Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Independence High School

High School M544

850 Tenth Avenue
Manhattan
NY 10019

Principal: Ron Smolkin

Date of review: April 29, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Rafaela Landin
## The School Context

Independence is a high school with 204 students from grade 10 through grade 12. The school population comprises 39% Black, 53% Hispanic, 2% White, and 3% Asian students. The student body includes 18% English language learners and 37% special education students. Boys account for 52% of the students enrolled and girls account for 48%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 65.0%.

## School Quality Criteria

### Instructional Core

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does the school…</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>Additional Findings</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<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>Focus</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### School Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does the school…</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Systems for Improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does the school…</th>
<th>Area of:</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<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>Proficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Area of Celebration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>3.4 High Expectations</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Findings**
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to staff, students and families and provide the necessary supports to achieve these expectations.

**Impact**
Due to the high expectations established a culture of mutual accountability for all constituents connected to a path of college and career readiness exists. Parents are an integral part of the school community and support students in achieving their goals and meeting with success.

**Supporting Evidence**
- The principal provides every staff member with a school handbook delineating the expectations for teaching and learning aligned to the Danielson framework for teaching. Annotation of texts, chunking information, small group instruction and academic vocabulary are strategies used to support the learning needs of English language learners and students with disabilities. The school’s instructional focus, alignment to Common Core State Standards and the implementation of rigorous instruction that leads to college and career readiness is communicated to all staff via ongoing differentiated professional development.

- School leaders have outlined professional learning for all staff in monthly cycles. Staff participate in training opportunities addressing several foci facilitated by the instructional coach, assistant principal, principal, and teacher leaders. The cycles include: student-centered instruction, questioning and discussion techniques, argumentative writing and using data to drive instruction.

- Students and parents participate in orientation at the beginning of the year to understand the expectations and the vision the school has for its students. At these meetings, students receive a road map indicating exactly what they need in each grade level. In addition, students are provided with a college and career plan and this plan is monitored by guidance counselors and the YWCA of the City of New York.

- The school provides ongoing opportunities for parents to learn about and understand Jupiter, an online system for students. Parents and teachers share information on students’ progress. Additionally, parents reported that they receive monthly newsletters in English and Spanish informing them of school events.

- Tasks given to students encourage participation, inquiry and ownership connected to college and career readiness. For example, in a writing class, students were asked to prepare a short presentation of a career of their choice. Students had to do a power point to present the information and dress professionally for the presentation.
Findings
Teaching practices are aligned to the curricula and center around a set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the Danielson Framework for Teaching. Teaching strategies provide multiple entry points into the curricula and meet the needs of groups of students.

Impact
As a result of teachers sharing a common set of beliefs about student learning and pedagogical practices and strategies, the majorities of students are engaged in challenging tasks and have opportunities to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in their work products. Although teaching strategies support student learning, multiple entry points and extensions are not sufficiently embedded to meet the needs of individual students.

Supporting Evidence
- Although classes visited showed evidence of differentiated instruction and multiple entry points and scaffolds, most tasks were for the struggling student and while the proficient student does well, they are not being continually challenged. For example, in a ninth grade algebra class, students were involved in solving absolute value equations, conjunction and disjunction inequalities to then use this knowledge and apply it to real world problems. Even though the task was challenging, there was missed opportunity to extend the learning for the top tier students.

- During classroom visits, students were observed working with partners and in groups responding to questions given by teachers, citing evidence from texts, annotating texts and using accountable talk stems to problem solve or give an opinion. Yet, there were some classes where the supports and extensions were not as challenging as they could be reducing the level of achievement for all students.

- Students in all classrooms had assigned roles and worked in collaborative groups to facilitate the assigned task. Groups had team captains who served as the content leader for the group. There was evidence across classrooms of teachers asking students to justify their answers and to make their thinking visible. However, in a few instances, students were not always given authentic opportunities to engage in challenging tasks and pushing their thinking to another level.
Additional Findings

| Quality Indicator: | 1.1 Curriculum | Rating: | Proficient |

Findings
All curricula are aligned to the Common Core State Standards and integrate the instructional shifts. Teachers use data and student work to plan and refine academic tasks and curricula.

Impact
The well aligned coherent curricula provides academic tasks that are designed to be engaging, rigorous and accessible and results in the promotion of college and career readiness for all students; including English language learners and students with disabilities.

Supporting Evidence
- The school’s decision to use the understanding by design template and the engage NY resources to develop units of studies and performance tasks builds coherence across grades and content areas. For example, teachers in all grades use a common template utilizing backward design principles to design curriculum maps, lessons and units that encourage inquiry based learning and embed performance based assessments. In earth science, a teacher developed a unit on the coordinate systems and maps. The unit is designed to engage students in solving interdisciplinary problems involving a variety of skills and strategies; including effective work habits, gathering and processing information, generating and analyzing ideas and making connections amongst common themes. In addition, students are given opportunities to engage in topics such as, ”Why go to college?” Improving communication skills, finding employment, interview skills and mock interviews through the school’s extracurricular activities promote college and career readiness for all students.

- Lesson plans and units of study include performance tasks that incorporate the instructional shifts such as argumentative essays, close reading, evidence based conversations about text and writing from sources. Units are planned and refined to ensure all students have access to the learning. For example, an English language arts unit on World War II and the Cold War was adjusted by teachers to include partner work, and small group work. Additionally, quotes, paintings, written documents, drawings and charts were added to support the different learning needs of the student population.

- Teachers across subjects and grades updated curricula to incorporate additional Common Core aligned skills and they continue to prepare students for current ELA and math regents. For example, the present curriculum for English includes writing a critical lens essay based on a quote, generating students’ own questions for group discussion, drawing and explaining a conclusion about an ambiguous story ending and identifying examples of symbolism in a short story.
Findings
Assessments, rubrics and the school’s grading policy aligns to the curricula. Teachers consistently use ongoing checks for understanding to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom level.

Impact
Students and teachers are provided with actionable feedback regarding student achievement across grades and subjects. Furthermore, teachers make effective adjustments to lesson plans and units of studies to meet the individual learning needs of all students.

Supporting Evidence
- Students use rubrics and checklists for all assignments to clearly understand what is expected. For example, in a science class, students were asked to describe the relationship of the immune system to organ transplants and the use of immunosuppressant drugs to prevent the rejection of the transplanted organ. Students were given a checklist of four components one being, why immunosuppressant drugs might be needed to prevent rejection of a kidney from an identical twin, to address in their response.

- A review of student work on bulletin boards inside and outside classrooms indicates that teachers use rubrics to assess students’ writing. For example, a persuasive essay rubric includes components such as claim and focus, logical development, organization and structure and content. Additionally, the rubric stated specific next steps like “break up your first paragraph” and “state what point you will discuss in your essay within the introduction and then describe those specific points”.

- A review of lesson plans, units and classroom visits revealed the use of checks for understanding and student self-assessment to advance learning. For example, units of studies and lesson plans indicate that teachers check for understanding by using think, pair share, turn and talk, small group discussions and exit slips. Teachers reported that they use the results of exit slips to adjust or revise their unit plans for the next day’s lesson if needed. They use these results to group students for targeted instruction or to reteach lessons with different strategies or scaffolds to meet the learning needs of the students.
Quality Indicator: 4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development  
Rating: Proficient  

Findings  
Teacher teams are engaged in structured professional collaboration and inquiry work. Ongoing analysis of the work of shared students is consistent across grades and subjects.  

Impact  
The work of teacher teams results in improved teacher practice, and progress towards goals for groups of students.  

Supporting Evidence  
- Teachers are provided with opportunities to engage in weekly structured professional collaboration and inquiry work to analyze student work. Teachers use agendas, minutes and the atlas protocol for analyzing student work; identify trends and next steps. Teacher teams analyze student data and classwork to strengthen the capacity of teachers and align teaching practice to the school’s goals and the demands of the Common Core State Standards. For example, during a teacher team meeting, teachers shared that they have improved their practice by looking at videos of their colleagues on school-wide initiatives. A teacher stated "I now know what effective student to student discussion looks like after I saw a video of one of the teachers in the school".  

- Teachers reported that the school provides them with opportunities to engage in inter-visitations with colleagues and to receive feedback from their peers. The principal, assistant principal and the coach provides teachers with ongoing feedback on units of studies and lesson plans. For example, the coach provided feedback to an English teacher on the strengths and areas for growth on a literacy lesson to promote the achievement of school goals.  

- Teacher teams use the Depth of Knowledge and Common Core Learning Standards to ascertain that unit plans and lessons are aligned and have rigorous tasks and higher order thinking questions. The principal and teachers both shared how they used the item analysis of the Regents exam to make adjustments to academic tasks and units based on these tests to make learning more engaging and to increase students’ critical thinking skills. For example, during a study of the Holocaust, teachers noticed that students were having trouble understanding the material; therefore, they decided to add a movie and pictures to make the learning more accessible. Adding visuals, improved students’ understanding of the content, resulting in writing assessments that evidenced significant improvement for all students.