidence. Staff in each department analyze and compare their test results to learn during the regular common planning periods what instructional techniques are the most successful. The administration uses data very effectively to check trends in the performance of groups and cohorts of students over time and to determine the next course of action. For example, the data showed a shortfall in the progress in math of special education students compared with others after the first marking period because the students were having difficulty reading word problems. As a result, the teachers of math worked alongside the resource room teachers to set up a remedial program for the students and get students back on track. Similarly, when the school recognized from its data analysis that the achievement of males students was falling behind that of females it set up a variety of initiatives such as the "Men's Club" to increase their motivation and raise their achievement. At present the school compares its performance with other "Social Justice" schools rather than a wider cohort of schools with a similar student profile.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The new principal has worked with the staff to set new and higher goals for student achievement. She has injected rigor and purpose into collaborative planning so that teachers use the time productively to set and monitor goals for their departments. Teachers keep a close check on the progress of individual students each marking period and some involve students in this process. "Scholarship improvement conferences" between subject staff, guidance counselors, parents and students which undertake a detailed analysis of student needs help the school identify personalized support programs. For example, an English language learner who needed help with English language arts now has a parallel text in Spanish which is helping her pass the class. However, the process of goal-setting for individual students is not fully established in all departments. The school is raising the expectations of higher achievers ambitiously by beginning to offer advanced placement (AP) classes, initiating visits to Ivy League universities and next year, providing a rigorous college preparation program. Students welcome these initiatives and spoke of the improved culture of the school that encouraged them to do their best.

The principal has listened to the views of parents and the community and acted on many of their demands. Parents receive regular report cards and, if they call or email,

information about interim test scores. The school's recent "Mother Daughter Tea" which was designed to encourage more parents to take an interest in their daughter's education was very well attended, and the school is planning a "Brotherhood Breakfast". These are imaginative initiatives which are helping to encourage greater support from parents and improving relationships between parents and the school. However, some parents are not well enough informed about the many new activities and programs, especially how they can help their child to gain extra credits.

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instructional Strategy to Goals: The school aligns its academic work, strategic decisions and resources, and effectively engages students around its plans and goals for accelerating student learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

By increasing the range of opportunities for students to improve their performance the school is improving scholarship rates for students across the ability range. Higher achieving students benefit from honors and AP classes and from a range of challenging electives. The school also offers Regents prep, credit recovery and a range of after school classes for those who the data shows are falling behind. Strategic decision making, for example, to provide a nine period day, has enabled students to benefit from a range of additional support and tutoring. It has also provided generous common planning time which has been instrumental in enabling the school to implement smoothly the many changes that are being made to the curriculum and instruction.

The classrooms are well resourced with electronic learning devices which enliven lessons considerably and enable students to participate in a more active way in lessons. For example, a beginners' Spanish class played a game of "Academic Football" enthusiastically which helped them revise vocabulary and grammar while, at the same time, enjoying the competitive spirit. There was a buzz of interest in an algebra class where students competed with each other to map accurately the graph of a water fountain, using a hand-held digital mapping device. However, there were several other lessons which did not actively engage students because there was over-reliance on paper based activities and work was not well enough matched to student needs. Students spoke highly of the developing range of extracurricular activities which is rekindling student interest and motivation. Since February, the range of extracurricular activities has grown and the school is wisely planning to increase this further. Students also appreciated that the culture of the school has become more supportive and focused on academic achievement. The school recognized that it needed to act aggressively to increase attendance. It now takes a much more proactive role in tackling absence and tardiness, for example by telephoning parents at 6.30am if students are developing a pattern of lateness. This has led to a rise of more than 15 percentage points in the school's attendance figures.

Quality Statement 4 - Align Capacity Building to Goals: The development of leadership, teachers and other staff capacity is aligned to the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The school's professional development program is very well organized and its impact has been enhanced by the generous provision of common planning time. Daily departmental meetings enable teachers to analyze student performance and trends, work out how to address student needs and learn from each other by observing lessons and exchanging

information about what makes a difference. The students are benefiting from instruction that is becoming better matched to their learning needs. The principal and cabinet visit classrooms frequently to check whether lessons are following the expected pattern and ensure consistency between classrooms. A session organized and led by the English language arts department indicated that the professional development program was very effective in meeting the needs of both staff and the school.

The principal has put in place firm structures and procedures that help the school to run smoothly. Students understand the reasons for the changes to the discipline code and are happy that the school is now safe and classrooms are calm. The number of suspensions has fallen markedly over the past three months. Teachers have responded well to the principal's new requirements, for example that they post their lesson plans on classroom doors and organize their classrooms similarly across departments. As a result, classrooms are more conducive to learning and the expectations of students are more uniform across the school.

A variety of after school and weekend programs and activities such as the New York City explorers club and the Young Ladies and Gentleman's club help to ensure that students develop personally and academically.

Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The new principal has acted swiftly to set in place new plans to guide the school's work and achieve immediate improvement. With her team of administrators, she has used performance data to take stock of the school's position and determine what needed to be done most urgently in the first two weeks, the following month and in the longer term. As a result of this analysis, the school devised separate plans for instruction, attendance and discipline. There are clear goals for each of these plans. Administrators check regularly whether they are achieving planned improvements by looking at the data, make adjustments quickly to make sure goals are being met and revise the goals as they are achieved. By modeling this process of goal setting, monitoring and review and allowing staff ample time to discuss data and plan together, the administration has quickly developed a culture in which data is routinely used to drive instruction and in the analysis of results. The classroom walls, which are rich with annotated student work and graphs and charts about student achievement, are testimony to this. The principal's clear vision and single-minded focus on improvement have been the catalyst for the school's turnaround. Because staff have been very willing to adopt new practices, the school has good capacity to consolidate and build on these changes for the future.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: The Acorn School for Social Justice	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
Quality Score				X	

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

To what extent do school leaders and faculty provide . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
1.1 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of each student, classroom, grade level?				X	
1.2 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of special education students?				X	
1.3 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of English language learners?				X	
1.4 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of ethnic groups, gender groups and all other categories of interest to the school?				X	
1.5 a measurement of performance and progress based on the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grades and subject areas?				X	
1.6 a measurement of performance and progress based on comparisons with similar schools?			X		
1.7 training, management systems and structures that support teachers in the use of school data to inform planning and instruction and to track the progress of students?			X		
Overall score for Quality Statement 1				X	

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each students learning.

To what extent do school leaders and faculty . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
2.1 engage in collaborative processes to set rigorous, objectively measurable goals for improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals?				X	
2.2 focus 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 identify and improve the performance and progress of those students in greatest need of improvement?				X	
2.4 share whole school goals with all members of the school community to rigorously improve the performance and progress of students?				X	
2.5 convey consistently high expectations to students and their parents/caregivers?				X	
2.6 regularly provide students and their parents/caregivers with information about the goals set for each student, and about each student's progress and performance, and how they can improve?			X		
2.7 invite and enable parents/caregivers to provide useful information to teachers and the school about the learning needs and capacities of their children?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 2				X	

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instructional Strategy to Goals: The school aligns its academic work, strategic decisions and resources, and effectively engages students around its plans and goals for accelerating student learning.

To what extent does the school . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
3.1 select core curricular approaches that facilitate and provide meaningful interim data about progress towards goals and focus on raising the achievement of students?				X	
3.2 provide a broad and engaging curriculum, including the arts, to enhance learning both within and outside the school day?				X	
3.3 hold teachers accountable for the progress and learning of the students in their charge, for making instruction interesting and compelling, and for creating a positive safe and inclusive learning environment?			X		
3.4 ensure that teachers use school, class and student data to plan for and provide differentiated instruction that meets the specific needs of all the students in their charge?			X		
3.5 make budgeting, staffing and scheduling decisions strategically, based on data, to meet the school's academic goals for all students?				X	
3.6 ensure that there is an environment of mutual trust and respect between all staff and students to support personal and academic development?				X	
3.7 ensure that there are effective and consistently applied procedures to encourage and monitor student attendance and tardiness?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 3				X	

Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building to Goals: The development of leadership, teachers and other staff capacity is aligned to the school’s collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.					
To what extent does the school . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
4.1 use frequent observations of classroom teaching by the principal and other available information to develop a differentiated strategy for improving the quality of each teacher’s instruction?				X	
4.2 make professional development decisions strategically, based on data, to help meet the improvement goals of students and teachers?				X	
4.3 provide frequent opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s classroom instruction and to meet together in teams to plan, share effective practices, and evaluate one another’s instruction in an open and reflective professional environment?				X	
4.4 develop effective procedures for the induction and support of teachers who are new to the profession or the school?				X	
4.5 align youth development, guidance/advising and other student support services around stated academic and personal development goals?			X		
4.6 consistently implement clear procedures that enable the school to run smoothly and encourage effective student learning, and effectively address discipline related incidents?				X	
4.7 create effective partnerships with outside entities that support the academic and personal growth of the students?			X		
Overall score for Quality Statement 4				X	

Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for evaluating each student’s progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.					
To what extent do . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
5.1 the school’s plans for improving student outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?				X	
5.2 the school’s plans for improving teacher outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?				X	
5.3 teachers and faculty use periodic assessments and other diagnostic tools to measure the effectiveness of plans and interventions for individual and groups of students in key areas?				X	
5.4 teachers and faculty use the information generated by periodic assessments and other progress measures and comparisons to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals?				X	
5.5 school leaders track the outcomes of periodic assessments and other diagnostic measures and use the results to makes strategic decisions to modify practices to improve student outcomes?				X	
5.6 school leaders and staff use each plan’s interim and final outcomes to drive the next stage of goal setting and improvement planning?				X	
5.7 the principal and school community have a clear vision for the future development of the school and implement procedures and systems to effect change?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 5				X	

◇	Outstanding
+	Well Developed
✓	Proficient
➤	Underdeveloped with Proficient Features
Δ	Underdeveloped