

# Quality Review Report 2013-2014

**Foundations Academy**

**High School 14K322**

**70 Tompkins Avenue  
Brooklyn  
NY, 11206**

**Principal: Jimmy Molina**

**Dates of review: March 18, 2014**

**Lead Reviewer: Deena Abu-Lughod**

## Part 1: The school context

### Information about the school

Foundations Academy is a high school with 110 students from 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 62% Black, 33% Hispanic, 1% White, and 2% Asian students. The student body includes 6% English language learners and 36% special education students. Boys account for 59% of the students enrolled and girls account for 41%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2012 - 2013 was 73.9%.

### Overall Evaluation

**This school is developing.**

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- The school is beginning to design curricula and tasks that reflect the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and the instructional shifts so that some student learning experiences are more rigorous and promote college readiness. (1.1)
  - Two years ago, with network support, many teachers created units of study that reference the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS). This year, the school created monthly scopes and sequences by pasting in all the standards, albeit without reference to the corresponding units. While the school has not yet updated these units to specify the formative or culminating tasks, evidence from the art teacher and the new Algebra teacher indicate that some new units are more fully reflective of the standards. A new partnership with Medgar Evers College Genome Project, which provides the curriculum for a new credit bearing complement to the Living Environment course, has a special section for advanced students who are exploring medical ethics, where some students engage in some substantial writing assignments. In addition, some teachers have begun the use of some rigorous units made available through EngageNY and included the requirement that some seniors use research skills. The wording of some classroom tasks, including projects and written assignments, draw on higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy and students indicate that teachers provide access to the curriculum in multiple ways, including read alouds, side-by-side texts of original and simplified Shakespeare plays, and videos. In some classes, students choose projects from a menu of choices at varying levels of difficulty so they can engage at a suitable level of challenge. Teachers are starting to develop student writing skills through document-based questions by prompting them to cite sources and provide evidence, making the requirement understandable by emphasizing, "This is the same skill as when you ask parents for money." As a result, there is an increase in the volume of writing and completion of work in some courses that is approaching the levels required for college and career.
- Some pedagogical practices reflect the school's belief in student-centered learning by providing opportunities for student discussion to elevate the levels of student thinking and participation. (1.2)
  - The school believes students learn best when provided with rigorous learning opportunities in a student-centered environment where workshop-model lessons provide students with multiple entry points into the curriculum. Teachers are aware of the Daniel Framework for Teaching, which has guided their professional learning over the last few years. In order to support curricular alignment, the school has also developed a uniform template for lesson plans that requires teachers to identify the standards, performance objectives, concepts, procedures, and plans for differentiation, assessment and homework. In some classrooms, some discussions are loosely based on texts or videos, and allow for students to tap into personal experiences, such as a discussion on whether all humans are selfish, on which all students could express an opinion. Students sit in groups or in circles in nearly all classes and typically engage in the same activities. In some classes, such as in geometry, the tasks required students to apply knowledge of altitude and leg theorems to find unknown lengths of similar triangles and students worked together in purposefully heterogeneous groups to solve them.

Students say that one teacher frequently involves them in Socratic Circles, on which teachers were trained three years ago, where they engage in structured debate and provide feedback to each other regarding the quality of their participation. The presence of these group structures is beginning to elevate the quality of student participation in some classes as observed across some classrooms.

- The school is working towards creating a safe environment that encourages open communication among all stakeholders that is promoting improvements in students' academic and personal behaviors. (1.4)
  - Parents, teachers and students agree that the tone at this small school where "everyone knows each other" has improved greatly, and classrooms and hallways were observed to be calm throughout the day. The new dean has implemented positive approaches to reinforce proper behaviors, speaking quietly and privately with individual students when necessary, and establishing systems to help students abide by school rules. For example, hats can be kept in the principal's office during the day, which helps students comply with this school rule. The principal has an open door policy that encourages communication so that teachers and students can have an impact on school decision-making. A student committee successfully proposed the establishment of a girls' basketball team, and students say the school is open to their proposals. To try to recover from last year's 10 point drop in attendance, the school now celebrates perfect attendance and improvement, as well as high achievement and improvement. These celebrations include the posting of a photo and a synopsis of the student's accomplishments written by the guidance counselor or a teacher, as well as material incentives, such as lunches, pizza parties, and gift cards. To build school spirit, the school has initiated flag football games in the new playground and school trips. The pupil personnel team meets weekly and has succeeded in providing the services identified in individualized education plans. In addition, the guidance counselor helps mediate interpersonal issues that arise between students. These measures are helping to create a culture of trust that is conducive to learning.

### **What the school needs to improve**

- Align assessments and rubrics to content and the standards so that these data sources inform adjustments to curriculum and instruction and enable teachers to provide meaningful feedback to students to improve their levels of achievement. (2.2)
  - The principal states that the school is working to improve its use of assessment and to develop a common grading policy, which is different for each department. At present, only 35-40% of course grades are based on standards-aligned assessments, a practice that prevents the school, students and their parents from using classroom grades as reliable indicators of student achievement. The school attributes the misalignment between course passing rates and Regents passing rates to test anxiety, which one teacher has tried to address by announcing that an assignment was a test after the fact or, according to one parent, by rewarding good scores with McDonalds. However, the school has not attempted to identify student needs through item analyses, or to evaluate the quality of their own assessments and curriculum in relation to the Regents or the Common Core standards to make adjustments. Teachers across the school use rubrics of various types,

including holistic rubrics from the Regents and in some cases, rubrics that align to the Common Core standards. However, teacher feedback to students is minimal and rarely aligned to the rubrics, and many students state that they do not see their value. While one student said having a rubric “is like having the teacher next to me,” other students complained that “even if a paper is perfect”, the teacher “still finds something to complain about.” Thus, teachers’ limited response to using assessment outcomes to provide meaningful feedback to students prevents students from knowing what to improve or how to make improvements, as reflected in some students’ comments. In addition, teachers do not share common understandings of quality and have not normed expectations using work samples in the Common Core appendix or other resources, resulting in students not understanding why work of similar caliber is graded differently. While there is no evidence of this year’s instructional focus on formative assessment, because of high absenteeism, class size is small, which allows teachers to circulate while students are working independently or in small groups to conduct informal assessments. Some teachers use the same “ticket-out-the-door,” where students write “what was the most important thing I learned” and questions that remained, but these are not specific enough to provide the teacher with meaningful feedback. For example, after a lesson on the achievements of Emperor Justinian, students responded “he was a peasant,” “his wife was a stripper,” and “everything,” thus losing an opportunity to evaluate whether the aim had been met. The absence of common approaches to developing and using high quality assessments limits the school’s ability to inform instructional and curricular adjustments to improve student learning.

- Establish and track progress on an explicit set of data driven goals that are understood by all constituencies to drive efforts for professional development that support school improvement. (3.1)
  - All constituencies claim the school’s main goal is to ensure students engage in a rigorous course of study and graduate. However, this goal is not stated in the Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP), and the principal indicated that most of the current cohort is not on track to graduate. Last year, the school was successful in increasing student credit accumulation which improved these metrics on the NYC progress report, but this was not matched by similar increases in Regents passing rates. For example, while approximately 80% of sophomores and juniors earned credit for their English courses, only 39% passed the English Regents, down from 56% three years before. Similarly, 66% of students earned Algebra credit, but only 20% passed the Algebra Regents, down from 36% two years ago. The self-evaluation states that the school’s instructional focus for the year is on formative assessment, but there is no action plan related to this focus, and there is no evidence that it has been supported by the school wide professional development sessions. Specifically, these sessions have focused on the role of Professional Learning Communities, unpacking Domain 3 of the Danielson Framework, and classroom expectations such as the use of rubrics and the electronic grading system, and engaging teachers in walkthroughs. Inspired by the chancellor, the principal states that he also started a “Book-of-the-Month” initiative for teachers in February, but has not clarified expectations for what should change in teacher practice or student outcomes, although some teachers on their own are implementing ideas they have read about. Some goals in the CEP do not relate to high school metrics, for example, “a 5% increase in students scoring at Levels 3 & 4 on the NYS ELA assessment” and many activities specified in the action plans

have not been implemented. For example, the "individual professional development plan for each teacher" consists only of a beginning of the year statement of what teachers believe their strengths are and what they are interested in learning. Few teachers indicated what they would work on to improve their practice and the supervisory process does not connect to what teachers wrote at the beginning of the year. In addition, there is little evidence that the plan for designing and implementing Common Core aligned units and tasks have been acted upon. In other cases, the action plan does not match the goal. For example, the goal related to the recommendation that teachers ask cognitively demanding questions, states that there will be a 3% improvement in attendance, which will be achieved by organizing, analyzing and disseminating data, utilizing data to monitor all systems that support student social and emotional health, and finally, through effective use of the school counselor to address absence and lateness. The lack of clarity about school goals and specific action plans that are tracked from progress hampers the school's efforts to improve student outcomes and teacher practice.

- Implement a supervisory process that provides specific, actionable feedback connecting identified areas for teacher growth to next steps, to accelerate improvement in pedagogy and impact positively on student outcomes. (4.1)
  - The principal and assistant principal conduct formal and informal observations of teaching practice using the Danielson Framework for Teaching. The principal states that these observations are used to inform overall professional development needs and to identify teachers in need of additional pedagogical support which is provided by the principal, network team members and a Generation Ready expert. According to the teacher union representative, teachers feel supported in improving their practice. For example, one teacher stated that he now stops videos at certain points to discuss the material rather than allowing uninterrupted viewing. However, his questions were tangential to the lesson aim of identifying the achievements of the Justinian Empire. Another teacher said he now provides wait time and no longer answers his own questions. While all the specific indicators from the Danielson Framework are rated, the descriptions do not include evidence from the observed lessons that indicate the teaching strengths and weaknesses. Instead, they contain only the language lifted directly from the rubric, such as "The teacher's questions lead students through a single path of inquiry, with answers seemingly determined in advance." This prevents teachers from understanding which aspects of the lesson were considered in arriving at the rating, which reduces the transparency of the supervisory process. In addition, there is no evidence that these evaluations involve the examination of student work and data so that teachers can reflect on the impact of their teaching on student learning. Informal observations do not provide any formative feedback to teachers that specifies what to change, how and by when. Formal observations stated, "Questioning techniques need to be improved" and "Try to step up the rigor in the delivery of the lesson," or opinions such as she has the potential of being an excellent teacher and include assignments of viewing video clips from the PD360 online platform. Teacher logins and viewing times are recorded electronically, but there is no system to evaluate how teacher practice has changed as a result of those viewings and not all teachers have actually viewed the videos. In the absence of specific, actionable feedback, the supervisory process impacts minimally on professional growth and reflective practice.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2013-2014

School name: Foundations Academy	UD	D	P	WD			
<b>Overall QR Score</b>		X					
<b>Instructional Core</b>							
<i>To what extent does the school regularly...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.1 Ensure engaging, rigorous, and coherent curricula in all subjects, accessible for a variety of learners and aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and/or content standards?		X					
1.2 Develop teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by the instructional shifts and Danielson Framework for Teaching, aligned to the 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						
<b>School Culture</b>							
<i>To what extent does the school ...</i>	UD	D	P	WD			
1.4 Maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports 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 those expectations?		X					
<b>Systems for Improvement</b>							
<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 student 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 Observe teachers using the Danielson Framework for Teaching along with the analysis of learning outcomes to elevate school-wide instructional practices and implement strategies that promote professional growth and reflection?		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					
<b>Quality Review Scoring Key</b>							
<b>UD</b>	<b>Underdeveloped</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>WD</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>