

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Urban Action Academy

High School K642

**1600 Rockaway Parkway
Brooklyn
NY 11236**

Principal: Abe Correa

Dates of review: May 14-15, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Ronald Feinstein

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Urban Action Academy is a high school with 305 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 83% Black, 11% Hispanic, 4% White, and 2% Asian students. The student body includes 35% English language learners and 37% special education students. Boys account for 63% of the students enrolled and girls account for 37%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 82.0%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Students experience a broad and engaging curriculum in which units of study incorporating the instructional shifts are embedded to meet the demands of the Common Core Learning Standards and to promote college readiness. (1.1)
 - The school has focused on developing the ability of students to communicate effectively in all content areas through writing and discussion, improving teachers' questioning techniques and designing lessons framed in the common core standards of staking a claim and using evidence to support one's argument. Some of the units of study come directly from the Common Core library, and others, especially in English language arts, have been adapted by the teachers to make them their own. For example, in a ninth grade English collaborative team teaching (CTT) classroom, students read *Macbeth* and study the decision-making process through an investigation of the difference between free-will and fate. Tenth graders study Tony Morrison's novel *Sula*, exploring the concepts of friendship and individuality and write an essay that analyzes two main protagonists and explains the role of individualism. Likewise, in living environment students explore provocative topics in genetics such as "What Are the Rights of My Offspring." The culminating task for this unit requires students to write a persuasive essay explaining the importance of genetic counseling, balancing claims and counter claims using evidence from a case study and three articles. In the math department, a review ensured that the instructional shifts were evident in unit plans as exemplified by a lesson in which students develop analytical skills through comparing properties of elements by graphing their ionization energies. A dedicated guidance counselor tracks progress to graduation of all students in every grade, with a focus on English language learners and students with disabilities providing trips to two out-of-state colleges with time to visit with professors and admission departments. Rigorous habits and higher order thinking are consistently emphasized in unit and lesson plans that engage all students and are purposefully designed to improve college and career readiness.
- High levels of student engagement across classrooms reflect a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn that is informed by a long-adopted common teaching framework. (1.2)
 - This year marks the school's third year of efforts with the *Framework for Teaching* in line with the Citywide Instructional Expectations. The school's charge to teachers on engaging students with high level questioning and discussion techniques sits strategically within their belief that meaningful work must be rigorous, while considering the students' current ability and social-emotional needs, and also further the school's mission to benefit the local and global community. Classroom visits reveal that teachers require students to make personal meaning, support and expand their reasoning through writing and discussion and

purposefully group students leading to high levels of engagement in challenging tasks. In a CTT class, students were reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. During a class discussion on what students' value, the teacher asked for evidence from the text of what a character valued and pushed students by asking, "How does this evidence prove that he has this value?" Later in the lesson, students wrote about what they value most, supporting their claims with evidence from real-life, and in a lively closing discussion, inferred the possible outcomes if they continue to hold this value. In a course specifically designed to support students who had previously failed the English Regents exam, students identified at least five literary elements that were used in Li-Young's poem "A Story." The school's large population of English language learners and students with disabilities are well-served in the many CTT classrooms where additional examples of access to the curriculum for all student abound such as another ICT class where all students engaged in a critical lens writing experience involving figurative language in a unit on faith and free will. One student stated, that figurative language "helps us to understand something that is complex...and gives us a different angle."

- The principal and assistant principal, cabinet and staff work cohesively to maintain the substantial sense of community and shared responsibility that motivates the academic and personal growth of all students. (1.4)
 - The school strives to remove student anonymity and students are known well and recognized by the principal, the assistant principal, the active parent coordinator and the dean, and, of course, their teachers. In fact, most students report that they rely first on their teachers and then any one of the aforementioned individuals. The practice of identifying students in crisis during the first period of the day and immediately providing intervention with the assistance of the full-time community assistant and or the guidance team is part of an action plan to create a nurturing environment through modeling forgiveness. Students are encouraged at every opportunity to own their behavior; apologies are accepted but the school motto is "I own my mistakes," encouraging safe risk-taking. For example, when a student is suspended, a re-entry conference is scheduled with the dean and the assistant principal for security and the student must write a reflection that connects behavior to academics. The student support team meets weekly with the principal and the attendance team and focuses on a set of five students to identify the source of misbehaviors, such as frequent absences and to address achievement issues. The tone of safety and the core value of forgiveness is echoed at assemblies and "lunch restorations," an opportunity for students to write and reflect and show forgiveness and be forgiven. Student government creates multiple opportunities for students to participate in school-wide decision making including on the school safety committee. Two students from each grade participate in student government and their collective voice has led to proposals providing trips for the school, several elective courses and club offerings that have resulted in academic advancements. In addition to a fairy tale club, sports clubs, ethnic dance, yearbook, and a gay straight alliance, the law club holds moot court and visited with a Supreme Court Justice in his chambers. These combined efforts resulted in a fall term course pass rate of 82% which exceeds the school's June goal of 78%, and a 5% increase in attendance.

- The school has crafted a highly effective system for monitoring all teachers' practices through a research-based lens that thoughtfully captures strengths and challenges and then provides actionable and accountable feedback. (4.1)
 - The principal and assistant principal have established a strategic support system for teachers which begins with a baseline self-evaluation early in the school year, two mid-year retreats and culminates with an end-of-year teacher self-reflection. Linking these two events are a series of classroom visits that are closely informed by the Danielsens *Framework for Teaching* focused primarily on designing coherent curriculum (1e), using questioning and discussion techniques (3b) and using assessment in instruction (3d). The school designed an electronic mini-observation tool to log teacher classroom observations based on the framework's rubric which attributes a quantitative score to each element observed. This system allows teachers and administrator to understand expectations for success and teacher development. For example, a pre-observation conference with a new teacher identified learning targets and outlined assessment strategies. During the observation, the principal took low-inference notes focusing on curriculum planning, questioning and discussion, and assessment, such as, "you continuously circulated to conduct formative assessments and guided conferences". The principal follows with specific recommendations and next steps such as "...expand the meaning of participation, so that more students are expected to participate and be active listeners." In subsequent visits to the same classroom the principal was able to provide a summary of the teacher's progress about classroom management and student engagement. The end-of-year self reflection provides an opportunity for teachers to measure how well their work aligns to the goals set earlier in the year and to create an action plan for the next school year. For example, in one end-of-year report, a teacher scored herself as a level two, and wrote that while she had aligned her course to the Blueprint for the Arts, she believed her instructional practices could be much improved if she had considered the goals of art appreciation along with the other core subjects more fully.

What the school needs to improve

- Make more explicit the link between teacher team collaborative work such as examining student work, surfacing gaps and misconceptions in student understanding and the connections to improvements in teacher practice. (4.2)
 - Teachers participate in twice-weekly inquiry teams using protocols such as Surfacing the Gaps, Tuning a Plan, and adaptations of Promises, Actions, Deliverables (PADS) and ICE (Introduce, Cite, Explain) to make group presentations on student work, ask clarifying questions about the work and provide feedback and time for reflection. Working toward meeting a school goal of continuing to build instructional capacity and developing students' abilities to use evidence to support oral and written argument, the teams use these protocols to analyze practice Regents exam essays and CCLS aligned culminating unit tasks. In one meeting, collaborative team teachers gathered sophisticated feedback on how to ensure their planned instruction would provide access for all learners in

their mixed ability and language challenged classroom. However, other teams visited were actually constrained by the protocols hindering their ability to strengthen instructional capacity. Likewise, the samples of work examined with the protocols did not provide a wide range of student responses, thereby limiting the team's ability to build coherence across the school.

- Deepen assessment practices of providing actionable information for purposeful decision-making at the instructional, team and classroom levels so that all students demonstrate increased achievement. (2.2)
 - The school administers baseline assessments in September and again at mid-year, practice Regents exams in late November and again in April with writing identified as an area of school-wide struggle. When eighth grade English language arts performance data showed that the design of the assessment instrument did not provide enough opportunities for students to expand on their writing, teachers collaboratively created an assessment that would allow them to measure student progress across five components: taking a position, providing evidence, organization, language and conclusion. The data specialist created a system that gathers data on these five components from September to mid-year in order to track progress for each student. Mid-year practice Regents data uncovered the need to help students strategize how to write more powerful document based essays. After making adjustments to curriculum and instruction such as incorporating more opportunities for writing and supporting argument across content areas and ensuring that lesson plans included high level questioning and critical thinking, ninth graders showed significant growth in using academic language and providing evidence from the documents with most students moving up one full level on a scale of 1-4. The percentage of students scoring a level one on the providing evidence component decreased from 23.7 to 5.1. While this work yields improved writing across classrooms, feedback to students is often focused on conventions over important content. For example, one teacher commented on an essay that "...you are very eager and willing to write, but you struggle with vocabulary." Another teacher provided this response to an essay on the Black experience: "You stated a precise nuanced claim that remains consistent throughout your piece. You distinguished the weighted claim against other opposing claims." This feedback does not provide students with the actions they need to take to improve their performance.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Urban Action Academy	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