

Quality Review Report 2011-2012

**Urban Academy Laboratory High School
High school M565**

**317 EAST 67 STREET
MANHATTAN
NY 10065**

Principal: Herb Mack

Dates of review: May 17-18, 2012

Lead Reviewer: Carolyn Yaffe

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Urban Academy Laboratory High School is a High school with 152 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 34% Black, 32% Hispanic, 23% White, 5% Asian students and 5% other students. The student body includes 0% English language learners and 6% special education students. Boys account for 41% of the students enrolled and girls account for 59%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2010 - 2011 was 99%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is well-developed.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Curriculum choice and design is at the center of the school's philosophy and practice, yielding highly engaging and rigorous assignments and student work products that demonstrate high levels of cognitive demand. (1.1)
 - o Course offerings in the school change each semester to target areas of student and student interest, all developed backwards from the standards outlined in the performance assessment rubrics the school uses as a member of the Coalition for Essential Schools. The standards in each subject area are referred to as "proficiencies." The vast majority of courses are organized to culminate towards readiness for proficiencies with rigorous writing pieces that require students to ask and answer original questions through a synthesis of readings and text analysis through class discussion. As a result of the coherence and rigor of the course planning, and the assiduous attention to creating courses that generate a high level of student interest (e.g. "The Great Depression," "It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop," and "Looking for an Argument in Science," to name a few), students demonstrate extremely high levels of engagement in class discussion and in discussing their work, as seen during classroom visits. Additionally, student writing across subjects and classrooms demonstrates original thinking, supported by text based evidence and analysis, as evidenced in student portfolios and in work presented for analysis during teacher team meetings.
- Teaching practice across classrooms is driven by the unifying belief that inquiry-based pedagogy builds students' ability to develop and support original thoughts and arguments, resulting in high levels of engagement, participation and thinking. (1.2)
 - o The facilitation of high-level student discussion is the heart of teacher pedagogy at Urban Academy. Across classrooms, text-based, thought-provoking and rigorous questions drive the conversations that take place during class. Classroom visits over the course of the review revealed students critiquing one another's experiment designs to understand the impact of social media on academic achievement, formulating hypothesis about the impact that race has on social interactions, analyzing *A Tale of Two Cities* and debating sharecropping policies during the Great Depression. During the discussions, students introduce and examine sophisticated concepts and use text based references to ask and answer questions. In addition, all students spoken to over the course of the review were able to articulate the role that reading and discussion plays in the writing of their papers and how these expectations prepare them for the level of independence and critical thinking required in college. This cohesion across classrooms is driven by the unified belief that students learn best through inquiry based instruction and the on-going faculty wide conversation that fortifies this belief and ensures it is translated into instruction. Students shared that "discussions are necessary because it's actually expanding on what you learn," and "arguing about a philosopher actually expands our views and helps us understand the views of others." One collective impact of this work is the 100% college acceptance rate for this year's graduates. Urban Academy's college readiness index is at 40.6%, which is approximately 30% above the average of its peer schools and 37% above the city average. Additionally, a research project of Consortium school graduates shows that Urban Academy and Consortium grades exceed national and city norms in terms of college persistence and grade point averages.

- There are exceptionally high levels of trust and accountability between all members of the school community that facilitate the growth of students and adults. (1.4)
 - o There are a variety of different structures at Urban Academy to personalize the academic experience for students and create an inclusive culture that fully supports student success. Students are assigned to a tutorial, when they enter Urban Academy and continue with this teacher throughout their time in the school. During this time, the tutorial facilitator serves as the point person for each student's orientation to the school community, supports time management for each student and liaises with other teachers and the student's family to identify and procure support as needed. Additionally, there are two teachers who serve as college advisors to provide a highly personalized college search and application process for each individual student. Students also choose teachers to guide them through their proficiency projects, which becomes another avenue where students develop trusting and productive relationships with the adults in the community. As a result of these structures, students and families describe the relationships and support in the school community in superlative terms. Students describe an environment where "everybody here really wants you to succeed and there is nothing they won't do to help you get things done." Other students described a "strong environment of working with teachers directly" and emphasize that they are "given an enormous amount of respect and trust from teachers" and say that it's the "kind of place you want to be."
- High quality classroom instruction and a personalized experience for students are the lenses through which resources are allocated and assessed, leading to a school community that is organized fully to support student success. (1.3)
 - o In addition common planning several times a week for departments to meet, the schedule at Urban Academy has been organized so that all students experience internships or community service on Wednesday afternoons, thus creating significant time each week for the entire staff to work together. Student programs are created on an individual basis, with the input of the advisor, to ensure that students' needs are being met not only from a requirement perspective, but also from an interest and skill perspective. For example, certain courses are created in response to identified needs and interests of the study body and advisors, knowing their students well, ensure that their advisees are placed in those courses. In order to optimize the student-to-teacher ratio, teachers choose and hold administrative responsibilities in addition to their teaching and advising work. As a result of this careful organization of schedule and human resources, class sizes are small, students and parents report an incredible amount of individual attention and teaching practices and student work are of high quality across classrooms. This resource alignment fulfills the school goals of ensuring that students experience a rigorous, individualized program that both meets their needs and moves them towards the proficiencies needed to graduate and succeed in college.
- The school uses a teaching framework that drives the implementation of its instructional philosophy and a mentoring and feedback process that supports the growth of teachers. (4.1)
 - o The goal of inquiry instruction across classrooms drives the lens through which pedagogy is assessed at the school. The school uses Fred Newman's framework to examine levels of critical thinking students are engaged in during classroom observations. The school has formal and informal structures that provide all teaching faculty with frequent feedback, the majority of the feedback coming from peers. In addition, the school has several structures to fold new

staff members into the planning and teaching expectations of the school, usually including a student teaching experience, followed by team teaching for an academic year. As an orientation to effective planning and facilitation processes the school deliberately pairs new teachers with an experienced teacher for the school-wide project that occurs at the beginning of each semester. As a result of these structures, the cohesion and quality of teaching practices across classrooms is exceptional and leads to high quality student work products.

- The school culture is driven by high expectations for all members, with supports in place to help all constituents understand and meet those expectations (3.4)
 - Peer-to-peer accountability drives the incredibly high expectations of the school community. Teaching faculty point out that because they regularly examine student work for movement towards proficiencies, this requires that they regularly review one another's assignments, feedback and teaching practices towards the assignment. This creates a high level of accountability among the staff to ensure that they are both assigning work that addresses proficiency skills but also that they are pushing students towards those skills, as evidenced by student work. In addition, because the observation process is driven so much by peer feedback, and because there is a strong informal culture of classroom visits, teachers report working towards the expectations set collectively by the community. The teaching staff at Urban Academy is highly experienced and because each goes through a rigorous orientation and mentoring process, and are organized around a unified set of beliefs, they are well poised to give one another the level of feedback that produces high quality instruction across classrooms.
 - Both families and students report that the school has high expectations connected to college readiness and is careful to provide appropriate supports to help achieve those expectations. Structures such as tutorial, drop-in (which is academic tutoring on as-needed basis), dedicated college counselors and an extremely accessible school leader help students achieve and helps families feel supported in helping their child achieve. As a result of the expectations and support, students report feeling prepared for college on a daily basis through the content of their classroom work; this feedback is coupled with strong college readiness data from New York City Progress Report and a high college acceptance rate.
- Collaboration and collective decision-making drives the learning in the school community and leads to high quality curriculum and teaching practices. (4.2)
 - All constituents share that collective envisioning and decision-making drive all processes in the school community, which result in high levels of ownership of student achievement as well as all the work that is connected to driving student achievement. Through both subject area teacher meetings, which evaluate work towards proficiencies, and whole faculty meetings that are used to analyze course grades, course offerings and support structures, the team structure at Urban Academy continually drives adjustment and improvement. One prime example of this is the revision of the course offerings that take place every semester; these revisions take place through the lens of skills and content students need to develop more fully and/or from a different angle in order to fulfill proficiency requirements. Another example is the drop-in structure that was introduced this year in order to create an additional structure for small group instruction. The result of this is high levels of collaboration, extremely high teacher retention rates (a "new teacher" is an 8 year veteran), remarkable cohesion across classrooms and a unified articulation of school goals and values from all constituents.

What the school needs to improve

- Examine current assessment practices connected to checking for understanding to ensure that all student learning needs are being met. (2.2)
 - o The school community has a variety of effective structures in place to assess student understanding and student movement towards mastery, including the regular, collective review of student work against proficiency rubrics and weekly conversations between teachers and tutorial facilitators to understand progress towards needed work. The school community also places a high premium on student evaluation of their own work; this happens through class discussions, critiques of one another's papers and self-reflection structures which exist in tutorial. What the school community does not currently have fully across all classrooms is a unified structure and emphasis on daily assessment of student understanding during and after class discussions. While the vast majority of students are deeply engaged with and participate in conversations, there are some students who do not demonstrate engagement during the class discussion, either via note taking or verbal participation. As a result, it is not clear how the teacher addresses daily misconceptions or identify supports needed.
- Continue to assess the structures that the school has in place that provide additional support to students in order to maximize the impact those structures have on student success. (5.1)
 - o There is an ongoing conversation among the school community that drives the monitoring and revision of school structures, school schedule and pedagogical practices. While this is highly effective, further reexamination of the efficacy of new support structures such as drop-ins, labs and mentoring pairings is something that constituents expressed a desire to deepen in order to understand the collective impact of these structures on student achievement.
- Further deepen school partnerships and professional development to identify and support students in need of additional guidance and advisement. (4.4)
 - o The school community places a premium on the knowledge and support of its students and this priority is evident through all conversations with constituents, especially students, who report that they feel very well known and cared for. There is also a robust advisement system in place for proficiency completion and the college application process. In addition, the school has strategically developed partnerships with a myriad of outside organizations to place students in weekly internships and be mentored through those experiences. What the school is currently working on is forging deeper and more expansive partnerships connected to supporting students with more serious social and emotional health issues.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2011-2012

School name: Urban Academy Laboratory 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