

# **Quality Review Report 2009-2010**

**The Paul L. Dunbar Middle School**

**Middle School 301  
890 Cauldwell Avenue  
Bronx  
NY 10456**

**Principal: Benjamin Basile**

**Dates of review: February 8-9, 2010  
Lead Reviewer: Deena Abu-Lughod**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

The Paul L. Dunbar Middle School has 326 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 39% Black and 60% Hispanic. The student body includes 17% English language learners and 28% special education students. Boys account for 56% of the students enrolled and girls account for 44%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2008 - 2009 was 87.6%.

### Overall Evaluation

#### **This school is well-developed.**

Innovative thinking, supported by visionary strategic planning is the key to this school's transformation into a safe haven with a shared commitment to student and adult learning. The school is rightfully proud to have met its targets in English language arts and math and to have achieved good standing. Parents praise the school for its individualized attention to students' academic, emotional and social needs. All plans are well coordinated, monitored, and evaluated to reinforce the positive direction, ensuring that successful initiatives are sustainable. Inquiry teams have made an impact on curriculum and instruction in order to narrow the gender gap and to elevate the performance of English language learners.

An energetic and compassionate principal, supported by a strong cabinet, has created collaborative structures that nurture professional growth. As a result, the teaching staff is stable, and they have improved their instruction to sustain the school's progress in literacy and math. A new social studies curriculum and new science teachers are improving outcomes in these areas. Teachers align curriculum, assessment, instruction, and materials across grades and use data to plan differentiated learning activities. They create student-centered environments, and several exemplary teachers serve as models to emulate. Students are mature and confident, take pleasure in their work, and enjoy a broad curriculum with multiple opportunities to pursue unique interests after school. As one student said, "The teachers help us to not be shy. There's nothing to be afraid of." However, higher achieving students are not always provided with sufficiently challenging tasks in all classes and subjects in order to maximize their learning. Faculty and leadership are united in their efforts to attain a common understanding of standard-level work to ensure academic rigor and to make sure that their beliefs about how students learn best are embodied in their instruction.

The school analyzes multiple sources of data, conducts frequent assessments, and sets annual and interim goals by sub-group. However, it does not yet have systematized interim benchmarks that optimize the use of internal and periodic assessments by sub-group for more effective monitoring of progress and student goal mastery.

The school facilitates communication with families through a very informative website, mailings, hand delivery, frequent workshops on high interest topics and at sporting events, and caregivers value the attention they and their children receive. Persistent innovation in the area of attendance has led to a significant improvement this year.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The school is realizing its vision by carefully staging, implementing, consolidating and evaluating its improvement plans.
  - o Comprehensive education plans reveal the school's exceptional long-term planning, clearly connecting curriculum, instruction, assessment, communication, and infrastructure to accelerate student learning. The successful implementation of strategic plans for literacy and math, which specify interim benchmarks based on the professional teaching standards, has resulted in a four-fold increase in the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency.
  - o The school engages in continuous self-evaluation and rigorously documents progress on action plans to make timely and productive adjustments that build on previous achievements. For example, in the past, grade level meetings were used to achieve horizontal alignment of curriculum. This year, departments have aligned the curriculum vertically and have developed shared instructional strategies to attain greater instructional coherence.
- Data-driven organizational decisions ensure that resources are aligned to support instructional goals and that they sustain improvements in student outcomes.
  - o School leaders use the budget wisely, providing a wide range of intervention services and enrichment, and in enhancing infrastructure, with a new library, science lab, and technology to ensure that students are supported according to their needs and interests. Reduced class size in literacy reinforces individualized attention, and many special education students are mainstreamed twice a week to prepare them for less restrictive environments. This practice has resulted in the school obtaining additional credit for this sub-group. Teachers have an additional period each week for departmental meetings and work together for a monthly half-day to advance the school's instructional goals.
- The school promotes the students' social, academic, emotional, and physical well-being, creating an environment that is highly conducive to learning.
  - o Close-knit relationships, a clear ladder of referral, and involvement of all constituents in developing school policies keep the school safe, calm, and focused on learning. The principal knows every family, and takes personal interest in assuring that their needs are met by the school or through the "community coalition", which includes church, university, and local health organizations. Parents attribute the school's turnaround to the principal who "acts as if the students are his kids."
- Exceptional in-house student support services provide students with consistent conditions to succeed socially and academically.
  - o New initiatives, including early morning sports programs and competitive advisory projects, have resulted in a 2.5% increase in attendance so far

this year. Teachers receive training in behavioral intervention, and refer concerns they cannot address to a designated liaison from the very competent academic intervention services team, which ensures rapid and thorough response.

- Purposeful, differentiated professional development advances school-wide goals and supports adult learners in improving curriculum, instructional practice and leadership.
  - o The entire faculty and leadership meet for a monthly half-day to refine the school's high quality curriculum maps, using protocols to examine data, reflect on instruction, and set new curricular goals. This has generated a common understanding of good practice, resulting in the provision of a rigorous, well-planned course of study that generates high levels of student engagement. To support the current focus on formative assessment, teachers observe colleagues conferencing with students and view videos of each other's classrooms to provide feedback, and gain insights into student learning.
  - o The teacher handbook clarifies expectations for instruction and guides the administration's observations. Leaders use student work and the teachers' written reflections to differentiate teacher support. All observations include specific next steps with timelines for completion, and designate expert mentors, coaches, and intervisitations as supports. The principal actively supports leadership development.
- Data is transparent throughout the school, and is used well by teachers and leaders for planning instruction based on identified skill needs.
  - o Summative and interim data help the school identify trends, plan targeted skill support, and improve curriculum. To monitor progress on its goal of making its State targets for each sub-group, the school charts ongoing performance on simulations, periodic and common assessments, and documents its support plans by class, for English language learners and for special education students. This allows the school to understand how each sub-group is progressing, which supports are having a positive impact on outcomes, and to identify new needs.
  - o Teachers disaggregate data to identify skill needs at the grade and classroom level and organize this data in templates to group students by skill during class and extended time. Assessment expertise is gained through collaborative scoring of open-ended math questions and monthly writing assessments. Their improved understanding of how students approach problem solving, and of standard-level work has helped them to design better lessons.
- Inquiry work builds teacher capacity to serve strategic sub-groups, improve curriculum, and ensure the school reaches its goals.
  - o A two-year inquiry project that identified organizational and curricular changes to accelerate boys' literacy resulted in boys obtaining reading gains that were twice as large as the girls'. The school now offers optional gender-based classes with different active learning strategies and literature. The students report favorably on their increased concentration and engagement.

- o An expanded team is accelerating language acquisition for English language learners. Teachers have begun to implement effective strategies, such as seating these students close to the front with a bilingual peer leader, conducting frequent comprehension checks and pointing out cognates. Newly arrived English language learners say this helps them to keep up with their work in other content areas like science.

### **What the school needs to improve**

- Strengthen the alignment between teacher practice and the school's beliefs about learning to ensure high levels of engagement and thinking, so that all students reach their potential.
  - o The use of conferencing, student choice, and flexible grouping is visible throughout the school. However, differentiation is insufficiently developed to address the range of levels in some larger classrooms, where many students use the same textbooks and assignments, with few extensions for the higher performing students.
  - o Some teachers rely on commercial products to build student skills and vocabulary. As a result, their students lack opportunities to learn and apply these skills in challenging problem-solving situations and present them for authentic audiences. Some math instruction is still procedural and group work does not always foster deeper reasoning ability.
- Refine goal-setting systems to include benchmarks within specific action plans for sub-groups so that student goals are consistently monitored and adjustments made.
  - o Student goals for sub-groups are clear to all the school. However, there are no interim benchmarks to indicate whether students are on track or to efficiently guide the necessary changes to student goals across subject areas.
- Calibrate the periodic assessment data and student work with the standards to create interim benchmarks for more effective monitoring of progress.
  - o Although the school disaggregates data by skill in English and math by class, subgroup and student, it has not ascertained which outcomes on periodic assessments are reliable indicators of mastery. This hampers its ability to set specific interim benchmarks to measure progress during the year. Also, science and social studies teachers do not consistently track item level data by unit to ensure alignment to standards and monitor progress. As a result, there have been high classroom grades but low outcomes on State tests in these subject areas.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2009-2010

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School name: Paul J. Dunbar Middle School   | Δ | ➤ | ✓ | + |
| Overall QR Score  |   |   |   | X |
| <b>Quality Statement 1 – Instructional and Organizational Coherence: The school has a coherent strategy to support student learning that aligns curriculum, instruction and organizational decisions.</b>                             |   |   |   |   |
| <i>To what extent does the school regularly...</i>  | Δ | ➤ | ✓ | + |
| 1.1 Design engaging, rigorous and coherent curricula, including the Arts, for a variety of learners and aligned to key State standards?   |   |   |   | X |
| 1.2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, and ensure that it is: aligned to the curriculum, engaging, and differentiated to enable all students to produce meaningful work products? |   |   | X |   |
| 1.3 Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school's instructional goals and meet student learning needs?  |   |   |   | X |
| 1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes toward learning that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?   |   |   |   | X |
| Overall score for Quality Statement 1   |   |   |   | X |
| <b>Quality Statement 2 – Gather and Analyze Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, analyze and share information on student learning outcomes to understand school and student progress over time.</b>                 |   |   |   |   |
| <i>To what extent does the school ...</i>   | Δ | ➤ | ✓ | + |
| 2.1 Gather and analyze information on student learning outcomes to identify trends, strengths, and areas of need at the school level?   |   |   |   | X |
| 2.2 Gather and analyze information on student learning outcomes to identify trends, strengths, and areas of need at the team and classroom level?   |   |   |   | X |
| 2.3 Use or develop tools to enable school leaders and teachers to organize and analyze student performance trends?  |   |   |   | X |
| 2.4 Engage in an open exchange of information with students and families regarding students' learning needs and outcomes?   |   |   | X |   |
| Overall score for Quality Statement 2   |   |   |   | X |

| <b>Quality Statement 3 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently engage the school community and use data to set and track suitably high goals for accelerating student learning.</b>  |                       |   |  |          |                   |   |                       |
|--|-----------------------|---|--|----------|-------------------|---|-----------------------|
| <i>To what extent does the school ...</i>  | △                     | ➤ | ✓  | +        |                   |   |                       |
| 3.1 Establish a coherent vision of future development that is reflected in a short list of focused, data-based goals that are understood and supported by the entire school community?   |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 3.2 Use collaborative and data informed processes to set measurable and differentiated learning goals for student subgroups, and students in need of additional support?   |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 3.3 Ensure the achievement of learning goals by tracking progress at the school, teacher team and classroom level?   |                       |   | X  |          |                   |   |                       |
| 3.4 Communicate high expectations to students and families, engage them in decision-making, and promote active involvement in the school community?  |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Overall score for Quality Statement 3</b>   |                       |   |  | <b>X</b> |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals and student learning and emotional needs.</b>                           |                       |   |  |          |                   |   |                       |
| <i>To what extent does the school..</i>  | △                     | ➤ | ✓  | +        |                   |   |                       |
| 4.1 Use the observation of classroom teaching and the analysis of learning outcomes to elevate school-wide instructional practices and implement strategies that promote professional growth and reflection, with a special focus on new teachers? |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning?  |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 4.3 Provide professional development that promotes independent and shared reflection, opportunities for leadership growth, and enables teachers to continuously evaluate and revise their classroom practices to improve learning outcomes?        |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 4.4 Integrate child/youth development, support services and partnerships with families and outside organizations with the school-wide goals to accelerate the academic and personal growth of students?  |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Overall score for Quality Statement 4</b>   |                       |   |  | <b>X</b> |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.</b>                   |                       |   |  |          |                   |   |                       |
| <i>To what extent does the school..</i>  | △                     | ➤ | ✓  | +        |                   |   |                       |
| 5.1 Evaluate the quality of curricular, instructional and organizational decisions, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school?  |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| 5.2 Evaluate systems for assessing students, organizing data, and sharing information with student and families, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school?                               |                       |   | X  |          |                   |   |                       |
| 5.3 Establish and sustain a transparent, collaborative system for measuring progress towards interim and long term goals and making adjustments during the year and over time?   |                       |   | X  |          |                   |   |                       |
| 5.4 Use data to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of structured professional collaboration, capacity building and leadership development strategies?  |                       |   |  | X        |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Overall score for Quality Statement 5</b>   |                       |   | <b>X</b>                                       |          |                   |   |                       |
| <b>Quality Review Scoring Key</b>  |                       |   |  |          |                   |   |                       |
| △  | <b>Underdeveloped</b> | ➤ | <b>Underdeveloped with Proficient Features</b> | ✓        | <b>Proficient</b> | + | <b>Well Developed</b> |