

Quality Review Report 2011-2012

Bronx Writing Academy

Middle School 323

**270 East 167 Street
Bronx
NY 10456**

Principal: Kamar Samuels

Dates of review: May 3 - 4, 2012

Lead Reviewer: Eileen Waters

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Bronx Writing Academy is a middle school with 508 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 32% Black, 66% Hispanic, 1% Asian students and 2% other students. The student body includes 25% English language learners and 14% special education students. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2010 - 2011 was 86.6%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is developing.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The principal's organizational choices align with the school's focus of strengthening student achievement and creating a learning environment where staff share the responsibility of student growth. (1.3)
 - o As part of their iZone partnership, the school has been restructured into seven small professional learning teams, referred to as pods. The pod arrangement allows teachers who instruct the same students in four main subject areas to discuss data, student work, and student behavior in order to collaboratively plan. The pod configuration is also cultivating a more structured parental involvement during meetings by involving parents in sessions when their child is being discussed. In addition to pod meetings, teachers participate in content area department meetings to plan units, lessons, and assessments. Additionally, the school has invested in various resources to support teacher's development in curriculum planning and project-based learning. These collaborations are strengthening a larger base of accountability among staff members for student achievement.
- Professional collaborations foster a team approach towards addressing student trends and the development of curriculum to strengthen teachers' capacity. (4.2)
 - o Teams of teachers meet by department and pod on a regular basis to focus their work and strengthen a collaborative approach towards student needs. In a pod meeting, teachers review the final grades for their cohort students and plan personalized behavior intervention strategies for students who need further interventions. From these discussions teachers modify instructional resources by providing students with lower-level books, creating folders of missed work for students with attendance issues, or tiered-writing assignments so students have different levels of support for the same objective. In addition, having teachers across the content areas plan together has resulted in students beginning to transfer their learning across content areas. In department meetings, teachers work with a consultant to review student data as part of the curriculum revision process. The data analysis process has initiated conversations across teachers on student trends and possible triggers, and has strengthened teachers' instructional planning to begin to become more interdisciplinary. The collaborations also provide teachers with professional training to work with students that have a wide range of abilities and learning challenges. Furthermore, meetings serve as a venue for network support in building teachers' capacity around using protocols to ensure that their voice is heard and that the meetings remain productive and goal oriented.
- The administrative team provides teachers with focused instructional feedback that captures next steps for teachers in order to unify pedagogical practices. (4.1)
 - o As part of the Talent Management Pilot, school leaders are working towards developing a similar lens when observing teachers. The structure of teacher feedback centers on six of Danielson's competencies, providing teachers with snippets from their lesson as evidence towards attaining the competencies. Some feedback practices highlight the full competency as a strength or improvement area, and provide next steps that are explicit directives. While other feedback practices guide teachers towards their next steps with a rationale.

The use of a common framework to structure feedback practices supports the faculty in developing a common understanding of expected instructional practices as they work towards elevating strengthening teacher pedagogy.

- The leadership's analysis of data influences school level decisions to support the identified needs of the learning community so that student achievement is made over time. (2.1)
 - Trends in absenteeism led to a school aide tracking student attendance and following protocols to improve the number of students in school on a daily basis. Based on the large number of level 4 incidents being reported, the school brought in the Ramapo for Children program to support teachers in defusing behavioral issues within the classroom so that more time is utilized on instruction. The utilization of a highly structured remedial reading program that directly teaches the structure of the language was brought in to target the needs of seventh and eighth grade students with disabilities, which is capturing gains in students' literacy abilities. Additionally, school leaders review data from the mid-year Talent Management survey to understand teachers' insight towards the effectiveness of the new practices and to inform adjustments that strengthen feedback to teachers.
- Partnerships offer staff techniques to address situations in an affirmative manner and equip students with life skills to support emotional growth through the use of positive decision-making skills. (4.4)
 - The partnership with Ramapo for Children provides teachers with awareness signs and consultants model appropriate strategies to dissolve potentially negative situations between students in order to avoid a stressful environment. The partnership with Bronx Works provides peer mediation guidance and team building activities to address students' social emotional needs. The 'Squash It' room emerged as a place for students to talk through their problems and discuss ways to be more proactive prior to the escalation of issues. Data captures a shift in the intensity of incidents occurring, where there is less physical fighting and more verbally aggressive language used between students.

What the school needs to improve

- Further refine curricula across content areas with the infusion of engaging learning tasks that challenge students' thinking in order to increase academic achievement for all students. (1.1)
 - The staff's ongoing conversion of the curricula to a backwards design format is setting the stage for alignment of curriculum across teachers. Whereas the current curricula depict a listing of objectives with supporting resources, an explicit emphasis on key standards focused on addressing student needs is not yet present. Some academic tasks are rooted in high-level questions to engage student thinking but lack the appropriate scaffolds needed to equip students with content knowledge that would allow them to take a stance to support their beliefs. In other cases, students are presented with work that struggles to challenge their cognition through rigorous tasks, thus minimizing the use of knowledge and content to support new learnings.
- Reform pedagogical practices to concentrate on students' unique learning needs through purposeful instructional choices that foster student ownership of knowledge to attain mastery. (1.2)

- The school believes the implementation of the workshop model with embedded scaffolds to target student's needs along with the gradual release of responsibility are instructional approaches that best meet the needs of their students. However, these beliefs are not yet embedded across classrooms. Some instructional practices transfer the ownership of thinking on to students as they synthesize multiple sources of information to support a stance on a social issue. Other classrooms reflect teacher directed learning, with limited scaffolds that support the needs of all students. Opportunities for high-level discussions across students are missed as low-level questions are posed to students from the teacher. A lack of explicit modeling of the expectation outcome leaves students unclear and unable to complete academic tasks successfully. The disparity of effective instructional practices across classrooms, impacts on students' mastery of learning.
- Strengthen the practice of continuously monitoring student progress and providing actionable feedback to students and families that captures learning supports and extensions to increase academic progress. (3.3)
 - Teacher teams collaborate more often with their colleagues to set a broad goal, discuss students' data, and make instructional decisions. Although they share a common approach towards meeting students' deficits, they have not yet formalized a tool that would allow them to effectively monitor student progress in order to adjust goals as needed.
 - The varying practice of providing feedback to students struggles to effectively capture how students can achieve mastery. Some students share that teachers place feedback on their work after its completion and that feedback can often be confusing. Student pieces are given a grade with feedback that states "creative", leaving students unsure what that means or what they need to become better. Other students share that teachers correct the grammar in their pieces without providing feedback that would guide students on how to build their own writing capacity. Parents use an online tool to check their children's grades or will speak directly with classroom teachers. Consequently, students and families struggle to receive and/or comprehend teacher comments in a manner that explicitly guides students towards mastery through actionable feedback.
- Enhance teachers' depth of data utilization and analysis to appropriately assess student outcomes and specifically identify causes of performance deficits to modify curricula and pedagogy so that student proficiency advances. (2.2)
 - Some teachers incorporate the collection of data through periodic checks for understanding and other teachers irregularly initiate the collection of reading levels hindering routine instructional adjustments. Although students complete unit work aligned with Common Core Learning Standards, some rubrics measure student work using the New York State Performance Standards. Teachers review common assessment data every six weeks to identify performance areas of deficit. While teachers utilize various data sources to gather a surface understanding of students' needs, a deeper analysis of student data that identifies that cause factor of students' deficits is not common practice. As a result, classroom level data struggles to capture findings that evaluate the effectiveness of curricula and struggle to pinpoint causal factors needing modifications relative to pedagogical decisions in order to increase student proficiency.
- Intensify systems that evaluate the effectiveness of assessment and grading practices to increase the coherence of policies across the school. (5.2)

- Across grades, students are assessed using a uniform rubric without a link to specific grade level standards. The school has identified a large discrepancy, where 87% of students are passing English courses and only 17% of students are gaining proficiency on the State English language arts exams, with a similar trend surfacing in math results as well. Although school leaders review student work, an effective structure that monitors the grading practices across grades and teachers is absent. Consequently, the school's has limited ability to make adjustments that would ensure coherence of grading policies aligned to course grades and to the level at which the CCLS deems students' proficiency.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2011-2012

School name: Bronx Writing Academy	UD	D	P	WD
Overall QR Score		X		
Quality Statement 1 – Instructional and Organizational Coherence: The school has a coherent strategy to support student learning that aligns curriculum, instruction and organizational decisions.				
<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?		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 as evidenced by meaningful student work products?		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		
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.				
<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?		X		
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?		X		
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?		X		
2.4 Engage families in school decision-making, activities and an open exchange of information regarding students' progress toward school and class expectations?		X		
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.				
<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?		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 staff, students and families, and support students and families to achieve them?		X		

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.

<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
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, 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?		X		

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.

<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
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?		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		

Quality Review Scoring Key

UD	Underdeveloped	D	Developing	P	Proficient	WD	Well Developed
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