

# Quality Review Report 2013-2014

**Validus Preparatory Academy: An Expeditionary  
Learning School**

**High School 09X263  
1595 Bathgate Avenue  
Bronx  
NY 10457**

**Principal: Javier Ocampo**

**Dates of review: March 25-26, 2014**

**Lead Reviewer: Heidi Pierovich**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

Validus Preparatory Academy: An Expeditionary Learning School is a high school with 376 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 30% Black, 67% Hispanic, 1% White, and 2% Asian students. The student body includes 14% English language learners and 21% special education students. Boys account for 44% of the students enrolled and girls account for 56%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2012 - 2013 was 79.2%.

### Overall Evaluation

**This school is developing.**

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The school leadership makes effective organizational decisions including coaches, partnerships, and effective use of teacher time aligned to instructional goals to improve student achievement. (1.3)
  - To support the goal of improving student achievement on Regents scores, the leadership has changed the master schedule to make it more student-centered. To accomplish this goal, classes now meet five times per week as compared to four last year. Students said, "By meeting daily, it helps me to understand the classes better." Additionally, administration implements a multiyear technology plan, including laptop carts and a student technology service team, whom teachers rely on to help troubleshoot. Students use the technology for research, access to their electronic portfolios for student-led-conferences, class work, and grading system. Staff uses technology for planning, meetings, using cloud-based shared documents for meeting notes, agendas, lessons, Standards-Targets-Assessments (STAs) or curriculum maps, and standards-based grading/communication system. Parents state that the online grading system is one of the best ways to know how their child is doing in school. Resources are also dedicated to the Instructional Guide, or coach who teaches and coaches part-time. She observes without rating, co-plans, sometimes co-teaches, and continually gives actionable, time-bound, specific feedback to teachers in a timely fashion. Teachers speak of her guidance and feedback as an asset to their own growth and refer to her with the utmost respect because she supports all teachers especially those new to the profession. She also facilitates grade level and subject team meetings. Expeditionary Learning (EL) provides a coach to support the implementation of the EL program. As a result, the successes of these endeavors are evident in the increasing quality of the work that students produce across all content areas.
  - The administration has structured the use of staff time so that teachers have a double preparation period daily to provide time for teachers to prepare lessons, meet with grade teams, and/or meet with department team. Previously, it was a requirement for teachers to attend both a department and grade meeting on the same day. Now those two meetings do not happen on the same day and since teachers now have a double period preparation period teachers are required to attend both meetings weekly. Teachers stated that their meeting time has been expanded concurrently with their professional responsibilities to conduct lesson study. To support lesson study, last year the Expeditionary coach trained 50% of teachers as to facilitate meetings using protocols. As a result, teachers are meeting regularly as grade teams and subject teams thus improving instruction and engaging students in challenging academic tasks.
- The school has developed an inclusive and nurturing environment, characterized by a variety of support systems that contribute positively to the academic and social-emotional development of all students. (1.4)
  - As an EL School, all first year students and faculty attend a NYC Outward Bound Expedition. A student stated, "I love the expeditionary activities when we go out camping and during Summer Search because we make such good friends—this school is a small family." Furthermore, students are required to do community service by applying the classroom skills to relevant community health issues, and to date, students have completed 74% of service hours toward the yearly goal. Another

school partner is Build On, an organization that builds schools in other countries and students, who meet minimum grade and discipline requirements, join these international efforts. "I really enjoy helping other people in other countries with Build On and no one I know has it [in their schools]. I built a school in Nicaragua last year and I will remember it forever." In addition to these outside culture-building activities, each teacher, or Crew Advisor, is assigned a group of students in their "Crew" and they stay together in this advisory for the four high school years, thus getting to know each other well. The teacher is able to support the students by monitoring their grades, discipline, study skills, and college and career planning. A student stated, "Together with our Crew Advisor, we would check our grades [online] and if she [my Crew Advisor] sees that a student has a write up or going low in a class she might speak to whole crew or that student alone, and ask why is your grade dipping and how can she help you improve it." A parent stated, "I really like how the advisor loops with the students for her four years. I think the continuity is great." Crew Advisors coordinate these efforts with the school counselor, college counselor, and attendance committee thus ensuring that student social-emotional issues are supported. Another student said, "I like my crew because there are different types of students to learn from each other. I am the crew leader and I go to the crew leader meetings where we get to tell administration what we want to do to." Each Crew has an opportunity to run the Town Hall, which has rules, rituals, and a rubric, as the crew will present an issue concerning the school community, competition, and celebration. This results in a team working together to present publically and have their voice heard and respected. Because of the discipline issues that had previously persisted in the school, the school has adopted a revised ladder of referral plus a few student-centered approaches. Students are part of the discipline resolution by being trained as peer mediators on the Fairness Committee, a venue for students to bring a peer or adult on campus to discuss an issue. Through mediation, resolutions are born and students have a valued voice throughout the process. There are restorative circles that are part of the Crews and some classes, where classroom discipline issues are discussed, students talk out issues through mediation, and student voice is respected and valued. As a result of all students being known well by at least one adult, and having their voice respected, valued, and welcomed, there has been a 33% decrease in suspensions year to date.

- School leaders use frequent classroom observation cycles to provide effective feedback that supports professional growth, accurately capturing strengths, challenges and next steps that leads to improved instruction. (4.1)
  - School leaders conduct frequent cycles of observations that provide teachers with timely feedback, accurately capturing strengths, challenges, and next steps using the Danielson Framework for Teaching as the lens for articulating clear expectations for teacher practice, as evidenced in all of the observations reviewed. Each of the observations reviewed provided next steps, for example, "In your planning, I want you to include 2-3 pre-planned questions that will prompt students to think critically and to be able to discuss their thought process amongst themselves. Posing a high level question, asking students to take a position on that question, and share it amongst themselves promotes a different level of thinking." The feedback in a vast majority of the observations suggested meeting with the assistant principal, Swains (department or grade leader), or the instructional guide to provide a structure for teachers to grow professionally. For example, "On Friday, bring a copy of a lesson plan you've used this week or one that you plan to use so that we can craft some structures to assess for learning during the lesson." Additionally, to support new and veteran teachers alike, administration suggests, "Please meet with (Instructional Guide) during your prep on Friday and bring your lesson plans with learning targets to support you with feedback about the quality of the learning targets so that you will

be able to use them right away.” Teachers stated, “Meeting with our Instructional Guide is the ‘holy grail’ of feedback, same with an administrator, ‘Here is what I see that you need”, and it is actionable, plus it happens the same day. It’s the best feedback, support, suggestions, and resources.” As a result of clear expectations and actionable feedback, teachers are well supported in professional growth by both administration and peers.

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

- Deepen the alignment of rigorous, coherent curricula and tasks to Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) that consistently emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills for all learners to make progress. (1.1)
  - This year teachers have created curriculum maps called Standards-Targets-Assessments Plan (STA) that show the CCLS as long-term targets and supporting targets, plus list essential questions, and formative and summative assessments. This is a new practice that has been supported by professional development and coaching. As they build this STA Plan, following a designed format, they are housed in Google doc where grade level and subject teams share access. Although aligned to CCLS, some are specific while most are general in the area of the task itself. For example, in a ninth grade English class, there is a long-term target to organize and develop clear writing and a Socratic Seminar and a theme analysis essay based on “A Raisin in the Sun”. Another example, in an English as a second language science literature self-contained class, there is a long-term target for writing clear and appropriate to the task, a supporting target to organize my writing, and the assessment states “writing prompt” but does not give the writing prompt nor the type of essay to be written. In an Algebra 2 STA Plan, there is a long-term target to use graphs to find solutions and the assessment is an undefined team project without details to show whether there is an emphasis on higher order skills. The staff and administration are developing these STA Plans and they are in the process of integrating the instructional shifts, where some contain details that show clear connections to rigorous habits and tasks. Teachers also create daily lesson plans. Some lessons show a variety of Depth of Knowledge (DOK) questions and others do not list any questions. For example, one lesson provided a six-question quiz whose results were used to data-determine the groups of students and the teacher prepared assignments for each group’s level. However, in a Global class, the lesson described an opportunity for students to create a perfect paragraph, without reference to, samples of, a rubric, or a topic on what the paragraph should be written. Questions listed in this lesson are from DOK 1-3, yet in another lesson plan the levels of DOK questions remain at DOK 1-2. Although teachers are developing STAs and lesson plans, of the curricula reviewed the academic tasks inconsistently emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills across grades, subjects and for English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities (SWDs). Therefore, not all students have consistent access to curricula and therefore are not challenged or engaged deeply and interactively in learning activities that ensure their steady progress towards college and career readiness.
- Improve pedagogical practices to ensure multiple entry points of access so that all students demonstrate higher order thinking as evident in student work products. (1.2)
  - The school wide foci are to engage students in rigorous hands-on learning and discussions, to ensure students analyze and annotate, or text code primary sources, and to have scaffolds for all to have access to the curricula. Several classes, including two English classes provided students with poems to text code. Teachers

are expected to prepare high-level Depth of Knowledge (DOK) level questions. However, one Global History teacher had prepared the questions, but did not ask them. A science teacher had prepared a scaffold for English language learners, but did not use it, leaving students at a loss for creating the complex sentence. Only a few classes observed provide students with opportunities to work on hands-on activities with specific supports designed for each level, while other classes remain in the beginning stages of providing multi-leveled tasks. For example, in a science class, students had to determine mass from volume and density and worked in data-determined groups on different leveled activities. Conversely, in a science literacy class, students were working with neighbors, in non-data-determined groups on gleaned vocabulary definitions from a video. Over a range of classroom visits, teachers used questions that extend from low-level, recall questions to higher-level questioning requiring students to analyze, synthesize their understanding, and explain their thinking. Yet, questions were teacher-directed and answered by individual students or even a choral response. Although in one writing class, the teacher encouraged students to discuss their Cornell Notes summaries, the discussion was teacher-to-student and not student-to-student. When students were asked to work in groups, they did, but the level of discussion remained focused on completing the poster or task and the questions did not develop into a deep discussion, whether it was in English or Algebra. When asked why you are making a poster of this poem or equation, students answered, "To present it to the class." Regardless of subject or grade level, there was a lack of ensuring ongoing student-to-student questioning and discussion. In Integrated Co-Teaching classrooms, both teachers provide multiple entry points, supports into the curricula so that all learners are engaged in challenging tasks, and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills in student work products. Currently, however, questioning techniques that provide for student-to-student questioning and discussion as well as multiple entry points for all learners, including ELLs and SWDs are inconsistent across classrooms. This limits student access and opportunity to exhibit thinking at high levels as evident in their work products.

- Improve assessment practices to provide consistent actionable feedback to students and formative, ongoing checks for understanding and students' self-assessments to make timely instructional adjustments to support learning needs. (2.2)
  - This semester the school changed its grading policy to be 15% based on character and 85% based on academics, because a review of data analyzed showed that students were passing classes but not Regents exams. The new grading policy has been in effect for a short time and evidence is being gathered to determine alignment to the curriculum. Teachers and administrators are reflective about the grading system and the message it sends to students. Furthermore, the student work samples collected and noted on bulletin boards inside classrooms have a variety of levels of feedback to students. Some provide editing and others simply have check marks. Many had encouraging comments regarding "Great work!" whether it was a 3 or a 4 on the same assignment. However, of the feedback observed across subjects and grades, there was a lack of consistency in providing actionable feedback to students on how to improve to achieve the next level. For example, in a student's portfolio an essay with rubric had this feedback, "You did a great job organizing your writing. Let's work on developing each event with some specific details." On one paper, a teacher provided editing notes and a comment supporting the student's "Major improvements in your writing and you should be proud of how you chose your quotes and explained them as they relate to the critical lens." The feedback was "to expand on the idea of characterization" but did not provide support on how to do so. On a group Algebra project of systems of equations that was presented, comments on the rubric with a 3.7 grade were, "Solid perspective to mastery and good signs of

responsibility toward each other.” However, there were no comments on how to improve to a higher grade. Similarly, in an English class, a rubric accompanied the student work that received edits, a grade of 3, and no comments on the paper or rubric. As a result, there is an inconsistency of actionable feedback provided to students missing the opportunity to support students to improve their work and increase their achievement.

- Although teachers walk around to observe student groups, there is no system for gathering formative assessment data and to check for understanding in real-time. One teacher demonstrated the use of real-time assessment using the SMARTboard and providing each student with ‘clickers’ to take a quiz. From this the teacher received instantaneous results and divided the students into data-determined groups for which she had prepared leveled assignments. In other class observations, the groups were created by undetermined measures, often by student-to-student proximity. Furthermore, the use of student self-assessment was not evident, seeing evidence of it as something that had previously occurred. In student portfolios, there were written reflections by students. During classroom observations, only one teacher who was moving from student group-to-group checking for understanding brought the class back together for a moment to clarify a misunderstanding she had found among more than one group. The remaining observations did not yield a system for gathering data from student groups or to place students in groups. As a result, there are missed opportunities to make timely instructional adjustments to support all students learning needs.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2013-2014

School name: Validus Preparatory Academy	UD	D	P	WD			
Overall QR Score		X					
<b>Instructional Core</b>							
<i>To what extent does the school regularly...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.1 Ensure engaging, rigorous, and coherent curricula in all subjects, accessible for a variety of learners and aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and/or content standards?		X					
1.2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the instructional shifts and Danielson Framework for Teaching, aligned to the 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 supports 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 those expectations?		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 student 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 Observe teachers using the Danielson Framework for Teaching along with the analysis of learning outcomes to elevate school-wide instructional practices and implement strategies that promote professional growth and reflection?			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					
<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>