



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Validus Preparatory Academy

High School 263

**1595 Bathgate Avenue
Bronx
NY 10457**

Principal: Brady Smith

Dates of review: April 28 – 29, 2008

Lead Reviewer: Alvin Jeffs

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Validus Preparatory Academy is a high school with 336 students from grade 9 through grade 11. The school population comprises 30% Black and 70% Hispanic students. The student body includes 14% English language learners and 13% special education students. Boys account for 33% of the students enrolled and girls account for 66%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2006 -2007 was 85%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 90% eligibility.

Validus is in its third year, with the final grade, Grade 12, being added in September 2008. It is an Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB) school, which means that there is an emphasis on high achievement through active learning, character growth and teamwork. It links closely with other similar schools, both in New York and across the country. It is also an Empowerment school, with greater flexibility in making budgetary decisions.

The school has been without an assistant principal for most of the year. Other staff have therefore carried out additional duties throughout the year.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- A respected principal sets the highest possible standards for staff and students alike.
- All staff seek the best for their students in terms of character development and achievement.
- The emphasis on students' responsibility for their own learning is consistent and highly effective in raising achievement.
- The school uses data well to track student progress, identify those in need of additional support and set challenging learning targets.
- Parents and students value the safe and stimulating environment.
- The principles of teamwork central to the Expeditionary Learning vision contribute well to the maturity demonstrated by all students.
- Effective staff collaboration provides a good model for students.
- Staff know the students very well and levels of communication are high.
- The strong emphasis on mutual support contributes to a strong and effective professional development program.
- There is a high level of consistency in the active encouragement of literacy skills in all subjects.

Areas for Improvement

- Clarify key leadership roles to provide effective day-to-day support to the principal.
- Seek appropriate resources to extend the arts and physical activities curriculum.
- Ensure that all class teachers are aware of personal targets for the year.
- Review informal assessment procedures to ensure that teachers' very good knowledge of students continues to be captured.

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.

Validus is characterized by the excellent communication that takes place between staff. There is a strong mutual respect between staff and students. These two factors, together with the generally high standard of teaching make this a small high school that is becoming increasingly the school of choice for many families. All involved with the school attest to the successful leadership of the principal, who has been involved with the school since the design and building stage. He models high professional standards, takes a keen interest in the progress and problems of all students and has carried the total responsibility for strategic management for the past three years.

Although it is a young staff, with many new to teaching, most have taken on additional managerial responsibilities over the past eighteen months. Attendance, curriculum planning and grade assessments have been the responsibility of teams which demonstrate very good collaboration and mutual respect. Similarly, the inquiry team has worked hard to analyze the performance of under-achievers in math. It is now looking to pass on its findings to a similar social studies investigative group next year.

Parents and students attest to the supportive and respectful culture that permeates the school. This largely derives from the commitment of all staff to the Expeditionary Learning philosophy. All incoming students participate in a 5-day backpacking orientation within “crews”, groups of 15 with the teacher. While staff maximize the face-to-face contact a small school allows, students benefit from a real sense of belonging with their “crew” throughout their school career.

The school has made good progress in all areas identified at the last Quality Review. Data has been further disaggregated, especially with regard to gender. Technology developments have meant that differentiation within lesson planning is now sharper because of the detailed data available for each student. The school’s strategic plan for 2007–2008 was compiled using the previous report, together with external progress reports and internal surveys. Current planning for this year places a high priority on the digitalizing of data to ensure easy access for staff and a greater standardization of assessment procedures. Despite the absence of an assistant principal, the principal has been meticulous in his support for teachers through structured classroom observation. Considerable effort has been put into following up absences.

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.

Validus has developed good systems of data collection that start very early. In the summer before grade 9 students arrive, staff acquire all available data and analyze it. This assists in the make-up of classes and in identifying those students who will require additional support. As students progress through the school this basic information is supplemented with regular end-of-unit tests in all subjects, self-evaluation and assessed work samples. The data relating to special education students is of particularly good quality and effectively informs "push in" and "pull out" support for those students with individual action plans. Staff regularly monitor the progress of students developing English as a second language. This is a key factor in ensuring that every year a significant number "test out" as fluent English speakers.

Since the last Quality Review the school has been active in beginning to analyze data relating to subgroups within the school. This has been helpful, for example, in identifying the progress of boys and girls in a school where boys comprise only 33% of the population. In such a young school, there is little in the way of past results with which to make comparisons. However, systems are in place to do this as data becomes available. The school is very active in making further comparisons with the many other Outward Bound schools and this has enabled the school to assess its success in achieving higher levels in English language arts.

Staff are well supported in their collection of data and its use in planning lessons. Support comes in the form of professional development, work with the instructional guide and the provision of laptops to all teachers. As a result, teachers show considerable enthusiasm for the rapidly increasing use of electronic data handling within the school.

Assessment data is detailed and exceptionally well used. The size of the school means that this takes place through informal systems and excellent communication. However, the school has identified the need to review assessment and communication procedures, possibly considering greater formalization as its population grows.

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.

Central to Expeditionary Learning is the empowerment of students to take responsibility for their own learning. Student-led conferences are regular and rigorous. Students present their work to a panel of professionals, including representatives from the Outward Bound Board and Goldman Sachs. Parents also attend and become closely involved with their child's work and self-designed targets. Parents and students attest to the power and value of these conferences. Similarly powerful are the special education individual education plan conferences, which many parents attend. The newly identified special education coordinator provides useful advice and support for students, teachers and parents throughout the year. Weekly grade team meetings make good use of data to

identify students requiring additional support within specific subject areas. This has led to the development of credit recovery classes, “intensives”, after-school sessions and summer schools. Teachers also provide lunchtime catch-up classes. High quality collaboration between staff has been the major factor in these successful developments. This is evident in the many team meetings that have provided support for the principal over the past year. At meetings of the attendance team, the inquiry team and the three grade teams, information is shared freely and plans of action devised for individual students, subgroups and classes. Thus, all staff are involved both in finding ways to increase student progress and meet the strategic whole-school goals.

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.

Students experience a rich and appropriate curriculum. The expeditionary model of learning ensures that teamwork develops well and teachers pay careful attention to the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. The investment in laptops and SMART boards throughout the school means that computer literacy is strong. In addition, excellent work has been carried out within music and art, increasing the number of classes and after-school activities significantly since the last Quality Review. Sensitive scheduling means that students are grouped according to their needs. Students in grades 10 and 11 have individualized timetables. Each student follows a schedule that is based on their achievement as indicated through assessment data and their needs that have been articulated in the student-led conferences. As one teacher commented, “There are over three hundred students and just as many programs.”

A particular strength of the curriculum is the way in which all subjects provide opportunities for the reinforcement of literacy skills, from developing persuasive writing in science to the using of presentation skills at student-led conferences. In a number of subjects, such as social studies, the school has adapted the sequence in which topics are taught to make the subject more logical in the minds of students. Some resource constraints mean that at present the school cannot implement the full fitness and art curricula. The school is actively looking beyond the school to develop resources and links.

Teachers are held accountable through regular visits by senior staff and sensitive feedbacks. At present there is no start-of-year dialogue with individual teachers to set goals for their classes.

Procedures for monitoring and addressing attendance and punctuality issues are strong, but have not yet had time to yield results in a school with a poor attendance record.

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.

Central to the very good professional development of staff is the imaginative and effective system of critical friends groups. Each member of staff who is not in their first year of teaching is part of a small group within which they discuss and explore professional

issues, gain support and identify training needs. A second program, Expeditionary Learning 101, has focused on teachers in their first professional year. These programs have allowed the sharing of expertise, the resolution of professional problems and modeled a teamwork approach to management that has been essential in a school with only one administrator. An integral part of this process is the development of inter-visitation. Staff are happy to be observed and to learn from colleagues. In addition, the teacher responsible for special education and the instructional guide make regular classroom visits to identify problems or model ways of working.

There is a rich professional development program. Staff identify deficits in their subject knowledge. Where common needs exist, such as learning to use SMART boards or develop assessment and differentiation skills, programs have been developed for the staff as a whole. The school designer is central to these developments and, together with the principal and instructional guide, has been able to develop a training program that addresses needs expressed by staff.

The school has established many valuable partnerships, from those with Outward Bound and Goldman Sachs, central to the student-led conferences, to the Brooklyn Artists' Alliance and Play4Life, which enrich the physical and arts curriculum. In addition, close links with mental health practitioners and programs relating to drug and alcohol abuse supplement the strong health curriculum. Close links with colleges and a program of internships provide very good vocational preparation.

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 school has clear timescales for identifying its main strategic goals. These goals arise from the principal's performance review, from needs identified within grades and departments and those articulated by the school leadership and strategic planning teams. Major goals for next year include developments within social studies, further drives to raise attendance and enhancement of the fitness program. Review points are identified at which incoming data, student performance and in-school surveys are used to assess progress towards the goals. The school is prompt to adapt its programs if necessary. For example during the current year, the monitoring of student progress has prompted the school to develop credit recovery classes in global history, math and English language arts. At student level, a similar process takes place, with grade teams discussing individual achievement. On the basis of these discussions, adaptations are made to work within subject areas and expectations of individual students. The school identifies that similar rigor is not yet fully in place for all classroom teachers.

Accelerating learning is a continuous process within the school. From the many formal and informal discussions that take place on a daily basis come the goals for the next stage of each process. The school is aware of the demands that the current "flat" management structure places on teachers and principal alike as student numbers increase. Consideration is being given to the key administration roles necessary to maintain the enthusiasm and momentum that have been generated over the first three year's of the school's life.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: Validus Preparatory Academy	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