

Young Scholars' Academy for Discovery and Exploration

280 Hart Street
Brooklyn, NY 11206
Principal: Danika LaCroix

Opened in the 2008–09 school year to replace Brooklyn's low-performing P.S. 304 (Casimir Pulaski), Young Scholars' Academy for Discovery and Exploration (YSADE) quickly rose to become one of New York City's success stories. YSADE serves some of the city's neediest children, with all students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch and 20% living in temporary housing or homeless shelters. This school is featured on the Doing What Works website under two topics: *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, and *Increased Learning Time: Beyond the Regular School Day*.

- ◆ K–5
- ◆ 60% Black
- ◆ 37% Hispanic
- ◆ 2% White
- ◆ 1% Asian
- ◆ 98% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 7% English Language Learners
- ◆ 13% Special Education

One School Closed, Another One Opened

In 2007, the New York City Department of Education's Peer Index—a composite demographic statistic based on percentages of English language learners, special education students, students eligible for the Title I free/reduced-price lunch program, and students with an African American or Hispanic background—ranked P.S. 304 as having one of the highest-need student populations in the district. The school, however, was struggling to provide appropriate supports to meet students' needs, receiving an overall school grade of F and low scores on both school performance and school environment. Quality Review, a systematic evaluation conducted by independent observers, rated the school management practices as “undeveloped.” Consequently, the school closed at the end of the school year and reopened as YSADE the following year with a new administration and school improvement plans.

The new principal, Danika LaCroix, had only a few months to plan the new management and organization strategies. She first decided to look at parents' perceptions of the school, setting up focus groups to discuss current practices, visions, and expectations. According to LaCroix, “That was the most important thing we did—getting those parents on board even before we set foot into the school building.” LaCroix and her assistant principal stood outside the building, distributing flyers and introducing themselves, giving parents the opportunity to begin informal conversations. These conversations were expanded upon during focus groups, which revealed that parents wanted a more rigorous academic program with more enrichment opportunities for their children, better information about the curriculum and expectations, and more involvement in school life.

Following the motto “Think Outside the Box,” the school implemented innovative ideas (“quick wins”) to shape all aspects of school life, including parental involvement. For

example, the school now holds meetings with parents in the morning, midday, and in the afternoon and posts information to Facebook, providing parents with training on how to access Facebook through cell phones and other technology. Moreover, parent meetings are strategically scheduled. At Friday morning drop-off, for example, parents are invited for coffee with the principal, after which they are invited to stay for “Parents and Learning Partners,” a weekly opportunity for parents to read books to students or facilitate hands-on activities in the classrooms.

Early turnaround efforts included highly visible changes to improve the school’s physical environment, such as mandating school uniforms and redesigning the school office to remove the traditional divider separating administrative staff from parents and visitors. Some of the visible changes took into account feedback from stakeholders and experts. In the case of moving the school entrance to separate it from the two other schools operating in the building, the principal consulted with parents regarding traffic, safety, and any other concerns. The principal acted on feedback and requested the installation of a traffic signal to ensure students’ safety when crossing the street to the new entrance.

Identifying Qualified Staff

The hiring process at YSADE was based on an agreement between the NYC Department of Education and the teachers’ union, which required that half of the positions for the new school be assigned to the most qualified staff from the preexisting site. For the remaining positions, the interviewing committee—composed of a representative from the teachers’ union, the principal, teachers, a member from the NYC Department of Education, and a leader from the Network Support Organization—developed a standard interview format with questions aligned to a scoring rubric, giving a fair opportunity to all applicants.

Providing Extra Learning Opportunities

As part of the turnaround planning phase, YSADE applied for and received a grant as part of The After School Corporation (TASC) Expanded Learning Time (ELT) pilot. TASC’s ELT/NYC model minimizes the costs associated with operations beyond the regular school day by employing a mix of certified teachers and youth development staff to serve under the principal’s leadership. This has allowed YSADE to extend the school day by three hours and expand the school week to include a Saturday program. The Saturday program allows students to receive extra support in core subject areas from the school’s teachers. About half of YSADE students attend weekly.

University Settlement Society, a community agency selected to partner with the school, provided a full-time site coordinator to work with an educational liaison from the school. University Settlement Society also recruited and trained high school and college students to work with classroom teachers during regular school hours and provide additional instruction beyond the regular school day. After-school instructors use multiple programs (e.g., TASC Masters of Literacy, Afterschool Science Plus, KidsLit, KidsMath, and Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop) and align the curricula to that of the regular school day to provide additional support in core subject areas.

Students can also select from a broad array of enrichment activities they may not otherwise have access to, including robotics, drama, art, cheerleading, basketball,

swimming, golf, ballet, cooking class, a Comic Book Project, a kindness curriculum, and Latin American and African dance and music. These academic enrichment opportunities offer more hands-on and engaging projects than are generally included in regular instruction.

Individualized Instruction

During the first six hours of the school day, staff from University Settlement Society work alongside classroom teachers. They provide individualized support to small groups of students who need intensive instruction in math and literacy and help the more advanced students do their homework.

Professional Development and Teacher Collaboration

Because YSADE opened with a melding of new and former staff members, the principal took immediate steps to build a cohesive and committed staff, implementing professional development sessions such as the weekly “Lunch and Learn” to facilitate learning around specific topics. Staff members share in the development and facilitation of these sessions. Teachers also meet in teams, both within and across grade levels. The principal purposefully steps back from using her “positional power” to empower teachers to lead and take ownership of these meetings.

Evaluation

The school’s documented progress is being systematically tracked through an independent evaluation commissioned by TASC. The evaluation assesses quality of implementation that includes measures of effects on student achievement and other data that link practices and positive student outcomes.

TASC is also tracking the school’s progress internally using Grad Tracker, a benchmarking tool that tracks and analyzes grades and test scores, behavior, and attendance. With this tool, TASC knows how many participating elementary school students are on track to graduate, how many are making progress toward being on track or off track, and how many are at risk of dropping out. The tool is used to improve services for at-risk students.