



The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

Christopher Columbus High School

High School 415

**925 Astor Avenue
Bronx
NY 10469**

Principal: Lisa Fuentes

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Lead Reviewer: Nick Butt

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Christopher Columbus is a high school with 1589 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 34% Black, 48% Hispanic, 11% White, and 6% Asian students. The student body includes 18% English language learners and 23% special education students. Boys account for 60% of the students enrolled and girls account for 40%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2006 -2007 was 76.2%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 62% eligibility.

The school is divided into four academies of small learning communities comprising students from grades 9 through 11. Seniors form a separate contingent this year, although they will become part of the academies in 2008.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The principal and assistant principal for organization inspire faculty, students and parents alike through their passionate and determined vision for the school.
- The school collects a wealth of useful data on students' progress that it arranges and presents in easily accessible ways.
- Teachers have a particularly good understanding of the performance of special education students and English language learners.
- Leaders go to great lengths to compare how students are achieving in relation to similar schools and discuss best practice with them.
- The school has devised imaginative and innovative programs to give its most at risk students every opportunity of succeeding.
- Students and parents value the high expectations the school has of them and aspire to meet them.
- Small learning communities help to promote a family atmosphere in the school where all students are known, respected and helped as individuals.
- The school offers high quality counseling and career guidance to students linked to their personal and academic goals.
- Consistently applied systems and procedures ensure that the school runs most efficiently as a harmonious learning environment.
- Very strong links with outside organizations contribute significantly to students' personal and academic development.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue to improve the quality of instruction by sharing the expertise already present in the school more widely among staff.
- Further refine data-driven differentiated instruction so that all teachers routinely group students according to their levels of achievement in each subject area.
- Ensure consistency in the approach and rigor taken by different academies in using data to set plans and review goals.
- Set specific timescales and describe how the impact of goals will be measured when devising action plans for departments and academies.
- Evaluate plans using measurable criteria at clearly defined intervals to ensure optimum progress towards reaching goals.
- Examine more closely how well subgroups of students are doing within different ethnic groups.

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 proficient.

Christopher Columbus High School combines the twin concepts of “a big school yet a small community.” Carrying the banner “Achieving Excellence through Exploration” it has been on its own voyage of discovery in recent years, navigating successfully some very turbulent waters. Under the passionate and dedicated leadership of its principal and assistant principal for organization, it has emerged stronger and united, with a school community fully behind the changes that have been introduced. The strength of the academy structure brings students together in small organizations where they are known and valued as individuals and which can give them the support and encouragement they need to do their best. This helps to foster the especially good relationships between staff and students. At the same time, they are part of the wider school community, with access to its excellent facilities and a wide range of electives to suit their learning requirements. The school recognizes that there are variations in how well the academies use data to set goals and plan improvement for their students. Some are more rigorous and purposeful than others.

The school has made good progress in addressing the several significant areas to improve from the previous review, with considerable investment in new technology such as computers and smartboards. Students make use of the new Writing Center to support their project work and to receive individual tuition in their literacy skills. There is increased challenge for higher achieving students and more of them are taking advanced placements. The school has worked on making information given to students detailed and accessible, with new trackers about to be presented to them. There have been improvements in instruction and differentiation, but there is still more to do in ensuring that all teachers match work to suit the needs of their students and perform to consistently high levels. The school does not yet make full use of its rich resource of highly skilled teachers to demonstrate what is possible and to model best practice. Teachers are held more accountable for students’ progress and are using data more effectively to inform planning. The inquiry team has made good progress in identifying groups of struggling ninth graders to study in depth, and has set up a control group to test out its findings.

A very wide range of data is collected and stored centrally in a database that staff can access. Assistant principals disseminate key messages to staff in their departments and academies, and teachers generally have a good understanding of the performance of individual students and where improvement is needed. Action plans are drawn up by academies and departments and clearly state the activities that are proposed for success. There is insufficient emphasis currently on what impact these tasks will have in meeting goals, or how teachers will know when they have been reached. Timescales are often not specific enough, so that it is unclear when progress towards goals will be measured, or by when tasks must be completed.

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.

Since the last review, the school has improved its systems for gathering data substantially. It has started to present a broader range of data in colored graphs, which clearly show teachers which students are on track to graduate and those who are struggling. Data is analyzed at individual, classroom, grade, departmental, academy and whole school level. Regular assessments of all students, including special education students and English language learners, keep teachers constantly updated with progress towards targets. The school's central database is a particularly useful resource, as it keeps all the information about every student in one place. It also allows leaders to disaggregate data according to subgroups such as boys and girls, and ethnic groups. In its analyses, the school does not take full account yet of the diversity within particular populations such as the Black or Asian groups, which contain students from several different ethnic backgrounds. Trends are tracked over time and challenging targets set to improve students' performance. Leaders collaborate with principals from similar schools in comparing their data and visiting to find out what is working well. Teachers welcome the more detailed information they receive, and most are using it well to plan instruction for students.

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 proficient.

Teachers meet together every day to discuss their plans and instruction, with weekly departmental and academy meetings. They often consider the progress of students who are at risk of not graduating and share data about them to ensure that intervention programs suit their needs. Every student who is not on track receives a personal scholarship action plan as well as a mentor to help them recover credits. The Renaissance program targets hardest to reach students with its combination of academic and vocational training, and has proved highly successful in tackling disaffection and producing motivated, qualified young citizens. One student said, "Renaissance is a new beginning. They don't just dwell on the past, they dwell on the future." Another commented, "They give you a second chance to get back on your feet." Teachers write action plans to meet academy and departmental goals and set out clearly the activities that will help to achieve them. They do not, however, currently describe what success will look like, or systematically fix specific deadlines by which tasks must be accomplished. These omissions weaken the plans. There are variations between academies in the rigor applied to setting goals, with some much more purposeful than others.

School leaders and faculty make known their high expectations of students and their parents, and their high aspirations for them. A student said, "They tell you when you're doing well and keep you motivated. You don't feel like you're doing it for nothing." Since the last review, much more information has been shared with students and they have frequent opportunities to discuss their progress with teachers, counselors, mentors and tutors.

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 proficient.

The school has become more creative and accomplished at aligning the curriculum to be relevant to its students, tailoring courses to suit their interests and aspirations. More advanced placements are running for higher achieving students. New centers have opened to support individualized learning such as the Writing Center and computer labs. A good range of activities enrich the curriculum, with particular strengths in music, physical education and art. The school environment is brightened by students’ murals. There are 25 sports teams and a fully equipped fitness center, which is opened up for parents to use at weekends. The school has several talented bands and regularly puts on performances, such as a “night of arts” that included a banquet cooked and served by the students.

Much work has gone into improving instruction since the last review, and this is beginning to bear fruit. Teachers are more accountable for their students’ progress as new data streams reveal comparative data between classrooms and academies. Many lessons engage and interest students, as when ninth graders prepared presentations on invasive species such as the Asian carp. There is still a residual of less inspired instruction which administrators are working hard to eliminate. Similarly, while a majority of teachers differentiate instruction to suit their students’ particular needs, a significant minority do not.

School leaders make effective use of resources to fund programs and tutoring that directly benefit students, giving many students work experience as student aides on the premises. The very positive relationships that exist between staff and students are a particular feature of the school. A parent noted this when she said, “They treat my children like their own children.” The fact that many of the staff come from similar backgrounds to the students, and some are alumni of the school themselves, establishes a bond that enables them to become positive role models. Mentoring schemes, such as “big brother-little brother”, team up seniors with freshmen. Attendance has improved as more students are eager to make up their credits and are motivated by school. Strategies such as first-day calling and certificates for no absence also help to keep the figures close to the citywide average.

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 proficient.

The principal and assistant principals combine informal walkthroughs with more formal observations to build up a picture of the strengths and needs of instruction in the school. Professional development is planned strategically at individual level where a teacher is new or struggling, or in order to meet whole school goals. Several initiatives have been introduced to address deficiencies revealed by the data, such as the curriculum development work in humanities and social studies under New Visions. The Math and Science Partnership provides training and student tutors in these subjects. In addition to outside sources, there are teachers with great expertise on the staff who are used insufficiently to train and mentor their colleagues to complement the valuable work of the school’s coaches. In particular, there is not enough sharing of skills in differentiating instruction and motivating and engaging students through active learning.

Students receive high quality support in achieving their aims from guidance counselors and mentors. The principal interviews each senior to support them in graduating. A particular success for the school was the graduation of the first cohort from the Renaissance program. The principal said, "For most of them, this award ceremony was the first time any of them had experienced any success." A student commented, "If it wasn't for Columbus I'd just be sitting at home watching TV." A large number of students obtain full scholarships to Vermont University, where long-established ties exist. Free travel is provided for them to visit with their families by Jet Blue Airline. Other strong links with the South Bronx Overall Development Corporation (college counseling), the Committee for Hispanic Children (academic outreach) and the Young Adult Borough Center and Good Shepherd Services (evening classes and employment opportunities), confirm the school's strengths in networking and building partnerships. Close links with the New York Police Department have seen the school removed earlier this year from the city's "impact list" of vulnerable schools. The transformation in the school's atmosphere was highlighted by a parent who spoke of "calmness in the hallways." This safe and orderly environment is reinforced by clear consistently applied structures, and through giving high levels of responsibility to the students themselves.

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 proficient.

The senior leadership team meets monthly to consider the whole school goals in the Comprehensive Education Plan. The team includes student representatives and parents, as well as staff. A recent innovation was to award a letter grade to students after the first marking period, rather than to give a level, commensurate with whether they were on track for graduation. This produced some useful data, particularly about the progress of students from their starting points when they entered the school, and raised questions about why some of them were not performing as well as might be expected. Teachers take this kind of information and use it to devise programs that will help students to get back on track.

Departmental and academy plans are reviewed periodically, but because they lack specific and measurable criteria for showing success, it is difficult for leaders and teachers to judge how effective they have been, or even if goals have been met. The lack of dedicated review dates means that in some academies there is not the sense of urgency to ensure that plans are evaluated systematically. The review of plans relating to the performance of individual students is more focused and much more effective, and timely interventions ensure they have every opportunity to succeed. This is especially true of those students most at risk of failing. School leaders use data to make strategic decisions regarding the curriculum and instruction, for example in renewing the social studies curriculum and in creating centers for students to pursue individualized learning. The principal and assistant principal for organization work together extremely effectively as a team, and have a shared vision for the school's development that is supported by their communities. They lead with boundless enthusiasm, tenacity and determination, and have seen the school make enormous progress in recent years. Christopher Columbus is set to continue its voyage towards excellence under the command of its committed leadership team.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS HIGH SCHOOL	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 demanding, 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?			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?				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 make 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		