

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

**Validus Preparatory Academy: An Expeditionary Learning
School
1595 BATHGATE AVENUE
BRONX, NY10457**

Principal: JAVIER FORTICHE-OCAMPO

**Dates of Review: Jan 14-15, 2013
Lead Reviewer: Carron Staple**

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Validus Preparatory Academy: An Expeditionary Learning School is a high school with 365 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 35% Black, 64% Hispanic, and 1% Asian students. The student body includes 12% English language learners and 16% special education students. Boys account for 44% of the students enrolled and girls account for 56%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011-2012 was 82.3%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is Proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school offers a standards-based curriculum containing a wide range of interdisciplinary connections and learning expeditions that integrate Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) to ensure student progress. (1.1)
 - The school's dedicated teachers believe in the Validus Expeditionary manner of learning, where students are expected to solve authentic problems even when it involves productive struggle, make interdisciplinary connections, use evidence to draw their own conclusions and construct meaning, and answer questions that require synthesis and analysis. Teachers co-plan and implement curriculum and learning tasks across content areas, ensuring that students take ownership of their learning and grapple with content that pushes their thinking such as Socratic Seminars, gallery walks, debates and high level questioning. Curricula and tasks emphasize rigorous habits to increase students' literacy and further deepen the work from the previous year, specifically around building sound arguments. The school is measuring their students' learning targets around common core writing standard 1: writing arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. By working on this goal it is the school's expectation as stated in the Comprehensive Educational Plan, that students who were scoring level 1 and 2 in the areas of critical analysis and evaluation in the 8th grade, will increase their performance levels to 3 and 4. In addition, as a result of this targeted literacy across all classes, the school has seen increased scores in the writing portion of the English language arts, Global and US History Regents exams. Further impact is noted as all students, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities, now demonstrate increased achievement on interim assessments, and in their bi-annual student-led conferences where they demonstrate evidence of their learning to the school community.

- Across all content areas, students are engaged in rigorous projects and performance tasks that result in meaningful work products and increased student engagement. (1.2)
 - Instruction is aligned to a set of common beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the Danielson framework. Most classroom instruction engages students with multiple entry points that lead to high quality questioning and discussions that probe students to deeper levels of thinking. Students are required to explain their answers orally and in writing and make text-to-self and text-to-text connections to demonstrate their understanding, as seen in classroom observations during teacher facilitated student-centered discussions. As a result, student work products now reflect higher level thinking and interdisciplinary connections. This shift has helped the school to close the achievement gap by engaging students in tasks that prepare them to reach their learning targets and reach proficiency on school and state assessments and work products. As a result, students now taking the Global studies Regents, a test the school has suffered with in the past, have increased their scores from a 65.9% to an 86.1% passing rate.

- The school's safe and positive learning environment fosters a college and career readiness culture where students take ownership of their learning, feel valued and are well-prepared for life beyond high school. (1.4)
 - The school partners with a variety of agencies and organizations in addressing the social-emotional and academic needs of students, resulting in a highly respectful and deeply reflective school culture that values the whole child, their voice, and their academic achievement. As one of 54 iZone schools, the 11th and 12th graders in the Upper Academy chose their classes after a thorough analysis of their transcripts, to meet their needs and interests. Teachers developed classes around the students' interests and students provided input as to what these courses would look like. This initiative impacted the culture of the school by increasing student voice. All students are members of a "crew" advisory program that facilitates positive and respectful relationships between peers, students and teachers. The students participate in a yearly expeditionary camping trip, where staff advisors address student development in areas such as leadership, culture and character. As a result, students expressed feeling highly valued in that the school would take them on such a bonding trip, and feel very supported and prepared to meet the academic demands required of them to graduate and move on to college and careers. Students who struggle with science are part of Science Genius Battles, a pilot program at Teacher's College that shows students how to incorporate rap music into science. This engaging and fun way to learn science concepts and vocabulary is highly motivating to students who use their creativity to improve their knowledge of science.
 - The school has a goal tied to school culture, and that goal of building community in a culture of achievement deepens the work that the entire school community is engaged in, which results in students having a strong sense of community as they fulfill their academic expectations. Teachers follow the rituals that come from the beliefs of Expeditionary Learning and work together in ensuring that the Habits of Scholarship and the Character Traits are incorporated throughout the school, hence the decreased suspension rate, the increased communication rate between students, parents and school personnel as evidenced by the Learning Environment Survey, and the increased rigor that has led to higher 4 and 6 year graduation rates from the previous year and 12% higher than schools in their peer group. Families expressed appreciation for the JumpRope website that provides them with up-to-date information about student grades and assignments, and the numerous trips and programs that the school has provided to enhance their children's learning experiences, such as college and Wilderness trips, College Now, and Parenting through the Arts. Parents also praised the school for providing them with resources needed to support their children's academic and social-emotional progress.
- The use of interim, formative and summative assessment guides instructional adjustments that result in meeting short and long term student goals and improved student outcomes. (2.2)
 - Teachers create a variety of rubrics which they share school wide connected to literacy goals. Teacher teams and individual teachers regularly analyze data, evaluate student work and identify trends. Assessment binders contain diagnostics, interim assessments, and learning expedition plans, as well as notes from teacher team meetings that are specific to the growth students have made in reading and writing. As a result, assessment data for literacy provides a clear picture of each student's strength and areas for growth which supports and inform teachers' practice and results in them making timely adjustments

to instruction so student achievement is improved as evidenced in the increased passing rate in semester scholarship reports across all grades and the increased regents scores.

- Teachers utilize a variety of checks for understanding that include circulating the room, asking questions, asking students to summarize, exit tickets, and learning target trackers. These checks for understanding that also come in the form of interim checkpoints, provide information to the teacher about what students know and results in students becoming more aware of their own learning and next steps. Students are regularly evaluated and provided with next steps for improvement using a rubric. Then students receive feedback via mastery-based progress reports twice a semester and prior to their final grade to ensure they are able to track their progress.

What the school needs to improve

- Use the actionable post-observation verbal and written feedback strategically to support teachers in improving their pedagogical practices, to further elevate pedagogical practices. (4.1)
 - School leaders frequently observe teachers and use a variety of tools including the Danielson framework to evaluate teacher performance. The Classroom Walkthrough Rubric assesses high quality learning targets with an agenda clearly stated in the parent, student and teacher handbooks and posted in every classroom, so students can track their learning. A Gradual Release model which embodies the Vygotskian approach is used, where teachers model and then expect students to follow with demonstrated learning, strategic questioning that leads to higher order thinking, formative assessments and incorporation of fluency, and application and conceptual understanding in math classes. Teachers receive feedback and next steps for improving their development and school leaders use this information to inform professional development designs throughout the year. This work results in consistent professional growth for most teachers as evidenced in classroom visits and observation reports and logs. However, the information gleaned from these observations coupled with administrative feedback does not always transfer to teacher practice in some cases.
- Refine the process and practice of how teacher teams examine and evaluate student work to adjust their practice and increase the focus on student learning.(4.2)
 - Teams of teachers worked together over the summer to devise and implement reading and writing learning targets aligned to Common Core Learning Standards, with a strong focus on developing arguments. However, it is not clear how school leaders monitor the on-going decisions the teacher teams make throughout the year. While it is commendable that leadership is distributed to teachers, school leaders do not regularly meet with teacher teams or their leaders to ensure that the focus of team meetings is aligned to meeting the overarching school goal; to increase student achievement for all learners. In one team meeting the Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol created by the School Reform Initiative was used. The teachers on this team had a very clear goal about how to improve argumentative writing, and shared diagnostics the 10th grade students had recently taken. They looked at student work products from students who had disabilities, and who were general education students and English language learners. Every teacher shared work, reflected and discussed next steps for supporting students on areas of weakness.

However the other team did not use the same protocol thereby limiting some teachers' input and voice on the students' end of semester writing reflections. This current practice is preventing some teachers from engaging in an inquiry team process that results in clear next steps for student improvement, thus limiting the targeted support some students may need at the end of the semester to be able to be successful in the following semester.

- Distributive and facilitative leadership training is in place and offered to all teachers with 50% recently trained to take on leadership responsibilities. Teachers' voice and the ideas they have about how to program, provide instruction and assess children best are taken very seriously. As a result of their valued input, the school now has the Upper Academy for 11th and 12th grades to build stronger relationships with students, where their voices are heard and where they are able to discuss and take ownership of their work and overall development. Further impact of this increased leadership capacity can be seen in key components of the school's structures such as the initiation of the JumpRope grading system, the redesign of the small learning communities, and the inclusion of a student wellness center. Teachers and administrators understand that every student must be reflected in the key decisions made to positively improve student learning, and expressed the desire to continue to refine structures as they meet in teams to collaboratively discuss the needs of their students.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Validus Preparatory Academy: An Expeditionary Learning School	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