

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2006/05/17/37inspect.h25.html>

Published: May 17, 2006

British Inspectors Bring Instructional Focus to N.Y.C.

'Quality reviews' of data, decision making part of new accountability plan.

By Jeff Archer

New York

Roger Brown has a habit of asking the same question over and over again. In his polite but direct British manner, he challenges principals, teachers, and students to explain how they know if they're improving.

"I suspect that you're actually making very significant progress," he said recently, over lunch, to a group of teachers at the International High School at Prospect Heights in Brooklyn. "But can you prove that progress?"

Soon, all of New York City's public schools will be similarly pressed. The nation's largest school system has hired Mr. Brown's employer—Cambridge Education, based in the English city of the same name—to help design a process for judging how well schools make decisions about instruction.

Adapted from the school inspections used in England, the quality reviews are slated to become part of a new accountability system here in the 2007-08 school year. About 100 of the city's 1,400 schools, including the Prospect Heights international school in Brooklyn, have opted to take part in a pilot test this spring.

The aim is to balance outputs, such as tests scores, with a more qualitative snapshot of how schools are functioning. Much of the three-day visits focuses on a school's use of data and other information to determine how to meet the needs of its students.

New York isn't alone in importing the approach. Cambridge Education, which does inspections as a government contractor in England, has assessed charter schools in the United States since 2000. Recently, the company evaluated regular public schools in Connecticut that were targeted for intervention under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

James S. Liebman, the chief accountability officer for the 1.1 million-student New York City system, said the reviews are a vital part of the district's evolving improvement agenda. By prodding schools to justify their decisions, the visits are meant to encourage self-examination about efforts to raise student performance.

"This is, in a real way, part of the support or training for schools to enable them to make the kind of progress we're asking for," Mr. Liebman said.

In classes, he prompted students to explain what they were working on, and whether they could have done such work before.

“Do you think by coming here you’ve made better progress than if you went to another high school?” he asked students assembled to meet him.

A key feature of the review was its “case studies,” in which Mr. Brown met at length with the teachers of two students to examine the youngsters’ work and talk about their progress.

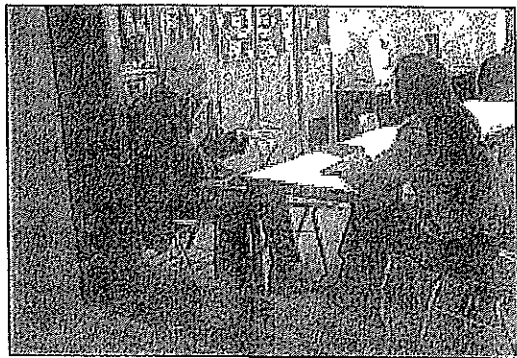
The international school shows both the value and the challenge of the reviews. Now serving students in grades 9 and 10 in its second year, the school has a mission to serve recent immigrants. Its 215 students hail from more than 30 countries. To keep them from falling between the cracks, the school puts a high premium on teamwork among teachers and students.

For the most part, Mr. Brown was impressed. In classes, students participated actively in their lessons, and often worked together. Just as important, they seemed happy to be at school, as did the teachers. For a group of students considered at high risk of dropping out, Mr. Brown said, that’s a significant accomplishment.

But he also noted the school’s difficulty in using data to drive instruction. At a school where students speak 19 different languages, and which emphasizes project-based learning as a way to keep students engaged, finding objective measures with which to plan adjustments in instruction isn’t easy.

‘Leading Indicator’

In a meeting with Principal Alexandra Anormaliza on his last day, Mr. Brown suggested working within a network of 9 high schools with similar missions to come up with benchmarks that make sense to school leaders.



Roger Brown of Cambridge Education interviews Assistant Principal Nedda de Castro at the International High School at Prospect Heights in Brooklyn last month. Mr. Brown’s employer, a British company, performs school inspections in England that are being adapted for use in the New York City public schools.

—Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

Coverage of leadership is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Vol. 25, Issue 37, Page 10