

# Quality Review Report 2012-2013

**The Essence School**

**Middle School 311**

**590 Sheffield Avenue  
Brooklyn  
NY 11207**

**Principal: Claudy Makelele**

**Dates of review: March 4-5, 2013**

**Lead Reviewer: Joyce Stallings-Harte**

## **Part 1: The school context**

### **Information about the school**

The Essence School is a middle school with 182 students from 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 74% Black, 24% Hispanic, 1% White, and 1% Asian students. The student body includes 7% English language learners and 17% special education students. Boys account for 42% of the students enrolled and girls account for 58%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 93.0%.

### **Overall Evaluation**

**This school is developing.**

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The school has a safe and respectful learning environment that fosters the academic and personal growth of students, teachers and parents. (1.4)
  - Parents, teachers and students comment that the school is safe and is a suitable environment for learning. In response to the recent Learning Environment Survey and end of year conversations where students voiced the need to discuss issues of concern, the principal established monthly, 'Overcoming Obstacles' meetings where students engage in 'difficult conversations' on topics such as making difficult decisions. At one meeting students discussed bullying and how to speak out about it. The principal stated that because of these meetings, students are now able to express these feelings and discuss ways in which they may respond. Additionally, teachers facilitate weekly advisory meetings for small groups of students and follow a curriculum to discuss issues such as bullying and career and college preparation. These relevant and engaging topics have contributed to a decrease in lateness across the school because students do not want to miss the sessions, which are scheduled at the beginning of the school day. Students said that they wanted an after school program and the school now provides the Good Shepherd after school program, which offers homework help for students, parent workshops and mental health supports. Students comment that their teachers get to know them through advisory as they talk about issues such as use of social media. Also, students comment that teachers care about them because they are also available before school, at lunchtime and after school to help answer their questions and address concerns if necessary. As a result of advisory, the after school program and the access to teachers, students feel that they are a valued part of the school community that supports their growth.
  
- School leaders are beginning to provide clearer expectations for high levels of instruction, professionalism and communication. (3.4)
  - The principal sends a monthly calendar/newsletter to make parents aware of the workshops and activities that are available. The workshops include topics such as Common Core Learning Standards and the Citywide Expectations. Parents receive a Performance Alert Notice, alerting parents when their child is missing assignments or failing class. Teachers maintain logs of when parents come in for a conference. Parents comment that the school 'stays on the students now' by sending letters and provides information on the more strident academic expectations. They state that their children now need to explain their thinking instead of simply providing the answers. In reading, the school sends home a weekly reading log which parents are expected to sign signifying that they are aware of what their child is reading. One parent noted that her child has increased from 50% to 70% in the math assessment because the school 'takes time out to help the kids'. As a

result of the supports the school provides, through extra tutoring and time with the teacher, students are able to show some improvement.

- Ten to fifteen employees of the school's PENCIL partner, Depository Trust Clearing Corporation, an organization that provides volunteers to speak with students about career options such as jobs related to architecture, engineering, business and the arts. Eighth graders create resumes for a job they are interested in with the assistance of the English Language Arts teacher. Parents are invited to attend the mock interview and a rubric is used to rate student performance. Students are expected to prepare for the interview as they would for an actual job interview. Students meet with teachers to conference about the application and assess using the teacher-made rubric. As a result, students receive guidance support and feedback necessary to prepare them for career and college.
- The principal makes purposeful organizational decisions that promote shared responsibility for student growth. (1.3)
  - In response to data review from the most recent New York State English Language Arts and math exams, administration revised the school schedule to allow for increased teacher team meeting time. During the school day, all teachers and school leaders conduct tutorials where they provide small group instruction for ten students twice a week for 45 minutes based on the analysis of the baseline assessments. The principal extends instructional time for students as these assignments are extended during the after school program. Students report that they are able to ask questions and get assistance from a teacher. This strategic use of resources is beginning to increase accountability for student progress and is shared by administration and all teachers.
  - Providing time for teacher teams to meet and review student work is a priority this year for the principal. Teacher teams are scheduled to meet weekly by department to review student work and work products. The teams have begun to use a protocol for the review that looks at the school wide goal for students of citing textual evidence. As a result, teachers design more challenging academic tasks and instructional practice is elevated.

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

- Deepen teacher pedagogy and shared belief systems that ensure all learners have access to appropriately challenging and rigorous learning opportunities that promote academic growth. (1.2)
  - The schools' stated focus is on engaging all students through discussion and questioning. The principal also stated that she expects lessons to provide opportunities for discussion and questioning. Observation of classrooms reveals limited opportunities for students to engage in discussion and raise questions that will deepen their thinking. Across classrooms, there was significant variation in the level of questioning with students responding to low level Depth of Knowledge questioning without

student-to-student discourse in most classrooms. In an 8<sup>th</sup> grade math class, while the teacher asked questions of varied DOK levels, one student at a time responded with no discussion or opportunity for further student discussion. In a 6<sup>th</sup> grade math class, students presented work, which gave opportunity for students to ask questions but only the teacher posed questions. Sixth grade students reported that they do group work twice a week and otherwise do independent work. In the science classroom, it was noted by the administrator that if there are no English Language Learners or Students with Disabilities hence, the work is not differentiated. Teaching strategies and questioning techniques provide limited opportunities for students to think deeply, engage in discussion or challenge each other's thinking. As a result, full student engagement in rigorous and challenging lessons is hindered limiting academic progress.

- While teachers have multiple sources of information on student performance and administrators identify a variety of strategies intended to support varied learning abilities and skill levels, the use of multiple entry points to engage all learners is inconsistent across classrooms. For example, eighth grade students identified by the teacher as higher performing in science were asked to create their own science myths while the identified lower level 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were asked to sketch pictures in response to the writing task. In an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts class, while students were seated in groups, all students received the same reading passage and writing assignment. In a class of students with disabilities, students worked from a set of SRA Reading Program cards that are not aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards which limits their access to increasingly complex text. Some students report that they are not grouped for English Language Arts and mathematics while others reported that there is small group work in mathematics. The inconsistency in teaching practices and academic demand of tasks results in significant differences in the level and quality of cognitive engagement in student work products which limits the possibility of student progress.
- Develop data analysis and establish ongoing assessment practices that ensure student progress toward goals.  
(2.2)
  - The school has started to use data from ARIS, NYStart and Acuity and baseline and midline assessments to examine student performance and group students for instruction. Data from the New York State English Language Arts and Math tests was used to form the small groups that meet twice/weekly. However, attention to subgroups is not always taken into account in planning or systematically measured for progress. Students report that they remain in their small group for the year that does not take into account ongoing checks for progress. Classroom observation indicates teachers' limited use of checks for understanding as evident in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms where students responded individually to the teacher's questions with no checks for understanding. While students use teacher-made and ready-made rubrics to guide the development of tasks, teachers' comments and student reflection are not always used to grade work. In the science class some student work had teacher evaluative comments posted but others did not. In a 6<sup>th</sup> grade

classroom, students were placed in groups but there is not always a clear rationale for the grouping of students. The practice of grouping students based on their learning needs, while identified as a priority of the school is not embedded in practice and limits the accelerated learning of all students including Students with Disabilities and English language learners.

- Implement structures for regularly evaluating and monitoring curricular practices in response to the Citywide Instructional Expectations and the Common Core Learning Standards in order to meet student learning needs. (5.1)
  - The principal has initiated structures to improve teaching and learning. Teacher teams have begun to align curriculum to the Common Core Learning Standards and grade level meetings provide teachers opportunity to discuss and evaluate the alignment of instruction to the curriculum. Protocols for looking at student work have recently begun as one team noted they have started to use the looking at student work protocol. Although professional development opportunities, administrative priorities and meeting agendas communicate a philosophy of learning, this has not translated into consistent practice across grades. Another teacher team reported they are going to develop a data gathering system to determine whether they are making progress toward goals. Observation of a teacher team noted that they lack consistent feedback about their progress, which hinders their ability to make significant progress in modifying lessons to meet the goal of designing rigorous lessons that engage all learners. While the school has identified key competencies including questioning and discussion, observation of teacher teams and short cycle observations indicate they have yet to provide focused evaluation or a system that will support adjustment to professional practice. Written classroom observation practices do not consistently note the progress teachers are making toward their stated goals. The inconsistency in the regular monitoring and evaluation of teacher practice and student progress toward goals and the lack of coherent systems for evaluating curricular practice hampers the ability to affect student progress toward the Common Core Learning Standards.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: THE ESSENCE SCHOOL	UD	D	P	WD			
<b>Overall QR Score</b>		X					
<b>Instructional Core</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, physical and health education, 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 that is informed by a research-based, common teaching framework and is aligned to curricula, engaging and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products?		X					
2.2 Align assessments to curricula, use on-going assessment and grading practices, and analyze information on student learning outcomes to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom levels?	X						
<b>School Culture</b>							
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?			X				
3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students and families, and provide supports to achieve them?		X					
<b>Systems for Improvement</b>							
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.3 Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school's instructional goals and meet students' learning needs as evidenced by meaningful student work products?		X					
3.1 Establish a coherent vision of school improvement that is reflected in a short list of focused, data-based goals that are tracked for progress and are understood and supported by the entire school community?		X					
4.1 Use the observation of classroom teaching with a research-based, common teaching framework 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 <b>inquiry approach</b> that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning?	X						
5.1 Evaluate the quality of school- level decisions, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school, with particular attention to the CCLS?	X						
<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>