Quality Review Report

2016-2017

The River School
Elementary 02M281
425 East 35th St.
Manhattan
NY 10016

Principal: Jessica Orleans

Dates of Review:
January 5, 2017 - January 6, 2017

Lead Reviewer: Debra Tasioudis
The Quality Review Report

The Quality Review is a two-day school visit by an experienced educator. During the review, the reviewer visits classrooms, talks with parents, students, teachers, and school leaders and uses a rubric to evaluate how well the school is organized to support student achievement.

The Quality Review Report provides a rating for all ten indicators of the Quality Review Rubric in three categories: Instructional Core, School Culture, and Systems for Improvement. One indicator is identified as the **Area of Celebration** to highlight an area in which the school does well to support student learning and achievement. One indicator is identified as the **Area of Focus** to highlight an area the school should work on to support student learning and achievement. The remaining indicators are identified as **Additional Finding**. This report presents written findings, impact, and site-specific supporting evidence for six indicators.

Information about the School

The River School serves students in grade PK through grade 3. You will find information about this school, including enrollment, attendance, student demographics, and data regarding academic performance, at http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm.

School Quality Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Core</th>
<th>To what extent does the school...</th>
<th>Area</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>Area of Focus</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<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>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td></td>
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<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 Finding</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### School Culture

**To what extent does the school...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports the academic and personal growth of students and adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations</td>
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</tbody>
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### Systems for Improvement

**To what extent does the school...**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school’s instructional goals and meet student learning needs, as evidenced by meaningful student work products</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Establish a coherent vision of school improvement that is reflected in a short list of focused, data-based goals that are tracked for progress and are understood and supported by the entire school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Observe teachers using the Danielson Framework for Teaching along with the analysis of learning outcomes to elevate school-wide instructional practices and implement strategies that promote professional growth and reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Evaluate the quality of school-level decisions, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school, with particular attention to the CCLS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations for professionalism, instruction, communication grounded in a shared exploration of the Danielson Framework for Teaching. School leaders and staff effectively communicate expectations connected to a path to college and career readiness.

Impact
Consistent communication and training for staff result in a positive school culture of mutual accountability. Effective communication and partnerships with families support student progress toward “River Ready” expectations.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal regularly communicates high expectations with staff through yearlong professional norms and her weekly email, the River Review. In this publication, she makes clear high expectations as demonstrated in specific classrooms she or teacher teams have visited, provides prompts for teacher self-reflection, and outlines and reinforces school priorities. The principal and teacher facilitators regularly guide the staff through weekly professional learning sessions connected to school goals and priorities. Teachers hold each other accountable to instructional expectations through frequent cycles of intervisitation. In addition, the principal’s feedback conferences for individual teacher observation require teacher self-assessment and purposefully focus on components of the Danielson Framework for Teaching to communicate high expectations for planning, instruction, collaboration and guiding student behavior.

- Actively listening, brightly thinking and clearly speaking (ABCs) are hallmarks of the River School’s culture of high expectations for staff, students and families. These, along with the school’s accountability system for being, “River Ready” are constantly reinforced with students and families. Teachers effectively communicate student progress to families through daily door-to-door check-ins and emails, through weekly River Raves, and each class’ monthly River Reader, which communicates expectations for students, and families. For example, a kindergarten River Reader describes the month’s major Common Core-aligned learning objectives in reading, writing, science and mathematics with suggestions of how parents can support student learning at home. The newsletter also communicates important upcoming events, and strategies for supporting positive discipline at home. Parents articulated that they use the ABCs and positive discipline strategies at home and in public places like restaurants with their children. Through these regular streams of communication and comprehensive triennial progress reports that include advances in content areas, next steps and progress in learning habits, families are well informed of the expectations for students that put them on a path to college readiness.

- School leaders and staff partner with families to support student progress toward academic and personal behaviors necessary for college and career through regular schoolwide and class events where faculty, students and families come together to explore and celebrate student work and success in the classroom. Monthly Family Fridays, meet and greet, inquiry celebrations, and publishing parties enable parents to partner with teachers and school leaders in learning and celebrating students at school. During Family Fridays, the staff invites families to school to learn instructional strategies from their child’s classroom teacher and then practice them with guidance before continuing to support their children at home. Parent surveys also guide the content of regular parent workshops that are held by teachers and are well attended by families.
### Area of Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>1.1 Curriculum</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
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**Findings**

School leaders and staff ensure that the curricula align to the Common Core and integrate the instructional shifts, with a focus on text-based answers, use of academic vocabulary, and writing to articulate deep understanding. Lesson plans consistently emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order thinking skills for all learners, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).

**Impact**

While the school’s curricula ensure alignment to the Common Core and instructional shifts, lesson plans, rather than the curricula are the driver for ensuring rigorous habits and opportunities for practicing higher order skills by all students, including students with disabilities and ELLs.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Across grades and subject areas, the curricula align to the Common Core. In Teachers College Reading and Writing units, EngageNY math curricula, science and inquiry-based social studies units, students practice college and career readiness skills with a focus on text-based answers in writing and discussions, and expressing deep understanding in math. Student writing consistently emphasizes rigor across the school where lessons focus on volume, stamina, and strengthening writing through planning and revising with guidance and support from peers and adults. In a kindergarten classroom, a student shared a piece of narrative writing he was composing about a recent family vacation, one of many pieces of narrative writing he produced during the unit. The lesson focused on students working in partnerships with a checklist and word bank to deepen their understanding and use of language. This example of clear learning expectations for writing, ample time for independent and partnered work, and focus on language and academic vocabulary is typical of the writing tasks seen across grades and subject areas. Students are producing writing with volume and connections to the Common Core.

- Rigorous habits are consistent in tasks for all learners as evidenced in lesson plans. Across classrooms, tasks involved analyzing text, citing evidence to support an argument in reading and in math, and making inferences. Purposeful planning for students with disabilities and ELLs was also evident, especially through partnerships with other students to provide opportunities for students to apply new skills and evaluate the work of others in partnerships before independent practice. In a third grade lesson plan, after whole-group instruction in making predictions, one small group practiced a strategy for making predictions while another group task asked students to evaluate the predictions of others in a shared text. In a math classroom, students worked in partnerships to practice using new mathematical language and reasoning before their independent practice. As in the previous example, this focus on appropriate levels of rigor for all students lives consistently in teachers’ lesson plans; however, it is not yet embedded in a coherent way in the school’s curricula.

- Although teachers are beginning to tailor rigorous tasks for individual learners, the curriculum maps do not yet reflect this. As an example, across grades, students and families receive an at-home learning menu with rigorous tasks to be completed throughout the week after school in lieu of traditional homework. The tasks ask students to review, invent, construct and highlight (enRICH) learning from across subject areas in creative ways, usually requiring participation of a family member, especially in the lower grades. Some parents noted that that their child’s enRICH task was tailored for their specific interests, reading, language, or math level, which teachers also shared. This tailoring of rigorous tasks so that all students must demonstrate their thinking, including the lowest and highest-achieving students, is not yet evident in the school’s curriculum.
Additional Finding

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>1.2 Pedagogy</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
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Findings

Across classrooms, teaching practices are informed by the Danielson Framework for Teaching and reflect an articulated set of beliefs, including the use of the workshop model, guided practice, ample time for partnered and independent work that are aligned to the curricula. Teaching strategies consistently provide multiple entry points into the curricula, with a focus on scaffolding learning.

Impact

Teaching practices reflect an articulated set of beliefs informed by the Danielson Framework for Teaching and the instructional shifts that enable students to produce meaningful work products and demonstrate higher-order thinking. Multiple entry points, including scaffolds and supports, enable all learners to produce meaningful student work products.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, teaching practices reflect shared beliefs for clear learning objectives, modeling, guided practice and opportunities for student-to-student discussions between partners and small groups before independent work time. In seven of the nine classrooms visited, teachers engaged students in learning through the workshop model with pacing that allowed for concise modeling or use of teacher-created models and ample time for students to work in partnerships and independently to create meaningful student work products. In a first grade classroom, students worked independently to use a strategy for noting interesting parts of a text and practiced sharing aloud alone before engaging in partnered work. In another classroom, the teacher briefly shared a model with students, provided time for students to interact with model texts before revisiting their own non-fiction writing, and created time for students to share their revisions with a partner before closing the lesson. These practices, typical of other classrooms, reflect the shared focus on independent and partnered work to drive student engagement.

- Across classrooms, teaching strategies consistently provided students with multiple entry points into challenging tasks. In several classrooms, like a science class focused on water pollution, teachers provided vocabulary supports and created opportunities for students to grapple with questions and tasks in partnerships, using student-to-student discussion as a scaffold. In other classrooms, teachers provided models of writing and success criteria to support students in creating meaningful work products of their own. For example, upper grade students were given reading response samples at several levels so they could situate their own response in the learning progressions as they worked. In many classrooms, students used sentence starters, class and personal word walls to support them as they engaged in speaking and writing tasks.

- In a few classrooms, teachers provided meaningful extensions for high-level students that took the form of a literature circle in one class and higher-level challenge problems in a math class. During a principal’s choice visit to small group instruction during River Research, a strategic period used for intervention, a teacher was observed reminding students of a strategy in a scaffold but purposefully taking it away, encouraging student independence. These examples of strategic use of scaffolds and high-quality extensions are emerging in a few classrooms.
### Additional Finding

**Quality Indicator:** 2.2 Assessment  
**Rating:** Proficient

#### Findings

Across classrooms, teachers provide actionable feedback to students and teachers regarding student achievement by using performance tasks, rubrics and recognition of what students are able to do and what they need to work on. Teachers’ assessment practices consistently reflect the use of ongoing checks for understanding, student self- and peer-assessment.

#### Impact

Frequent, actionable feedback regarding their achievement guides students to improve their work. Teachers make effective adjustments to support students’ learning needs.

#### Supporting Evidence

- Students regularly receive guidance and actionable feedback about what they are good at and what they still need to work on within units through teacher-created feedback charts or rubrics. In the early childhood classrooms, feedback may be verbal or written simplistically with single words and pictures, and placed on their desks in front of them. The clearest example of this widespread practice is the use student-specific t-charts, laminated with columns labeled, “I know I can…”, and “I’m working on….” Through this purposeful “compliment” conferencing, teachers aim to recognize talents, and other times, areas requiring more work connected to their units of study or reading levels, teachers use sticky notes to specify skills and progress. One such chart belonging to a kindergarten student in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) class recognized student strength in identifying characters and the setting in a story and that she should continue to work on understanding dialogue. For another kindergartener, his goal sheet acknowledged that he is good at labeling his stories and should continue to work on putting a vowel in the middle of a word like *dog*.

- In the upper grades, teachers more commonly used rubrics connected to the units of study to provide students with grades and glows and grows that provide tailored feedback aligned with the grade-level standards. Across the school, in lieu of letter grades, teachers use narrative feedback to paint a clear picture of student progress towards the standards.

- Checklists, clear criteria and glows and grows are provided to guide students to improve their work. Teachers are consistently checking for understanding in classrooms and students are assessing themselves and their peers. In a math lesson, a pair of students used a five-step checklist entitled, “I know my work is sunny when I have…” to solve an equation. In a writing classroom, students worked independently, in partnerships and in conferencing with teachers to check their work at the end of a piece using a checklist called, “How did my piece go?” that contained eight elements of narrative writing so that students received actionable feedback and specific next steps regarding their achievement. These checklists were evident in classrooms across the grades and subject areas.

- Teacher assessment practices consistently reflect the use of ongoing checks for understanding, primarily through conferencing. Across classes, teachers and related service providers confer with students, keeping detailed notes, usually on clipboards. In a math class, teachers recorded strategies used by students (make ten, visualize, started with a picture), whether they worked independently or with a teacher or partner. The teachers also charted student strengths and identified whole class needs in the lesson to inform re-teaching. Teachers consistently used these conferencing notes to adjust questions asked of individuals and partnerships and to select students for small-group instruction or extension activities during independent practice, thus making effective adjustments to learning.
Additional Finding

### Quality Indicator: 4.1 Teacher Support and Supervision

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<th>Rating</th>
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**Findings**
The school leader and teachers, organized into inter-visitation teams that include mentors and mentees, support teachers with effective feedback and next steps from the strategic use of frequent cycles of classroom observation. Collaboratively developed feedback to teachers accurately captures strengths, challenges, and next steps and strategically includes reflection on teacher practice and student work.

**Impact**
Strategic cycles of observation by the school leader and teacher teams elevate school-wide instructional practices, articulate and support clear expectations for teacher practice. Feedback to teachers align with their professional goals and promotes teacher understanding of their own practice, and the Danielson Framework for Teaching.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Cycles of teacher observation and support happen through principal observation or observation of teachers by their inter-visitation team. Principal observations are frequent and focus primarily on the Danielson Framework for Teaching domain three, which the principal stated is the “heart of instruction.” Principal observations leverage the Danielson Framework for Teaching and analysis of student work to reflect on teacher set-goals and priorities. Teachers are also strategically grouped into intervisitation teams, generally four teachers that purposefully include mentors, mentees and teachers who are paired together to look at common practices or common students. The teams stay together in two-month cycles and purposefully reflect on chosen domains. Intervisitation teams focus around a common question, “Is the footprint of our teaching visible?” Teachers reflect on this question, develop glows and next steps from their observations, and share their findings publicly amongst the staff in Google Drive, to purposefully create transparency and promote school-wide elevation of instructional practice.

- The principal as the school’s sole administrator visits classrooms frequently, formally and informally and keeps an observation tracker. Both formal and informal observation follow up includes detailed low-inference observation notes with some possible next steps and a set meeting time for the teacher. A sample observation note captured teacher and student questions, statements, and actions with timestamps. Feedback to the teacher connected back to her goal around clear modeling of the teaching point and noted, “The visual chart for the students could have been clearer and you could have modeled more with the book.” The teacher’s own review of the low-inference notes observed in a written self-assessment of her practice also noted that she could have provided more discussion around the visual and another example for students. Together, the teacher and principal collaboratively developed next steps that included adjustments to her modeling and a visit to a colleague’s classroom to observe this practice. This practice articulates clear expectations for teacher practice, supports teacher development, and aligns with professional goals for teachers.

- External coaches from Teachers College and Lucy West’s Metamorphosis Math also create intervisitation observation and cycles to support teacher growth. In these visits, coaches observe teachers, often alongside the school leader, and provide feedback, modeling and other supports. As an example, as part of their ongoing support, Teachers College hosted a Foundational Reading Skills Institute for River School teachers and teachers from across the city. This provided an opportunity for teachers to deepen their knowledge and highlight strengths that they have developed in their practice such as modifying instruction and curricula for individual learners. One teacher noted, “The coach has helped us to match models to lessons and student needs.”
Findings

The majority of teachers are engaged in structured, inquiry-based professional collaborations that promote the achievement of school goals and the implementation of Common Core, with a focus on student’s use vocabulary, ways of speaking and language in math.

Impact

Teacher teams’ use of a structured inquiry approach promotes shared leadership, mutual accountability, and focuses on improved student learning.

Supporting Evidence

- The school’s teacher teamwork is aligned to the school’s focus on math instruction. As the school is small and growing, grades two and three meet together with a focus on collaborative unit planning that is informed by looking at student work. The team meets weekly using a protocol to analyze student work and other data in order to build coherence in instructional practices and planning. Similarly, a grade one team focuses on students’ use of strategies to solve word problems with practical applications. As in other grade-level teams, the teachers have created a checklist for students to use as they solve problems and are monitoring their progress with an eye toward spreading the practice school-wide.

- Aside from professional collaborations among the grade levels, teams meet to work toward goals and monitor progress for groups of students, particularly through the English as a New Language (ENL) team and the special education teams. These teams meet on Mondays and analyze student work and strategies in eight-week cycles. Through their work, they look at the adaptation of strategies to serve students with disabilities and ELLs across classrooms and leverage the expertise of the ENL provider and special educators to inform instructional strategies across the school. As an example, teachers across the grades and content areas are now planning lessons with language objectives alongside other Common Core objectives, thus strengthening teacher practice and work toward goals for groups of students.

- Structured, professional inquiry has improved greatly this year by a school-wide adoption of a protocol where teachers evaluate what students can do, can almost do, and what they cannot do, known as the CAN protocol. This allows teachers to be thoughtful about how they look at student work especially in math, and it is strengthening how they differentiate instruction and planning for students identified as producing high, medium and lower level work in specific standards. While teachers commit to one another to try new strategies and make adjustments to curriculum and instruction before their next meetings, these adjustments are not yet making their way back into curricular documents; their analysis however, is improving teacher instructional practices.