Quality Review Report

2016-2017

The Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters
Secondary School 07X551
339 Morris Ave.
Bronx
NY 10451

Principal: Brandon Cardet Hernandez

Dates of Review:
May 8, 2017 - May 9, 2017

Lead Reviewer: Jorge Estrella
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 Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters serves students in grade 6 through grade 12. 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

### Instructional Core

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<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>Additional Finding</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>Additional Finding</td>
<td>Well Developed</td>
</tr>
</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>Area of Celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports the academic and personal growth of students and adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Systems for Improvement

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Area of Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Additional Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Area of Celebration

| Quality Indicator: | 1.4 Positive Learning Environment | Rating: | Well Developed |

Findings

The school’s theory of action for building a safe, nurturing, and inclusive environment is rooted in the belief of social responsibility, student leadership, supportive relationships as well as respectful communication and collaboration. Structures are in place to support the social-emotional needs of all students.

Impact

As a result, the school has several structures for students to engage in social responsibility activities while receiving individualized social-emotional support which promotes leadership, empathy, and voice, and impacts academic and personal behaviors.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders shared that the theory of action is to ensure students develop a strong sense of social responsibility, empathy, and respect for others which strongly reflects the school’s core values that state, “We believe that when students understand that they are leaders and deeply responsible for making our community a better place, we can transform culture and society while also building skill and content acquisition.” A feature is the range of varied community service activities undertaken by a significant number of students, which help them develop their leadership and team-working skills. As a result, the Online Occurrence Reporting System (OORs) data shows a reduction in the overall suspensions by 40 percent in grades ten and eleven in 2017 as compared to 2016. In addition, based on the culture impact mid-year survey 100 percent of the students responded strongly agree or agree to the question “I believe in restorative justice” and 87 percent of the students reported that order and discipline are maintained in the school.

- House council is the school’s student government where scholars develop proposals that are shared during a weekly check-in with school leadership. House council members participate in the planning and organization of the Black History Month celebration, National Coming Out Day, pep rallies, the founder celebrations, and other activities. Additionally, the majority of classroom lessons promote student responsibility and leadership during whole class and small group instruction. Students are involved in monthly restorative justice cycles, and peer group connection program. The school has 23 trained peer mediators to support students in crisis. Peer mediators are on duty four periods a day, per week, so conflicts in the school are able to be addressed and de-escalated by students in a timely fashion. Students reported that the peer mediation approach has contributed and supported the school community by dealing with conflicts which is reflected in classrooms where lessons are conducted without disciplinary concerns. The school engages students in a program called Be the Change Week where for two-weeks twice a year, students work on community-based projects and develop school-wide organizations like the club for Movement to Equality, a feminist organization aimed to combating the historical oppression of women.

- To provide the necessary social-emotional support to students, school leaders provide each grade with dedicated guidance support. The school also has a full-time college/post-secondary counselor. Students reported that they felt supported by their guidance counselors and can go to them for support as well as their teachers, school leaders, or any members of the staff. Also, programming includes advisories for the high school and service learning classes for middle school students. In addition, the attendance reviews attendance data on a weekly basis. Noted weekly trends are monitored and result in interventions every Friday where the attendance coordinator and staff take part in home visits. As a result, attendance records show that twelve percent of the students have shown improvement in attendance.
Area of Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator</th>
<th>3.1 Goals and Action Plans</th>
<th>Rating: Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Findings

School leaders and faculty have a clear set of instructional goals aligned with the learning needs of students and staff as apparent in the *School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP)* goals and action plans which are informed by ongoing data-driven needs assessments and analysis.

Impact

Although the school has developed collaborative structures to design the *SCEP* goals, these plans have yet to leverage thoughtful changes that have explicitly accelerated student learning and social-emotional growth with specific sub-groups to purposefully improve teacher practice and minimize the achievement gap.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders, faculty, and staff have a collaborative process that results in the development of overarching goals to support student progress and positive social-emotional growth. The planning process of the *SCEP* is conducted via cabinet meetings, instructional lead meetings, grade and department-level sessions, and school leadership teams which culminate in a yearly all staff retreat. In this retreat, school leaders review the student performance trends, successes, and begin brainstorming on ideas for improving student needs in the following year and how they relate to program decisions. Further work is conducted over the summer to refine the *SCEP* goals and action plans based on state assessment results, a school survey, and Measures of Teacher Practice (MOTP) data as well as qualitative feedback received during the school year. Although, the *SCEP* goals reflect planning by the instructional team, the needs assessment and action plan sections have yet to address the needs of specific sub-groups such as English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities and lead to accelerated learning for these students.

- A review of the *SCEP*, subject and grade-level action plans reflect that the school leaders consistently track for progress towards goals. School-wide assessments are administered three times a year that emulate the New York State standardized assessments. The results of these assessments are maintained in a tracking system and used to make adjustments in curriculum maps, unit plans, performance-based assessments, and lesson plans to meet the school’s goals during teacher team meetings. All members of the staff have access to this information via Google Docs. Although, over the last three-years, teachers have been refining curricula and have shown improvement in teaching practice, these are yet to be reflected in significant improvements in students meeting achievement levels on the New York State standardized assessments.

- Action plans aligned to instructional goals are implemented by school teams, which include promoting the common practice of looking at student work and data. For example, the Instructional Leads Team looked at the Living Environment state assessment results and determined that the students with disabilities scored higher than 50 percent on low-level questions, yet are scoring lower than 50 percent on high-level questions. ELLs have shown similar patterns. In addition, the school is implementing action plans related to developing a rigorous curriculum aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards which are modified with scaffolds. These action plans are supported through the inquiry process and professional development provided by school leaders, instructional leads, and by teacher teams through the analysis of problems of practice. To measure the impact of these changes, the school analyzes scholarship reports, Regents passing rates and results on formative and summative assessments. The school also tracks student academic performance in spreadsheets to monitor student data such as graduation plans, supports, and interventions for at-risk students, and others who are on track for graduation. Although, teaching practices have improved, the school has yet to close the achievement gap.
Additional Finding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>1.1 Curriculum</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Well Developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Findings

School leaders and faculty have strategically integrated the Common Core Learning Standards and instructional shifts into the curricula, emphasizing higher-order skills and rigorous habits across grade bands and content areas.

Impact

The school's curricula reflect an embedded coherency in the level of rigor and thoughtful integration of the instructional shifts, inherent in real-world academic tasks. As a result, planned tasks allow students to demonstrate their thinking in work products and promote college and career readiness for all learners.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders and faculty have created their own curriculum maps which are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and instructional shifts such as argumentative writing, academic vocabulary, precision, and fluency, and reflects teachers' understanding of Common Core-aligned curriculum design. Across grades and content areas, unit and lesson plans provide evidence that the school has a coherent approach to planning using common literacy strategies which includes tiered texts, debates, literature circles, read-alouds, think-alouds, and roundtables.

- The inclusion of the instructional shifts is evident in all curriculum documents that were reviewed. Unit tasks consistently ask students to synthesize, evaluate, and apply information across grades and subjects. An English Language Arts (ELA) unit of study incorporates activities where students write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. The aim in an ELA lesson plan states, “How do we gather textual evidence to support claims about how Salva and Nya survived?” In social studies units on the Civil War, the task requires students to review a set of documents, take notes, form an argument around topics, defend a position while supporting their claims, address counterclaims, and make connections to historical events.

- To further promote a Common Core-aligned curriculum, emphasize rigorous habits, and higher-order thinking skills, school leaders and teachers designed curricula to engage students in self-directed, service-learning projects that connect real-world, current societal issues relevant to the school's core values. The project-based learning curricula addresses the instructional shifts while promoting the use of collaborative learning strategies and instructional techniques to structure thematic learning that drive students' acquisition of content and skill. The culminating product of these activities are school projects where students have engaged in a research process, data collection, creative writing, and artistic representation of their learning. For example, students are engaged in projects studying genocide in Aleppo, photojournalism, diabetes and obesity, environmental racism, animal rights and breaking stereotypes.

- In a grade eight ELA lesson plan, one task requires students to work in small groups to engage in the design of a dual timeline to track events from books in literature circles where they have to identify literary elements including flashbacks and flash forward while explaining why they are important. For this task, students have to use various parts of a book and to connect the present and past events and determine their significance. The lesson includes a timeline checklist, group roles, exemplars, and a self-assessment.
## Findings

In the vast majority of classrooms, teacher pedagogy demonstrates a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, shaped around the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* where teacher practice is engaging, aligned to the curricula, and informed by discussions from teacher teams. Teaching strategies strategically provide multiple entry points and high-quality supports and extensions into the challenging tasks.

### Impact

Pedagogical practices reflect the coherent use of strategies to foster students' teamwork abilities using embedded literacy strategies which engages all learners, including ELLs and students with disabilities, in appropriately challenging tasks and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills in student work products.

## Supporting Evidence

- Teacher teams have incorporated the school’s belief of collaborative grouping/teams with embedded common literacy strategies such as literature circles into the school-wide goal of improving literacy across grades and subjects. In a grade seven ELA class, students were assigned to work in literature circles where they had to track and analyze the development of the character, Ponyboy, from the novel, *The Outsiders*, by S. E. Hinton. For this task, each member of the group has a role such as discussion director, team tracker, sharer, and timekeeper. Students used the protocol, *Save the Last Word for Me*. The discussion was guided by the students' response to what they read. Then, the teacher provided students with graphic organizers to memorialize their conversations and thoughts. As a result, students took responsibility for their own learning, where they took charge of their own discussions and held each other accountable to accomplish their task.

- Across classrooms, the use of academic language, glossaries and dictionaries, graphic organizers, visuals, and scaffolds to offer multiple entry points into lessons based on students’ needs was observed. In the delivery of instruction, open-ended and tiered questions are used to reach and engage all students with the necessary skills to become critical, analytical, and have an entry point into the higher-order thinking and to make their thinking visible. In an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) grade-seven math lesson, students calculated the income they would receive from the carrier they selected. Then, the students created a monthly budget of how much they were going to spend. Once completed, the students shared in their groups the rationale for selecting a carrier and how they could make better decisions about money spending. Furthermore, across classes, students are working in groups, using accountable talk stems. Teachers ensure active student participation by conferring with each group, provided them with opportunities to express verbally and in writing, as well as having assigned roles within groups.

- In a grade nine ICT Algebra class, students were working in groups, comparing linear and exponential models and students used graphic calculators, graphic organizers, and had group roles. The ICT teacher used chips to illustrate linear versus exponential models, while the other teacher assisted ELLs with vocabulary development. Higher achievers solved complex models and assisted students who needed help. As a result, all students were highly engaged in their task and showed mastery on their learning targets. In an English as a New Language (ENL) class with newly-arrived students, the teacher used strategies such as vocabulary building, visuals, charts, graphic organizers, and scaffolded questions to support students. During the lesson, students engaged in activities where they used a graphic organizer to learn verbs and adverbs, then worked in groups to make observations and inferences about a graphic, and practice the new words.
Findings

Across the vast majority of classes, teachers use rubrics and create assessments directly aligned to the curricula which offer a clear portrait of student mastery. Teachers use multiple, varied formative approaches and tools to check for understanding and student self-assessment practices on an ongoing basis.

Impact

Assessment practices lead to actionable and meaningful feedback to students regarding their achievement. Effective adjustments result in student awareness of their next learning steps and the demonstration of progress towards learning targets.

Supporting Evidence

Across all subject areas, teachers use Common Core-aligned rubrics to assess students, of whom have a clear understanding of their purpose. During a meeting, one student mentioned, “Before each assignment, we receive rubrics so we have a clear expectation for the level of our work. It is a guide to help us accomplish our assignment at the highest level.” Another student shared, “We use rubrics in all subject areas, and teachers give us feedback and grades based on the rubrics.” This was evident as per a review of student work products, curriculum planning documents and tasks posted on bulletin boards.

- The review of students’ work products reveal that feedback is targeted such as, “For this paragraph, focus less on specific studies and more on broader understandings”, “You did a great job finding a variety of relevant evidence. However, you often put evidence in without fully explaining what makes it so relevant” and “Some of your sentences can be separated into multiple thoughts. Reread your second and third body paragraphs to make sure your sentences are not run-ons.” Students mentioned that teachers not only offer feedback that is helpful, but also follow up to ensure progress. While reviewing student's work products, they were able to share their work and clearly explain their next steps.

- School leaders and teachers reported that they are focusing on formative assessments to gauge students’ progress during lessons. To ensure consistency across the school, teachers created a formative assessment form called the Circulation Tool where teachers record students’ responses based on learning targets of the lesson. Ongoing checks for understanding are evident in the vast majority of classrooms and takes place in numerous ways. Teachers use individual and group conferring during class time to assess students’ understanding of the task at hand. These interactions enable teachers to provide support in real time, while students are working individually or in groups on their instructional tasks, and make on-the-spot instructional adjustments. In a seventh grade social studies class, students worked in groups and the teacher circulated around the room asking questions while taking notes on the circulation tool. Based on group or individual responses, the teacher prompted students to determine if they were on the right path to completing their assignment.

- During classroom visits, students were observed monitoring their own thinking through various modes such as student-facing checklists, peer assessments, and student rubrics which enable them to monitor their own understanding and identify their next steps. This was evidenced through classroom observations, board displays, and discussions with students where they shared that the self-assessment process has helped them have a better understanding of what they were learning so they can improve their work and their grades.
Findings

All teachers are engaged in structured, inquiry-based professional collaborations focused on problems of practice on argumentative writing. Distributed leadership structures are in place.

Impact

Although the work of teacher leadership and school teams has resulted in improved instructional planning that promotes the school goals and has strengthen the pedagogical capacity of teachers, the impact of this work has yet to demonstrate significant progress on student achievement.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders and faculty members shared that teacher inquiry-based collaborations are based on specific problems of practice designed by teacher teams. In the high school ELA team, the problem of practice states, “If assessments are authentic and student-centered, performance on argumentative writing tasks will improve.” Based on the problem of practice approach, teachers examine student work to ensure that it meets the Common Core Learning Standards and analyze the results of assessments and Regents exams to determine students’ strengths and needs as well as instructional next steps. In addition, as part of the inquiry cycles, the school has embedded professional learning opportunities in teacher team meetings. To this end, the main approach is to use teachers’ capacity to facilitate learning opportunities across grades and subjects to support the school’s goals. Teachers engage in sessions to learn about differentiated instruction using Google classroom and strategies to use primary and secondary resources in social studies as well as strategies to implement in the restorative justice program. However, these efforts have yet to result in the improvement of students’ outcomes as informed by a decline in the 4-year graduation rate since 2013.

- Teams are focused on achieving the school’s goals of increasing students’ achievement levels in ELA and math by using common literacy strategies across grades and content areas. Teachers share that as a result of their weekly grade and department-level sessions, professional learning opportunities arise. They plan intervisitations to each other’s classes and they model lessons for each other. They were very enthusiastic to share that the school, in addition to the regular Friday meetings, uses Google Docs as another effective way of collaborating and sharing best practices, instructional materials, planning documents, assessments as well as a database to track students’ progress towards graduation. They also have an instructional strategy bank where they share instructional strategies used for each of the content areas. A teacher reported that as a result of using several approaches, his levels of planning and use of common literacy strategies in his lessons has resulted in higher levels of student engagement.

- The principal reported that the distributed leadership model is part of the school culture where teachers play a role in decision making on instruction. Instructional lead teachers facilitate department and grade-level meetings. These teachers support colleagues through peer intervisitation and engage in instructional decisions that impact student learning and personal behaviors. Members of the vision team review schoolwide scholarship data, identify and discuss department and grade-level trends, share best practices across the school, reflect on and revise changes in the school program. Furthermore, instructional leads serve as a lab-site classroom for modeling best practices.