

Quality Review Report 2008-2009

The Explorations Academy

**High School X251
1619 Boston Road
Bronx
NY 10460**

Principal: Susana Hernandez

**Dates of review: April 6 – 7, 2009
Lead Reviewer: Joel T. DiBartolomeo**

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Explorations Academy is a high school with 345 students from grade 9 through 12. The school population comprises 32% Black, 66% Hispanic, 1% White, and .6% Asian students. The student body includes 14% English language learners and 16% special education students. Boys account for 48% of the students enrolled and girls account for 52%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 79.5%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 86% eligibility.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

School leaders continue to secure structures and routines that support the learning process. The principal is described by one teacher as a “leader who has real expectations in classrooms and for safety and school climate...she has made a difference.” Teachers and support staff are committed to their students and the success of The Explorations Academy. As a result, the school is transforming into a viable educational choice for students in the Bronx.

The school routinely analyzes a variety of data sources to develop an updated picture of student achievement. Teacher-created assessments inform instructional decisions. Displayed prominently in corridors, classrooms and offices are color-coded charts that track progress towards graduation. Inquiry teams interrogate the performance and progress of target population students rigorously and make causal connections to the conditions in which their learning is taking place. While City and State accountability measures trigger school improvement efforts, the school does not probe as deeply into the root causes of barriers to student achievement. This makes accelerating student achievement difficult.

Goal-setting and on-going monitoring of interventions for struggling students is first rate. However, instructional plans across the school do not always contain measurable goals, specific action plans or interim benchmarks. As a result, the school and its teachers do not always determine with precision the impact of the initiatives and instructional strategies they have enacted. This makes some future planning and subsequent goal-setting activities inexact. In addition, because these practices are not secure for most students, they do not always receive feedback they can use to articulate their next learning steps or that parents can use to provide additional support.

Effective teamwork and strong relationships support collaborative processes that enhance learning. Mentors, responsive colleagues, and a variety of professional development opportunities support new and veteran teachers. Teachers do not have technology and training available to access regularly Department of Education data and diagnostic systems or to manage the data they generate about their students. As a result, teachers assess student reading and math ability using “paper and pencil” assessments and use their time inefficiently maintaining student assessment binders.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school analyzes relevant periodic and summative data in all subject areas routinely to determine students' strengths and areas of need.
- The school disaggregates each data source to identify precisely the unique strengths and needs of each cohort as well as special education, English language learner, male, and female students.
- Publically displayed, color-coded charts track students' credit accumulation in all subjects and their progress towards graduation with Regents distinction.
- The principal and the faculty work together to do what is best for students, which results in positive relationships between and among staff, students and parents.
- A supportive mentoring program and the collegiality of staff provide valuable help for teachers new to the profession and to the school.
- Strong teamwork and relationships support effective collaborative processes, including the work of the inquiry team, which enhance student learning through the sharing of assessment data, teaching strategies, and other relevant student information.

What the school needs to improve

- Use assessment data to provide students and families with feedback about student learning that identifies each student's next short-term goal so that students can articulate their next learning steps.
- Refine goal-setting practices to ensure that all action plans interim checkpoints to enhance the evaluation of impact, inform future planning and the setting of subsequent goals.
- Formalize, with teachers, goal-setting practices for their professional growth and the evaluation of its impact on the achievement of their students.
- Strengthen instructional decision-making by evaluating progress towards goals at regular intervals and making associated changes in a timely manner.

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 analyzes City, State and periodic assessments in all subject areas and attendance data at appropriate junctures. In the process, school leaders have a better understanding of the unique strengths of each cohort of students. They identify the needs of special education, English language learner, male, and female students, but there is no consistent analysis by ethnic group. The school's three inquiry teams interrogate rigorously the performance and progress of target population students and make productive causal connections to instructional environments. While similar analyses are beginning to take shape with respect to the progress of special education students, the school does not always investigate deeply the root causes of barriers to overall student progress. This makes accelerating achievement for all students difficult.

Teachers create assessments in English and math and use past Regents examinations for other subjects to develop baselines, monitor progress, and inform instructional decisions. However, teachers do not undertake these assessment procedures consistently across all subject areas. While English teachers utilize the Gates-MacGinitie assessment to determine students' reading levels, teachers do not have access to other diagnostic tools such as Performance Series or Acuity to measure more precisely students' reading and math ability. Therefore, administrators are not always able to make informed, school-wide instructional decisions in a timely fashion and targeted instruction is not a consistent practice.

Prominently displayed throughout the school are color-coded charts that track each student's progress towards a diploma with Regents distinction. As a result, all students can identify their own standing with respect to credits earned and Regents passed. The percentage of students expected to graduate on time has improved since last year by 10%. Students discuss periodic assessment results with their teachers, who send detailed student progress reports every three weeks to the parents of struggling students. However, most parents and students do not receive written feedback regarding specific standards and skills learned that help students articulate next learning steps.

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.

Several times a year, school constituents including parents, teachers, students and senior leaders collaboratively review and develop school goals. Goals address major areas of concern for the school, including graduation rates, performance in English language arts and math, and attendance.

However, the school does not create formal goals or plans to address differences in sub-group performance nor does it always probe adequately the underlying reasons for differences in sub-group performance. In addition, while the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan includes interim checkpoints, the school has not established a secure routine to utilize these opportunities to support the evaluation of impact, inform future planning and the setting of subsequent goals. This compromises the quality of the strategic planning process and limits the school's capacity to improve results.

Effective models for student goal setting and instructional planning are secure for the target population, special education, and other struggling students. In addition to classroom goals set by their teachers, most students develop personal goals in all subject areas at the beginning of each marking period. However, not all goals are measureable or have benchmarks that enable students and teachers short-term progress to be assessed rigorously. As a result, determining the impact of intervention strategies lacks accuracy in some classrooms.

Advisors meet with students to discuss academic progress and classroom teachers support their self-evaluation of assessment results. The school communicates expectations for behavior, attendance, and work standards through bulletin board displays, incentive programs, and in the policies and procedures that govern them. The school-created, omnipresent, color-coded charts underscore expectations for graduation. Parents attend meetings to review the demands of the curriculum and graduation requirements periodically throughout the year. School leaders recognize that student attendance levels are low at 80%. However, they have identified a number of poor recordkeeping practices that occurred under the previous administration that are being addressed currently.

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 participate in a State mandated core curriculum enriched with art and drama and the opportunity to enroll in the College Now program at Lehman College. The school offers students a variety of classes to meet their needs for more support or enrichment. School leaders collect unit plans to ensure alignment with State standards.

To enhance students' engagement, teachers check content with graphic organizers, carefully scaffold new information, utilize timed workstations, and infuse popular music into their lessons. In addition, to support opportunities for differentiation, core subject teachers engage students in at least one major project each year. Some teachers group students using assessment data and the support for students in collaborative team teaching and English language learner classes are successful examples of differentiation. However, teacher's use of data varies across the school and, as a result, not all lessons extend students' learning.

The school uses its budget judiciously to resource its classrooms with texts and other curriculum related materials to meet the demands of the curriculum. The school recently procured the services of a math coach to support its math teachers in order to achieve one of its priority goals. However, the lack of technology in the school does not enable

teachers to manage the data they generate, access Department of Education teaching resources and diagnostic tools, or use technology as a tool to accelerate learning.

The principal and faculty have earned the respect and affection of the students they serve by doing what is best for them. Students see their principal as someone who is accessible and responsive, "If I ever need anything I can see her and she will respond." Adults support and appreciate one another's contributions. Consequently, classroom environments are orderly and students are beginning to assume responsibility for their own learning.

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.

Teachers are committed to learning together and have begun to take responsibility of their own continuous professional growth. They engage in a wide variety of professional development activities, including workshops conducted by the Institute for Student Achievement, local and national conferences, and summer institutes. The school has yet to formalize procedures for setting goals for each teacher's professional growth and an effective means of evaluating progress and the impact on student outcomes.

The administration's formal and informal observations result in well-informed feedback for improvement. Administrators' detailed knowledge of each teacher's practice, gained through these observations contributes to providing them with good support. A well-conceived mentoring program and the collegiality of staff provide valuable help for teachers new to the profession and to the school. However, because there is no formal goal-setting process, decisions about the effects of practice do not link accurately to learning outcomes.

Strong collaboration during department, attendance, inquiry team, and grade meetings results in the enhancement of student learning through the sharing of assessment data, teaching strategies, and other relevant student information. The process and instrumentation used to set goals for the target population have been disseminated to other classrooms. Inquiry team and collaborative team teachers share the deep analysis of barriers to student learning and the process for formulating instructional adaptations that take place in inquiry settings and collaborative team teaching meetings with their colleagues during department and grade meetings. As a result, new evidenced-based teaching strategies are emerging in classrooms across the school.

The house system promotes a high degree of positive, personal interaction between and among teachers and students. Advisors serve as student advocates and counselors review transcripts after each marking period, which enhance students' personal and academic development. Parents view the school as safe and accessible and as one parent stated, "the school takes an interest in my son and makes sure he is doing the right thing."

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 evaluates individual student and sub-group progress and performance at the conclusion of each marking period and when City and State accountability reports are published. As a result, struggling students receive tutoring, credit recovery options, and small class sizes and staff review programming decisions for English language learners and special education students. In addition, school leaders meet with teachers to discuss classroom outcomes and to identify adjustments to instructional plans for the upcoming marking period. However, because the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan lacks measurable interim checkpoints, school leaders cannot evaluate the impact of these decisions on learning as part of an ongoing process.

Teachers in all core course areas use periodic and end-of-unit assessments to monitor performance and to respond flexibly to emerging student needs. However, while there are examples of good practice, teachers demonstrate variable capacity to conduct these activities consistently across all classrooms. The result is that instructional plans do not always match well with student needs and the evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions for all students is sometimes imprecise.

The administration's classroom observations and inter-visitations help them evaluate professional development activities. This appraisal includes the use of grades. However, the school does not directly link student data that measures progress in the acquisition of targeted skills and sub-skills to results. As such, the school cannot judge with certainty whether professional development has the intended impact on instruction.

Teachers know the school's learning goals and understand that the school leadership team uses data generated internally and externally to prioritize them. Because of an abrupt change in leadership last year and the necessity to focus on the development of structures and routines to stabilize the school, the principal recognized the need to review the core values of the school. As such, senior leaders are engaging the staff in a renewal process and are working with the school community to build a shared vision to guide its future development.

School Quality Criteria 2008-2009

School name: The Explorations Academy	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.							
<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