

Quality Review Report 2011-2012

Independence High School
High School 544

850 10TH AVENUE
MANHATTAN
NY 10019

Principal: RON SMOLKIN

Dates of review: May 31- June 1, 2012

Lead Reviewer: Sarah E. Goodman

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Independence High School is a Transfer High school with 413 students from grade 9 through grade 12 enrolled at two locations. The school population comprises 35% Black, 57% Hispanic, 2% White, 4% Asian students and 1% other students. The student body includes 7% English language learners and 12% special education students. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2010 - 2011 was 67%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is developing.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school community creates a calm and caring environment for students that supports their social, emotional, and academic development. (1.4)
 - o Each of Independence High School's four guidance counselors, including one bilingual counselor at the main site, are responsible for a group of students from their initial registration until graduation. Counselors meet regularly with students to review their credit accumulation, Regents' scores, attendance, and behavior, and use this data to set goals collaboratively. In addition, the counselors work with parents and teachers through a conferencing system, and connect students and families to outside resources and organizations so that they can take advantage of a range of youth support services. This individualized attention helps students as they transition from a previous school through the formulation of post-graduation plans.
 - o Students at the school report that the staff is "on top" of them and cares about their work. They describe the school as a place where "you can be who you are" and where student conflicts are rare. The school also supports student involvement through the student council, which organizes spirit week, the prom, and participates in other decisions. As a result of the respectful relationships between students and the faculty, the school's culture promotes optimistic attitudes towards learning for students who previously have not typically experienced success.
- The school has developed its capacity for youth development through a variety of partnerships that provide students with real world learning opportunities. (4.4)
 - o In collaboration with the school's guidance counselors, the YWCA-NYC has an on-site full-time coordinator who oversees a partnership with the school to bring needed additional academic and youth development services to the student body. Students enroll in credit bearing academic and physical education classes as well as receive homework help and one-on-one tutoring. The YWCA also provides students with post-secondary support through job placement help, college counseling, and work within their on-site recording studio. As a result, many of the students involved with the Y last year reported an increase in their understanding of math and literacy as well as receiving higher grades on their report cards.
- The faculty is working to align the curriculum to State standards and the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) within interesting assignments that support student engagement and academic development. (1.1)
 - o The administration has integrated the Understanding By Design curriculum planning process to the staff and offered on-going time and support for teachers to work on their unit plans. In addition, the staff has been working to incorporate close reading techniques for informational texts and various writing genres across departments so that students are better able to access content. In addition, a science teacher who is currently a Common Core Fellow is working with an interdisciplinary group of teachers to develop a forensic science unit, thus furthering the collaborative work around enhancing curriculum to include key standards.

- o Teachers typically plan with their students' interests and experiences in mind, as was evidenced during the two days of the Quality Review. Lessons covered a range of topics that engaged students in topics including marriage customs in third world countries, the legacy of the civil rights movement, themes of death and morality in *Of Mice and Men*, South American jail conditions, and an emergency room scenario. Many of these lessons were embedded in units that challenged students to understand, analyze, and synthesize new content.
- The administration strategically utilizes resources to support students during and after school to promote their academic progress. (1.3)
 - o The principal has secured a large five-year grant to support the on-site academic and youth development partnership with the YWCA-NYC. Additional support from the City council has sponsored two comprehensive science carts, and additional funding has integrated financial literacy work into the school. Technology is widespread at Independence High School. Both sites have computer labs that utilize a computer based credit recovery program that pre-assesses students and provides them with individualized work they complete at their own pace. As a result of these offerings, students are able to take part in a wide variety of coursework that is tailored to their needs and promotes progress towards graduation.
 - o In an attempt to increase instructional time for students and meeting time for teachers, classes are blocked during the day and snack is served within the building. A last period lunch allows students to have a break before the extensive afterschool offerings begin and provides teachers with daily time to meet as departments or for independent or collaborative planning. This time is also utilized to bring faculty together to discuss students at risk and meet with parents as a group when needed. As a result, teachers are unified in their support of academics and social needs of individual students and feel a sense of community.
- The school provides a range of professional development opportunities to provide the faculty with on-going learning experiences that impact the classroom. (4.3)
 - o The faculty takes advantage of a wide variety of opportunities to learn more about their profession. All staff have been working, with the support of a consultant, on curriculum planning. The principal and assistant principals are involved in individual pursuits that increase their educational and administrative knowledge. Individual teachers have taken advantage of funded programs through Bank Street and the Department of Education to develop their own curricular and teaching skills and have found numerous ways to pass on the techniques they have learned. These on-going adult learning opportunities provide a focus for formal and informal collaborations that support teachers in revising and refining their instruction.

What the school needs to improve

- Develop a system to set goals with interim benchmarks in order to monitor and adjust progress towards school improvement. (5.3)
 - o The school currently has goals around the improvement of literacy and math performance for students and is working to integrate the expectations of the Common Core Learning Standards into that work. However, aside from on-going

tracking of Regents' pass rates and credit accumulation, the administration and teacher teams have not set up any other ways to measure student progress towards the skills and content required of the Common Core or their instructional goals. Without a clear system for initial and ongoing benchmarking as well as methods for effectively analyzing data, the faculty is unable to collaboratively work through a plan of action that supports meeting student achievement targets.

- Monitor the effectiveness of distributed leadership within professional collaborations to strengthen the ability of teacher teams to adjust instructional practices that support student learning. (5.4)
 - o The school has programmed common planning time into the daily schedule for staff. While the teachers come together as an interdisciplinary team at the Village location, the teachers at the West Campus meet as departments weekly with additional time available for mostly unstructured common planning. Teacher leaders have naturally emerged amongst the staff and the assistant principals attend some meetings, however, there are no formal structures to assess or support professional collaborations. Additionally, although several teachers take part in professional development through programs like Bank Street or the Common Core Fellows, the impact of their work on teacher practice or student performance is not systematically evaluated, limiting the ability to regularly improve the quality, structures, and impact of leadership development.
- Strengthen lesson planning and teaching to consistently provide opportunities for all students to engage cognitively with the material to support their academic progress. (1.2)
 - o Many lessons incorporate opportunities for students to participate in hands on activities or to think about current events or moral themes that get their attention. Yet, typically, class discussions around these themes do not encourage rigorous opportunities to write, think, or have peer-to-peer discussion via higher order questions. Some teachers have been influenced by shared faculty texts that have encouraged the development of scaffolded graphic organizers and the use of other reading techniques. However, overall methods that offer access to content to a range of students, including those with disabilities or English language learners, are inconsistently present in classrooms limiting the engagement of students and development of rich work products.
- Align assessment practices to key standards across the school sites to provide students and teachers with on-going opportunities to reflect on progress and next steps. (2.2)
 - o The small class size often allows teachers to check on students individually or in small groups during a lesson and offer additional support. Additionally, teachers at the school utilize a wide variety of rubrics, checklists, item analysis, and other forms of assessment to measure student progress. Some teachers provide students with rubrics or checklists to guide their work before a project, and some teachers utilize these materials throughout the drafting process for peer- or self-assessment. However, these assessments are not typically aligned to key standards and there is little consistency within departments or across teachers, making it difficult to effectively utilize these assessments to monitor progress and target instructional adjustments that would support learning.
- Strengthen the systems for providing teachers with on-going feedback to clarify professional expectations and improve pedagogy (4.1)

- o The school currently has a system to ensure that teachers are observed formally by the principal and by the assistant principal each year. While the school has developed a checklist that aligns with a research based teacher effectiveness rubric, it is not uniformly used by the administration and does not yet tie to a professional goal setting system, hindering the development of teachers' effective practices and a community that is collaboratively engaged in focused professional growth.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2011-2012

School name: Independence High School	UD	D	P	WD
Overall QR Score		X		
Quality Statement 1 – Instructional and Organizational Coherence: The school has a coherent strategy to support student learning that aligns curriculum, instruction and organizational decisions.				
<i>To what extent does the school regularly...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
1.1 Design engaging, rigorous and coherent curricula, including the Arts, for a variety of learners and aligned to key State standards?		X		
1..2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, and ensure that it is: aligned to the curriculum, engaging, and differentiated to enable all students to produce meaningful work products?		X		
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?			X	
1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes toward learning that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?			X	
Quality Statement 2 – Gather and Analyze Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, analyze and share information on student learning outcomes to understand school and student progress over time.				
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
2.1 Gather and analyze information on student learning outcomes to identify trends, strengths, and areas of need at the school level?		X		
2.2 Align assessments to curriculum, use on-going assessment practices and analyze information on student learning outcomes to adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom level?		X		
2.3 Use grading policies and tools to enable school leaders and teachers to organize, aggregate, and analyze student performance trends to inform instruction and curriculum?		X		
2.4 Engage families in school decision-making, activities and an open exchange of information regarding students' progress toward school and class expectations?		X		
Quality Statement 3 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently engage the school community and use data to set and track suitably high goals for accelerating student learning.				
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
3.1 Establish a coherent vision of future development that is reflected in a short list of focused, data-based goals that are understood and supported by the entire school community?		X		
3.2 Use collaborative and data informed processes to set measurable and differentiated learning goals for student subgroups, and students in need of additional support?		X		
3.3 Ensure the achievement of learning goals by tracking progress at the school, teacher team and classroom level?		X		
3.4 Communicate high expectations to staff, students and families, and support students and families to achieve them?		X		

Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals and student learning and emotional needs.

<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
4.1 Use the observation of classroom teaching and the analysis of learning outcomes to elevate school-wide instructional practices and implement strategies that promote professional growth and reflection, with a special focus on new teachers?		X		
4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning?		X		
4.3 Provide professional development that promotes independent and shared reflection, opportunities for leadership growth, and enables teachers to continuously evaluate and revise their classroom practices to improve learning outcomes?		X		
4.4 Integrate child/youth development, guidance/advisement support services and partnerships with families and outside organizations with the school-wide goals to accelerate the academic and personal growth of students?			X	

Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.

<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	UD	D	P	WD
5.1 Evaluate the quality of curricular, instructional and organizational decisions, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school, with particular attention to the CCLS?		X		
5.2 Evaluate systems for assessing students, organizing data, and sharing information with student and families, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school?		X		
5.3 Establish and sustain a transparent, collaborative system for measuring progress towards interim and long term goals and making adjustments during the year and over time?	X			
5.4 Use data to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of structured professional collaboration, capacity building and leadership development strategies?	X			

Quality Review Scoring Key

UD	Underdeveloped	D	Developing	P	Proficient	WD	Well Developed
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