

Quality Review Report 2012-2013

Russell Sage

**Middle School 190
68-17 Austin Street
Queens
NY 11375**

Principal: Marilyn Grant

Dates of review: January 8 - 9, 2013

Lead Reviewer: Sheila S. Gorski

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Russell Sage is a middle school with 1035 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 8% Black, 26% Hispanic, 28% White, and 36% Asian students. The student body includes 11% English language learners and 12% special education students. Boys account for 53% of the students enrolled and girls account for 47%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2011 - 2012 was 95.1%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- The school is consistently focused on aligning the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) to curricula so that units of study are rich and motivating for all learners, thus strengthening the level of student engagement. (1.1)
 - The school's curriculum maps are data-driven and thematically designed to align to the school's chosen key standards and instructional shifts. They include an essential question as each lesson's focus to guide questions and sparks, thus promoting engaging conversations. In English language arts, math, and all content areas, teachers plan the assignments of student groups so they collaboratively work in flexible groups on performance-based projects and presentations to deepen the thinking and understanding around reading and analyzing complex text. When speaking to students it was evident that students understood the purpose of group assignments and the expectations of choosing the appropriate concept for application. An eighth grade midpoint CCLS aligned math task required all eighth grade students to use functions to model relationships between quantities. Each student was to create function tables for three different scenarios, and then evaluate their data to answer questions, justify their choice, and extend their function tables to answer challenging questions defending their responses. Careful emphasis is placed on making content relevant to real life situations to maximize transfer of skills and generalization while assuring that all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities are cognitively engaged. Teachers use student work to make specific revisions and instructional bends with the purpose of ensuring continuous student engagement and supporting student interests. Similarly, tasks in all content areas are planned and refined prompting students into deeper reasoning. This is evidenced in the math data indicating that 78% of eighth grade students are at grade level in math expectations.
- Across classrooms teachers engage all students in supportive lessons where multiple entry points reflect the school's shared belief that students learn best via effective questioning techniques that result in high levels of student thinking. (1.2)
 - The school's deeming planning and preparation as critical components to student engagement and questioning as central to teaching and learning, mirrors the school's teaching framework based upon the Danielson Framework. Thus, students are probed into higher-order thinking through the art of questioning. Teachers plan question scaffolds in English language arts, math, and across the content areas, consequently, engaging all learners including relevant subgroups, supporting them by building from the literal, to interpretive, to critical thinking via questions. Throughout lessons teachers ensure that they tap into various thinking levels so that all students have ample opportunities to show authentic thinking as evidenced school wide in student portfolios complete with math, writing, and content area work samples exhibiting high levels of thinking.
 - Teachers express that the focus on questioning techniques required, "a coherence shift." Further explication describes the coherence shift as,

“teachers now have an acute awareness of the questions they plan, and where and how to design and embed them in their plans,” requiring them to engage in consistent planning of questions in order to prompt student conversations and deepen student discussions. Furthermore, this conscientious approach has continuously resulted in students asking thoughtful questions of their teachers and their peers leading to rich discussions. A variety of access points, such as, graphic organizers, large print materials, representations, and models, along with the use of visuals are some examples of what teachers use to facilitate comprehension, while assuring that all students including relevant subgroups are cognitively engaged in text-demanding tasks. This is evidenced in unit exit project choices where students aptly engage in creating videos, power points, comic books, and research projects, models that demonstrate concepts or phenomena, or an interactive, informative poster. This is coupled with a writing assignment, an oral report, and an essential question that all students must respond to, generating yet another written report, and opportunity to exhibit higher-order thinking skills in student work.

- Teachers use common assessments aligned to key standards and unit objectives to determine student progress and make effective curricular adjustments. (2.2)

Student portfolios filled with formative assessments and dated student work show gradual academic improvements and rubrics with teacher comments and feedback so students know their progress toward meeting academic goals. Periodic assessments aligned to key standards are diagnostic measures used across grades and subject areas to identify trends, strengths, and needs, and consistently inform instruction and the development and use of a uniform grading policy, thus teachers have a clear understanding of student learning needs and are able to continuously make suitable curricula changes. Student groupings in science are occasionally rearranged based on reading comprehension data results. The teacher posts a list of assigned triads that students reference as they arrive for class, so the “Where do I sit today?” is a suitable group assignment. Students understand that these triads are formed from data results relative to similar skill levels, enabling peers to support one another. For continuous peer and teacher individual support students are regularly reassessed and reassigned to other groups. Student comprehension in content areas is measured via formative assessments throughout a unit of study culminating with summative assessments at the end. Teachers use formative assessments to inform instruction and measure student performance and progress relative to achieving set goals. Such include conference notes from strategy lessons, on-the-spot daily notebook checks, homework assignments, and small group instruction. Teachers also use summative assessments to measure content-specific knowledge and student acquisition of a subject area, and multiple choice, constructed responses, a case study of a topic, make up suitable assessments, . After completion of a unit study, seventh grade students were asked to select a colony from the New England, Middle or southern regions and research geography, daily life, culture, land use, resources, government, key people and the role of Native Americans, Africans and women. The resulting research of factors contributing to the development of the colonial regions, examining what life was like in the colonies, explaining the sequence of events that led the colonies to declaring independence from Great Britain, discussion of the outcome of the Revolutionary War, and its impact on everyone, provide teachers a clear picture of student progress toward unit goals. .

- The school 's focus on questioning techniques draws from Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) to assist in designing performance-based tasks that highlight content-specific vocabulary and content embedded activities. CCLS aligned tasks that are also assessments comprise content text reading, and questions that challenge thinking and deepen the learning. Teachers administer Acuity-CCLS assessments to evaluate student work and determine student grades across content areas as evidenced on the Acuity CCLS assessments showing grade 7 gains from 53% to 59%, and in grade 8 an 18% gain from 53% to 71% of the students at or above grade level expectations.
- The school draws on a short set of databased goals that serves as a lens for leveraging changes that improve teacher practice across classrooms, resulting in accelerated student learning and social-emotional growth. (3.1)
 - The Comprehensive Educational Plan shows a clear set of goals depicting the school's initiatives that carry over from 2011 to the present, and include raising the level of teacher knowledge of the CCLS and furthering their implementation to increase student learning and personal behavioral growth. The school's numerous action plans focus on relevant subgroups and pedagogical growth so that there is an understanding of the key standards as the center of the instructional improvement. The Principal's Performance Review supports the long-range goals with an intensive focus on the needs of African-American students, a subgroup the school data cites as deficient in vocabulary, comprehension of non-fiction text, and critical thinking. The guidance department examines individual circumstances to determine student needs, and together with teachers and parents develops success plans that incorporate one-to-one or small group counseling, study skills, coping mechanisms, and life skills, all of which promote social-emotional growth and increase student achievement. Internal and external professional development opportunities are designed by the network's English language arts specialist and special education specialist, and provide opportunities for teacher input around specific needs. Collaborative inquiry goals foster the execution of strategies such as the use of thinking maps, scaffolding strategies, writing in all content areas to support and reinforce skills for extensive writing, and a compilation of teacher best practices to share amongst colleagues and that expand teachers' toolkits. Extensive data analyses and adjustments continue to guide teacher capacity and contextualize school goals across classrooms. Periodic use of data results hone in on skills not yet mastered. Moreover, for targeted subgroups teachers employ academic intervention services that are supplementary, and include Prentice Hall Skill Builder, and Reading Advantage. Pre/post assessments inform student status and progress of initiatives and teacher examination of student work and created checkpoints inform careful changes. Data results indicate that the relevant subgroups are making substantial progress at this time. 86 of 95 African American students are at levels 2-4, 55 of 67 English language learners are at levels 2-4 and 107 of 156 students with disabilities students are at levels 2-4 in English language arts. Thus, there is a closing of the achievement gap as evidenced in the item analysis in English language arts showing 93% of all students achieving at levels of 2 through 4.

What the school needs to improve

- Enhance the observation process of classroom teaching to strategically elevate clear expectations that result in accelerated pedagogical growth. (4.1)
 - The school implements a structured observation process that the leadership uses to tailor professional development for all teachers. Formal and informal observations include instructional rounds, and student data meetings. TeachBoost is an online goal-based program the school uses to set teacher goals. Frequent, targeted observations lead to informed feedback and meaningful conversations about next steps for teachers as related to their goals. The school may choose to focus on specific action areas or State standards. In efforts to build upon a transparent and collaborative teaching environment, teachers have the ability to set their own goals and contribute evidence toward their progress, thus affording them input over their growth and development. However, teachers do not seem to fully understand how to transfer and apply the feedback they receive as it relates to the current work with CCLS and key standards and its basis for teaching and learning, resulting in a limited approach to how teachers use and apply the feedback.
 - Teachers receive specific feedback that assists in reflections of what teachers do well and in the challenges faced around the practices used to continuously increase the rigor of instruction. Teachers learn from one another and the network support specialist and utilize best practices identified by colleagues and shared across the grades and subjects. These practices support teacher development and are discussed with leadership, providing teachers one-to-one verbal and written feedback. During teacher team meetings, teachers expressed their support of how the school has implemented the instructional shifts and key standards, but also revealed their thoughts of the need for more feedback and further guidance on their professional development. In spite of the school's efforts to effectively provide teacher feedback, there is not yet an in-depth approach to systemically align the feedback so that there is a school-wide understanding of how this feedback promotes assistance in their professional growth.
- Expand the evaluation process to purposefully monitor and adjust the effectiveness of teacher teams and cultured-embedded teacher practices to best support student mastery of Common Core Learning standards. (5.1)
 - Teachers proactively avail themselves of teacher development workshops. Attendance at workshops hosted by Urban Advantage, a standards-based partnership program designed to improve student comprehension of scientific inquiry enabled them to engage in hands-on experiences, which they then used in the classroom, so that students shared similar experiences. A lead teacher team is charged with fostering effective instruction via demonstration and dialogue of effective practices, standardized lesson planning, and planning using Acuity data in the content areas, and team members' classrooms serve as lab-sites for teacher visitation. However, although teachers engage in relevant activities, and receive verbal feedback, teachers express the need for additional written feedback and training in data analysis that will inform their teamwork and assist in making necessary adjustments to ensuring their work is purposeful. Additionally, while the school has a process for regularly evaluating the quality of its culture and teacher teams, it has not yet advanced its processes to formalize procedures in written feedback as reference points for teachers, thus hindering the full impact on teacher development, building teacher capacity around instruction, and further increasing student achievement.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2012-2013

School name: Russell Sage	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