



NYCDOE

Quality Review: Final Report

The New York City Department of Education



Quality Review Report

The Essence School

Middle School 311

**590 Sheffield Avenue
Brooklyn
NY 11207**

Principal: Gail Gaines

**Dates of review: June 2-3, 2008
Lead Reviewer: Martin Weinstein**

Content of the report

Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well
What the school needs to improve

Part 3: Main Findings

Progress made since the last review
Overall evaluation
How well the school meets New York City's evaluation criteria

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

The Essence School is a middle school with 248 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 75% Black, 21% Hispanic, 1% White, and 2% Asian students. The student body includes 4% English language learners and 10% special education students. Boys account for 42% of the students enrolled and girls account for 58%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2006-2007 was 94%. The school is in receipt of Title 1 funding with 65% eligibility.

The school shares space with elementary school 190. Middle school 311 occupies 2 of the building's 4 floors and shares the library, gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria and yard.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The whole community shares the school's driving goals of project-based learning and differentiated learning.
- The school's portfolio system coupled with the City's accountability tools enables teachers and administration to know their students' learning needs very well.
- Teachers are afforded the opportunity to make their own instructional decisions based on data and their knowledge of students under their charge.
- Budgeting and staffing decisions are effectively and efficiently aligned with the school's improvement needs.
- The school embeds challenge and interest in a good quality interdisciplinary curriculum for students of all ability levels.
- Beneficial relationships between students, staff, administration and parents are particularly impressive reflecting a climate of support, caring and mutual respect.
- Instruction is very well geared to the specific learning needs of individual students and is complimented by a well-developed goal setting process.
- Students are actively engaged in learning opportunities and are articulate, reflective members of the school community.
- Systems for student, classroom, grade level and subject area goal setting are well established, carefully monitored and revised appropriately.
- The principal and school community have a clear vision for future developments for the school.

What the school needs to improve

- Extend learning opportunities for parents in Acuity and Scantron, so they can further support their children in achieving their goals more effectively.
- Build upon the work of the parent teacher association and parent coordinator in engaging more parents in sharing information about their children's learning.
- Further compare performance and progress with similar schools in order to enhance the school's best practices.

Part 3: Main Findings

Progress made since the last review

The school has made good progress in addressing the issues identified in the previous Quality Review report.

Overall Evaluation

This school is well developed.

The Essence School has shown substantial growth based on the recommendations in last year's Quality Review. Data is collected from a wide range of sources. Developmental reading assessments and math benchmark assessments identify student needs early in the school year. The data from the school's portfolio system, State summative assessments and in-house formative assessments in English language arts and math, augmented by Acuity, Scantron and other periodic sources, serve as the road map for all instructional decisions and student goals. Teachers write narrative accounts on an ongoing basis reflecting instructional and intervention strategies for all students and the projects students have engaged in. These accounts are maintained in teachers' portfolios. This unique form of documentation helps teachers know their students needs very well. The principal has maximized her limited budget to provide art and technology learning opportunities for many of the students. These opportunities have led to the development of an interesting and compelling projects-based curriculum which integrates trips to other countries and local areas of cultural significance. The inquiry team has focused on the needs of grade 7 students who have been held over or are not adequately progressing. Differentiated support for these students is provided by curriculum leaders during lunch periods and by English and math teachers during small group instruction daily. This type of support is an integral component of the school's efforts to improve student achievement.

The work of the inquiry team has been expanded to help drive the school's goals of project-based learning, increasing integration of the arts and technology and differentiated learning. This is evidenced by school-wide small group instruction which is scheduled immediately following the lunch period. The school's firm grasp of data gathering, interpretation, sharpened goal setting, monitoring and modification has led to enhanced, differentiated learning opportunities that are tracked in both student and teacher portfolios. There is an acknowledgement between administration and staff that efforts to involve parents in Acuity and Scantron training as well as parents sharing information relating to their children's learning, will further support the positive work within the school. The continued growth of the school is supported by a culture and climate based on mutual respect between all constituencies. One student commented, "This is a small community space and the students have great one-on-one conversations with staff and administration. This helps to enhance our learning...they really care about all of our needs". Teachers applaud the principal for her tireless support and recognition of their efforts. The principal looks to increase visits to similar schools to enhance further the school's best practices to improve student achievement. Parents acknowledge the exemplary level of pervasive caring in the building through statements such as, "The administration and teachers all want our children to be lifelong learners. Even though test scores are important, they feel the development of the whole child is more important to make them responsible citizens".

How well the school meets New York City's evaluation criteria

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor the student's progress over time.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The school demonstrates rigorous in-depth analysis of data across classes, grades and subject areas. The school disaggregates data thoroughly by gender, ethnicity, and English language learner, grade level and subject area in order to establish good individual educational plans for those students requiring additional support. This disaggregation process is reflective of the teachers' good understanding of student performance and progress. The wide range of assessment tools utilized by all teachers, including narrative profiling, Acuity, Scantron, diagnostic reading assessments as well as formative reading and math inventories, enables the school to measure student year-to-year and yearlong performance. Special needs students are evaluated using Acuity and school-developed assessments to provide support for the long-and short-term measurable goals in each student's individual educational program. The progress of the English language learner population is similarly well-tracked and planning points for their improvement identified through the New York State English as a second language assessment test and other school-developed assessments. Review of data is used well to identify school's higher-achieving students who work on projects geared at their respective achievement levels. Teachers well use the school's portfolio system and their own data management systems to monitor effectively student performance and progress. The school appreciates the value of visiting similar schools. In order to enhance their own instructional strategies, plans are being developed to increase these visits in the near future to learn best practices.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

From the moment a student enters the school, a narrative written assessment is initiated summarizing the student's strengths, weaknesses and recommendations. This narrative is augmented with the results of a variety of standardized diagnostic testing. The school makes sure all instructional constituents, and students and parents, collaboratively agree upon the evaluation and formulation of goals for students. Ongoing grade level and subject area meetings with curriculum leaders and supervisors use these assessments and the evaluation of student work contained in portfolios to gauge progress and set interim- and long-term goals accordingly. Teachers also plan during grade level meetings, differentiated instructional strategies using a variety of periodic assessments and by looking at student work. Interim goal setting is also of paramount concern during these meetings where discussions involve the "next steps" to enable students to raise their achievement levels. Teachers have a very good understanding of the school's goals and how to meet them. The learning and progress of special education and English language learners students are monitored carefully. They receive support of paraprofessionals to bolster their achievement. Additionally, English language learners receive additional support through push-in and pullout instruction. Teachers have high expectations of their students and students know what is needed to improve their

progress. This determination is well anchored in teachers' extensive work with students during lunch conferences, small group tutorials, extended day and Saturday academy activities. The sharing of the progress of the school's inquiry team is also an integral part of daily life within the school and is seen as a catalyst for refining the lens of the study of all students. Parents receive an abundant flow of information about how well their children are performing. However, the participation of parents in school-wide activities such as the parent teacher association and curriculum workshops is somewhat limited. The principal and her team understand the importance of bolstering parent participation to share information about their child's learning. Of note, the training of parents in Acuity and Scantron is of utmost concern in order for parents to receive direct and immediate feedback on their children.

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instructional Strategy to Goals: The school aligns its academic work, strategic decisions and resources, and effectively engages students around its plans and goals for accelerating student learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The school provides a very broad, engaging and differentiated projects-based curriculum that is highly embedded with interdisciplinary strands. Teachers are afforded great flexibility in their instruction and this level of respect has resulted in many unique and Standards-based learning opportunities for students. A team of grade 8 teachers recently collaborated on a unit involving students' researching lunar landings and reading articles germane to "conspiracy theories" involving these landings. The culminations of this project were lunar replicas and persuasive essays. Students in the grades 6 and 7 create models of Aztec and Mayan temples and write plays pertinent to the time when Aztec and Mayan cultures flourished. Trips are tailored to students' interests and needs and are an integral part of the curriculum. As one student said, "We get to see the big picture of what our books are talking about."

The school's student portfolio system is rigorous. In grade 6, students are required to submit a total of 50 pieces of publishable work, (10 for each of the five major subjects), and one reflection. As students progress to the grade 8, the requirements become more challenging, whereby they are expected to submit 50 pieces of publishable work and 50 reflections. Teachers memorialize their work with students through their own portfolios, which are discussed regularly with curriculum leaders and administration. Students in grade 6 receive exposure to art and technology. Grade 7 students receive technology and pre-Regents preparation for math. Grade 8 students receive additional support in English language arts through an additional period of classical literature, French and Regent's math. The principal is aware of the need to provide art and technology throughout the curriculum as well as infuse music. She writes grant proposals and works towards stretching her limited budget further to immerse all students in the arts and technology.

Quality Statement 4 - Align Capacity Building to Goals: The development of leadership, teachers and other staff capacity is aligned to the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

Teachers praise the principal for supporting them in developing and delivering instruction based on their interests and talents. This has a positive impact on student learning. One

student commented, "We don't have a school chorus and in fact, we don't have our own auditorium because we are a small school in a bigger school. All this is OK because our math teacher takes time during his own lunch period to work with us on songs so we can perform at special events." Another student commented, "My social studies teacher who likes acting is really cool. After we made models of Aztec and Mayan temples, I got to star in a play in class and I never thought I could do this because my friends say I am shy".

The school offers staff a diverse compliment of professional development based on supportive and frequent observations by the principal. First and foremost are workshops germane to curriculum mapping, differentiated instruction and SMART Board training. This year consultants have been hired to support student assessments. There are many opportunities for teachers to visit one another's classrooms in order to share best practices. The principal and her administration believe that these opportunities have led to a more exemplary level of instruction. Demonstration lessons are regularly offered by curriculum leaders and administrators. Supervisors regularly visit classrooms and effectively focus on the measurement of student performance and progress. There are many effective partnerships with outside entities that support the academic and personal growth of the students including alliances with the Center for Urban Environment, Depository Trust Clearing Corporation and Integrated Mental Health Company. The school has recently introduced a program involving the care of young children known as "Baby Care". The latter program requires student to carry and tend to five and ten pound bags of rice which represent an infant and gives students clear guidance for their development as responsible adults.

Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.

This area of the school's work is well developed.

The formalization of the ways to improve student achievement has certainly taken hold this year. A coherent working plan of action has been spearheaded by the principal and her administrative team to set interim goals that are objectively measurable through the scrutiny of both student and teacher portfolios as well as regular assessments throughout the school year. Analyses of student performance are based on evaluative and testing adjustments to goals and new timeframes set. Grade level conferences primarily focus on the goals each student must attain and conversations flourish during these conferences surrounding adjustments to meet the needs of these students. Teachers confer with supervisors in order to develop new instructional strategies and secure outside services for the students under their charge if applicable. Through the close analysis of the portfolio and assessment results for each class, the school's principal and administration meets with teachers to discuss these results and provide direct support for the amelioration of teacher practice to improve class outcomes. The principal and school community have a very clear vision for the future development of the school. They are able to respond quickly to any changes to improve the lives of students. As each school year unfolds, the school is achieving greater success in furthering the attainment of the school's driving goals for project-based learning, the integration of arts and technology and differentiated learning.

Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

SCHOOL NAME: The Essence School	Δ	▷	✓	+	◇
Quality Score				X	

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather and generate data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor the students progress over time.

To what extent do school leaders and faculty provide . . .	Δ	▷	✓	+	◇
1.1 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of each student, classroom, grade level?				X	
1.2 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of special education students?				X	
1.3 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of English language learners?				X	
1.4 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of ethnic groups, gender groups and all other categories of interest to the school?				X	
1.5 a measurement of performance and progress based on the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grades and subject areas?				X	
1.6 a measurement of performance and progress based on comparisons with similar schools?				X	
1.7 training, management systems and structures that support teachers in the use of school data to inform planning and instruction and to track the progress of students?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 1				X	

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each students learning.

To what extent do school leaders and faculty . . .	Δ	▷	✓	+	◇
2.1 engage in collaborative processes to set rigorous, objectively measurable goals for improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals?					X
2.2 focus on each student, classroom, grade level, academic subject and group of students whose performance or progress has been identified by the school as a particular focus area?				X	
2.3 identify and improve the performance and progress of those students in greatest need of improvement?				X	
2.4 share whole school goals with all members of the school community to rigorously improve the performance and progress of students?				X	
2.5 convey consistently high expectations to students and their parents/caregivers?				X	
2.6 regularly provide students and their parents/caregivers with information about the goals set for each student, and about each student's progress and performance, and how they can improve?			X		
2.7 invite and enable parents/caregivers to provide useful information to teachers and the school about the learning needs and capacities of their children?			X		
Overall score for Quality Statement 2				X	

Quality Statement 3 – Align Instructional Strategy to Goals: The school aligns its academic work, strategic decisions and resources, and effectively engages students around its plans and goals for accelerating student learning.

To what extent does the school . . .	Δ	▷	✓	+	◇
3.1 select core curricular approaches that facilitate and provide meaningful interim data about progress towards goals and focus on raising the achievement of students?				X	
3.2 provide a broad and engaging curriculum, including the arts, to enhance learning both within and outside the school day?				X	
3.3 hold teachers accountable for the progress and learning of the students in their charge, for making instruction interesting and compelling, and for creating a positive safe and inclusive learning environment?				X	
3.4 ensure that teachers use school, class and student data to plan for and provide differentiated instruction that meets the specific needs of all the students in their charge?				X	
3.5 make budgeting, staffing and scheduling decisions strategically, based on data, to meet the school's academic goals for all students?				X	
3.6 ensure that there is an environment of mutual trust and respect between all staff and students to support personal and academic development?				X	
3.7 ensure that there are effective and consistently applied procedures to encourage and monitor student attendance and tardiness?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 3				X	

Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building to Goals: The development of leadership, teachers and other staff capacity is aligned to the school’s collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.					
To what extent does the school . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
4.1 use frequent observations of classroom teaching by the principal and other available information to develop a differentiated strategy for improving the quality of each teacher’s instruction?				X	
4.2 make professional development decisions strategically, based on data, to help meet the improvement goals of students and teachers?				X	
4.3 provide frequent opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s classroom instruction and to meet together in teams to plan, share effective practices, and evaluate one another’s instruction in an open and reflective professional environment?				X	
4.4 develop effective procedures for the induction and support of teachers who are new to the profession or the school?				X	
4.5 align youth development, guidance/advising and other student support services around stated academic and personal development goals?				X	
4.6 consistently implement clear procedures that enable the school to run smoothly and encourage effective student learning, and effectively address discipline related incidents?				X	
4.7 create effective partnerships with outside entities that support the academic and personal growth of the students?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 4				X	

Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for evaluating each student’s progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.					
To what extent do . . .	Δ	➤	✓	+	◇
5.1 the school’s plans for improving student outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?				X	
5.2 the school’s plans for improving teacher outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?				X	
5.3 teachers and faculty use periodic assessments and other diagnostic tools to measure the effectiveness of plans and interventions for individual and groups of students in key areas?				X	
5.4 teachers and faculty use the information generated by periodic assessments and other progress measures and comparisons to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals?				X	
5.5 school leaders track the outcomes of periodic assessments and other diagnostic measures and use the results to makes strategic decisions to modify practices to improve student outcomes?				X	
5.6 school leaders and staff use each plan’s interim and final outcomes to drive the next stage of goal setting and improvement planning?				X	
5.7 the principal and school community have a clear vision for the future development of the school and implement procedures and systems to effect change?				X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 5				X	

◇	Outstanding
+	Well Developed
✓	Proficient
➤	Underdeveloped with Proficient Features
Δ	Underdeveloped