

Quality Review Report 2008-2009

Academy for Social Action: A College Board School

Middle-High School 367

**509 West 129th Street
Manhattan
NY 10027**

Principal: Crystal Simmons

Dates of review: April 6-7, 2009

Lead Reviewer: Alexis Penzell

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Academy for Social Action is a middle-high school with 304 students from grade 7 through grade 10. The school population comprises 63% Black, 36% Hispanic, 1% White, and Asian students. The student body includes 11% English language learners and 18% special education students. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 88%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 67% eligibility.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

The Academy for Social Action provides a college preparatory curriculum in a safe and supportive environment that promotes academic rigor and community service as the bridge to college acceptance. The principal provides strong leadership and a clear vision for student success that is communicated across the school through four core values: "prompt, prepared, positive and productive". There is a strong and uniform curriculum in English and math with small classes and bi-weekly advisories offering students academic, social and emotional support. Teachers work hard to ensure that students are focused and engaged, but data gathering and analysis do not yet extend to all core subjects to enable staff to gain a full picture of each student's progress. There are multiple opportunities for students to receive additional classroom support and tutoring after school and on Saturdays. There are clear, academic expectations in all subjects with all students expected to fulfill the two-course Advanced Placement graduation requirement by grade 12.

The staff is organized as a professional learning community and members speak positively about the professional development provided by The College Board, Lorraine Monroe (for whom the school currently serves as a demonstration site) and multiple other partners. There are varied professional development opportunities, but teachers are not fully implementing differentiation in all classes, particularly for subgroups outside of gender. Strategic planning effectively focuses on the key areas targeted to improve student achievement through the creation of biannual individual teacher action plans and goal setting with timeframes for achievement. However, the school has yet to implement a strategic professional development plan that aligns with both school and individual teacher goals, detailing measurable interim checkpoints for monitoring the impact on student achievement.

Teachers use unit-planning templates with instructional goals, objectives and assessments articulated for each unit with varied implementation in the classroom. There are also mechanisms in place for students to develop both long and short-term goals. However, not all goals include measurable outcomes or interim checkpoints to monitor progress in every subject.

Communication with students and families is strong and teachers use an online grading system to communicate information on student progress. As a result, parents are positive about the quality of education and care from the faculty. Students feel valued and are intent on graduating from high school and going on to college. All constituencies understand that every student is expected to go to college and then give back to their community and the world through some form of community service.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Positive leadership, high expectations and support from all constituencies drive the vision for the development of the school and for continuous improvement in student achievement.
- The school encourages academic achievement and community service as the bridge to college admission, by working closely with students and families and offering effective educational, social and emotional support.
- The school provides students and families with frequent, supportive feedback about students' progress through advisories, mid-marking period alerts, report cards and email or phone contacts.
- The entire school community works together to create a calm, respectful and orderly environment in which learning takes place, student work and achievements are honored and students feel valued.
- A well-developed collaborative and collegial culture is supportive of those new to teaching and promotes a willingness to learn from each other.
- A wide and varied range of assessment data is used effectively to review student progress and plan interventions to remedy weaknesses.

What the school needs to improve

- Extend the analysis of whole-school, grade and individual-level data to examine patterns and trends in all subgroups and develop action plans with interim benchmarks that address any negative trends.
- Include measurable outcomes and interim checkpoints in all goals across the school to monitor progress and growth efficiently and effectively.
- Improve the consistency in differentiation of instruction, learning activities and student groupings to provide high levels of appropriate challenge for all students and subgroups at all achievement levels.
- Implement a strategic professional development plan that aligns with both school and individual teacher goals, detailing measurable interim checkpoints for monitoring the impact on student achievement.

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 school gathers a wide range of useful performance data and conducts baseline assessments, mid-term exams, end-of-unit monthly analysis and teacher-created diagnostics to get an overall understanding of students' performance. Since the school is in its second year, there is limited formal assessment data and a strong reliance on teacher-generated data. Although the school has introduced ARIS and staff know what it can do, its use is not well established.

Across the whole school, faculty develops curriculum maps, unit-planning guides and rubrics for assessing student performance and conference with students about goal setting. Teachers maintain open communication with parents, notifying them of successes and challenges regarding their child's academic standing. Staff share data with students to encourage ownership of learning and use a wide range of assessment data to monitor student progress, plan instruction and create intervention strategies as needed. The school also uses the College Board Tracker for math that allows teachers to make notations on exams, look at student productivity and set goals. In English language arts and math, the Springboard curriculum facilitates the tracking of student progress. Additional tracking in social studies is done through the Teach for America tracker. Effective tracking of data in other departments is not yet developed.

School data shows that the females are more successful in passing their courses, both through middle school and Regents. In response to this, the school has established gender-based advisories and an incentives-based "Gentlemen's Club" for all males to focus on identity, social skills and academics. However, the school has not yet analyzed whole-school, grade and individual-level data in order to examine performance patterns and trends for other subgroups.

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.

The school meets together in frequent configurations to set course, grade-level and class goals. For English and math, the school uses the College Board Springboard curriculum that provides teachers with professional development for learning the content, setting goals for achievement and a setting for establishing a professional learning community for collaboration and support. All other courses are developed using State standards and setting goals consistent with these standard. The school's next steps include developing school-wide benchmark exams and continued work in differentiation.

Both long- and short-term SMART student goals are framed at the current levels of student performance through advisory classes. Students are aware of their goals, and the school makes multiple opportunities available for support and check-ins regarding progress towards those goals available. The school raised the standard of the passing grade for all subjects, effectively increasing high expectations across the board. Students and families understand that this higher bar is the entry to college acceptance, one of the goals for every student. High expectations are conveyed to students around three central core values: scholarship, leadership and fellowship. These are frequently posted in classrooms for students to learn what they are and what they mean.

Encouraging parents' involvement is a constant challenge and the parent members of the school leadership team do their best to reach out to the greater parent community. Although teacher, parent and student members looked at all available data, the bulk of the Comprehensive Educational Plan has been developed by the administration. There are multiple opportunities for administration and faculty to meet to discuss student goals and how to ensure that students achieve their targets in each subject. Teachers create syllabi that they share with students and families and grading criteria is similar by department. Although the school communicates frequently with families, some parents feel that teachers do not update information frequently enough between marking periods, so that they have enough time to tackle academic issues before a student fails.

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.

As a College Board School and a Lorraine Monroe Leadership Institute demonstration site, the school has excellent support for creating challenging programs aligned with State standards that meet the needs of all students. The school uses a uniform blackboard organization layout for sharing the instructional aim and lesson plan with students to promote student engagement and academic rigor. All classes have lesson plans, seating charts and handouts for the day in pocket folders posted on the wall for reference. Students use a self-tracking system to monitor their academic goals and have individual conferencing time within classes to support their learning targets. The school uses its budget wisely to provide a wide range of learning resources for students and staff, and additional funds are used to provide staff with resources and professional development in and outside of school.

Although the school provides professional development to support differentiation, many teachers lack confidence in planning to meet different needs and levels of achievement within the same class. Students sit in groups in most classes, yet in some cases the grouping is not purposeful or based on data. In two lessons, differentiation was outstanding, with students grouped by ability and tasks both rigorous and differentiated in content and product. However, this practice is not yet consistent school wide.

The tone in the school is calm, trusting and respectful, a positive shift from some issues evident last year. Students, families and staff speak of an environment where the focus is on learning, teachers are approachable and students' work and achievements are celebrated. Students are involved in both community service and social action, and take advantage of multiple opportunities to participate. Students identified their expectations as, "everyone goes to college, we act as responsible citizens and we give back to the community".

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.

There is a culture of teacher reflection, collaboration and professional development, supported by outside partners, as well as internal structures, such as critical-friend groupings and weekly peer mentoring. Teachers meet regularly in faculty, grade or department meetings. Professional development is focused on raising student achievement and ensuring that all staff are highly qualified. High quality supports are in place to ensure that the staff continues to grow as a professional learning community with differentiated opportunities and resources for veteran and new staff. Administration and partners promote effective teaching and learning, explore current research and foster personal and professional growth. New teachers, many of whom teach in the middle school, have outside on boarding and mentor support from the College Board, as well as an internal buddy system that includes inter-visitations to build collegiality.

Administrators conduct formal and informal observations using checklists and summary sheets, with teachers observed formally three times a semester and multiple times informally. This data is used to inform professional development. Teachers are encouraged to turnkey expertise and lead workshops. School-wide learning walks have been introduced this year and staff are invited to undertake collaborative visits using a specific lens. Although professional development is comprehensive, the school has not implemented a school-wide plan aligning school and individual goals with measurable interim checkpoints for monitoring the impact on student achievement. Classroom observations reveal that using data to develop differentiated lessons for different levels and varied subgroups is not sufficiently established in the school.

The school inquiry team focused on 15 grade 8 and high school students with comprehension and organization issues whose grade 8 English scores were below the standard. However, the work of the team is impeded by technology problems and a lack of training, with too few teachers directly involved with the target population. As a result, the work of the inquiry team is not yet having sufficient impact on teaching and learning.

Students are immersed in the school's core practices and core values from their first day at school. They have helpful support from two half-time deans, a guidance counselor, a campus SAPIS worker and their advisor who meets with them twice a week as well as their course teachers. High school students also receive extensive, additional outside mentoring as well as free tutoring in PSATs and SATs through the school's partner, The College Board, thereby setting the bar for graduation and college.

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 proficient.

The school's vision to prepare students for college success is shared and supported by all constituencies. This commitment is at the heart of the school's mission and is the driving force behind all decisions. The principal is reflective about the school's progress and continually looks for ways to ensure that all students achieve the necessary steps to go to college.

There are six formal and multiple informal opportunities for monitoring students' progress and for making adjustments and providing interventions for students. Teachers use multiple teacher-generated reports to track student progress and have students use an in-class tracker to monitor their own progress. Guidance counselors use ARIS to track credit accumulation and set goals for students. To ensure that students stay on course, they use a self-tracking system that monitors their achievement of academic goals. In addition, folder-check days every two weeks help them stay on track. However, although teachers use the on line-grading system, data is sometimes entered too late for students and families to be aware that passing may be in jeopardy.

Each staff member creates a building-level action plan for the course they teach twice a year. Presently, these plans reflect goal setting without targets and interim checkpoints. The teachers know what they want to achieve, what actions they need to take, the resources they need to achieve the goal, and the evidence they will have by what date. This is a good first step, but their action plans do not have interim goals and measurable benchmark targets to track progress, make readjustments as needed, and to evaluate incremental success.

Teachers and parents share the principal's vision for improving the learning opportunities for students and providing supports that lead to college as the next step, through high expectations and support for all constituencies. Students' work is celebrated in a variety of colorful displays that enrich the classrooms and hallways throughout the school. There are promising signs that the school has the potential to achieve a positive outcome for its first graduating class in the next two years.

School Quality Criteria 2008-2009

School name: Academy for Social Action: A College Board School	△	▷	✓	+
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>				
	△	▷	✓	+
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>				
	△	▷	✓	+
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, DYO, 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.							
<i>To what extent do ...</i>	△	▶	✓	+			
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.							
<i>To what extent do school leaders...</i>	△	▶	✓	+			
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.							
<i>To what extent do...</i>	△	▶	✓	+			
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							
△	Underdeveloped	▶	Underdeveloped with Proficient Features	✓	Proficient	+	Well Developed