Quality Review Report

2014-2015

The William McKinley School/J.H.S. 259

Middle School K259

7305 Fort Hamilton Parkway
Brooklyn
NY 11228

Principal: Janice Geary

Date of review: January 23, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Debra R. Lamb, Ed.D.
The William McKinley School/J.H.S. 259 is a middle school with 1,475 students in grades 6-8. The school population comprises 1% Black, 25% Hispanic, 31% White, 42% Asian, and 1% other students. The student body includes 13% English language learners and 20% special education students. Boys account for 53% of the students enrolled and girls account for 47%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 94.5%.

### School Quality Criteria

#### Instructional Core

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#### School Culture

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#### Systems for Improvement

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Area of Celebration

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<th>1.1 Curriculum</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
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**Findings**
School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and strategically integrate the instructional shifts. Rigorous habits and higher-order skills are emphasized in curricula and academic tasks and are embedded in a coherent way across grades and subjects.

**Impact**
There is coherence across grades and subject areas that promotes college and career readiness for all students. All learners, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, must demonstrate their thinking.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Teachers began writing their own English language arts (ELA) curricular units about five years ago, using the “Principles of Learning” from University of Pittsburgh’s Institute For Learning (IFL), research-based features that are present in classrooms and schools when students are successful. Two years ago, teachers began incorporating resources from the Expeditionary Learning program as a supplement to their curriculum. The ELA curriculum currently in use incorporates what teachers deemed to be the best of their teacher-created curriculum and Expeditionary Learning. Nonfiction texts and primary documents have been added to the curriculum in ELA and social studies. In math, fewer topics and more real-world situations are incorporated for greater conceptual understanding. For the past two years, the school has used Pearson’s Connected Mathematics Project® 3 (CMP3), however teachers were concerned that the sequence of CMP3 content and skills were not aligned with the state mathematics test, as some topics were covered after the test was given. “Students had not learned a lot the material assumed was taught in the earlier grades,” said a teacher. Teachers began incorporating EngageNY resources and fewer topics to build from basic skills to conceptual understanding to real-world applications.

- Curricular unit plans for grade 6 through 8 are maintained on the school’s weebly.com website. These unit plans incorporate three texts at different Lexile Levels and teach students to read complex informational or fictional texts critically and to respond through writing. Each unit focuses on a specific set of reading comprehension skills and a writing mode, such as argumentative or narrative. For example, the overarching question for a grade 7 unit taught in entitled “Choices and Decisions” is “How are choices and decisions we make in life reflected in all aspects of literature?”

- Modified texts for ELL students and students with disabilities are also listed, such as The Poison Tree (490L) by William Blake and a poem entitled “Fire and Ice” (890L) by Robert Frost. Guiding questions include: “Is making a decision a freedom or a privilege? How do experiences impact and transform us? How are we responsible for developing our own identities?” Concept word study includes such words as adversity, social hierarchy, socio-economic status, and privilege. Discussion or writing activities are centered on text-dependent questions, such as “How can you apply the theme of “Nothing Gold Can Stay” to the characters in The Outsiders?” An 8th grade self-contained social studies class was studying World War I through a primary source document called “Memories from the Trenches.” The planned activity required 8th grade students with disabilities to design a plan of attack on the opposing side using images and research. “Our kids are expected to learn what everyone learns,” said the principal.
**Area of Focus**

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<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>1.2 Pedagogy</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
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**Findings**

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teaching practices are aligned to the curricula and reflect a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best. Teaching strategies strategically provide multiple entry points and high quality supports and extensions into the curricula. Although student work reflects high levels of student thinking, strengthening teacher facilitation of classroom discussions is an area for focus.

**Impact**

Teaching practices are informed by the Danielson Framework and the instructional shifts, as well as by discussions at the team and school levels. All learners are engaged in appropriately challenging tasks and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills in student work products. In some cases, discussion techniques miss opportunities to support greater student ownership of learning.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Danielson Framework components are regularly discussed when teachers meet before school on Tuesdays mornings to talk about instructional priorities to be emphasized with students. For example, teachers planned higher-order questioning and discussion techniques (3b) and embedded formative assessments (3d) in a grade 7 ELA lesson plan focused on the novel *The Outsiders*, which incorporates “cubing” as a way of strengthening writing and gaining new perspective. A “cube” is a visual and tactile prop with six sides on which appear the one of the following task words: *describe* (define identity and explain), *compare* (what is identity similar to?), *associate* (what does the word identity make you think of?), *analyze* (break down the word identity), *apply* (how can we apply the term identity to our own lives?) and *argue* (argue for or against the importance of individual identity). Students used the cubes as pre-writing tools in preparation for an extended writing activity. Working in multi-level groups, students took turns rolling the cube and discussed the novel’s abstract theme of “search for identity.” As the teacher circulated among the groups, she asked such questions as “What comes to mind? Do you think having an identity is great? Would argue that people need an identity? A gallery walk enabled students to read each other’s perspectives.

- In a bridge class for “newcomers,” the target of the reading lesson was “I can identify the author’s purpose of a video or text and use evidence to support my answer.” After viewing three short video clips, 6th and 7th grade ELL students used “Plicker Cards” to identify the author’s purpose for each video. Plicker cards are paper cards with a unique visual code with four sides, each lettered A, B, C, and D. The teacher used an electronic application to scan the room and record each student’s response. The results appeared live and in real time on the SMARTboard for the class to see. The teacher told students to look for three traits—persuade, inform, and entertain—as they worked in differentiated groups—beginners (the newest students), intermediate, and advanced—based on their proficiency level in English and the prior day’s self-assessment.

- A social studies class is piloting the *Independent Investigation Method* (IIM), which is used to guide students through a research project about how complex societies and civilizations change over time. Advanced students were encouraged to explore ancient Greece and Rome, in preparation for a future unit. Students were grouped at tables according to the culture or time period explored.
Additional Findings

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<th>2.2 Assessment</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
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Findings
Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers use assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are aligned with the school’s curricula and offer a clear portrait of student mastery. Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers’ assessment practices consistently reflect the varied use of ongoing checks for understanding and student self-assessment.

Impact
Actionable and meaningful feedback is provided to students and teachers regarding student achievement. Teachers make effective adjustments to meet all students’ learning needs and students are aware of their next learning steps.

Supporting Evidence
- The school triangulates item-skill analyses of State test results formative assessments to target student weaknesses, including Measures of Student Learning (MoSLs), pre-assessments, for each unit, performance tasks, student work products and other benchmark assessments. These assessments are all modified by teachers to meet the needs of their students and to ensure Common Core-alignment. The school’s uniform grading policy as well as the use of summative and formative data is clearly outlined in the School Policy Handbook.

- Lesson plans have rubrics for use by students connected to each embedded assessment and culminating task. For example, a two-point rubric—Level 1 = no credit, Level 2 = partial response, Level 3 = a proficient response—provided for an ELA task requiring grade 7 students to compare and contrast how a quote from the book *The Outsiders* by author S. E. Hinton applies to the two rival gangs in the book, the “Greasers” (working class youth) and the “Socs” (social climbers). Teacher feedback to students is detailed and specific to the task. For example, “Susan, you have written an eloquent response that compares and contrasts both groups. Your textual evidence and explanations only enhance your overall analysis. Strive to improve word choice to ensure a lack of comprehension doesn’t interfere with the ideas you convey.” For this short response assessment, Susan received 95% (Level 2). Rubrics addressing attitude/behavior, focus on classwork, contributions in class, and time management are also used daily by students.

- Entrance and exit tickets as well as the three-colored “Stoplight Method” are actively used by teachers as quick checks for understanding. Teachers also use “Pickers” ([www.plickers.com](http://www.plickers.com)) to know whether their students understand various concepts and are mastering key skills. Using this technology application, content-based question and answer choices are projected on a screen and students use the unique shapes on Plicker cards to respond to the question. Using an iPad, real-time data is generated for the teacher’s use as student responses are captured by the Plicker system. All student portfolios have reflection sheets for students to complete, which capture from the student’s perspective, “I can…I have trouble with…Next time I will….“ Students answer “yes” or “no” to questions like: “ Were most of my sentences smooth and varied?”, “Was my opinion clearly stated, focused and strongly maintained?” and “Did I include a strong counterclaim in my introduction, including evidence to discredit it?” To support teaching and learning, all teachers pass their student portfolios to the next grade. Students also use Post-Its® to give each other feedback and advice.
Quality Indicator: 3.4 High Expectations  Rating: Well Developed

Findings
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to the entire staff and provide training. Expectations connected to a path to college and career are effectively communicated to families by school leaders and staff.

Impact
A culture of mutual accountability exists among staff. The school successfully partners with families to support progress towards those expectations.

Supporting Evidence
- The school policy handbook for pedagogues addresses a wide range of policies and procedures, pedagogical and professional practices, and organizational systems and structures. Teachers provide administrators with measurable objectives following their participation in professional development. Teachers are surveyed in September regarding their professional learning choices. The 2014-2015 survey included such choices as: “The ins and outs of Skedula (a student information system),” “Modifications for visual, auditory, and tactile learners,” and “Co-teaching in the classroom”. The school’s professional learning plan states: “The staff is provided professional learning opportunities that would enable them to (a) properly complete four rigorous, engaging, and coherent Common Core-aligned units of study across the grades and subjects; (b) develop a culture of collaborative professional learning through the use of teacher leaders leading to improved school and individual development; (c) dramatically increase the level of communication with parents through outreach forms, and to take part in analysis of a series of students’ formative and summative assessment outcomes to provide varied forms of actionable, real-time feedback from teachers and peers.” For example, multiple professional development sessions held on effective questioning and discussion techniques purposefully address the school’s area of focus.

- The school has incorporated curricular components that focus on the Habits of Mind, dispositions that contribute to success, such as persistence, empathy, accuracy, flexible thinking, work habits, humor, effort, and creativity. Connections between these dispositions and historical connections like civil rights are made with students. A school-developed document connects many of these dispositions to promotional requirements for grades 6-8.

- Parents access PupilPath to view important student and school information such as student attendance records, class schedule, and assignment due dates and grades, and read anecdotal notes by teachers. SchoolMessenger also communicates announcements by phone. One parent reported receiving phone calls home from teachers regarding his son’s demonstrated areas of improvement. This school gives children an opportunity to do homework at school so they can focus on other things at home. A parent said that she is regularly asked to review and sign her child’s exams, and stated that the time management and organizational skills that parents support at home “shapes the child as a whole person.”
Findings
Teacher teams systematically analyze key elements of teacher work including classroom practice, assessment data, and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused. Distributed leadership structures are embedded across the school.

Impact
There are shared improvements in teacher practice and mastery of goals for groups of students. There is effective teacher leadership and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning across the school.

Supporting Evidence
- Every Tuesday, teacher teams focus on looking at student work to identify “evidence of impact” of their pedagogical decisions on such instructional practices as including assessment design and student engagement. During a meeting of the grade 7 math team, teachers focused upon common student mistakes when trying to identify algebraic expressions representing the area or perimeter for various shape. They shared best practices, such as: “One thing I did with my ELLs to address like terms was to give students crayons to differentiate using color,” and “I focus on visual representations in my class.” The team said that their goal is to get to a point where they have collected a list of strategies to use as a resource. Teachers also discussed a pre-assessment for Unit 3—distributive property, with particular attention on what to emphasize to students, such as organizing from the highest to the lowest exponent.

- The team’s focus is consistent from meeting to meeting: “To rationalize the evidence cited in order to build critical thinking skills, solve real world problems, support arguments, and synthesize new concepts and information.” The protocol used for collaboratively looking at student work asks the following questions: “What do you see? From the student’s perspective, what is the student working on? What are the implications of this work for teaching and learning? What is your take-away action or learning from this conversation?” The grade 7 math team reported that this year they actively articulated with grade 6 math teachers and following the state exam they plan to ask grade 8 teachers, “What do you need us to focus on?”

- Professional learning opportunities are teacher-directed and conducted by teacher leaders including the United Federation of Teachers Teacher Center Staff Developer, Peer Instructional Coach, Demonstration Teachers, and School Ambassadors. A first-year teacher stated: “Collaboration has been beneficial as a teacher. I have all these big sisters and brothers whom I can go to anytime for help.”

- Distributed leadership structures also include the school’s Student Government Organization, which contributes to community service projects like the Sock & Glove Drive, Penny Harvest, and the Nursing Home Supply Drive. Various student clubs, committees and societies are facilitated by staff members assisted by student club leaders. Examples of the school’s extracurricular offerings include: Math club, chorus, technology club, newsletter committee, yearbook committee, environmental society, photography club, social justice society, and yoga society.