

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Aspirations Diploma Plus

High School 646

**1495 Herkimer Street
Brooklyn, NY 11233**

Principal: Shermila Bharat

Dates of review: May 7 - 8, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Rosemary Stuart

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Aspirations Diploma Plus is a high school with 275 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 78% Black, 20% Hispanic, and 2% Asian students. The student body includes 2% English language learners and 7% special education students. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 56.8%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Administrators, teachers, students, and parents, uniformly believe and value a respectful, supportive culture to re-engage struggling students that results in positive impact on students' lives. (1.4)
 - The entire school community works to identify and recruit students who have been disengaged in academic pursuits and to support them as they re-focus on preparing for their futures. This philosophy is reflected in a school motto, "Meeting students where they are and equipping them to go where they aspire to go." Advocates from the Child Center of New York partner with administrators and teachers in outreach to prospective students while contributing to the school's supportive atmosphere that respects the place each student has reached on their journey to college and career. Students are active members in the school leadership team (SLT), even serving as co-chairs in accordance with another guiding principle relative to adult students taking responsible for their own decisions, who state they have a choice in how they learn. When students decided that studying Shakespeare would be a good way to prepare for the work they expect to do in college, their teacher included *Richard III* in a unit of study. Students were consulted on the best way to provide time for Regents prep courses and school leadership followed their advice when creating the schedules for these classes. Reflecting on the culture the school has built to support its students, over 90% of parents, teachers and students reported on the School Survey that they believe their classrooms are safe.
 - The school puts structures in place so that every student is assigned an advocate who knows him/her well and who is responsible for initiating daily contact. The advocates, from the Child Center of New York, are responsible for a wide variety of supports such as calling targeted students daily to remind them to come to school on time, making home visits to students who have been absent, and identifying ways to resolve issues preventing students from attending school. These advocates meet with each student individually twice each month to discuss progress and to ensure the support needed to succeed. As a result of these structures, attendance thus far this year is 64.6 %, 8% higher than last year, and 59% of eleventh grade students passed all of their courses in the second trimester, an increase from 39% the previous year.
- The principal allocates resources, assigns staff, and builds partnerships to attain school goals leading to improved student outcomes. (1.3)
 - The principal allocates funds for art, English, social studies, science, and math teachers to work with consultants on aligning units of study to the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and improving instructional practices. The school partners with Apex for online learning opportunities and offers pre-college skills courses with Medgar Evers College thus giving students opportunities to accelerate credit accumulation and improve their readiness for success in college. In addition to providing social-emotional supports, the Child Center of New York partners with the

school to organize paid internships for students in their Learning to Work program. Students say these internships not only provide them with income, but also give them experience and confidence to achieve their long-term goals.

- Two new guidance counselors focus on analyzing transcripts of new and existing students to determine what each one needs to graduate. In turn, the principal uses this information to determine teaching assignments and to program students accordingly, while keeping class size as small as possible to maintain needed support. The principal also analyzes scholarship data and Regents' exam results to determine the best matches between teachers and students for Regents preparation classes. After determining there was a need, the principal made program changes to provide the necessary support to English language learners and reassigned teachers after analyzing January Regents pass rates. A special education teacher partners with general education teachers to provide integrated co-teaching instruction in English classes. The impact on credit accumulation and Regents exam pass rates is already evident by comparing results from January of this year to the same time last year with 22% more ninth graders passing all of their classes, the English Regents exam pass rate improving from 17% to 62% and the Global History pass rate improving from 9% to 36%.
- Teachers align assessments with content area curricula and utilize a common grading policy to provide consistent feedback to students and inform adjustments to instruction in order to meet the needs of all learners. (2.2)
 - In line with the principal's policy, teachers design assessments that not only measure mastery of course content, but also help students develop persistence and become familiar with the types of questions they are likely to encounter on Regents exams. Even though there is no culminating Regents exam, the mid-term for physical education courses included multiple choice and short answer questions, such as explaining to an alien from outer space how to throw a football. When the principal determined there was a need for a common, uniform grading policy, teachers developed one that emphasizes assessments and class work. The policy, which is posted in classrooms, is used across grades and content areas to ensure that students know what is expected from them and to help them self-reflect on their own progress. Additionally, teachers use rubrics that are intentionally similar to those used on Regents' exams to inform students how to improve their work products. Students use the same rubrics to provide feedback to each other and self-reflect on their own learning. One student stated that he knew he had learned something when he could recognize that he had made a mistake. Teachers use the results of their formative assessments to revise future lessons and determine when re-teaching is needed and to inform other teachers about progress being made by students they share.
- Teacher teams and staff communicate high expectations and inform students and families about academic progress contributing to a culture that supports learners as they prepare for college and career. (3.4)
 - The school created a staff handbook in August 2012 that includes a letter from the principal outlining some of the challenges for the year that

concluded by stating, “I will be standing side by side with you as we continue our journey to graduating every child who enters our door.” Also included in the handbook is a graphic illustration depicting an Aspirations graduate as one who is articulate, open minded, responsible, able to overcome adversity, a problem solver and a rational thinker. Teachers and administrators are not alone in communicating high expectations for student performance: students report that they hold themselves and their peers to the same high expectations and that students who do not live up to those expectations, socially or academically, are wasting their last chance to graduate from high school. Parents report that teachers contact them frequently to give updates on the progress their children are making and that they can always obtain up-to-date information from the online grade reporting system. One parent observed that her daughter, “...has ten short-term goals, she didn’t used to have any” and attributed the change to the school’s constant pushing her to be college and career readiness.

- Teacher teams analyze student work and performance data, and focus on identifying the obstacles students face, providing support to students as they overcome those obstacles, and preparing students for success at the next level. In one team meeting, teachers conferenced with a student whose performance had dropped in recent weeks and together they developed an action plan with steps that both the student and the teachers would take to get him back on track. The principal attributes the large increase in the January 2013 graduates, from five students in 2012 to 12 students in 2013, on this type of intense attention to individuals. While five students met graduation requirements at the end of the trimester in March of 2012, 13 met them in March of 2013. Over 60 students are currently on track to graduate by August 2013, more than triple the number who graduated by August of 2012.

What the school needs to improve

- Expand the design of rigorous performance tasks to emphasize cross-grade and cross-content area connections with particular attention to the cognitive engagement of English language learners and students with disabilities. (1.1)
 - All teachers create curriculum maps for their content area and identify key standards to address in the units of study. After reviewing and providing extensive written comments on the units of study, the principal meets with each teacher to discuss how their units, lessons, and tasks, can be made stronger and more reflective of the CCLS instructional shifts and the Citywide Instructional Expectations. One teacher commented that it was not easy poring over his units of study with the principal, but in the end, he realized how much it helped him improve his lesson planning. However, this intense work has not yet resulted in curriculum maps that are integrated vertically from grade to grade or lesson plans that explicitly address the needs of all learners. As a result, the school is not fully leveraging the curriculum to close the achievement gap for its relevant sub-groups.
 - Most teachers incorporate rigorous tasks and focus on acquisition of skills needed for college and career, but not all teachers are designing tasks that incorporate the same high level of thinking. For example, in one lesson a task addressing the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle required

students to write about the relationship between writer, reader and subject, but a lesson plan on the causes of a lunar eclipse called for all students to cut out a template and create a two-dimensional model of the motion of the earth, moon and sun following a set of detailed instructions, a level 2 task on the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) matrix. This inconsistent planning for rigorous tasks does not allow all students to explore and create their own understanding of complex topics.

- Provide consistent access to challenging tasks through multiple entry points across classrooms so that all students are engaged in higher-order thinking leading to improved discourse and participation. (1.2)
 - Teachers use strategies and questioning techniques to animate and engage students in higher-order thinking with varying levels of success. In one writing class, students were involved in a lively character analysis of Shakespeare's Richard III. One student claimed that Richard had a heart, even if he was a swindler while others debated whether being manipulative could be both a positive and a negative character trait. As animated as this discussion was, students were not required to explicitly refer to the text to support their arguments. Some teachers, but not all, conduct their lessons to allow for differing student needs. In an English class, the teacher purposefully organized one group of students to complete a writing assignment they had missed and a second group of students to peer edit each other's work. In both groups there were some students with a high level of participation and other students who were disengaged. In a math class the teacher retaught a lesson to the entire class even though at least one student had demonstrated understanding in the prior lesson. This inconsistent engagement of students in challenging tasks hinders the school in achieving its goals for all students to reach their potential.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name:	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