



# **The New York City Department of Education**



# **Quality Review Report**

**Urban Academy Laboratory High School**

**High School 565**

**317 East 67 Street  
New York  
NY 10021**

**Principal: Herb Mack**

**Dates of review: March 5 - 6, 2007**

**Reviewer: Sandra Tweddell**

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## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

Urban Academy Laboratory High School takes students from grades 9 to 12, most of whom are transfers from other schools. Many of the students who come to the school have been unhappy in their previous schools or have missed much schooling. There are 137 students enrolled including eight students from the autistic school on the same site. There are almost equal numbers of Black, Hispanic and White students. The school has no English language learners and fewer special education students than most schools, although many of the students have special needs. Attendance at 91.7 per cent is higher than similar and city schools. The school is part of the community of schools and resources based at the Julia Richman Education Complex. There are currently plans to demolish the building to provide housing.

The aim of the school is to offer a small, personalized educational setting for students interested in a rigorous, academic, college-orientated curriculum. Assessment is through performance based tasks and the school is mandated to set its own assessments. I was not told that this was an empowerment school although I checked before the review.

As an Empowerment School, the Academy for Scholarship and Entrepreneurship has greater flexibility in making decisions, allocating resources, accessing professional development and identifying affiliations. It benefits from reduced reporting and paperwork.

The school is run through committees of staff. It is a US Department of Education Blue Ribbon of Excellence Academy and a New American High School National Showcase Site.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- Excellent use is made of data to inform all the school's activities.
- The principal is highly respected by staff, students and many parents and has a strong presence around the school.
- All staff are part of the management team and work very closely together.
- Staff have high expectations of their students and offer excellent academic and personal support to enable students to become inquiring learners.
- An ethos of mutual respect between staff and students supports personal and academic achievement.
- As a result of the positive culture, students are articulate, thoughtful young citizens who hold well-informed opinions.
- The views of students are valued highly and students are involved in decisions about how the school operates.
- The curriculum is very broad and well chosen to prepare students with higher order thinking skills needed for college and for life.
- External expertise is used very effectively to support students' achievement and the professional development of staff.
- Excellent use is made of the community to support the personal and academic development of students.

### What the school needs to improve

- Ensure that the extensive range of data is used to monitor how the school is meeting its overall goals and how well it compares with similar schools.
- Ensure that leaders and teachers use the data to compare how different groups of students are progressing, particularly across classes, and use the data to hold teachers to account for the differentiation of instruction.
- Review the pilot interim assessments and develop the strengths particularly to create progress records for each student.

## Part 3: Main findings

### Overall Evaluation

#### **This is a well-developed school.**

This is a very successful school that meets the needs of its students well, most of whom go on to two and four-year colleges. Its aim of developing students into thoughtful questioning adults is met very well and is seen in the lively debates that take place within classrooms and in the halls outside. All teachers have an equal role in the management and decisions about the school. The very close team work results in staff understanding the principles behind the school and more especially, having a thorough understanding of each of the students in the facility. Teachers apply the principle of inquiry based education in their own work through constant updating of their skills through research and contact with outside expertise. This is being effectively used in the development of new models of assessment that recognize what students know, understand and can do. Students have a strong voice in the running of the school as their views are sought and respected by the staff. The challenge for the school is to maintain its high quality of education during a period when there are questions about the demolition of its facility.

### How well the school meets New York City's evaluation criteria

**Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.**

#### **This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The school has an excellent range of information about the progress of all of its students through regular assessment tasks. When students apply to the academy they are expected to complete a number of tasks such as solving logic problems or reading critically. In mathematics a test determines in which class a student should be placed. Each curriculum area and course has its own regular assessment designed by teachers, appropriately using the resources of external expertise. Students take Regents in English language arts and some take the PSAT and SAT.

Action is swiftly taken when teachers analyze the data for trends. In one example, teachers identified that African American boys were underachieving relative to other groups of students. A club was established for them, run by a male teacher as a model, to raise their self esteem and improve their work ethic. The impact of this was seen in greater participation. There are no English language learners but if any arrive, they attend an international school that is in the Julia Richman complex. Students from homes where English is spoken as the second language are put into classes at a level appropriate for their language skills. The school does not yet compare how well students progress compared with similar and City schools.

The eight students from the autistic school within the complex attend regular classes and take part in the communal activities. In a pre-algebra class, two students participated and learned as well as their peers, supported effectively by a specialist teacher for autistic students working closely with the mathematics teacher. Homework clubs are available for students who live in homeless or overcrowded accommodation. Pregnant students are

supported throughout their pregnancy and a crèche on the complex is available for them to continue their studies when the baby arrives. Many of the students who come to the academy are disillusioned with education or are school-phobic. They are given the opportunity to take a smaller number of courses and, as their confidence grows, they go on to take the number of courses required for graduation.

**Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student’s next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student’s learning.**

**This area of the school’s work is well developed.**

The progress that students make towards proficiency for college drives all the academy’s actions. Leaders and teachers have clear goals for the whole school which are shared effectively with students, parents and carers. These goals state that every student must reach the six proficiencies and aim for a high status college course. As this is a small school each student is reviewed individually so individual circumstances are considered in great detail and goals are effectively set with personal circumstances in mind. . Every teacher is involved in setting and reviewing the goals for each student. Tutors co-ordinate regular, and on-going staff discussions, about individual students very effectively. Regular meetings are held to discuss the progress of students who are causing concern and future actions to improve progress are agreed. The close knit nature of the school community results in problems being picked up and tackled immediately.

Leaders and teachers have very high expectations of students’ achievement, particularly so in the light of the background of students, many of whom were disaffected by education when they started. Students are very clear that the school culture expects them to make their own decisions using their skills of inquiry. They are closely involved in monitoring their own progress through discussion with their tutor and teachers. In some of the courses, experts from colleges and universities are brought in to discuss the papers written by students. A student confidently argued her case about Washington’s military tactics with her history teacher and a college professor of history. The discussion took her work to a higher level of proficiency. Each student has a detailed progress report showing how they are doing in each class and what they need to do to improve further and reach proficiency. These are sent regularly to parents and carers, although a significant number of parents do not use the information as the school would wish to revise plans and goals to support their children’s education. Students also present their work to their peers, so successes are shared and all students learn from one another. Teachers work very closely together in this effective learning community. Team teaching is common and teachers often sit in on lessons to further their own expertise. This area is one that is fostered exceptionally well by the collegiate management approach and is one of the reasons why 97 per cent of students go on to two or four year college courses.

**Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity and resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.**

**This area of the school’s work is well developed.**

The range of classes offered in this small school is very broad, for example, in one semester, students have a choice of 61 different and varied classes. The curriculum is

appropriately closely aligned to school goals. It aims to enable each student to gain proficiency in six disciplines, namely literature, mathematics, social studies, science, creative arts and art criticism. The choice of courses mirrors that of colleges, so some students attend courses at colleges instead of one of the six proficiencies. In addition, students must undertake community service and become competent in library research and computer use. Students select their preferences from classes within the six disciplines then discuss their choices with their tutor. Tutors use very good assessment information to help guide the discussion. Students are clear that it will take longer to graduate if they do not select a course from each of the six areas, but they have the choice should they wish. This is an example of how the school develops autonomy in its students. The range of courses changes each semester following a review of how well the courses have gone.

Teachers are held accountable for the progress of their classes in a very public manner as discussion is on going and involves all teachers through the collegiate approach of the school. They adapt their teaching in the light of their interim assessments. Students also move classes if assessment shows they are struggling or finding the class too easy, for example, students are regularly moved between pre algebra and algebra. Classes contain students from grade 9 to 12 and teachers are skilled at ensuring that gifted and talented students are challenged and less confident students are given opportunities to have their say. Resources, including the use of teacher time, are guided by the needs of the students. Gaps are identified and teachers use their expertise very well to design classes to meet the needs. The inquiry based approach to teaching is extremely effective. Students in a constitutional law class emerged at recess, debating furiously and continued the debate throughout recess until it was time to return to the class.

Attendance rates are high, fostered by the lengths that teachers take to ensure students attend regularly. Students are woken by telephone calls from teachers, they are given alarm clocks and any absence is followed up immediately. The principal is on duty from early in the morning to late in the evening and his presence is a constant reminder to students of not only the culture of the school, but the need for regular attendance.

**Quality Statement 4 - Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

There are clear expectations of teachers for selection, including good subject expertise and a commitment to teaching through inquiry based learning. Teachers must also be willing to develop classes within and sometimes, outside, their expertise. Professional development is excellent and is what drives the school. It is appropriately based on the teachers' extensive knowledge of each student and the collaborative approach to management. Outside evaluators are brought in to review practice and outcomes as part of research projects and some of the teachers have published research papers. Teachers develop their skills very well through access to subject and assessment courses. The school is part of a consortium of schools developing performance based assessment which meet regularly for professional development. Teachers in the school are recognized as having expertise in performance based assessment and inquiry based learning so regularly provide courses for groups of teachers across the city and nationwide. Many visitors come to the complex which allows for review and development of practice for both visitors and staff in the complex. This enables the school to have a clear overview of how well it is doing and to learn from others when necessary.

New teachers are mentored for two years, sitting alongside experienced teachers and taking classes with another teacher present. This gives them an excellent understanding of the culture of the school. Debriefs follow each class both formally and informally and a list of topics to pursue comes from these sessions. Meetings between all the staff and departments are frequent and allow for constant revision of plans at school wide and individual student level. An excellent source of professional development is the meetings to discuss students' papers between an external expert, the class teacher and the student. These give teachers additional insights into their subjects. The weekly mandatory community program draws excellently on the resources across the five boroughs.

The school has an excellent collegiate approach to management. Peer observation is a regular practice and as the school is small, there is an excellent overview through regular meetings and discussion. The principal has a very high profile and knows teachers and students very well. The school works very effectively as a team and constantly reviews and revises plans. This is an excellent feature of the school's work. There are excellent links with outside agencies, including support agencies for the most needy students.

**Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerated learning.**

**This area of the school's work is well developed.**

The school is firmly focused on every student reaching the proficiencies to gain a high status college place. Interim assessments are used excellently and are being further developed as part of performance based assessment. These give an excellent written record of how well students are meeting the standards and the next steps towards proficiency. They are currently part of a pilot so the impact of their use is not clear, but students and teachers report they find them extremely helpful. Teachers are looking to draw the commentaries into a single progress chart for each student. This would add a very useful source of information to the other systems the school uses. The school is closely monitoring the impact of the work using external expertise and the cluster of schools involved in the innovative procedures.

Goals are regularly reviewed by groups of teachers and full school meetings. The collegiate approach to management is an excellent vehicle for this. Teachers regularly look for trends in performance across the whole school and then take action to tackle any issues. The club for African American boys is one example. Another is the recent concern that the work ethic amongst many students was not strong enough. As a result, on two days a week, all students meet in the hallways for *Urban@work*. Students are expected to research and study alone for a set period, modeled by students with good work ethics and teachers. This is starting to have a positive impact on achievement.

The school culture is reluctant to compare groups of students. In a successful school, this may be a step to ensure that the school maintains its success. Teachers rightly focus on the progress of individual students but do not step back to consider if the school goals are met or are appropriate. This is another small step that may help an already great school to become even better. The self evaluation by staff is thoughtful and well considered and involves all teachers in the school.

## Part 4: School Quality Criteria Summary

<b>SCHOOL NAME: Urban Academy Laboratory High School (HS 565)</b>	∅	✓	+
<b>Quality Score</b>			X

<b>Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather data and use it to understand what each student knows and is able to do and to monitor student progress over time.</b>	∅	✓	+
1.1 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• each student, classroom, grade level,</li> </ul>			X
1.2 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ethnic groups, English language learners, special education students*</li> </ul>			X
1.3 The school uses available data and generates its own data to provide an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all other categories of interest to the school*</li> </ul>			X
1.4 Performance and progress are measured based on comparisons with similar schools, with the school's own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grade levels, academic subject areas, ethnic groups, and other groupings of interest within the school.		X	
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 1</b>			X

\* These criteria are partially aspirational as of now because schools do not have routine access to all of this data. The NYC DOE plans to provide schools with enhanced access to the necessary data in 2007.

<b>Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use available data to understand each student's next learning step. Through collaborative planning and student and parent engagement, they set high goals for improving teaching practice and accelerating each student's learning.</b>	∅	✓	+
2.1 Using data, school leaders and faculty engage in a collaborative process to set demanding, objectively measurable goals for immediate and long-range improvement, and to develop plans and timeframes for reaching those goals.			X
2.2 Goals and plans focus on the school as a whole and on each student, classroom, grade level, academic subject, and group of students whose performance or progress has been identified by the school as a particular focus area.			X
2.3 Particular attention is given to improving the performance and progress of students in greatest need of improvement.			X
2.4 High expectations are conveyed to students and parents/caregivers. Students and their parents/caregivers are regularly invited to provide information about each student's performance and how to improve. This information is central to setting challenging goals and developing, evaluating, and revising plans.			X
2.5 Goals and plans for improving student performance and progress drive the activity of all members of the school community: leaders, staff, students, parents, and other partners.			X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 2</b>			X

<b>Quality Statement 3 – Align Instruction: The school aligns its instructional activity, resources, and student engagement around its focused plans for accelerating learning for each student.</b>	∅	✓	+
3.1 The school selects the curriculum based on how well it aligns with or implements the mandated curriculum and on the curriculum's capacity to generate meaningful interim data about progress towards goals and to support the school's high expectations and improvement plans.			X
3.2 Teachers are accountable for improving instruction and student outcomes. They plan and differentiate their instruction based on the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.		X	
3.3 Budgeting decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.			X
3.4 Staffing decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes.			X
3.5 Scheduling decisions about the use of teacher and student time are guided by the needs that emerge from examining student data and by the focused plan the school develops to improve student outcomes.			X
3.6 Instructional programs actively engage students.			X
3.7 Staff know and respect students and respond to their academic needs, as well as their personal needs that affect academic performance. Each student knows and trusts an adult on the staff who is concerned about him or her.			X
3.8 Student attendance and engagement are high priorities. High rates and patterns of absences trigger immediate intervention.			X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 3</b>			X
<b>Quality Statement 4 – Build and Align Capacity: The development of instructional leadership, staff, and capacity are aligned around the school's collaboratively established goals for accelerating the learning of each student.</b>	∅	✓	+
4.1 Leaders, faculty, and staff are selected based on their high expectations for student performance and progress and based on their commitment and capacity to use data, compare outcomes within and across classrooms and schools and develop and revise plans and methods to improve performance and progress.			X
4.2 Professional development decisions are driven by the needs revealed by student data and by the focused plan the school has developed to improve each student's and group of students' outcomes. Professional development is designed to help leaders, faculty, and staff use data, self- and peer-assessments, and collaboration with peers to achieve goals for improved school and student outcomes. Professional development and self- and peer-evaluation are aligned and overlap.			X
4.3 The principal frequently observes classroom teaching and has a considered strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction. Teachers frequently observe and support each other's classroom instruction with the goal of improving student outcomes.			X
4.4 Planning, evaluation of results, and revision of plans takes place in teams. Leaders and faculty inform each other of their goals and results, candidly evaluate themselves and each other, and use what is learned to drive improvement.			X
4.5 The principal is respected and has capacity to effect change.			X
4.6 The school runs smoothly. Procedures are clear, communicated to all, and are generally followed.			X
4.7 The school aligns youth development and support services around stated academic goals. Partnerships with outside bodies are routinely used to achieve academic goals.			X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 4</b>			X
<b>Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has built-in structures for evaluating each student's progress throughout the year, recognizing weaknesses in its improvement plans and teaching practices, and flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.</b>	∅	✓	+
5.1 All school plans and other interventions include frequent interim goals and diagnostic assessments of progress designed to reveal in objectively measurable ways whether the plan is being effectively implemented and reaching stated goals.			X
5.2 Comparisons of student progress within and across classrooms and schools are used in making interim diagnostic assessments and measuring the progress of plans and interventions.		X	
5.3 Information generated by periodic assessments and diagnostic measures of progress and comparisons is used to revise plans immediately in order to reach stated goals. Interim and final goals are modified when data objectively demonstrate that revision is required.			X
5.4 Each plan's interim and final outcomes drive successive phases of goal setting and improvement planning, and each successive phase is characterized by agile and flexible realignment of practices and resources to improve student academic outcomes.			X
<b>Overall score for Quality Statement 5</b>			X