

Quality Review Report

2008-2009

Seth Low School

Middle School 096

**99 Avenue P
Brooklyn
NY 11204**

Principal: Denise Sandra Levinsky

Dates of review: May 4 – 5, 2009

Lead Reviewer: Richard D. D'Auria

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Seth Low is a middle school with 1,132 students from grade 6 through grade 9. The school population comprises 16.1% Black, 19.2% Hispanic, 31.7% White, and 32.8% Asian students. The student body includes 14.8% English language learners and 14.1% special education students. Boys account for 51.9% of the students enrolled and girls account for 48.1%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 92.3%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 68.1% eligibility.

Overall Evaluation

This school is underdeveloped with proficient features.

The school underwent a transition in leadership midyear. The new principal is evaluating current structures, systems and practice strategically in an effort to align resources with needs and goals. Teachers regularly collaborate to share instructional strategies and materials. They are increasing their competence in using formative assessments and related accountability tools. However, their use of this data does not yet translate to differentiated instructional practice consistently. Even when students sit in groups, most classes are engaged in whole group instruction that does not meet individual students' needs.

While the school began work on student goal setting earlier this year, the continued monitoring and revision of goals over time, accompanied by adjustments in instructional planning, is not yet systemic. Although the goal setting documents include intervals throughout the year, in most cases they are not yet used. Teacher feedback on student work is very limited, often only indicating that the work approaches, meets or exceeds the standards. The use of task specific rubrics as the basis for both evaluation and critical feedback is inconsistent. As a result, students may not know specifically why their work is rated as it is or how to improve it.

Students, staff and parents all appreciate the family-like community within the school. Teachers regularly collaborate and share materials and teaching strategies to improve their knowledge and skills. Parents report that they are at ease, knowing that their children are well cared for and getting a good education. The school offers an enriched curriculum, including the arts, music and dance and opportunities for students to accelerate in selected subjects. The school enjoys effective partnerships with a number of community-based organizations, which complement the school's curriculum with a variety of after school programs. Several grants and a partnership with a local hospital offer counseling and related services to students.

The school continues to employ strategies to engage more parents. Members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and some of the more active parents indicate that they are partners with the school and that the principal has been keeping them well informed through the School Leadership Team and at PTA meetings. This collaboration and the open door policy of the school's leadership position the school well to move forward with a shared vision.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The new principal transitioned into the leadership position smoothly mid-year and shares a vision based upon professionalism, high expectations and rigor for all.
- Teachers work in a collaborative and supportive culture whereby they collect and examine data routinely and share instructional ideas and strategies regularly.
- The inquiry team is well poised to play a pivotal role in fostering faculty-wide use of data to further inform and guide instructional planning.
- The school offers an enriched curriculum, including visual arts, choral and instrumental music and opportunities for acceleration in mathematics, social studies, earth science and a second language.
- Parents appreciate the warm and caring school community and are highly satisfied with the instructional program provided to their children in a nurturing, supportive environment, where they are welcomed as true partners.

What the school needs to improve

- Utilize lesson observations and appropriate professional development to foster the use of formative assessment data to group students flexibly, based upon skill proficiency, as the basis for more consistent use of differentiated instructional strategies.
- Build upon the initial work done on student goal setting by focusing upon specific skills and sub-skills in all subject areas and regularly assessing progress over time.
- Implement systems and processes to monitor the progress students make toward achieving their goals and for revising instructional plans, as needed, with established interim benchmarks throughout the school year.
- Incorporate task-specific, constructive feedback to students on how to assess and improve their work using standards-based rubrics.
- Further enhance communication with both parents and students through a variety of strategies to engage more of them as partners in identifying and supporting the achievement of learning goals.

Part 3: Main Findings

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

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do and to monitor the student's progress over time.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The new principal engages teachers proactively in further training in the use of accountability tools such as ARIS to increase familiarity with managing and using data. Grade and departmental conferences support this effort effectively. Teachers administered non-standardized pre-tests at the beginning of the school year and some have followed up by monitoring progress with subsequent assessments. Teachers use Acuity and Scantron Performance Series as formative assessments and are collecting this data. However, the degree to which teachers are using this data to inform instruction varies and is currently inconsistent. As the principal transitioned into the position mid-year, she wisely assessed current programs and data trends. External support helped to compile a comprehensive school analysis report. This tool enabled the quick determination of trends and needs and facilitated immediate planning and decision making for future budgeting and programming in alignment with these needs.

The distribution of Black and Hispanic students in special education is disproportionate. However, most of these students came into the school as per Individuals with Disabilities Education Act legislation and not referred into special education from within. Nevertheless, school leadership monitors the progress of all students closely and uses the Inquiry Team Tool (ITT) effectively to determine patterns and trends. Last year, the school received extra credit for the progress made by Black students in the lowest third. Sixteen percent of students are long-term English language learners. Some have been unable to pass the New York State English as a Second Language Assessment Test (NYSESLAT) over six years. The principal is analyzing the current grouping of these students and considering realignment by proficiency level as a means of raising their achievement. No differences in performance along gender lines are noted.

School support staff make personal home contact regarding student lateness and attendance. In response to the diverse, multicultural population, the school is considering an electronic home messaging service that provides communication capability in multiple translated languages. The school is making efforts to address concerns regarding communication through a variety of strategies, including breakfasts with parents, empowering the parent coordinator to be creative with outreach strategies, single parent female and male caregiver workshops, a bullying workshop and a campaign to have more parents respond to this year's Learning Environment Survey.

The school recognizes and has identified its next steps. These include furthering professional development regarding sub-group performance, increasing the role of the inquiry team and enhancing communication with students and their families, particularly about students learning needs and assessment results.

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 underdeveloped with proficient features.

The principal provided training for the whole school community in January and February around the establishment of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely (SMART) goals. Preliminary efforts resulted in the establishment of a template to facilitate the setting, recording and monitoring of goals. However, practice in using the goal monitoring tool is not systemic. In many cases, the goal monitoring sheets remain in student portfolios, but are not regularly revisited. In some cases, particularly in English language arts and math, goals are skills based, thus specific. However, in some of the other content areas, goals are less useful being either too broad, such as “to go to a good high school” or are content bound, i.e. “I will learn about volcanoes” rather than skill and sub-skills based. The implementation of plans and timeframes for achieving learning goals is in its early stages. There is currently a lack of consistency in terms of the nature of the goals across all of the content areas and the degree to which teachers are actually using the established tool to actively monitor, reassess and adjust goals with students.

The principal provides information and data to the leadership team, which functions collaboratively. Shared information includes items such as the Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP), Title I funding and the one percent set-aside for parental involvement. Parents indicate that they appreciate the information that the principal shares with them and that they are true partners in their children’s education. They express great satisfaction with the functioning of the school and their opportunities to have input.

Professional development for teachers and parent meetings emphasize strongly the principal’s high expectations, the importance and process of student goal setting and the role of parents as true partners. School leadership is confident that the ARIS parent portal will provide further insight to parents on the progress of their children and will engage them further in the educational life of their children.

Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students’ learning goals.

This area of the school’s work is proficient.

Students’ education is enhanced considerably by the enriched and diverse curriculum. They enjoy courses that include the visual arts, choral and instrumental music, dance and the opportunity for acceleration in math, earth science, social studies and a second language. However, at a practical level, the degree to which teachers are differentiating instruction is limited. The strongest examples are evident in English language learner (ELL) and collaborative team teaching (CTT) classes. In most other classes across both grade and content area, the primary mode is whole group instruction. Even where students are seated in groups, they are for the most part engaged in the same activity which does not meet individual students’ needs. There is little evidence that teachers are using the data culled from formative assessments to group students strategically and flexibly and address their skill strengths or weaknesses.

Additionally, while most teachers are using standards-based rubrics to assess student work, very few provide students with constructive feedback on how to improve their work. The impact of the lack of feedback is clearly illustrated during conversations with students about their work. For example, one young man said that he did not understand why he had received a “3” on a writing assignment when a classmate with more corrections in red had received a “4”. School leadership plans to address this weakness through the identification of model practitioners, encouraging greater opportunities for inter-visitation and the utilization of an English language arts coach. If funding permits, a math coach and the establishment of an in-house teacher center as a professional development resource for staff are planned.

School leadership makes strategic organizational decisions focused upon the current challenges it faces, to ensure the appropriate certification of all teachers within their respective content areas of specialization, and the alignment of teacher certification with teaching assignments. Additional leadership goals are to establish further heterogeneous grouping of students, the inclusion of more common planning time for each grade and the strengthening of horizontal subject area organization along with the current vertical grade-based organization.

Teachers, students and parents all spoke enthusiastically of the culture of mutual trust, respect and positive attitudes within the school. Students confirmed that there is a significant adult on the staff that they feel comfortable approaching. Teachers value the collaborative nature of the faculty and the professionalism and respect shown by the new principal. Parents’ complimentary comments which characterize the school include “family feeling”, “kids well taken care of”, “encouraging”, “balanced” and “I feel happy and don’t have to worry, I can rest and do my work”.

Quality Statement 4 - Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals for accelerating student learning.

This area of the school’s work is proficient.

Assistant principals hold conferences with small groups of teachers, based upon need. The school provides ongoing support to staff in the use of data systems such as ARIS and with interim assessment tools such as Acuity and Performance Series. While the new principal is assessing overall teaching practice and the systems that are currently in place to support it, she is not yet conducting formal observations along with their resultant written reports. This is a missed opportunity to establish clearly focused expectations and critical feedback on observed lessons and may be contributing toward the lack of consistency in differentiated teaching practice. While some teachers do participate in outside professional development, such as a session recently provided by a local college on differentiated strategies for English language learners, these opportunities are limited. Selected groups of teachers also visit other schools and participate in professional development activities provided through the school support organization. The school does not currently have any new teachers, but buddy teachers and coaches would ordinarily support them. Teachers are in the beginning stages of establishing professional goals for themselves, but progress on goals and on differentiated practice based upon formative assessment data, is slow.

The school’s reconstituted core inquiry team is a highly functional and cohesive group that is examining reading comprehension sub-skills among a target population of seventh graders. The team makes effective use of a variety of assessment tools, as well as soft, anecdotal data from student interviews and observations about each of the

student's classroom behaviors. The team's effective use of these observations of the students reveals a common issue of their lack of ability to focus. The team effectively liaises with the current 7th grade English language arts teachers to implement instructional strategies with the target population students. The team is also making a concerted effort to share their work more effectively with the entire school community and, along with the principal, to encourage more teachers to participate in the inquiry process.

While professional development addresses teachers' use of assessments to monitor student progress, continuous self-evaluation and revision of teaching practices based upon student outcomes are not yet systemic.

The school provides effective youth development support services to students through one guidance counselor per grade and a crisis counselor, thus allowing manageable case loads and maximizing opportunities for students to obtain assistance and support. The school hosts an enriched after-school Beacon program sponsored in partnership with a community based organization. In addition, a 21st Century grant provides an after-school counseling component. The school also reaps the benefits of an extended day violence prevention initiative and an on-site mental health clinic in partnership with a local hospital.

Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and 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 underdeveloped with proficient features.

The new principal is assessing current practice toward establishing a baseline to support next steps, as outlined in the schools' self-evaluation. The implementation of measurable, interim goals with clear timeframes is in the preliminary stages. Although the school took some first steps, including the development of goal tracking documents, teachers do not yet use these tools systematically for ongoing monitoring. While the tool developed for interim checkpoints indicates September, December, March, and May, all forms viewed in randomly selected student portfolios within classes visited had only the initial entry identifying goals, with little to no follow-up since.

The principal utilizes an effective, comprehensive summary of data in a school analysis report as the basis for assessing organizational decisions. As a result, various initiatives are under serious consideration. These include more heterogeneous grouping of students, greater alignment of teacher certification and teaching assignments, and the inclusion of special education teachers into subject area organizational structures to assist them in becoming specialists rather than generalists. These provide strong evidence of school leadership's flexibility in adapting plans to meet future goals. Moreover, the leadership provides ongoing professional development to help staff strengthen their skills in continually monitoring student progress toward achieving learning goals and to be flexible in adjusting their teaching plans. However, this practice is not yet consistent. The principal keeps the SLT and staff well informed and articulates a clear vision for the future growth of the school. Achievement of this shared vision is based upon a welcoming, open-door policy and the provision of ongoing support for staff, as needed. In the principal's words, the end goal is "children receiving instruction that is tailored to their needs to enable them to leave this building ready for the next steps"

School Quality Criteria 2008-2009

School name: Seth Low Middle School	Δ	➤	✓	+
Overall QR Score		X		
Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do, and to monitor the student’s progress over time.				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty regularly...</i>	Δ	➤	✓	+
1.1 collect and analyze actionable information, including assessment results and attendance data, to provide a complete view of the learning outcomes and needs of individual students and groupings of students?				X
1.2 focus analysis on the learning outcomes and needs of all sub-groups of students?				X
1.3 engage in an open exchange of information with students and families about students’ learning needs and outcomes, including assessment results and attendance data?			X	
1.4 design or adapt tools to enable school leaders and teachers to organize and analyze student performance, identify trends and inform instructional and organizational decisions, and to enable students and their families to assess and track each student’s progress?			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 student’s learning.				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty...</i>	Δ	➤	✓	+
2.1 use collaborative and data-informed processes to set measurable, actionable and differentiated learning goals in core subjects for individual students and groupings of students and develop differentiated plans and timeframes for reaching these goals?		X		
2.2 use collaborative and data-informed processes to develop the school’s Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP)?			X	
2.3 ensure that the achievement of learning goals, and the implementation of plans and timeframes for reaching these goals, is the central focus of school leaders, faculty, students and families?		X		
2.4 communicate high expectations to all students and families, and involve students in developing their learning goals and plans and in taking their next learning steps?			X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 2		X		

DEFINITIONS

“**Analyze**” or “**analysis**” includes, but is not limited to, comparisons of:

- the current and past outcomes of . . . individual students, administrative groupings and sub-groups of students and the school itself in core subjects;
- the outcomes of different classrooms and sub-groups in the same grades and core subjects; and
- the school’s Progress Report and other outcomes to those of peer/other schools

“**Assessment results**” include student outcomes on summative assessments (e.g., state ELA, math, science and social studies tests, NYSESLAT, Regents Exams, and Performance Based Assessment Tasks) and formative assessments aligned to the school’s curriculum (including Periodic, DY0, and teacher-developed Classroom Assessments).

“**Core subjects**” are ELA, math, science, social studies/history, the arts, foreign language, and physical education/health.

“**Data-informed processes**” include analysis of Progress Report, Quality Review, Learning Environment Survey, Inquiry Team findings, assessment results and attendance data

“**Groupings of students**” include classrooms, grade levels and high school cohorts.

“**Organizational decisions or strategies**” refer to a school’s use of budget and resources, staffing, planning, scheduling, grade structure, departments and teacher teams and other aspects of the school’s structure and organization that can affect student outcomes.

“**Sub-groups of students**” include special education students, English Language Learners, the other NCLB sub-groups, boys, girls, and other groups significant to the school.

Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students’ learning goals.

To what extent do ...	Δ	➤	✓	+
3.1 school leaders and faculty deliver challenging and engaging curricula in core subjects, including the arts, that are aligned to state standards?				X
3.2 teachers plan and teach lessons that are differentiated to meet the needs of individual students and student groupings and are designed to enable all students to reach their learning goals?		X		
3.3 school leaders make strategic organizational decisions to support a coherent and rigorous instructional approach that enables students to reach their learning goals?			X	
3.4 school leaders maintain a culture of mutual trust and respect and positive attitudes toward learning that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?				X
Overall score for Quality Statement 3				
			X	

Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals for accelerating student learning.

To what extent do school leaders...	Δ	➤	✓	+
4.1 use their own observation of classroom teaching and the analysis of student outcomes to implement an explicit, differentiated strategy to improve each teacher’s instruction, with a special focus on new teachers?		X		
4.2 encourage teachers to take part in Inquiry Teams and other structured professional collaborations (informed by the examination of student work, assessment outcomes and their own peer observations) and share in the instructional leadership of the school with the goal of improved student learning?				X
4.3 provide professional development that encourages teachers to continuously evaluate and revise their classroom practices to improve student outcomes?			X	
4.4 utilize youth development, support services and partnerships with families and outside organizations to accelerate the academic and personal growth of students?				X
Overall score for Quality Statement 4				
			X	

Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and 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 and its strategies for improving each teacher’s instructional practices include measurable interim goals and suitable time frames for evaluating success and making adjustments during the year?		X		
5.2 school leaders and faculty use interim checkpoints and data to inform lessons, improve curriculum, differentiate instruction and revise student learning plans throughout the year?		X		
5.3 school leaders use data to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of and modify organizational decisions, structured professional collaborations and teacher improvement strategies?			X	
5.4 school leaders and the school community have a clear vision for the future development of the school and implement procedures and systems to support academic, personal and professional growth?				X
Overall score for Quality Statement 5				
		X		

Quality Review Scoring Key

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