

# Quality Review Report 2011-2012

**Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School**

**Secondary School M348**

**511 West 182<sup>nd</sup> St  
Manhattan  
NY 10033**

**Principal: Brett Kimmel**

**Dates of review: March 1 - 2, 2012**

**Lead Reviewer: Doug Knecht**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS) is a secondary school with 604 students from grade 6 through grade 12. The school population comprises 96% Hispanic, 2% Black, 1% White, and 1% Multi-racial students. The student body includes 20% English language learners and 18% special education students. Boys account for 56% of the students enrolled and girls account for 44%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2010 - 2011 was 92.0%.

### Overall Evaluation

**This school is well developed.**

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The impassioned leadership and staff have partnered with students and families to co-construct a school culture that produces academic strivers who value their school community and one another. (1.4)
  - All students are known well through frequent grade level teacher team meetings, during which individual and small groups of students are efficiently discussed, and through the advisory program, Crew, where one staff member tracks the strengths and needs of a group of students of all grades and teachers them about college preparedness. During Crew, and through the curriculum across classes, students learn to develop their voice, as an advocate for themselves and their community. Subsequently, students are challenged and supported to succeed in high school and strive for college; the data on the first graduating class is projected to be around 85-90%, and all students unequivocally envision attending college.
  - The school culture is built upon strong values, such as the “We Believe” statements, WHEELS Ways to Be, and Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLs), which clearly articulate the intellectual, academic, and personal behaviors students need to be successful in the school community and in college. There are numerous structures in place to reinforce and teach these values: the student handbook, student-led parent-teacher conferences, a two-week 6<sup>th</sup> grader integration session, grade level expeditions and regular community meetings, high school spirit week, the grading of HOWLs learning targets, various academic celebrations – such as the public and shared delivery of college applications to the local post office by seniors – and incentives for more relaxed dress codes as students mature. The School Survey responses validate student descriptions of a culture in which they are held accountable for respecting themselves as scholars and each other as human beings.
- Multi-year plans adroitly link layers of instructional goals, thus deepening and broadening the exceptional pedagogical consistency across classes, all in service of accelerating and closing gaps for students. (3.1)
  - The principal’s theory of action since opening the school has focused on developing and sharing a high standard for effective lessons across classrooms. In year one, the staff worked on crafting clear learning targets and lesson objectives; year two they shifted from the first five minutes of class to the last five minutes, honing strategies to check student understanding in relation to the lesson’s learning targets. In subsequent years, the staff has implemented the (a) Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model of lessons in order to consistently move students into the center of their learning experience, as opposed to the teachers, and (b) design-your-own interim assessments to drive tailored instruction. Presently, the instructional goals include increasing the rigor of lessons and aligning curriculum to the higher standards of the Common Core. Results from this careful planning, and the constant monitoring and revising of their collective work, are evident in the progress students are

making, such as almost 60% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders earning at least one high school credit, as opposed to the city average of 23%.

- The close alignment of interim assessments to curricula and the use of varied checks for understanding in classes generate crucial data that refines teachers' instructional decisions and students' goals. (2.2)
  - Interim assessments are created by teachers and the data is used regularly by teacher teams and leadership. Teachers discuss next steps for supporting individual and groups of students, and share related instructional strategies to ensure student success. For example, during the 7<sup>th</sup> grade team meeting, interim assessment data confirmed that a swath of students is struggling with making inferences. The English teacher handed out a one-pager on how to support their shared students in drawing inferences within their different disciplines: as readers, writers, mathematicians and researchers. Each teacher committed to using these strategies in class and reporting back to the group. A similar set of strategies has been shared and implemented for annotation, which was apparent in the coherence of approach by students when engaged in reading complex texts across classrooms.
  - Teachers have an impressive set of assessment strategies, which they rely on, as needed, based on the feedback they receive on students during the lesson. Teachers frequently ask challenging questions, provide students with self assessment opportunities, and guide them to turn-and-talk with pre-determined partners to check for their understanding throughout lessons. Students understand they will be called on or asked to share aspects of their small group discussion, thus creating attentiveness and accountability for engagement and learning.
- Through a highly attuned system of coaching, observations, and weekly professional learning sessions, teachers receive continuous feedback that improves their instruction and student outcomes. (4.1)
  - A combination of co-constructed teacher goals, coaching, frequent informal observations, and formal feedback to teachers, using the Danielson Framework for Teaching, along with the focused multi-year school instructional goals, has generated a common and deep understanding of acceptable teaching practice among staff, which is evident across classes and in discussion with teachers. This includes teachers new to the school, who report receiving weekly coaching and clear next steps to improve their work with students, and, along with the rest of the staff, articulate feeling supported to be effective overall.
  - The generation of trusted interim assessment data has transformed the regular departmental and staff-wide professional development sessions. Teachers concede that, while frustrating at first, the inputting and sharing of this information on their students has positively impacted the way they approach grouping and engaging their students; the interim data shows a general increase in the learning of both content and skills in literacy and math.

- The communal commitment to creative teacher and student time, as well as the clever use of budgetary and human capital, puts the needs of students first, resulting in rich work products across the spectrum of students. (1.3)
  - With support from the entire staff, the school's daily, weekly, and monthly schedule has been altered and refined at least five times in the past few years so that: teacher grade teams meet multiple times during the week; department team meetings and staff wide professional development occur weekly; and students in need of additional help regularly receive the attention they deserve. In addition to this scheduling flexibility, other strategic investments, such as the partnership with Blue Engine – an organization that provides more than a dozen vetted teaching assistants to the school – allow for more flexible small group and individualized instruction. For example, in math students work through content in groups of 4-7 with an adult, based on their performance on interim assessments, or, if they are excelling, they are guided to use the free Khan Academy online resource to accelerate their learning. Consequently, from 2009-10 to 2010-11, the percentage of special education students scoring level 1 on the math test decreased significantly in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, and the percentage of special education students passing the Integrated Algebra Regents exam increased in the upper grades, with most of that increase coming from a subgroup of students earning 75 or above.
  
- Student-led conferences and open online gradebook tools have made crystal clear to families and students how well they are mastering academic and personal behavior expectations and targets. (2.4)
  - Students are supported by their teachers to lead conferences three times per year with the adults educating and caring for them. This practice impacts every single student and family: the staff ensures 100% participation. Student work and data available in the online gradebook system, in the form of mastery of learning targets, including the HOWLs and expectations aligned to the Common Core standards, are central to this process. As a result, students not only gain leadership experience and have their voice central to their development, but there is clear communication of support for the students' next learning steps as outlined in action plans developed together by student, teacher, and guardian.
  
- The relentless monitoring of staff practices and organizational resources by the school's leadership has yielded revised instructional and programmatic supports that are increasing student attainment. (5.1)
  - From the descriptions of the high quality instructional practices above, the leadership has clearly been successful in moving the staff to fine-tune its practices in a coherent manner, and in light of the Common Core standards, for the sake of their students' success. Evolving staff-wide policies, such as the mastery-based grading system centered on the student-friendly, curriculum-aligned learning targets, have tightened the connections between what is taught, how it is taught, and data on student progress. As a result, students and teachers more clearly grasp how students are performing in relation to the school's high expectations and respond accordingly.

- A weekly meeting structure of the leadership team has been the main source of vision for change. During this time, leadership digests large amounts of quantitative and qualitative data to refine current structures, policies and practices, or invest in developing new ones – granted they find creative ways to break budgetary and time constraints. Presently, as an Innovation Zone school, leadership and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade team are experimenting with longer blocks of time to engage in a blended (online and on paper) project-based curriculum. The leadership and teacher team are, in tandem, attacking this challenge with constant, data-based, student-centered analysis and reflection, which has led to an evolving and shared approach to the 9<sup>th</sup> graders coursework, much of which is accessed through the use of laptops. The goal is to learn from this process and scale the best practices, some of which have already been identified, across grades and disciplines.

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

- Continue to improve the coherence of curricula and generate rigorous performance tasks with multiple access points for all students by leveraging key Common Core standards across grades and content areas. (1.1)
  - At present, powerful and thoughtful scope and sequences articulate the grade-by-grade curriculum in ELA and math. The work of the coaches, as well as that of the teacher teams, clearly evidence the use of these maps, effectively honing the instruction to key skills and content for students, and development areas for teachers. Analogous maps for science and social studies are being revised and refined; once completed, they will serve to further solidify the coherence of what is taught and how it is taught across classrooms and cohorts of students.
  - Rich, authentic, interdisciplinary, year-long “expeditions” are planned and executed, in partnership with Expeditionary Learning, by each grade team, such as “The History of Salsa” in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and “Energy: Life or Death” in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Academic tasks across classes typically ensure that students compare, contrast, and analyze sources and positions, not merely summarize and recall facts, procedures, and algorithms. However, the demand of certain tasks do not reach the level of complexity as required by the Common Core standards, such as sufficiently developing the ability to acknowledge and address counterclaims with solid evidence while constructing an argument. As a result, students are not consistently practicing these key skills.
- Capitalize on the impressive consistency of pedagogical practices across classrooms by increasing text-based writing and discussion opportunities for students to express higher order and complex thinking. (1.2)
  - Teachers exhibit a similar tightness and seasoned judiciousness of classroom routines that align with the school’s beliefs about how students learn best, thus effectively transferring responsibility to students for their learning and moving the pace of the lessons to keep students alert, engaged and interested. However, it is not clear that there is consistently time built into lessons to regularly return to – or entertain for a moment when a student asks in an unplanned fashion – the big, fascinating

essential questions that purportedly drive the curriculum. This creates a tension between considering the big themes of the learning and the need to skill-build, which may limit the amount of deep thinking students regularly do.

- Strategies to support comprehension and foster important reading and annotation skills have been articulated and are shared across disciplines. The impact on students, especially in the younger grades, is clear in interim assessment data. As expressed by the school leadership, though, the focus in literacy must now encompass more targeted support for students to express what they are thinking in their writing.
- Build upon the elevated postsecondary expectations and thorough college supports for students in grades 9-12 so that students in the lower grades have concrete college-readiness benchmarks as well. (4.4)
  - The educators are collectively committed to making sure no students fall through the cracks as they progress towards graduation and college. Professional learning with key partners shapes this system. As a result, efforts in Crew, grade teams, and individually as guidance counselors and teachers, provide students with repeated opportunities and support to improve their personal habits of work and their academic habits of mind. In particular, the steps high school students take in preparing for college, as outlined by a carefully crafted plan and set of structures and experiences, ensure that every student has a realistic postsecondary goal and set of next steps. As is the case with almost every school with grades 6-8, there is not yet a clear depiction of and system for teaching what these students should know and be able to do regarding college readiness. Subsequently, the expectations for “what college readiness looks like in middle school” are not as strongly connected to the high school process as it could be, thus leaving more for students and families to make sense of on their own as they move through the middle grades.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2011-2012

School name:	UD	D	P	WD
<b>Overall QR Score</b>				<b>X</b>
<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>	UD	D	P	WD
1.1 Design engaging, rigorous and coherent curricula, including the Arts, for a variety of learners and aligned to key State standards?			<b>X</b>	
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?				<b>X</b>
1.3 Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school's instructional goals and meet student learning needs as evidenced by meaningful student work products?				<b>X</b>
1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes toward learning that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?				<b>X</b>
<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>	UD	D	P	WD
2.1 Gather and analyze information on student learning outcomes to identify trends, strengths, and areas of need at the school level?				<b>X</b>
2.2 Align assessments to curriculum, use on-going assessment practices and analyze information on student learning outcomes to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom level?				<b>X</b>
2.3 Use grading policies and tools to enable school leaders and teachers to organize, aggregate, and analyze student performance trends to inform instruction and curriculum?				<b>X</b>
2.4 Engage families in school decision-making, activities and an open exchange of information regarding students progress toward school and class expectations?				<b>X</b>
<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>	UD	D	P	WD
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?				<b>X</b>
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?				<b>X</b>
3.3 Ensure the achievement of learning goals by tracking progress at the school, teacher team and classroom level?				<b>X</b>
3.4 Communicate high expectations to staff, students and families, and support students and families to achieve them?				<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>	<b>UD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>WD</b>			
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?				<b>X</b>			
4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning?				<b>X</b>			
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?				<b>X</b>			
4.4 Integrate child/youth development, guidance/advisement support services and partnerships with families and outside organizations with the school-wide goals to accelerate the academic and personal growth of students?				<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>	<b>UD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>WD</b>			
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, with particular attention to the CCLS?				<b>X</b>			
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?				<b>X</b>			
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?				<b>X</b>			
5.4 Use data to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of structured professional collaboration, capacity building and leadership development strategies?				<b>X</b>			
<b>Quality Review Scoring Key</b>							
<b>UD</b>	<b>Underdeveloped</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>WD</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>