

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Independence High School

High School M544

**850 Tenth Avenue
Manhattan
NY 10019**

Principal: Ron Smolkin

Dates of review: February 11 – 12, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Flavia Puello

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Independence High School is a transfer high school with 386 students from grade 9 through grade 12 enrolled at two locations. The school population comprises 38% Black, 57% Hispanic, 2% White, 2% Asian students and 1% other students. The student body includes 5% English language learners and 14% special education students. Boys account for 47% of the students enrolled and girls account for 53%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 66.0%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is developing.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school provides a safe and welcoming environment that nurtures academic, social and emotional growth and, as a result, students re-engage with their learning. (1.4)
 - Each student in the building has at least one adult that knows them well and whom they seek for support. One guidance counselor explains, “The amount of time we spent with students is crucial.” The counselors conduct academic reviews with each student at least once per semester and meet frequently with struggling students. This was evident when meeting with students since almost all of them had copies of their transcript review detailing courses they had completed and what they still needed to do to graduate. In addition, the staff conducts face-conferencing sessions where they review students’ anecdotes, performance level, and student work in order to get a sense of how students are performing academically and adapting to the school. Therefore, the entire staff, as well as the school-based support organization staff from the YWCA-NYC, have developed strong relationships with students around both their academic and emotional needs. These supporting relationships allow students to overcome obstacles that limited their academic success in the past and have improved the academic performance of many of the students at Independence, as evidenced by the improvement in course passing rates for the fall semester. For example, the course passing rates for English language learners increased by 10% when compared to last year and the passing rate for students with individual education plans increased by 5%.
 - One parent at the school reported that, “the school gives our children a chance, a voice, stability and hope.” One of the parents explained that, prior to coming to this school, her son was disengaged with school and was considering dropping out. Both parents and students agree that the school’s personalization model, high expectations, and support services have allowed students to re-engage with school and to make a positive transition from their previous school. Students articulate that adults are respectful to them, and that the adults want them to do well while providing opportunities for students’ voices to be included. As one student stated, “Before, I thought I was not going to be able to ever be done with school.” “Teachers care about us here,” says another. This personalization and sense of community has led to an increase in student attendance, particularly for students with chronic absenteeism, and a decline in the number of incidents so far this year, which has allowed students and staff to communicate that they feel safe and respected in school. This system of support for students provides a positive culture of collaboration and mutual respect. As a result, the number of students becoming involved in school activities as well as those participating in classroom activities and discussions had increased, thereby creating a positive impact on student academic and social development.
- The school administrators provide targeted feedback that supports professional growth for teachers at all stages of their career. (4.1)

- The administrative team has implemented a common framework to provide targeted feedback and determine specific professional development needs of teachers. The administrative team is currently in the process of completing the second instructional round on questioning and discussion. Teachers receive written feedback during instructional rounds with recommendations to improve questioning and discussing, as well as feedback on developing rigorous instructional tasks that support student thinking and engagement. Because of the targeted focus on questions and discussion and the feedback provided, across the school teachers are beginning to shift how they tailor their lessons in order to develop meaningful learning experiences for students.
- School leaders provide professional learning opportunities that are aligned with the school's vision for teaching and learning, and provide multiple entry points for teachers to receive support. The school shared their professional development agendas, which detail questioning and discussion techniques as part of the primary instructional focus. This provides evidence that the school is supporting teachers as they begin to shift instructional practice and classroom routines.
- The school leader has made strategic decisions around organization and resources that support the school's goals and these decisions are leading the school in a positive trajectory. (1.3)
 - The principal has developed a strong partnership with YWCA-NYC, which support students' social-emotional and academic needs through the after school program and internship opportunities. The school is part of the Transfer School Common Core Learning Standards Institute, which provides both pedagogical and administrative support to teachers as they prepared for the full implementation of Common Core aligned curricula. Funding through the Transfer School Initiative has allowed the school an opportunity to set structures that can supplement the school's professional development offerings and enhance the support offered to new teachers as well as teachers identified for additional support. The school works closely with the Network Achievement Coach and has hired consultants to support new staff, assist with the school focus on Understanding by Design (UbD), and support the social studies teachers by implementing The John Collins Writing Program. As a result of this effort to align resources to the needs of the school and to implement a more consistent instructional focus, student outcomes on summative assessments have improved.
 - School leaders have structured common planning time three times per week for all teachers in order to meet the instructional expectations, as well as to increase professional collaboration and sharing of best practices. Teacher teams use common planning time to share and discuss curricula in order to provide feedback as teachers work to develop performance tasks and Common Core aligned units. Additionally, the teachers use this time to work on developing school-wide rubrics and have discussions around best teaching strategies to support English language learners and students with disabilities. This structure has increased collaboration between the staff and is providing a vehicle to increase rigor and differentiation of curricular tasks.

What the school needs to improve

- Further develop assessment practices, including a school-wide grading policy, that allow for consistent evaluation of data in order to make curricular and instructional decisions that improve student outcomes. (2.2)
 - Each student takes a math and writing diagnostic assessment as they enter the school. However, it is unclear how these results are used to drive instruction as students transition into the school. Teachers track progress of students in their classes via teacher made tests, projects and other informal classroom assessments; however, they do not use common periodic assessments that would inform progress across classrooms and over time in a systemic way to allow for monitoring student growth and setting goals for improvement. The administrative team is in the process of supporting teachers with implementing mid-terms and end-of-the-year assessments. The principal states, “We are working to implement a school-wide grading policy for the spring semester.” In some classrooms, teachers assess students through conferencing, class work and the use of “exit slips” where students leave notes about what they learn; however, these practices are inconsistent across the school. The school leaders identify that they are currently working on a feedback tool or rubric that captures what students do in class. The lack of school-wide periodic assessments limits the school’s ability to evaluate individual and groups of students’ strengths and weaknesses as well as the ability to monitor the school’s progress in regards to meeting the instructional needs of students across classrooms.
- Continue to develop instructional practices across classrooms so that all learners are engaged in classroom discussions as well as rigorous tasks that deepen their understanding and support higher-order thinking skills. (1.2)
 - The school leaders have asked teachers to focus on implementing higher-order thinking questions that promote classroom discussion and student engagement. In the majority of classes, teachers are beginning to focus on higher-order skills by including them in lesson objectives; however, in classes observed most teachers used a majority of low-level questions through the lesson. The use of open-ended questions and discussion are not consistently implemented and not all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities, are fully engaged in the curriculum and supported across the content areas. As the principal stated, “It is a work in progress.” For example, some teachers use higher-order thinking questions but do not allow sufficient time for students to engage with each other around this learning experience. When any kind of discussion took place, this occurred between teachers and students with minimal student-to-student interactions. In some classrooms, teachers offer additional assignments for advanced students, but they are not rigorous or engage students in higher-order thinking, which resulted in lost opportunities to push students thinking and the growth of high performing students. Therefore, the instructional practices are inconsistent with the needs of both struggling students and students that are ready to be challenged with rigorous task, as evidenced by classroom observation and students work samples. As a

result, inconsistent instructional practices and challenging tasks hinder student academic success across classrooms.

- Strengthen systems for ensuring curricular alignment across grades and disciplines in order to identify content and skills needed to guide career and college pathways. (1.1)
 - A review of sample unit plans artifacts shows that the school is making progress in terms of developing units aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS). However, a unit plan reviewed during the science teacher team meeting only included key State standards and lacked CCLS alignment. Currently, teacher teams meet weekly to work on curriculum development and alignment by providing peer feedback around the CCLS-aligned unit of studies. Units are developed through backwards planning using the UbD model. Essential questions are included in each of the units, but some of the questions appear to be overarching questions rather than essential questions. In addition, rigorous instructional task were not evident in some classrooms and these task were not differentiated to meet the needs of students that are performing at different levels. In these classrooms, lessons were teacher centered and there was not enough opportunity for students to engage in accountable talk and critical thinking. For example, in one classroom, students sat in groups to complete a diagram comparing meiosis and mitosis. In some instances students already knew the content of the lesson objective and, therefore, were able to complete the lesson assignment without much effort, while others were simply relying on information provided by their peers rather than discussing the difference or developing their understanding of these processes. Overall, the quality of the curriculum remains uneven among the staff, leading to missed opportunities for students to be consistently exposed to a rigorous curriculum that promotes college readiness.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Independence High School	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