

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

The Willis Avenue School

Elementary School 049

**383 EAST 139 STREET
BRONX
NY,10454**

Principal: Philip Caraher

Dates of review: May 29 - 30, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Jacqueline Gonzalez

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Willis Avenue is an elementary school with 680 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5. The school population comprises 31% Black, 68% Hispanic, and 1% White students. The student body includes 20% English language learners and 18% special education students. Boys account for 51% of the students enrolled and girls account for 49%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 92.5%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is developing.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Leadership decisions about the use of human and fiscal resources and teacher meeting time support the school's instructional goals to meet students' learning needs. (1.3)
 - Based on data that reveals that only 38% of students are performing on or above grade level, the school has prioritized the goal to increase reading proficiency across grades. Further analysis by third grade teachers identified deficiencies with overall preparedness as well as gaps in reading comprehension and writing skills of third grade students. The leadership strategically selected teachers for the current second grade and provided professional development in the areas of writing conferences, shared and guided reading strategies, word work, and the use of informational texts. Teachers met with parents to ensure awareness of raised expectations for second grade students and provide support so that parents are able to work with students at home. As a result, second grade writing reflects the increased use of content specific vocabulary and decrease of repetitive sentence structures. Thus, the school's decisions around change strategies for second grade instruction are yielding improved student outcomes as evidenced by student work.
 - Teachers' schedules are inclusive of three common preparation periods across grades to support collaborative planning, review of student work, and peer-to-peer reflection and feedback about pedagogy. Additionally, special education teachers and teachers of English language learners also meet weekly to discuss targeted student needs and plan lessons to engage all learners. The increased focus on collaborative planning and analysis of teacher practice and student work has led to improved planning and the development of challenging academic tasks for students.
- The school's respectful and welcoming environment supports structures for meeting the social emotional needs of students and is conducive to teaching and learning (1.4)
 - The administration and faculty believe that school climate has a significant effect on students' academic achievement and behavior. Students and parents state that this is reflected in the tone of the building that is warm and welcoming. Students express pride in their work and projects which are on display in creative and artistic ways for all to enjoy. They say this motivates them to do their best work to share with the school community. Students are encouraged and expected to manage themselves throughout the day in and out of classrooms. Each morning, selected students lead the school in a pledge over the public announcement system reminding all students of their commitment to behave appropriately and focus on their academic success. Students say that teachers care and listen to them when they have a problem. Additional opportunities for students to engage in non-academic activities include a variety of clubs and other extracurricular groups open to students from grade 2 to 5. These include sports clubs, chess club, computer club, 'Why?' club, recycling committee, nutrition committee, student council, color guard, chorus, garden committee, and a math club. The clubs allow students to connect with their peers and teachers in a variety of settings outside of the regular instructional program. A team of three administrators, two guidance counselors, two social workers, two special education teachers, an attendance teacher, and two family workers work with students and families who are at-risk based on a variety of family and academic issues. This structure enables the staff to

know the students well and consequently are able to address their needs. Additionally, the school's professional development plan includes opportunities for teachers and school staff to participate in school based workshops, as well as training offered by the Network team, and Central's offices to develop strategies for dealing with students' social emotional needs. As a result, teachers are able to help students self-regulate their behavior and stay engaged in their academic success.

- School improvement goals are effectively communicated in planning documents and shared with the school community resulting in increased ownership by stakeholders for increasing student achievement. (3.1)
 - The school's Comprehensive Education Plan includes clear goals for a 5% increase in students performing at or above grade level in math and English language arts. ELA goals are designed based on what was learned from the prior year's inquiry work, which revealed that language development was an area of need for all students. Before the opening of school, a teachers' 'Think Tank' was formed to discuss some of the areas of success in the school as well as areas of challenge, or needing improvement in teaching and learning for both subject areas. New teachers participated in an orientation presented by one of the assistant principals, which helped to develop a shared understanding of the school's data and prioritized goals. Parents were also included in the process via parent association and school leadership team meetings, in which the principal shared student performance data and engaged parents in conversations about goals for the school year with a focus on Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) and the integration of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS). As a result, parents and faculty are invested in the attainment of these goals and the community is working cohesively to support students in their academic progress.

What the school needs to improve

- Ensure that alignment of curricula and academic tasks in all subjects reflect the expectations of the Common Core Learning Standards so that all learners are cognitively engaged. (1.1)
 - The administrators and faculty have participated in school and network professional development about the integration of CCLS and instructional shifts into the curriculum, which served as the foundation for the school's current work to align units of study to key standards. In ELA these include requiring students to cite evidence from text and use academic vocabulary in writing. As a result, individual teachers currently use the CCLS as a guide to develop grade level units of study in ELA. They utilize resources from the Common Core Library as well as other websites to access additional texts and rubrics that support unit goals. In math, teachers use Everyday Math activities to support skill development in fluency, and follow a math-pacing calendar of topics and assessments. Across the school, however, the emerging practices of embedding the school's key standards and shifts into daily lesson plans are inconsistent. While some lessons and units clearly articulate goals and content standards and reflect a workshop model for the delivery of instruction, most lessons are activity driven and do not indicate plans for conceptual development. For example, a unit in the pacing calendar for early childhood math classrooms includes activities with manipulatives for single digit subtraction, which teachers can use in their lessons, but there is no supporting information of how teachers will ensure that the students can demonstrate their understanding of the concept. . Although across the school, teachers' plans generally reflect grade level work and content standards, there is little evidence of how curriculum or lessons are adjusted to meet the identified needs of English language learners or students with disabilities. As a result, there are missed

opportunities to cognitively engage many learners in challenging tasks that lead to critical thinking and higher order skill development.

- Strengthen teacher capacity so that instructional strategies provide multiple entry points into curricula for diverse learners and lead to high levels of thinking and participation across classrooms. (1.2)
 - Teaching strategies and routines in some classrooms reflect attempts to engage students in meaningful and relevant ways. For example, in one classroom, a fifth grade teacher and a second grade teacher partnered for a "Buddy Reading" activity. Students use guiding information about the character traits of heroes to develop and co-write stories. Teachers provide fifth grade students a reading profile of the second grade "buddy" that helps them to focus on modeling reading strategies for their young peers. The embedded rubrics and self assessments engage all students in appropriate level work that develops their thinking, analysis of text, and discussion of their work at a high level. In a kindergarten bilingual classroom, the teacher facilitates conversation and asks probing questions to help students deconstruct the meaning of the word "Piggyback" by using visual support and a "skip the word" strategy that enables them to develop the skill to use context clues for figuring out meanings for new words. Students are able to make connections and turn-and-talk to one another excited about their predictions and confirming one another's responses. However, these practices are not evident in most classrooms as lessons across grades are predominantly teacher directed, and only provide low-level discussion prompts where students recite or recall information. As a result, there are many missed opportunities to accelerate learning and student ownership of content and concept development.

- Improve the use of data from common assessments so that teachers' make informed decisions about instructional adjustments and effectively meet the needs of all learners. (2.2)
 - Teachers use common assessments including rubrics for evaluating student work, CCLS performance tasks in math and ELA, running records, and monthly portfolio entries. Grade level teacher teams meet weekly to discuss student work and identify ways to adjust instruction based on their observations and analysis of data. Earlier in the school year, some teams used protocols for looking at student work, which they found helpful to the extent that it allowed them to determine strengths and areas of need in their classrooms for particular students. However, in January, the school switched over to a "Looking at Teacher Work Protocol" to begin to look at the ways in which strategic adjustments to planning and delivery of lessons could impact student learning. This practice is being used by most teams across the school, which includes a presentation by a teacher of a problem of practice, identified based on student response to their learning, and a discussion of possible change strategies to improve student outcomes. However, the discussion is absent of data from common assessments or specific examples of the raised concern. The protocol only allows for one week between presentations of new problems of practice, thus limiting teachers' abilities to delve deeper into pedagogical improvements. Teachers state that there is a need to revise this process in order for their work to have an effect on student growth, given the large numbers of students reading below proficiency across the school. Additionally, the use of the feedback from assessments and teacher discussions is inconsistently used to determine student progress, limiting the timeliness and effectiveness of adjustments to instruction or curriculum in order to meet students' needs.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Willis Avenue	UD	D	P	WD			
Overall QR Score		X					
Instructional Core							
<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					
School Culture							
<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					
Systems for Improvement							
<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 inquiry approach 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					
Quality Review Scoring Key							
UD	Underdeveloped	D	Developing	P	Proficient	WD	Well Developed