Quality Review Report

2017-2018

Explorations Academy
High school 12X251
1619 Boston Road
Bronx
NY 10460

Principal: Susana Hernandez

Dates of Review:
April 10, 2018 - April 11, 2018

Lead Reviewer: Elsa Kortright-Torres
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

Explorations Academy serves students in grade 9 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Core</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To what extent does the school...</strong></td>
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</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>Additional Finding</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>Additional Finding</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>Area of Focus</td>
<td>Proficient</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 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports the academic and personal growth of students and adults</td>
<td>Additional Finding, 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, Proficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Systems for Improvement

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<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, Proficient</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, Proficient</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>Area of Celebration, 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, Proficient</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, Proficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Area of Celebration

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

Findings

Teachers receive feedback that captures strengths, challenges, and next steps through cycles of observations and analysis of student data.

Impact

Feedback to teachers articulates clear expectations and next steps with cycles of observations that support and are aligned to the teacher and school goals, and supports teacher development.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders and teachers, including those new to the profession work strategically to conduct observation cycles. The school leaders use Advance data to keep track of areas of growth for teachers and have created a plan to address those areas by having teachers conduct inter-visitations through cycles of lesson studies. Teachers meet by department to look at and analyze student work products. A teacher then prepares, and presents a lesson to colleagues, and then those colleagues visit the teacher to provide meaningful feedback about the effectiveness of her instructional strategies. The teachers in the group ask clarifying questions and provide meaningful feedback, as well as next steps. Teachers have sessions to norm each other and use Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, specifically, by focusing on the school’s components of questioning and discussion and student engagement. These intervisitations with a specific lens to ensure that students are asked or create their own higher-order thinking questions and are cognitively engaged have resulted in an increase of the ratings in those components. A new teacher reported feeling supported by her colleagues and learning about how to have a structure in her classroom to engage students with the writing process. Another teacher reported receiving meaningful feedback from her colleagues about using higher order thinking questions in her lessons.

- School leaders provide accurate feedback to teachers by pointing out strengths, challenges, and next steps with a specific focus, questioning and discussion and engaging students in learning. A teacher who had a challenge with using questioning and discussion techniques was provided with feedback and next steps in his observation report. The school leader stated in his report that the teacher attempted to ask questions that would lead to discussions, however only a few students were active participants in the discussion. The school leader suggested the strategy of “share out”, then pick to have students share out then pick another student to participate. This strategy was then utilized with regularity in the same classroom as reported by school leaders, which increased the level of discussion in that classroom. Another teacher increased his rating in engaging students in learning after the school leader provided feedback on his observation report. The school leader suggested that students use a protocol to make their thinking visible in his math classroom. As a result, in his next observation, students made their thinking visible not only by annotating, but by using technology in the classroom. The teacher increased his rating from developing to effective in engaging students in learning.

- School leaders provide feedback rooted in Danielson’s Framework for Teaching and provide professional development to support teacher development and to align with their professional goals. Using Advance data from previous observations, teachers create goals that are specific to their professional development. Teachers then participate in differentiated professional learning sessions offered at the school or outside the school. For instance, teachers that exhibited a challenge of having more student-led discussions in their classrooms participated in a specific professional learning session about discussion protocols. Teachers report that they are supported with high quality professional learning to achieve their goals and improve teacher practice.
Findings
Teachers use assessments that are aligned to the school's curricula. The school's common assessments determine student progress towards goals.

Impact
Teachers provide feedback to students regarding their achievement. The results of common assessments are used to adjust curricula and instruction.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, teachers provide actionable feedback to students regarding their progress and achievements. Teachers use State Regents rubrics to grade tasks and provide grows and glows or warm and cool feedback to students. For example, a grade-nine student, received feedback from her English class teacher to elaborate more in her essays by explaining the quotes that she uses and how it connects to the character. The student shared that this feedback helped her with future assignments and being able to explain herself more clearly. Another student reported receiving feedback from his Global teacher on the spot. The teacher graded the essay and shared with the student that he needed more details added to major parts of his essay. Students reported receiving feedback including in their native language, Spanish, to help them make progress.

- Teachers provide actionable feedback that help students improve their work as evidenced in work products. For example, in an essay about theory of evolution of beaks of finches in a Living Environment class, the student received a glow and grow. The teacher wrote that the student effectively used the writing protocol, topic sentence, introduced evidence, presented the first evidence, discussed it, introduced the second evidence and discussed it and ended with a discussion of how the evidence proves the claim (TIEDIED). For next steps, the teacher wrote that the student’s sentences were long and should be revised to have a stronger impact. In a Common Core Learning Standards math task, students had to use the structure of an expression to identify ways to rewrite it. The teacher wrote that a student neatly completed the work, however, that she needed to show all the steps to evidence her thinking process. In a United States History essay about the Schenck v. United States Supreme Court Case, the teacher wrote a grow and glow on a student’s work. The glow read that the student's essay was well organized. However, the grow read that the student made references to how America could have lost territory during World War I, but that she needed to make a connection to the Zimmerman telegram and Germany to make the connection clearer.

- Teachers use a common assessment data analysis tool after administering unit tests and practice Regents exams to guide their instruction and adjust curricula. A science teacher reviewed the results of the unit six Chemistry exams and plans on being more intentional with checks for understanding and focus on conducting more re-teaching to increase the number of students who scored at the college level ready percentage. Other common assessments such as unit tests, in various formats such as multiple choice assessments and extended responses in various subjects, have resulted in including different instructional strategies in lessons. A math strategy that was agreed upon by teachers is the CUBES strategy: circle important numbers, underline the question, box any math action words, and evaluate the steps to take, solve and check to solve math problems. Annotation strategies such as this, were also agreed upon by teachers and are included in instruction and curricula documents for English, science and social studies.
Quality Indicator: 1.1 Curriculum

Rating: Proficient

Findings

Faculty ensures that curricula are aligned to the Common Core, instructional shifts and New York State content standards. Rigorous habits and higher-order thinking skills are emphasized in planning documents.

Impact

A variety of learners have access to curricula and academic tasks that promote college and career readiness across grades and subjects.

Supporting Evidence

- The faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core and content standards. A review of all units evidenced purposeful decisions in planning documents to ensure coherence across subjects and grades. In a unit plan on chemical reactions, students will write informative/explanatory texts such as the scientific procedure and technical processes. Students will also draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. In a global history lesson plan, students will cite specific evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources. In both instances, the learning activities require students to analyze and use information gained from text.

- Content specific standards were also clearly outlined. A science standard asked students to understand and apply scientific concepts, principles, and theories pertaining to the physical setting and living environment of finches to explain their evolution. Next Generation Science Standards and engineering practices were also clearly outlined. A math standard in an algebra lesson, asked students to apply the addition rule to analyze possible outcomes of independent events by understanding and applying probability formulas.

- In two English Language Arts (ELA) lessons, students would need to evaluate, analyze, interpret, and provide evidence of their thinking. Planning documents also included the criteria for success so that students would reflect on their learning. One lesson plan outlined the task of having students choose a quote from the text they are reading that show or connect to a focus question and having a recording of their evaluation and analysis of the author's words. Rigorous habits and skills for all learners, such as these were evident in units and lesson plans.

- Lesson plans also listed English Language Learners and students with disabilities that would require scaffolds, such as the use of visuals, glossaries, the use of the native language, and restating and explaining when necessary. In one lesson plan, the teacher planned on allowing students to self-modify in consultation with the teacher based on personal needs and interests to satisfy performance requirements.
Additional Finding

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

Teacher practice across classrooms reflect school beliefs that students learn best when they are provided with a learning target, criteria for success, and asked higher-order thinking questions to promote student to student discussions. In addition, the faculty has developed structures to strengthen instructional practices by implementing scaffolds and learning strategies for all students.

Impact

Teaching strategies aligned to Danielson Framework for Teaching provide multiple entry points for all learners so that they are engaged in cognitively engaging tasks.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, there is evidence that teachers plan and execute lessons by ensuring that there is alignment to the shared beliefs of the school. For example, in an AP Language Composition class, the students were having a discussion by using the Last-Word protocol. The teacher provided images of societal issues in history, such as segregation. Students used: I see, I think, I wonder, I connect strategy to make observations and inferences about the images. A student-led discussion about a group of white men surrounding a black man in a diner took place. Students used accountable talk stems, such as “I agree or disagree.” The teacher read a sentence from the I Have a Dream speech by Dr. Martin Luther King and asked students to look at the image and make inference about beliefs during that time. In another classroom, a World History class, the teacher posted a stop and think statement for students to make an inference as to why the Muslims and Hindus would want to create separate countries in India. The teacher asked why and or why not they were separated. One student responded, “cultural diffusion.” Another responded, “there are two different areas.” The teacher asked more questions to elicit a discussion from students. Student discussions were evident across classrooms.

- Across classrooms, teachers posted the learning target and criteria for success. In a math classroom, the teacher wrote on the board the criteria for success which included that students had to justify their answer with a talk stem or ask a question using a talk stem. In an English classroom, the teacher used a PowerPoint slide to list the criteria for success which included to refer to the focus question and for students to write their thinking and explain why. Students reported that having the criteria for success posted before each lesson helps them ensure that they have completed all the parts of a task. Students also reported that having the criteria for success helps them by reminding them of what they are learning and ask questions if they are not sure of what they need to do.

- All students including English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities are provided with scaffolds and multiple entry points that afford them the opportunity to engage in cognitively engaging tasks. For example, in a social studies classroom, all documents about The Great Migration and PowerPoint slides were translated into Spanish, since there were primarily Spanish ELLs in the classroom. In another English classroom, the teacher paired up students and monitored the use of annotation of a close read text which was about the experiences of a non-native speaker. The teacher circulated and wrote feedback on sticky notes and put it on students’ desks. For one student, she wrote that she needed to think about what questions to ask and provided scaffolds, such as a slide that had visuals and a task for students to re-read and underline how other people reacted to the character’s English. In a science classroom, students conducted a lab and had all the necessary materials and equipment to engage in a task about the evolution of beaks of finches. Students worked collaboratively assisting each other.
Findings
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to staff through ongoing feedback and professional learning aligned to the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. Teacher teams and staff have established a culture for learning that consistently communicates high expectations to all students.

Impact
Teachers are aware of and understand that school leaders hold them accountable for teaching and learning that meets the leaders’ expectations, and that they receive professional development and support to achieve their professional goals. Students are receiving messages of high expectations and guidance in preparation for the next academic level.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders consistently communicate high expectations around teaching practices, professionalism, and their core beliefs. The school focuses on higher order thinking questioning and student engagement. School leaders communicate that lessons plans should include a minimum of three higher order thinking questions and opportunities for student-led discussions by using think-pair-share, accountable talk stems, and share and pick strategies. Feedback to teachers on the use of these strategies is provided immediately, through informal and formal observations. There is evidence of a system of accountability through teacher observation reports and other correspondence such as emails to teachers from school leaders about lesson planning feedback and teacher practice.

- Through a robust professional development plan, teachers are supported to evidence best practices around the instructional focus in their classrooms. For example, the school expects that for each lesson there is a learning target and criteria for success. The learning target should include higher level Webb’s *Depth of Knowledge* (DOK) words. For example, a professional development session took place for teachers to learn how to align the learning target to the criteria for success. The purpose of the criteria for success is for students to have a reference on how to achieve the learning task. Teachers reported receiving professional development to improve their teaching and that there is accountability for schoolwide expectations.

- The school’s participation in the College Access for All and the Advanced Placement (AP) for All initiatives evidence a culture for learning that consistently communicates high expectations and guidance toward preparing students for the next level. For example, the school has prepared a schema for each grade level that articulates plans for each grade level to prepare them for admissions into college. Each grade level plan builds on the next providing a sequence that will lead to acceptance into college. Another example of supporting high expectations to students is a plan that articulates activities to take place during College Week. For example, included in the plan is a college interest survey and a celebration for students that are on track to graduate. Students are also offered the opportunity to take AP courses throughout their high school years. One English Language Learner (ELL) reported that he was encouraged to take AP courses even though he is still learning English. Through continuous feedback and guidance, students are encouraged and supported to prepare for their future career plans.
Additional Finding

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator:</th>
<th>4.2 Teacher Teams and Leadership Development</th>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
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</table>

**Findings**

The majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based professional collaborations to conduct lesson studies, analyze student performance data, and find problems of practice. Distributed leadership structures are in place.

**Impact**

Teachers are strengthening their instructional capacity and building leadership skills by having a voice in decisions that affect student learning.

**Supporting Evidence**

- Most teachers are engaged in inquiry-based professional collaborations. There is a cycle of weekly activities for teachers to engage in every day. For example, on Mondays, teachers use the Tri-State rubric to assess the level of rigor in units of study and alignment to the Common Core. Data is analyzed and revisions are made if needed. On Tuesdays, the teams meet to review a host teacher’s lesson to be presented to the team before the next meeting to provide feedback to the teacher. On Wednesdays, teachers meet to conduct inquiry work on a select group of students and bring student work from the host teacher’s classroom. On Thursdays, the teachers provide observation feedback to the host teacher and lastly, on Fridays, the teachers discuss the targeted group of student outcomes from the lesson observed or other performance tasks. Teachers report that these cycles have strengthened their instructional capacity because they receive feedback that is meaningful from their colleagues.

- Inquiry-based collaborations of lesson studies have resulted in strengthening teacher capacity and improved student learning. For example, during one of the cycles, the host teacher planned a lesson on analyzing elements of drama by keeping track of the character’s interactions and plot and by annotating the text, *An Overture* from *The Crucible*. The teacher realized a problem of practice after she was provided feedback from colleagues observing her execute the lesson. She concluded that she needs to add more visuals, such as adding an image to the Do Now, include more higher order thinking questions that align with citing textual evidence, and having a student facilitator leading a discussion using the share and pick strategy. This teacher reported that her instructional capacity to help her students, especially her visual learners, increased because of the analysis of her lesson and student work.

- Teachers have structures in place such as, the professional collaboration cycle of lesson studies to contribute their voice in making decisions about curricula and instructional practices. For example, teachers reported adjusting to their instructional practices and to the curricula, frequently. Teachers have been instrumental in implementing strategies such as, CUBES, TIEDIED, and the school’s expectation of aligning learning targets to the criteria for success. For example, one teacher was responsible to provide training on how to align learning targets to the criteria for success by modeling exactly as teachers should, in their classrooms. The teacher shared discussion protocols such as think-write-pair-share and annotation guides. Another teacher reported that she attended a training on math discussions and turned-key the training in her department. School leaders report that teachers have naturally become leaders by presenting their new knowledge to other teachers and thus building teacher capacity to make key instructional decisions that affect student learning in the school.