

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Cornerstone Academy for Social Action

Elementary 11X189

3441 Steenwick Avenue

Bronx

NY,  10475

Principal: James Bellon

Dates of review: March 13-14, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Veronica Yurcik

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Cornerstone Academy for Social Action is an elementary school with 378 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5. The school population comprises 55% Black, 39% Hispanic, and 4% White, and 2% other students. The student body includes 6% English language learners and 15% 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 91.7%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Strategic administrative decisions support long-term goals in the advancement of teaching and learning to raise student achievement. (1.3)
 - The principal recognized that in order to raise levels of student achievement and promote college and career readiness, he would need to establish enduring structures to achieve these goals. He purposefully placed grade levels within close physical proximity to facilitate sharing. This decision has furthered collegial sharing among staff, supported mainstreaming special education students in math, and enabled inter-class student movement for guided reading, ensuring that students above and below grade level receive targeted instruction to meet their academic needs. In addition, the principal instituted block scheduling to create common planning for grade level teacher planning, professional development, and inquiry work. Moreover, by maximizing budget allocations, the school utilizes a United Federation of Teachers (UFT) school-based coach to support math instruction and school-wide professional development needs and Teachers College (TC) coaches to support literacy. A new teacher expresses appreciation for the daily support she receives from the UFT coach. Teachers note how the school-based coach assists in strengthening guided reading strategies as well as recognizing that their students need more than skill and strategy groups to improve fluency and comprehension. As a result, teachers appreciate the on-going support in both literacy and math which both the principal and teachers cite as contributing to improved pedagogy so that students are meaningfully engaged in new curriculum supporting the school's long-term goal of raising student performance across all grades. Furthermore, the principal's mandated schedule for administering running records and reporting results fosters closer observation that has improved student progress. To enable funding of an additional classroom teacher and still maintain a viable lending library, the principal used two Learning Leader volunteers to maintain the school library while strategically opening an additional third grade class to provide more individualized student support in response to concerns about the former second grade's academic and behavior record. Consequently, there is a dramatic decrease in behavior incidents for this group of students and speedier progress in improving their Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) reading levels. New norms of practice are established through the principal's decision to continue with the Teacher Effectiveness Pilot (TEP), coupled with clearly set pedagogical expectations. Thus, there is an emphasis on the use of data, improving questioning and discussion, creating opportunities for student talk, and the refinement of academic tasks to align to Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) across the school. Lacking funds for extracurricular after-school programs, grant writing created successful partnerships with community-based organizations and volunteers to provide after-school arts, sports, and homework help programs.
 - The school considers collaboration as a "key school-wide practice" and purposefully schedules all teachers for weekly grade team meetings and weekly data meetings. In addition, the principal strategically invites teachers of English as a second language (ESL) and Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) to grade team meetings. These

regular opportunities to plan instructional and curricular adjustments collaboratively, create and review assessments, and analyze student work to determine progress contribute to consistency in grade level instruction across classes, thus raising standards so that students engage in challenging academic tasks. Additionally, the formation of a teacher math team and a grade leader team enables vertical sharing, promoting a common language and understanding of CCLS to strengthen instructional connections and create curricular coherence across grades.

- The school has established a strong positive culture that generates a safe and respectful learning environment fostering the academic and personal growth of both students and staff. (1.4)
 - The principal analyzed school survey results astutely, recognizing a critical need to improve student discipline and tackle perceptions regarding lack of equity and lack of clarity in school direction. As a result, he forged a course of action, wisely focusing on developing a strong school culture stating that he models “consistency, fairness, and leading by example” to create a safe school where students are welcome. A teacher as well as a parent described the principal as a “role model” for the school. Prioritizing discipline during the first year, through implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS), has improved school climate. Careful attention to stocking classrooms with needed instructional materials and revising practices and systems to support a unified goal for “academic excellence” has provided the support necessary to increase teacher confidence and buy-in. When asked what is expected of them, students respond clearly referring to the school rules, “Be kind, work hard, be safe.” They state that the school listens to them and cares about them “very much”. Their input has shaped selection of school trips, the merchandise content of the school store, and alternative recess arrangements for students needing extra assistance. As a result, behavior incidents have been reduced dramatically by 70% from the same period as compared to the previous year.
 - The school uses key tools such as its Progress Report, Quality Review and School Survey to strategically prioritize efforts for supporting improved student personal and academic behaviors and for educating and communicating with constituencies regarding those priorities. Thus, teachers, parents and students can verbalize the school’s academic foci and key goals. Students explain clearly the importance of keeping focus. Their comments illustrate how they are developing important behaviors such as persistence and self-regulation, stating that “it takes more than one try to get a single thing right”, and describing how their teachers’ monitoring helps them to make repeated revisions to improve their work. The result of the schools’ coordinated efforts is evidenced in last year’s improved scores in every category of the school survey, with a two grade increase from an F to a C with a 4.3 point score jump in school environment on its most recent Progress Report. In addition, interim benchmarks for this year’s action plans to improve attendance, safety and respect, and parent involvement indicate the school is on track for meeting these targets.
- The conscientious work in redesigning curricula and creating academic tasks aligned to new standards is exposing students to more cognitively challenging tasks that promote learning requisite to closing the achievement gap. (1.1)

- Recognizing that its Everyday Math curriculum was not aligned to CCLS, the school conducted a three-day summer math institute to scrutinize challenges laid out in the Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE), examining the math scope and sequence in light of CCLS, and investigating potential resources. Hence, teachers began to write their own Common Core-aligned math units, utilizing the expertise of their UFT coach, university resources from Georgia and other new vendor resources. Throughout this major undertaking, teachers have sustained their efforts, stating that the work has provided them with a “deeper understanding of content” and changed classroom methodology to focus on exploration, vocabulary, thinking and explanation. Students describe their math classes as more challenging this year. A student explained that “there are a lot of steps to get to one simple answer,” attesting to the school’s commitment to providing math work that requires students to think, organize information, and pursue multiple problem-solving pathways. Furthermore, the school strengthened its focus on math fluency, recognizing that students’ lack of fluency was affecting their ability to complete multi-step problems within testing time limits. Additionally, the school has continued to make modifications to strengthen its Teacher’s College (TC) literacy curriculum, concentrating on developing guided reading pedagogy to improve student reading skills. Recognizing that students struggle with comprehending main idea, the school strategically chose to focus on using text-based evidence to improve students’ attention to details. Thus, curriculum modifications and emphases support integration of Common Core shifts necessary to meet rigorous college and career performance standards promoting academic tasks that increasingly require students to demonstrate stamina in attending to details, developing rationales in their oral and written work to defend thinking. For example, a fourth grade assignment required students to cite supporting details to explain their reasoning to answer how the American Revolution affected life in New York and a fifth grade math assignment required students to plan a route for a race within a local park given explicit specifications and landform considerations.

- Through professional development and attention to the demands of CIE, teachers are shifting practice from matching standards to lesson activities to working from the standards in order to develop lessons and are pre-planning questions. Also, teachers evaluate frequent formative assessment work to inform planning that meets students’ academic needs. Such planning has informed choice of materials and specific scaffolds such as prompt cards for English language learners (ELL). At a fifth grade team meeting, teachers analyzed student essays and identified potential scaffolded support through use of ‘boxes and bullets’ graphic organizers to aid students in writing well-structured body paragraphs with distinct details. Thus, because of inclusive planning, students including ELL and students with disabilities (SWD) are attentive in class and speak with interest about their classroom learning tasks, their learning accomplishments, and academic goals.

- Intentional development of standards-aligned assessments informs curricular and instructional adjustments that aid students in improving their skills to meet proficiency standards. (2.2)

- The school uses a wide range of common standards-aligned formative assessments including standardized State, vendor, and TC rubrics, as well as teacher-developed content area baseline exams, and pre- and post-unit assessments to gain valuable information on students’ knowledge and

skills. In addition, the school conducts one-on-one and small group conferences and administers two full standardized practice assessments yearly. Drawing from these data sources, teachers work with students to set academic goals, re-group students and adjust instruction, using several school-developed tools to illuminate assessment results that provide actionable feedback on student achievement. For example, a second grade tracking sheet on informational writing provides detailed information regarding pre/post and cumulative growth for both individual and class performance. The Cornerstone Academy for Social Action assessment analysis form (CAAF) records the analysis of specific content performance, disaggregates strengths and needs, summarizes overall performance and lists detailed, small group action plans to achieve stated goals. Both administration and teaching staff credit this careful analysis and requisite adjustments as the reason for the upward movement of students in performance levels on interim assessments this year.

What the school needs to improve

- Leverage existing pedagogical strengths to ensure a closer match between beliefs and practice in developing strategies, higher level questions, and supports to raise consistency of critical thinking opportunities for students. (1.2)
 - Although teachers support school-wide belief systems in workshop teaching and differentiation, when tailoring pedagogy to align with competencies in the adopted common framework, especially around questioning and discussion, pedagogical proficiency varies. Planning of questions is now a common practice; however, teacher summarization and explanation overshadows opportunities for focused student discourse. Assignments offer challenging tasks such as using text details to support evidence or citing a genre's structural elements to aid in comprehension. However, task directions or prompts for student talk are not always explicit, generating student confusion. The school is aware of these challenges and is working to tighten alignment of activities with intended outcomes and raise level of student talk within classrooms. Nonetheless, inconsistent pedagogy contributes to missed opportunities for all students to demonstrate daily the higher order thinking skills across content areas necessary to achieve demanding performance standards.
- Continue professional support to further develop teacher inquiry skills for designing learning experiences that increase achievement for all students. (4.2)
 - Although a vast majority of teachers engage in regular, structured inquiry and study that are informing instructional changes and the development of CCLS-aligned units across the school, inquiry is a comparatively new established practice. Even though, pedagogy and student progress are improving, teacher teams are still learning effective protocols to deepen coherence of practice school-wide in order to affect greater numbers of students reaching proficient levels on State exams. While there are regular analyses of student work products and assessments, systematic analysis of key elements of teacher work is not in place. Inquiry study tends to focus on student performance, class-by-class analysis, and interventional strategies over pedagogy. Teacher teams tend to report their observations of student work rather than to investigate together, thereby overlooking chances to identify deeper causal factors for lack of student achievement, such as those related to clarity of assigned tasks or a teachers chosen pedagogical moves used in instruction. Thus opportunities are missed to identify

potentially powerful, shared pedagogical shifts to effect improvements for wider groups of students.

School name: Cornerstone Academy for Social Action	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