Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning
Middle-High School M348
511 West 182nd Street
Manhattan
NY 10033

Principal: Brett Kimmel
Date of review: March 18, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Richard Cintron
The School Context

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning is a middle-high school with 705 students from grade 6 through grade 12. The school population comprises 2% Black, 97%, and 1% other students. The student body includes 16% English language learners and 20% special education students. Boys account for 57% of the students enrolled and girls account for 43%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 89.0%.

School Quality Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Core</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Ensure engaging, rigorous, and coherent curricula in all subjects, accessible for a variety of learners and aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and/or content standards</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<td>1.2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the instructional shifts and Danielson Framework for Teaching, aligned to the curricula, engaging, and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products</td>
<td>Additional Findings</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<td>2.2 Align assessments to curricula, use on-going assessment and grading practices, and analyze information on student learning outcomes to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom levels</td>
<td>Additional Findings</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<tr>
<th>School Culture</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations</td>
<td>Celebration</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
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<tr>
<th>Systems for Improvement</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
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<td>4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning</td>
<td>Additional Findings</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
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Area of Celebration

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<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>3.4 High Expectations</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
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**Findings**
Leadership and staff effectively communicate high expectations to families to support student progress towards high expectations connected to college and career readiness. The school has established a culture that provides all students, including high-need subgroups, with clearly focused and effective feedback, guidance, and ongoing support toward a path to college and career readiness.

**Impact**
Staff takes ownership for creating true partnerships with parents that result in increased student achievement towards stated expectations. Students are motivated to own their own educational experience and support their peers so that they are prepared for college and career decisions.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Parents spoke at length about student-led parent conferences where students explain their performance in their classes to their parents, identify goals, and then set specific times frames for when they will accomplish these goals. Parents spoke to how teachers, through the school’s Advisory program called Crew, work with students so that they own this process and see it as valuable part of their educational experience. Parents stressed that this regular practice of teacher supporting students with owning their own parent conferences was perhaps the best way that teachers are proactively partnering with them to help support their children.

- During a student meeting students spoke to how staff across all grade levels regularly speaks to them about obtaining the best possible diploma option and the right college or career choice that fits their interest. The school has a partnership with a non-profit organization called Friends of WHEELS that supports students with all aspects of the college application process. All students attend multiple college trips and all seniors in addition to regularly meetings with their own counselor and have access to three different college advisors. Other organizations such as the Opportunity Network and College Spring work with students to develop professional etiquette skills and support them with The Preliminary Scholastic Achievement Test (PSAT) and Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). The WHEELS college application march is an annual ritual where seniors march from the school to their local post office to mail their college applications while the entire school community as well as local business and community leaders cheer them on. Students spoke to how this event is a powerful part of their experience at the school and serves as a source of pride for seniors and motivation for underclassmen.

- During a student meeting, when students were asked how they knew they were ready for the next grade, in addition to explaining how they are exposed to rigorous courses such as Advanced Placement and honor courses, they spoke to how they have also learned perseverance and responsibility by practicing school designated Habits of Work and Learning (HOWL) and Community Values which are regularly discussed in all core class. Students specifically spoke to the practice of student-led parent conferences as being instrumental in helping them create their own goals and own their own learning. Data revealed that graduation rate, college and career preparatory courses taken by students, and college readiness index have all steadily increased over the last few years.
Area of Focus

Findings
School leaders and faculty ensure curricula are aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and the instructional shifts, however those shifts are not always strategically analyzed and implemented across all grades. Higher order skills are consistently emphasized in curricula and tasks across grades and subject areas for all students.

Impact
The school’s purposeful curriculum decisions are building coherence and promote cognitive engagement emphasizing rigorous habits and higher-order thinking that promotes college and career readiness for all learners, including English language learners (ELLS), special education students, and highest achieving learners.

Supporting Evidence
- The school has created templates for curriculum maps, case studies, and lesson plans and has developed a process for teachers, administrators, and coaches from Expeditionary Learning to peer review all teacher work products. Teachers begin creating or modifying next year’s documents at the beginning of the summer, receive feedback, and finalize them during summer professional development the week before school begins. The principal spoke to how this process has helped teacher’s develop their skills in planning curriculum and has been instrumental in helping to drive professional development plans for the school year.

- Teachers across all grades and departments create case studies, which are end of unit projects that all students complete in addition to end of unit summative exams, which are aligned to the Common Core Standards and/or content standards and integrate the instructional shifts. For example, an English language arts (ELA) case study called for students to analyze various pieces of writing, synthesize ideas, develop an argumentative essay defending a point of view, and then create a children’s book along with a parent support guide which conveyed their message in a form suitable for younger children which they would then eventually read to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children at the school. Case studies are well aligned to curricula especially in middle school where work strategically analyses instructional themes, however in high school while studies are strong they do not follow a continuum of work across grades.

- A review of written lesson plans across all content areas revealed that in-class learning targets consistently emphasize higher order thinking skills such as evaluating a speaker’s point of view and their use of evidence to defend their ideas, developing logical arguments, analyzing information from multiple sources, and applying concepts in real world situations. For example, in a ninth grade math class, students were asked to justify their use of materials and space using appropriate mathematical equations to construct walls to defend a village from attack. In a seventh grade social studies class, students were asked to create a historically accurate newspaper article and political cartoon that fully expressed a Federalist/Anti-Federalist point of view.
Additional Findings

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<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>1.2 Pedagogy</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
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Findings
Across classrooms, teaching practices reflect an articulated set of beliefs about how students learn best. Teaching strategies consistently provide multiple entry points and high-quality supports for all learners.

Impact
Across classrooms, all students, including Ells and special education students, are motivated and actively engaged in classroom activities and discussions resulting in them demonstrating higher-order thinking skills and meaningful work products.

Supporting Evidence
- The school has adopted an instructional model called the Gradual Release of Responsibility that stresses high levels of student engagement through authentic real world tasks, an emphasis on the teacher as a facilitator, and maximum time for students to productively struggle both collaboratively and individually with higher order tasks. Instructional strategies, determined by teacher teams and related to these beliefs, were seen in all classrooms. For example, in two different ninth grade Algebra classes, students were given time to work collaboratively to discuss various problems in order to identify agreed upon solutions, to create questions for their classmates where they could not reach consensus on an answer, and to determine additional questions for the teacher related to the overall topic being covered.

- Teachers use a variety of strategies to ensure all students can access curricula material. In a seventh grade social studies class, students were purposely grouped and certain students were provided with academic vocabulary cards and sentence starters so that they could access the task. In two different ninth grade Algebra classes, students were given fewer problems of the same high level of complexity and assigned a teaching assistant. In a sixth grade math class, students were purposely paired to allow students who had a stronger grasp of the material to support other students who had questions and to also model finding alternate ways of solving the problems for their classmates.

- In classrooms visited, teachers used a variety of strategies to ensure students’ demonstration of higher-order thinking skills. For example, several times during a seventh grade social studies class the teacher asked questions to the class and then had the students turn and talk to their partner and then be prepared to explain their partners answer. In an eighth grade science class, where students were given an assignment to build a rocket, each group was assigned a budget and charged a “consultancy fee” if they asked the teacher a question, thus reducing the amount of money they had to spend on supplies for their rocket. This process encouraged students to not only exhaust all possible sources of information to find a potential answer to their question, but to also determine the real importance of their question to completing their task before just seeking an immediate answer from the teacher. In a twelfth grade anatomy class, where students were assigned various activities related to movements of joints in the body, students had to identify common learnings they all experienced during each activity as well as create questions connected to common misunderstandings or information that they still needed to fully understand the lesson.
Findings
Teachers create assessments and use rubrics and grading policies aligned to the school curricula. Teachers regularly check for understanding and use student self-assessment practices.

Impact
The school’s consistent use of rubrics accompanied by actionable feedback and regular use of checks for understanding allows teachers to determine student progress towards goals and adjust instruction accordingly to meet the needs of all students.

Supporting Evidence
- The principal spoke to how the school uses mastery-based grading accompanied by an online grade book that allows teachers, students, and parents to track student progress towards achievement of each learning target studied in a unit. Formative and summative tasks as well as all case studies are accompanied by rubrics. The principal, teachers, and students described targeted actionable feedback as an established ritual for improving student achievement across the school and with helping students to move towards mastery. Students also spoke to how they regularly use rubrics in class and with homework assignments and how teachers confer with them to provide next steps. A review of student portfolios in an eighth grade science class revealed feedback from the teacher on how students could improve their writing referencing specific language from the rubric. A review of student work during a student meeting revealed specific steps students should take in order to reach mastery for a case study. Students mentioned how this consistent practice has helped them to create their own learning goals and has helped them with facilitating their own student-led parent conferences during the year.

- Across classrooms, students were consistently seen peer and self-assessing. For example, in a twelfth grade ELA class, students worked in groups reading each other’s final drafts of the children’s books they were creating and provided each other feedback. In a sixth grade math class, students checked each other’s work and used a model problem as a guide to help answer any questions. In a twelfth grade anatomy class, students were heard discussing the task and checking each other’s work to ensure their answers aligned to the task and provided enough detail.

- In classrooms observed, teachers consistently used a variety of methods to check for understanding, such as exit tickets, one-on-one conferencing with students, thumbs-up thumbs-down, and a school-wide process referred to as “say back” where students repeat either what the teacher has just said or the answer that a student had just given. For example, in a seventh grade science class, the teacher conferred with all student groups asking them targeted questions about what they had accomplished yesterday and how that work would relate to the current lesson. In both ninth grade math classrooms, teachers individually worked with students to ensure they understood the homework from the previous night that was discussed during the Do Now. In a number of classrooms, teachers stopped and asked targeted students to repeat an answer that another student had given and to comment on the answer before moving forward. Learning targets were posted in all classrooms and referenced throughout the lesson to ensure students understood how in-class activities connected to them.
Quality Indicator: 4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development | Rating: Well Developed

Findings
All teachers are engaged in consistently examining teacher practice and student data within inquiry-based structured professional collaborations. Distributed teacher leadership is embedded across all areas of the school.

Impact
School-wide coherence that strengthens teacher instructional capacity and promotes the implementation of Common Core Learning Standards is seen throughout all classrooms. Teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect teaching and learning across the school resulting in increased student achievement.

Supporting Evidence
- Teachers spoke about how they have a strong voice in school-wide decisions and that their leadership is not only valued but actively sought after. For example, teachers collaborated with the administration to create the school’s goals and professional development plan to ensure alignment, differentiation, and support for all teachers. Teachers regularly facilitate professional development sessions during teacher team meetings and during whole school professional development. Teachers updated the school’s HOWL and Community Values and then modified the existing student and parent handbooks to align with them. Teachers updated the teacher handbook to ensure alignment to the school’s needs as it expands from a secondary school serving sixth to twelfth graders to a pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade school. Teachers also commented how they played a huge role in the decision to not purchase recommended curriculum and rather to design their own curriculum documents for all grade levels. This process, they felt, was instrumental in helping teachers take ownership of all key instructional decisions connected to professional development, curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment.

- The principal meets weekly with teacher team leaders to discuss student scholarship, observation trends, and other issues related to the school culture. These meetings frequently result in the modification of school-wide plans to target support better for teachers and students. For example, the school’s professional development plan was recently modified to allow more time for teachers to collaboratively plan case studies across grade level content area classes. Additional time was also created for middle school and high school teachers to meet in order to further strengthen planning opportunities between the high school and middle school teachers.

- All teachers regularly meet in department and grade level teams, as well as in informal learning groups, to review student and teacher work products to ensure alignment to the Common Core learning Standards and share best practices for increasing student achievement. All departments have created and posted model case studies and common core aligned tasks with accompanying samples of student work to help norm planning and grading practices across the school. Teachers and the principal spoke to how this practice has helped create instructional coherence across the school, provided students with clear examples of what mastery level work looks like, and helped teachers focus support for targeted groups of students. The principal spoke to how these practices are aligned to the schools goals and how mid-year reviews of student data show that the school is once again moving towards raising the graduation rate and the four-year college readiness index.