Quality Review Report

2016-2017

Hillside Arts & Letters Academy
High School 28Q325
167-01 Gothic Drive
Queens
NY 11432

Principal: Raquel Nolasco

Dates of Review:
March 28, 2017 - March 29, 2017

Lead Reviewer: Thomas McKenna
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


School Quality Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Core</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the school...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<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 Celebration</td>
<td>Well Developed</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>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</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>Area of Focus</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### School Quality Ratings continued

#### School Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does the school…</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports the academic and personal growth of students and adults</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
<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>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Systems for Improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does the school…</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school’s instructional goals and meet student learning needs, as evidenced by meaningful student work products</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 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>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 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>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
<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 Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 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>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator: 1.1 Curriculum  
Rating: Well Developed

Findings
Curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and strategically integrate the instructional shifts. Rigorous habits and higher-order skills are emphasized in planning documents and embedded across grades and subjects.

Impact
Common Core alignment in curricula, including using textual evidence to support writing tasks and a schoolwide college-level writing emphasis, has resulted in the promotion of college and career readiness and cognitive engagement for all students and curricular coherence across grades.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders and teachers can articulate how they ensure curricula is aligned to both the New York City Scope and Sequence and the Common Core Learning Standards across grades through grade and department team-based planning and revision using common school planning documents. Staff can also articulate their strategies for incorporating the instructional shifts within lessons, focusing on using an inquiry-based instructional approach across classes that includes building academic vocabulary and engaging in rigorous research projects. In addition, in order to ensure college readiness for all students, the school offers curricular documents for teacher-assigned college credit-bearing courses, including business math, Advanced Placement English, biology, and statistics. Unit plans show that students begin writing MLA-style research papers in grade nine and that this requirement continues with increased frequency through grade twelve. Teachers and administrators use an established protocol to review and provide feedback on unit plans and to monitor adjustments based on that feedback.

- All lesson plans contain a section for modifications that identifies students of concern for teachers to confer with for the day as well as delineating differentiated tasks for these students based on Webb's Depth of Knowledge for rigor. Lesson plans then indicate areas for reflection and exit ticket activities to allow students to respond. In grade ten English Language Arts (ELA) lesson plan, questions include, “Describe the role of the United Nations in solving humanitarian issues. Which countries in Africa face, what you would consider, a crisis and why do you think so? What research would be critical to support a speech to the United Nations to elicit support for that crisis?” This lesson plan also included specific adjustments for students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). In a newcomers English as a New Language (ENL) class, in a unit on immigration stories the overarching question of “Why do we share our stories?” is referenced not just in the introductory lesson, but across the unit and attached to more in depth assignments as students progress.

- Lesson plans consistently emphasize higher-order thinking skills and rigor. While many plans call for students to analyze literary characters, cite evidence to support arguments, and revise work products, a key element of the arts focus at the school is the concept of creation. Across grades and subject areas, lesson and unit plans reflect that students are asked to create monologues in connection to character analysis in literature or to visually represent concepts in science. This creative focus emphasizes the school’s desire to push students to the highest levels of Webb's Depth of Knowledge.
Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are aligned with the school’s curricula and that inform feedback to students. In addition, classroom practices consistently include checks for understanding and student self-assessments.

Impact

While most assessment practices provide actionable feedback to students and checks for understanding result in effective instructional adjustments during classroom instruction, there are instances where students are not always aware of their next steps.

Supporting Evidence

- Teachers use a competency-based grading format in which student feedback is skill-specific. The feedback format is standardized across the school. The feedback process also calls for the students to reflect on the next steps, which then leads to students’ conferencing with teachers and revising their work products. One example of feedback in a grade eleven ELA essay in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) class stated that while the student had accurately explained the meaning of several quotes from Macbeth and supplied sufficient analysis, the student needed to “add 2 to 3 more details to each analysis to more fully analyze the character of Macbeth.” In a grade nine ELA class a teacher wrote, “Be more consistent in identifying the types of imagery used in the poem,” while a grade ten math class feedback example stated that more mathematical vocabulary was needed, as per the rubric, and for the student to reference anchor charts in the room for examples. However, one example of written feedback merely stated “Check spelling.”

- Across the school, students use checklists and rubrics as self-assessment tools during the completion of work. Examples of the checklists and rubrics used were posted on classroom walls and hallway bulletin boards and included within student work portfolios. In addition, the competency-based grading format allows for a more aligned and coherent grading framework across classes and provides both teachers and students with a deeper shared language. For example, the school utilizes competencies such as critical thinking, writing, collaboration, work ethic, and content standards as the bulk of the grading policy. These categories are tailored to specific subject areas and topics, but the framework itself assists in shared expectations for performance, shared understanding of quality student work, and as a tool for creating highly actionable and specific feedback to students.

- Lesson plans include a menu of checks for understanding which teachers employ to gauge student understanding and refine instructional adjustments and next steps. Checks included color-coded flags, colored cups to put on the table during the independent or group work period to alert teachers as to student need, mid-period verbal checks, thumbs up/down, and exit tickets. One math teacher uses an online system which combines students holding coded placards aligned to answer choices and the teacher’s phone. As students hold up the placard of their choice aligned to their answer, the teacher takes a picture and the program quickly displays results on the interactive whiteboard, which both engages the class further in examining their own responses and alerts the teacher as to who needs assistance. When asked about checks and adjustments in class, one student responded, “Teachers will stop and class and try another way to re-teach whenever you don’t get it. They won’t just move on.” While there were many strong examples of utilizing checks for understanding in adjusting instruction, three of nine classes observed demonstrated practices less robust than the other classes. Two classes had very quick verbal checks in which at least one student reported being still unclear to the reviewer, though the teacher continued with the lesson.
Additional Finding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<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 the belief that students learn best when engaged in active inquiry, collaboration, and arts-infused project-based learning. Student work products and discussions reflect high levels of student thinking, participation and ownership.

Impact

Teaching practices are informed by the Danielson Framework for Teaching and the instructional shifts, as well as by discussions at the team and school levels. Student work products, including discussions, evidence high levels of thinking and student ownership.

Supporting Evidence

- Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers guided students through activities that require students to develop academic language to support arguments in discussion and writing across the content areas. The school’s stated belief that students learn best through inquiry and project-based learning, with an arts integration, is reflected in all classes. A grade eleven ICT ELA classroom had students engaged in a Socratic seminar exploring Banquo’s influence on Macbeth. The teacher guided students through a rigorous period in which students cited evidence from Macbeth and other texts that had been used in the class to support their arguments while students outside the Socratic circle composed and posited questions to the participants challenging their arguments and their use of evidence.

- Student work products examined reflect high levels of student thinking and, in many cases, deep ownership. Both students and teachers referred to the school as having a “culture of revision and improvement,” and students report continually working on projects until both they and the teacher are satisfied. A grade nine student’s final benchmark project from the fall of 2016, an argumentative essay on discrimination in America in 2016, displayed high levels of textual analysis in supporting the argument that Barack Obama’s speech, “Remarks to the NAACP,” is a more accurate depiction of impediments to racial equality than Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” or George Bush’s “Ending Racial Inequality.” The multiple revisions and reflections against the rubric demonstrated an in-depth attachment to the work and the final product was of high quality. Products of similar quality and showing a similar depth of work were evidenced by the school and by students.

- Anchor postings that detail how the school’s instructional focus is reflected in all subject areas are posted in all classrooms. These postings were all individualized to the classroom, connecting academic vocabulary use and accountable talk structures in all subject areas and grade levels. In addition, students in all classrooms were able to quickly identify the specific posting that applied to the lesson in which they were engaged and were eager to demonstrate their ability to use those words appropriately. Teachers facilitated lessons in which students were highly engaged and actively participating in cooperative learning and student-to-student discussions and ongoing projects, embodying the coherent set of beliefs that students learn best when through collaborative inquiry and in arts-infused project-based learning.
Findings
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to staff. Teacher teams and school staff utilize an advisory structure focused on college and career preparation and a common classroom language to communicate high expectations to students.

Impact
Communication and professional development around high expectations results in a culture of mutual accountability. High expectations for all students are maintained and supported through clear, focused and effective feedback and advisory supports so that students are better prepared for college and careers.

Supporting Evidence

- Frequent classroom observations and feedback from administrators based on the Danielson Framework for Teaching contain specific language from the rubric, evidence from the classroom observation that supports the rating, and actionable next steps. These are then addressed in subsequent classroom observations. This takes place through modeling, coaching, designated intervitations opportunities, and daily opportunities for debriefs with school leaders where actionable feedback for shifts in teaching practice is provided. In addition, teacher leaders partner with administrators to deliver an orientation course to new teachers around professional expectations and ongoing support and training to existing teachers. These trainings focus on high-level project-based learning course design, integration of accountable talk, and de-escalation techniques.

- All incoming ninth grade students participate in a summer bridge program where the tone is set for the college preparatory curriculum at Hillside Arts and Letters Academy. All incoming students are apprised of the school’s mandatory college writing focus, starting with writing one MLA-aligned research paper in grade nine leading to writing four MLA-aligned research papers in grade twelve. All students in the school engage in the college-focused and arts-infused advisory curriculum. Students are supported in understanding their transcripts and individualized tracking on progress towards graduation. For example, the school's work in graduation tracking and the ensuing supports has resulted in graduation rates for Black and Latino students increasing by 10 percent from 2015 to 2016, with current data pointing to more increases in 2017. In addition, the school has an articulated relationship with several colleges. The school's current College Advantage Program offers college credit opportunities through St. John’s University. Students who are more deeply engaged in the school’s arts focus have multiple opportunities for outside internships with arts partners such as the Queens Museum, as well as the 10-credit optional arts sequence at the school which leads to a Regents diploma in Arts.

- The school provides and promotes opportunities for students to exhibit ownership of their educational experiences and to demonstrate preparedness for high school graduation, college, and beyond. Portfolio Day, Exhibition Day, and Interview Day provide major capstone opportunities for students to showcase their learning at each grade level. Ninth and tenth graders present their highest-level projects to a round-table of outside educational, political, and community leaders at Portfolio Day. Eleventh grade students create an arts performance in response to a theme and then defend their ideas to a similar group of distinguished outside guests. Twelfth grade students engage in a mock interview process that includes a portfolio of work and a one-on-one meeting with a professional adult in their personal field of interest.
Additional Finding

| Quality Indicator: | 4.1 Teacher Support and Supervision | Rating: | Well Developed |

Findings

School leaders support teacher development with effective feedback and next steps from frequent classroom observation cycles which also informs the design of professional development.

Impact

As a result, there is a focus on professional growth and reflection that positively impacts teacher practice and leads to improved student achievement.

Supporting Evidence

- The school's annual professional development plan is based on a needs-assessment that began in the summer of 2016 and was refined over the early months of the 2016-2017 school year. In reviewing prior year's observation data, it was noted that half of teachers scored developing on questioning and discussion, so in collaboration with teacher team leaders a professional development focus on this area was implemented schoolwide. After reviewing the first round of periodic assessments for students, leaders and teachers identified the instructional shift of writing arguments using evidence as a priority area for the school and added that to the professional development plan. In addition, teacher surveys given by school leadership indicated that staff wanted further supports in Universal Design for Learning and strengthening their own inquiry processes. These areas were all integrated into the 2016-2017 school professional development plan. Teachers and administrators report that continued examination of observation data and teacher feedback, as well as reviews of student performance data, are incorporated into professional development adjustments. This work and adjustments are documented in the school's professional development planning materials. As a result of feedback and support, over 15 percent of teachers are rated highly effective and 80 percent are rated effective against the Danielson Framework for Teaching.

- Frequent cycles of classroom observation provide feedback utilizing the Danielson Framework for Teaching. One observation report includes feedback to the teacher on the improvement of checks for understanding: “If students have discussion questions accessible, this would allow you to use a variety of individualized assessment practices. For example, you can use a room sweep to check student responses or a quick write to have students respond individually to comments made in classroom discussion.” Another observation report includes feedback stating, “This lesson could have included a direct teaching period, a few challenging formulas for ionic compounds that the students completed in differentiated groups. Please include scaffolds and differentiation in both the lesson plans and in class.” The quality of observation feedback is one component of the supports for teachers that results in their ability to guide students to graduation and post-secondary enrollment rates that exceed city and district averages.

- Prior to formal observation cycles beginning, the leadership team performed classroom observations on all one-third of teachers as method of creating an extended norming activity to create greater coherence in evaluating teacher practice and providing supports across the school. Teachers noted that “Those visits are helpful. You have three leaders that know you. I had a challenge in scaffolding. I always provided scaffolds for lower level students, but I was rarely considering scaffolding up for high performers. I was able to engage with school leaders in this process and ask for help. Administrators are always in our rooms, it’s normal, and they are always giving feedback.” In addition, the official administration log of assistance is used to track needs assessed of teachers, what action plan and supports were provided, and what progress is being made in each teachers’ development.
## Additional Finding

### Quality Indicator: 4.2 Teacher Teams and Leadership Development

| Rating: | Well Developed |

### Findings

The vast majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based, structured professional collaborations focused on student achievement. Distributed leadership structures are embedded into school structure.

### Impact

Collaborations within grade teams and the vertical inquiry team strengthen teachers’ instructional capacity, establish a level of schoolwide instructional coherence, and improve student performance and achievement. Across the school, team structures have built leadership capacity and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning.

### Supporting Evidence

- **Grade teams meet for two periods every week.** Currently, all grade teams participate in an inquiry cycle in order to improve teacher practice and student outcomes. Each team is led by two teachers who co-plan and co-facilitate. The principal and assistant principals meet with the co-facilitators every other week to review agenda and provide support. Department teams meet for 40 minutes every other week to set goals for students and track progress by analyzing school-designed assessment data. The department chairperson leads the department meetings. An assistant principal meets with department chairs every week to ensure that department meetings are aligned with school goals and, as one teacher stated, “It is another opportunity for two-way communication so we can bring things to the administration’s attention as well.” All teacher teams use inquiry-based protocols that are informed by student work, data, intervisitation and other sources of information to guide their decisions. As a result, the school has seen increases in Regents Examination scores and over a 10 percent rise in graduation rates for Black and Latino students.

- **Interviews with administration and staff, as well as a review of agendas and planning documents,** evidenced distributed leadership built into all key decisions around instruction and the processes of school operation. For example, each grade team is facilitated by two teachers, each department is led by a teacher who is a department chair, the school offers monthly teacher-led professional development and workshops, and two teachers share the responsibility of coordinating student activities. The principal’s cabinet is comprised of 12 faculty members who have direct involvement in decision-making at the highest levels, such as the teacher-led committees, including the hiring committee, the accreditation committee, and the mentoring committee.

- **School leaders and teacher leaders,** including team leaders, instructional leaders and department leaders, identified distributed leadership practices and structures that are deeply rooted in the school’s day-to-day operations. For example, the school supports and empowers a range of teachers as grade leaders, department leaders, equity leaders, and data leaders. Each leader has an assigned task corresponding to school goals and the autonomy to pursue that task. The extended cabinet allows the opportunity for these individual leaders to share their progress and align as a leadership team. These structures foster a culture in which teacher leaders provide continual input into strategic decisions that affect student achievement. For example, the growth of formalized college-credit classes evolved from teacher and school leader collaboration.