

Our review

Since its founding in 2007, BELL Academy has offered a nurturing environment and innovative educational approaches and achieved generally high marks for its academic performance. Now, though, school leaders are looking to implement a more demanding curriculum.

"The big push is to maintain student choice and opportunities for them to flourish, but classes need to be rigorous and aligned with the Common Core," says Principal David Abbott. Before coming to BELL, Abbott worked for one of the school networks and was an elementary school assistant principal. In 2013, he took over from Cheryl Quatrano, one of BELL's founders, who left to start Veritas Academy, a high school based on the BELL model. In Abbott's first year at BELL, he brought in a number of new teachers and Assistant Principal Paul Perskin.

This is the kind of school where everyone knows everyone else. The principal and assistant principal stand outside every day to greet students. As Abbott walks the halls, he addresses each and every student, many by first name. The children we spoke with praised the school for being a friendly community with teachers who help them. "It's an interesting group of people, very loving and very caring," one 8th-grade boy said.

Small group work is key here. Teachers encourage student participation in everyday classroom discussions. In a 6th-grade math class that included students with a range of abilities and some students with disabilities, we saw children work together to find definitions for a number of mathematic terms. Generally students seemed happy and eager to participate. One student told us that now she's "not zoning out as much in class."

Like many schools in the city, BELL has increased reading of non-fiction, relying less on what Abbott considers "dessert books," like Harry Potter. We were particularly impressed that much of the reading has a current-events focus. Students debate issues, such as whether to ban carriage horses and the Trayvon Martin case. In a recent Socratic seminar on fracking for natural gas, children considered issues such as the economic effects of fracking and the impact fracking could have on people's lives. On the whole, the nonfiction reading curriculum seemed much more engaging than what we've seen in similar schools.

While some classroom tasks did not seem very demanding, other work we saw was very strong—in particular a student-made video on bullying and writing samples. In a technology class, students investigated traffic patterns around the school in preparation to write to their City Council member about the issue. BELL is in a small residential corner of northeast Queens with little mass transit, so getting students there can be a problem.

Except for 8th-grade Regents math, classes have students at all levels. Abbott says it's important to challenge all of them. "Every student needs to be pushed at their level. The high achieving students shouldn't be able to say, 'That lesson was easy.' The top students should leave here with some brain burn."

The school has stepped up its use of technology, with SMART boards and iPads. It has purchased two curriculums for teaching Common Core but Abbott says teachers make changes to these programs frequently.

BELL has a fairly intensive program to prepare students for the state standardized tests in the spring. Some students take the integrated algebra Regents in 8th grade, and BELL hopes to begin offering the Earth science Regents in 2014-15.

All students take enrichment classes of their own choosing for two periods a week. The three-month long classes have included stop motion animation, string music, mathematical origami and quilting. Students participate in basketball, flag football and track and field through the [CHAMPS Middle School Sports and Fitness League](#). In 2014, the school will work with the Y to offer more sports as well as drama and art. All classes have gym twice a week.

The school shares its building with the well-regarded elementary school PS 169. The two schools share a library, cafeteria, auditorium and gym, but Principal Abbott says the relationship is very fluid and supportive. Students from the elementary school make up a large portion of BELL's incoming freshman. After graduation, BELL students go on to some of the specialized high schools, [Townsend Harris](#) and other Queens schools.

Special education: BELL has team-teaching classes mixing special education and general education students at every grade level. It also has a self-contained class.

Admission: Students graduating from PS 169 are automatically admitted if they select BELL as their first choice. There are about 800 applicants for the remaining 60 seats, which are filled by lottery. Admission is limited to students in District 25. (*Gail Robinson, May 2014*)