

Quality Review Report

2008-2009

Bronx Academy of Letters

High School 551

339 Morris Avenue

Bronx

NY 10451

Principal: Joan Sullivan

Dates of review: May 4 – 5, 2009

Lead Reviewer: Joel T. DiBartolomeo

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Bronx Academy of Letters is a high school with 492 students from grade 6 through grade 7 and grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 37% Black, 61% Hispanic, 1% White, and 1% Asian students. The student body includes 10% English language learners and 17% special education students. Boys account for 40% of the students enrolled and girls account for 60%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007 - 2008 was 93.6%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 73% eligibility.

The school is adding a middle school component and will enroll grade 8 next year.

Overall Evaluation

This school is well developed.

The school's accessible and capable principal and her talented assistant blend skillful visionary and strategic leadership to support high levels of student success. A full-time data specialist generates a variety of disaggregated assessment reports that teachers and administrators use to make well-informed organizational and instructional decisions, review student progress and plan interventions. Well-defined action plans and interim goals support the evaluation of many school, department, grade, and classroom practices.

The school sets both short- and long-term goals at each level of learning, and reviews and recalibrates them routinely. Each marking period, every teacher creates instructional goals for their students, who use them to estimate their own performance and progress. Students understand and are able to articulate these next learning steps. Bottom-quarter and advanced students set personal goals, but this is not a secure practice for all students. As a result, the acceleration of learning for students in middle performance ranges does not always take place.

Families receive progress reports every three weeks and have many opportunities to discuss student progress with advisors and teachers. However, not all parents receive assessment results or feedback that identifies a student's next personal short-term goal. This compromises some parents' efforts to provide additional support for student learning.

A rigorous literacy-based curriculum that focuses on college-readiness is available to all students. Course design maximizes flexibility and challenge to meet the needs of special education students, English language learners, and advanced students. However, instruction does not always provide middle range students with challenging activities matched to their identified learning needs.

A formal mentoring program and structured collaborative venues provide good support for new and veteran teachers, who actively inquire about student outcomes. The staff work with parents as a united team to support students in an environment that optimizes teaching and learning.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- School leaders' thoughtful staging of plans to implement the school's vision, provides staff, students and parents with clear expectations and support for their efforts.
- Teachers and administrators use a wide and varied range of assessment data to review student progress and plan interventions where appropriate.
- 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, ethnic, gender, and ability sub-groups.
- Course design maximizes flexibility and challenge to meet the needs of special education students, English language learners, and advanced students.
- School leaders make informed and effective organizational decisions across all aspects of the school to support improvements in learning.
- A formal mentoring program, the collegiality teachers have built as a team, and a school culture that supports high standards for their work, supports both new and veteran teachers.
- The principal, staff, and parents work as a united team to maintain a calm, respectful, and orderly environment that well supports students and in which high quality learning takes place.

What the school needs to improve

- Use assessment data to extend the classroom goal setting practices that exist in all core subjects to include personal goal setting for all students so that next learning steps are fully understood by students and shared with their parents.
- Further improve the differentiation of instruction to provide the "average" student in all classrooms with challenging activities matched to their identified learning needs.
- Formalize the use of interim goals in all action plans to support the evaluation of school, department, grade, and classroom practices.

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 well developed.

A full time data specialist gathers data from a number of State and city databases and generates an assortment of routine and on-demand reports. Teachers and administrators dissect this data rigorously. They use it frequently and consistently to develop an ongoing understanding of student performance and progress, to inform instructional plans and to make organizational adjustments. The school disaggregates each data source to recognize patterns and trends as well as the unique strengths and needs of each cohort, special education, English language learner, ethnic, gender, and, ability sub-groups. As a result, the school enjoys high levels of student success and special education students, English language learners, bottom-quarter students and advanced students make good progress in their learning. In addition, the school has very high student outcomes and is a bronze medal winner in the *U.S. News & World Report* listing of America's best high schools.

Students use feedback about their learning to review their progress towards established classroom goals in advisory, academic classes and through the college department. They understand well these goals and can describe them clearly as well as their progress towards them. The school uses a variety of means to keep families informed fully about school activities and student performance. Teachers send a progress report home every three weeks that identifies monthly opportunities for parents to meet with advisors to discuss student progress towards established subject area goals. Parents can also access grades and other information on-line. However, not all parents receive student assessment data or feedback that identifies each student's next short-term goal. As a result, some parents are unable to provide more focused academic support for learning.

Parents are supportive fully of school leaders and teachers and value highly the instructional program in which their children are educated. Teachers and administrators are available to them and parents describe them as responsive to their requests for information or assistance.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

Teachers, students, administrators, and parents work together to create school, department, grade, and classroom goals and to monitor progress over time. Careful analyses of State and city accountability databases as well as internal measures developed by the school inform these goals. Action plans carefully "stage and phase"

enhancements to the school's curriculum, such as its College Readiness initiative and serve to inform and adjust subsequent school improvement plans.

At the beginning of each marking period, the school dedicates a day for all teachers to communicate to students the instructional goals they have created for the ensuing six-week unit of study. A discussion takes place to enhance the understanding of each goal and its related criteria for success as well as to consider steps students can take to meet these goals. Students record their goals for each subject on an "academic goals and self-assessment" form and are encouraged to accrue evidence of their having met their goals. Advisory teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on and self assess their work and support in the formulation of personal goals. However, this practice of setting and monitoring differentiated student goals and the development of related action plans is not a consistent process except for bottom quarter and advanced students. As a result, teachers do not always identify learning gaps accurately and action plans do not always address meaningfully what students need to do in order to succeed.

The school expresses high expectations for the work of students and teachers in clear and tangible ways such as awards ceremonies, bulletin board displays, school publicity materials, and the school's unique requirements for a Bronx Letter's diploma. Parents learn about graduation requirements and curriculum demands in monthly meetings and while conferencing with teachers. Both parents and students are aware of the supports available to assist them in meeting these expectations. The principal outlines progress three times a year with a state of the school address that acknowledges past achievements, but also presents new challenges to motivate the school community. The result of these efforts is a graduation rate of 95%, and a growing number of students graduating with advanced Regents diplomas.

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 well developed.

The Bronx Academy of Letters offers students a literacy-focused curriculum that emphasizes college preparedness and academic standards that exceed State and city mandates. A growing number of advanced placements, arts and technology courses, a summer enrichment program and dozens of co-curricular clubs, sports, and electives that address student interests, abilities, preferences, and needs complement the core curriculum. Two full-time staff members support students who intern at a number of New York City institutions such as the Studio Museum, Lincoln Center, Bank of America, and the Heckscher Foundation. Each year dozens of students venture to different countries because of the school's interest in exposing them to global experiences.

Department teams create scope and sequence plans that articulate a clear progression of skills and content. Teachers prepare monthly calendars with lesson topic/activity, as well as daily lesson plans for students that specify the learning intentions, lesson components, materials needed, relevant announcements, formative assessments, homework assignment, and reflection activities. However, the criteria for successfully meeting the demands of the curriculum are not apparent in most classrooms. As a result, students are compromised in their ability to self monitor their own work.

Teachers use a variety of periodic and formative assessment data to understand the progress of each student and to inform decisions about teaching strategies. The school

has added honors and advanced placement courses as well as collaborative teacher support that maximize flexibility and challenge to meet the needs of special education students, English language learners, and advanced students. However, the differentiation of classroom instruction in many classrooms is insufficient to provide the “average” student with challenging activities matched to their unique learning profiles. Consequently, this compromises the acceleration of their learning.

School leaders make informed and effective organizational decisions across all aspects of the school to support improvements in learning and ample resources exist in each classroom to support responsive classroom environments. They allot time to learning in appropriate increments, and offer co-curricular activities during the day for middle school students resulting in a 100% participation rate. Staff have daily common meeting time, and the school is relentless in its efforts to hire highly quality staff.

The principal, staff, parents and students work as a united team to maintain a calm, respectful, and orderly environment in which learning can take place. A high level of care for students, which manifests itself in responsiveness to their needs and regular contact with their families, characterizes relationships. Students value and respect their teachers and teachers enjoy membership in a supportive professional culture. The school is safe and orderly and a set of conditions exists in classrooms to support learning. The result is a high level of engagement and enthusiasm for learning, mutual respect between and among teachers and students, and exceptionally high achievement levels.

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 well developed.

Teachers meet with school leaders five times a year to develop goals, monitor the impact of teaching strategies and to adjust classroom conditions when necessary. Evaluation is informed by student work, including discourse, achievement outcomes, and classroom observations. Feedback in formal and informal observation reports utilizes rubrics from the “*California Standards for the Teaching Profession*” and serves to define teacher practice and identify next steps for improvement. A formal mentoring program, orientation activities, frequent classroom visitations, staff collegiality and a school culture that insists on high standards for their work, supports both new and veteran teachers. One teacher described the professional environment this way, “If I slack-off, I let my colleagues down.”

All teachers meet five times a week in department, grade, and advisory groups. Good team dynamics support the sharing of assessment data and teaching strategies, investigations into student progress, and curriculum planning. However, the school’s formal inquiry work does not utilize methodology that contributes to the identification of evidence-based strategies nor does it result in significant organizational learning. Therefore, staff cannot be certain of the causal relationships between the change strategies they enact and results. Not all teachers participate in inter-visitations or in focused learning walks and, as a result, do not benefit from the observations and coaching of their colleagues.

The school expands its resource base because of its prodigious fund raising efforts, which have procured close to five million dollars since 2003. In addition, the school’s partnership with Urban Assembly supports professional development activities, student

incentives, leadership development, and classroom resources. Teachers report that a strength of the school is the availability of materials to support the instructional program.

The school supports students comprehensively in both the formal and informal aspects of school life. Advisors meet daily with small groups of students with whom they remain for three years. As a result, strong bonds with students and families form, which support good teamwork and shared responsibility for learning. Counselors, advisors, and teachers support the college application process, which results in over 90% of the graduating class matriculating into a college or university.

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 well developed.

An assessment calendar ensures a routine for reviewing student achievement, attendance, school climate, and survey data to evaluate classroom practices and progress towards school goals. The school has the capacity to reorganize quickly if previously unidentified needs emerge during the course of the school year. As a result, the school changed its math sequence, added more time to the study of English language arts, and strengthened its inclusion model.

Teachers use data accrued from a variety of assessments such as Wilson Reading, Acuity, SRI, State test results, and former Regents' test items to match student strengths and needs with instruction to accelerate their learning. Teachers also analyze this data to identify student skill and content gaps in the curriculum revision process, design interventions, and identify students for additional tutoring or advanced course work. However, the school's action planning practices are inconsistent in their utilization of interim goals and benchmarks to accelerate student learning. This also affects the evaluation of progress towards defined goals, by limiting the measurement of interim progress against clear benchmarks to enhance strategic decision-making. As a result, the evaluation of impact towards defined goals is not always exact.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the school's organizational practices and modify them when necessary, the school examines State and city assessments, program results, school climate data, student products, and interim assessments to good effect. To determine the impact of teaching on learning and to provide feedback and next steps in the teacher development process, the school makes effective use of the *California Standards for the Teaching Profession* alongside these data sources.

Teachers view the principal as a visionary and thoughtful leader who is available, competent, and personable. All members of the school community support the school's vision, including the implementation of a middle school component. Teachers are empowered to create effective teaching strategies in accordance with the principles established in the Comprehensive Educational Plan. Administration skillfully and strategically executes each phase of the plan and reviews progress at the end of each marking period. The result is an accurate self-evaluation and an efficient and orderly school improvement process that builds carefully on each successive stage of implementation.

School Quality Criteria 2008-2009

School name: The Bronx Academy of Letters	△	➤	✓	+
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, DYQ, 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
---	-----------------------	---	--	---	-------------------	---	-----------------------