

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Academy of Arts and Letters

Elementary-Middle School K492

**225 Adelphi Street
Brooklyn
NY 11205**

Principal: John O'Reilly

Dates of review: April, 8-9, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Barbara Freeman

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Academy of Arts and Letters is an elementary-middle school with 424 students from kindergarten through grade 2 and grades 6 through 8. The school population comprises 65% Black, 11% Hispanic, 17% White, and 4% Asian students. The student body includes 1% English language learners and 14% special education students. Boys account for 45% of the students enrolled and girls account for 55%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 94.0%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is well developed.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school designs comprehensive, rigorous and coherent curricula that are well aligned to State standards for all learners, leading to immersion of all students in academic tasks that accelerate higher order thinking. (1.1)
 - The school designed and/or adapted curricula in all content areas aligned to the integration of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE). The English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum is solely designed by teachers based on a review of student data that informed their decision to design fewer units enabling them to involve students in deeper contextual work. Social studies is taught as humanities enabling literacy strategies and skills to be naturally embedded in grade-specific content while increasing students' opportunities to interface with informational text. The math curriculum is adapted from multiple sources such as Pearson's Connected Math program, College Board, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). The school focuses on college and career readiness through its work with the College Performance Assessment System (CPAS) which gives students opportunities to problem solve, reason, and revise their work based on State standards. Reading informational text and operations / algebraic thinking standards are instructional shifts that are addressed in kindergarten to grade 8 vertical teams in order to preserve grade-to-grade alignment as well as to determine scaffolds needed in order for all students to produce meaningful work. This has resulted in the schools' ability to provide clear and rational curricula aligned to rigorous Common Core standards embedded in cognitively demanding units of study and academic tasks for all learners as evidenced by the school receiving additional credit on its Progress Report in closing the achievement gap between general and special education students.
 - Teachers developed tools in order to strategically respond to the different learning needs of students, particularly special education students. Student work is evaluated based on a continuum for work presentation, problem solving in core content areas, and a college readiness matrix that measures students' abilities and cognitive strategies such as research, interpretation, reasoning, precision and communication. The matrix is a reflection of a student's performance throughout their middle school years. Students are responsible for participating in two roundtables per year in which they discuss their work and the skills and strategies used to complete rigorous, thought provoking tasks. Student feedback requires persistence in the revision of work adding an additional level of rigor. Digital portfolios are maintained for all students in order to illustrate the growth of students' work over time. Adjustments have been made to the presentation skills continuum in order to support rubrics for exhibition, learning goals, supports needed during the drafting phase of the presentation, and clarity of expectations. Consequently, demanding academic behaviors are embedded in all units of study that result in all learners being able to demonstrate higher level thinking in student work products on all grade levels.
- Cognitively demanding curricula are accessed by all learners via teacher practice is aligned to a set of beliefs on how students learn best enabling them to demonstrate higher order thinking and high quality work. (1.2)

- The school believes that students must be provided “thinking” curricula that invite students to be integral partners in setting the agenda for their own learning and interacting with demanding and rigorous units of study in all content areas. The school utilizes the Danielson research-based framework to deepen their work on open-ended questions that require all students to use higher order thinking skills. Teachers’ instructional practices and modes of lesson delivery address the school’s essential question: How do we ensure students are really thinking? Based on book studies, shared research readings, inquiry, grade and department meetings, the school determined successful practices that access and maximize students thinking enabling the school to have strong alignment between what is taught and how it is taught to maximize student success as evident by high quality student work products.
- Across classrooms, common approaches such as student groups that are no larger than three, student discussion based on direct questioning, opportunities for independent practice, and self- assessment and reflection on class work were evident. During an eighth grade science lesson students discussed the impact of environmental pressures on wildlife. They were responsible for their own note taking and active engagement in whole class, group, and paired discussions in order to further their understanding of inherited traits and acquired traits of birds as they adapt to new environmental situations. Students used conversation stems such as “I agree/ disagree” and were accountable for explaining their thinking; “This is why I think...” This led to lengthy, thought provoking discussions regarding migration and species of birds that do not migrate. The teacher monitored student conversation and posed additional questions to student groups in order to further discussions which resulted in an engaging lesson that included multiple opportunities to access learning in different ways for all students as evidenced by deeply thoughtful student note-taking and reflective comments on class exit slips.
- School leaders make highly strategic organizational decisions including hiring practices that are aligned to long/short term goals and student needs resulting in improved instruction for all learners and exemplary student work. (1.3)
 - In order to address school-wide mathematics performance, an additional math teacher was hired to reduce teacher-student ratio allowing for deeper conceptual opportunities for students and address the short term goals of increasing students’ scale score math performance on state assessments. The principal provided funding for Eighth grade math teachers to collaborate in introducing an integrated math approach using a customized, blended learning environment that fosters independence and autonomy. An additional technology investment is the school’s purchase of a license so that students have internet access at home in order to access online lectures that build on deep mathematical concepts taught in class. Students have the ability to revisit lectures if needed for additional reinforcement. Furthermore, in order to support long-range goals centered on teacher effectiveness and its impact on producing exemplary student work by all students, the principal set aside funds for teacher partnerships that allow teachers to engage in developing tasks, and rubrics, and units of study which have moved teachers’ practices towards highly effective as determined by observations linked to the research based teachers effectiveness rubric. The Arts are integrated through partnerships with the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music and Art Shack providing students’ additional opportunities to utilize skills across all content areas. These organizational and budgetary decisions enable the school to align its resources to support goals that result in an increased quality of student work and noted progress on common assessments.

- School leaders strategically match students and teachers to ensure improved student outcomes. The school maintains an active file of resumes for potential candidates for vacancies which are given to the vertical teams that help determine the candidate best matched for the school. Teacher assignments reflect the needs of students with teams such as advisory, K-8 cohesion, and school culture meeting regularly to develop strategies for meeting student's academic and behavioral needs. Students are grouped heterogeneously and teacher assignments are based on licensure. Primary teachers are programmed to "loop" with their students during the expansion phase in order to provide instructional continuity from grade to grade. As a result, individuals and team of teachers are assigned to support targeted students especially English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities (SWD), who have shown improved quality in their work product as viewed in their digital portfolios.
- The school has created a safe and all encompassing environment with adults who work effectively in delivering a broad range of support services that meet students' academic and socio-emotional needs.(1.4)
 - A social-emotional-based curricula and transparency with staff regarding the integration of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and supports to strengthen instructional practices provides adults with opportunities to learn and grow producing more effective classroom environments. Teachers participate in lesson studies by evaluating videotaped lessons and discussing next steps. Teachers are encouraged to problem solve in safe spaces such as inquiry teams and grade meetings. Furthermore, the school's advisory system is the primary vehicle to support student advocacy with each teacher responsible for approximately 15 students. Advisors are responsible for remaining in contact with content area teachers on their advisee's performance and growth and maintaining a relationship with their students in order to support non-instructional concerns such as attendance and punctuality that might deter progress. Daily, morning meetings with middle school students and staff provide another opportunity for discussions around instructional and behavioral areas of concern in a safe place for students to voice their opinions. The middle school has an Office of Student Life consisting of a dean, guidance counselor, parent coordinator and the assistant principal that provides a daily check-in for students and a place for students to "de-stress" allowing students to be more proactive in controlling, monitoring and reflecting on their behaviors. Primary students are supported in a similar fashion with the services of a primary early childhood resource manager. Moreover, students have opportunities to discuss extracurricular activities and course offerings. An environmental club was created after a discussion with students and staff regarding recycling and global warming as well as a tolerance club that focuses on compassion towards others that might be different. This extended into a day of silence when negative and hateful words were not used and students participated in an anti-hate door design campaign. This results in an inclusive, highly responsive environment to staff and students as evident by an average attendance rate of 94% to date, few incidents reported on the On-Line Occurrence Reporting System and improved student performance on common assessments viewed in data binders.
- The extensive use of classroom observations and analyses of student outcomes provides feedback linked to a common teaching framework resulting in ongoing professional growth and improved student performance. (4.1)

- Cycles of observation by school leaders strategically focus on deliberately selected competencies, such as creating classrooms that build student independence and teacher questioning to further student discussions. Formal and informal observations include a look at student data and work samples and on several occasions are conducted together with teachers in order to norm feedback and next steps across staff. Classroom inter-visitation records are created based on focused questions to highlight overall trends, patterns, questions and next steps. Teachers observe each other's practices in provide an additional level of viewing classroom instruction. Peers follow a formalized school-developed tool to surface questions based on practices observed. For example, a teacher pairing led to a conversation about the necessity for explicit warm-up activity connections to support skills students need to solve newly introduced math problems. These professional activities result in feedback that informs self-reflection and goal setting for co-teaching and planning partnerships that support new teachers while building the capacity of other staff.

- Professional development opportunities are determined by observation data, teacher interest, CCLS integration and citywide instructional expectations. Teacher interests include topic extensions such as exploring Alaska and the effects of global warming in order to enhance student content knowledge. Furthermore, teacher and classroom data is used for transparent decision-making regarding teacher assignments. For example, teacher strengths are considered for "looping" from grade to grade. School leaders utilize strong vertical and horizontal inquiry teams to develop teacher and administrative leadership while also developing the skills of support personnel. Teachers and the assistant principal lead these teams, set agendas, and follow up on agenda items such as determining the impact of adjustments to units of study, refinement of teacher-created assessments, and vertical expectations on specific strands of the Common Core Learning Standards such as citing contextual evidence. The assistant principal uses her strong content knowledge and pedagogy to further teacher discussions in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) allowing strategic plans to be presented to students with appropriate scaffolds and supports. This results in a thoughtful and well developed plan to ensure all staff members grow, develop and lead to produce high quality student work.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue to align assessments to curricula and feedback that informs effective adjustments to instructional decisions at the team and classroom level. (2.2)
 - Student roundtables, college and career readiness continuum, and pre-and post-assessments are utilized to monitor student growth towards instructional goals. Common assessments such as performance tasks and teacher-created assessments are used to make strategic adjustments to curricula and monitor student progress. However, observed inquiry team meetings did not discuss targeted students' progress and adjustments made for specific students preventing a well-defined picture of all students' progress toward school goals.
 - Teachers consistently monitor student work, class data, and student's behaviors based on identified scholarly habits in order to determine student progress. Through the use of exit slips and student self-reflection sheets teachers across classrooms check for understanding and adjustments are made to lesson plans. However, reliance on those two types of checks for student learning limits teachers from making more precise adjustments to the curricula as well as providing more targeted feedback to all students on their work.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Academy of Arts and Letters	UD	D	P	WD			
Overall QR Score				X			
Instructional Core							
<i>To what extent does the school regularly...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.1 Design engaging, rigorous, and coherent curricula, including the arts, physical and health education, 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 that is informed by a research-based, common teaching framework and is aligned to curricula, engaging and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products?				X			
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?			X				
School Culture							
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that support the academic and personal growth of students and adults?				X			
3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students and families, and provide supports to achieve them?				X			
Systems for Improvement							
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.3 Make strategic organizational decisions to support the school's instructional goals and meet students' learning needs as evidenced by meaningful student work products?				X			
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?				X			
4.1 Use the observation of classroom teaching with a research-based, common teaching framework 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			
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?				X			
Quality Review Scoring Key							
UD	Underdeveloped	D	Developing	P	Proficient	WD	Well Developed