



**Department of
Education**

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**Quality Review
Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning
2013-2014**

Quality Review Report 2013-2014

Essex Street Academy

02M294

**350 Grand Street
Manhattan
NY 10002**

Principal: Erin Carstensen

Dates of review: March 3-4, 2014

Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman

Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Essex Street Academy is a high school with 346 students from 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 34% Black, 43% Hispanic, 16% White, and 7% Asian students. The student body includes 4% English language learners and 19% special education students. Boys account for 49% of the students enrolled and girls account for 51%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2012 - 2013 was 87.1%.

Overall Evaluation

This school is proficient.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- Teachers design Common Core and New York Performance Assessment Consortium aligned curricula offering all students a rigorous learning experience that requires them to demonstrate critical thinking. (1.1)
 - The “ultimate standard for rigor” is when students at Essex Street Academy work towards completing the four-year graduation requirement process (PBAT). The design of the PBAT is such that students must master a set of discipline specific skills aligned to The New York Performance Assessment Consortium and the Common Core Standards in literature, social studies, math, science, and art. This process guides curricula planning with the goal to prepare students to write literary criticism, historical research, conduct an original science experiment, problem solve in math, and produce a work series in art. Ultimately, all seniors will defend a well-researched issue of their choice in a panel discussion in senior year. To this end, ninth and tenth grade class work is focused on acquiring skills needed to participate in a round table (mini PBAT) discussion so that by eleventh and twelfth grade, students can defend an original thesis. Students discussed the difficulty in the PBAT process, speaking in defense of a topic and not knowing which side of an issue they will be asked to defend. “It is an honor to qualify for a roundtable, a teacher will say, “you are not ready.” Another added, “Roundtables and presentations help to prepare us for college where you may be in classes where you have to debate.” This results in students who are well-versed in articulating claims and counterclaims, as evidenced in exemplary work products, an increase in college and career readiness on the Progress Report, and preparedness and readiness in demonstrating critical thinking.
 - Across classrooms extensive tasks provide access for all students. For example, in Genetics class students created Punnett Squares and Pedigrees to determine if it is possible for two brown-eyed people to have a blue-eyed child. Students worked together, teachers conferred with students, and the task packet included vocabulary and writing prompts, charts and note taking organizers to support students with disabilities and English language learners. This prefaced students creating an experimental family to extend learning to a new circumstance. In an Immigration and Economics class students used primary source documents regarding naturalization, visiting “stations” to study migrant stories and to infer what the stories revealed about United States immigration policy, where they were to ultimately draw conclusions about immigration policy based on primary sources. One student shared that while “they discussed deportation, these stories go deeper.” The lesson culminated in students using their new understanding to consider how immigration policy has evolved over time. Additionally, all departments create grade level Common Core-aligned promotional requirements that outline yearly curricula goals and skills that prepare students for the rigorous final roundtables. Thus, this cross-content rigor consistently ensures students demonstrate their thinking. As a result, in students’ literary analysis and historical research papers reviewed, students consistently moved up in rubric ratings from approaches or meets standards, to exceeds standards and honors.

- The school has established a highly collaborative, safe and respectful community where students and adults have multiple opportunities for personal, professional and academic support that ensures learning. (1.4)
 - The school resonates a powerful culture where all stakeholders are well-invested in providing social-emotional support for all students. Advisory meets twice a week and students remain with their advisor for four years. A parent shares that advisors are “unusually accessible, we have conversations 11:00 at night and on weekends.” This structure aligns to the principal’s belief that academic success is rooted in knowing students well, building relationships, and tending to student’s social and emotional needs. Advisors track students’ overall character mastery in traits such as I am a self-directed learner and I am a college and career ready learner and this is included in all students’ Progress Reports in evidence on the on-line standards based grading system. Additionally, this year the principal programmed one Advisory period a week for academic coaching. Advisors, trained in coaching by Outward Bound and Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), focus on goal setting in self-awareness and advocacy to develop the habits and skills to be academically independent. Students reflect on and track academic progress toward goals and on parent teacher night, lead the discussions with their teachers and family members. The principal procured a grant from ESI to focus specifically on her Black and Latino students. Because of this initiative, the school now offers the “Big Sib” program wherein older students are assigned to support younger peers in developing habits of mind those being communicate, use evidence, analyze information, make connections, multiple perspectives, and taking risks. Partnership interactions are logged to drive student groupings within instructional periods. As one student shared, “SIB” mentors have to have good grades and be role models.” As a result, tenth grade supported SIB participants moved from 88% on track for promotion in 2011-12 to 95% in 2012-13.
 - The principal prides herself on offering small classes of 20 students; the ratio of students to teachers is 10:1, so that teachers know their students well. Advisors and the attendance team work in partnership to address the social emotional issues underlying absence. The attendance team conducts home visits and advisors supply updates on student attendance. The principal meets with the Attendance team to monitor progress. Additionally, the principal surveyed students to find out what brings them to school and keeps them there and this led to a Community Building Day where students across grades had opportunities to get to know each other. In several cases shared, targeted, individual interventions such as counseling, regular contact with dean, or daily calls home resulted in attendance increases for individual students ranging from 10% to 40%, and students who recognize that “our school is like family; and even when we want to give up, our teachers won’t let us.”
- The school’s rigorous performance based assessments allow teachers to use this information to bolster student understanding and mastery of content and skills that meet the needs of all learners. (2.2)
 - All student work products demonstrate all developmental stages in the writing process with teacher commendations and next steps provided and aligned to discipline-specific Consortium rubrics. Most projects include a student

reflection where students articulate learning, challenges, and areas for continued growth. Students are consistently rated on a continuum from incomplete or approaching standards, to exceeds standards or achieved honors. This system ensures that students are able to provide critical feedback to each other. For example, when a peer offered that “too much [of this essay] was not connected to the thesis” the student revised her work and, as a result, received the highest grade of honors. She further explained, “we do not get graded just on grammar, but on how we prove the thesis.” Teachers provide feedback to students based on habit, submitting work on time, reading, the quality of literary analysis and understanding quotes, writing, presenting an effective argument claim, supporting evidence, organization, and language. This results in students who are consistently meeting academic standards as evidenced by an increase in English language arts Regents exam results from 54% in January, 2013 to 68% in January, 2014, and the school identified as one of the top four ESI schools with the highest percentage of Black and Latino young men earning eleven or more credits in their freshmen year.

- All teacher-created project assessments are an ongoing part of the unit trajectory and evaluate students on a set of content, skill, and work habit mastery such as understands the ideology and the reason for US involvement in the Cold war, skills related to locating resources independently and work habits such as organizing materials. Teachers analyze data that is captured and tracked in an on-line standards-based grading system that measures the Consortium rubric standards. This allows teachers, students, and parents to track progress, and informs instructional adjustments such as flexible groupings and a standard focus for individual students. For example, the school’s two science teachers tracked student progress in evaluating and revising experimental design and determined that students required more practice in independently grappling with data without immediate support from the teacher. Therefore, they adjusted direct instruction and provided additional time and practice for all students. The lengthy and robust PBAT process wherein students demonstrate outcome mastery is reflected in student work products such as researched oral and written defenses and higher levels of data analysis in their study of sciences. Teachers formatively assess student work and this practice results in teachers across content areas collectively tracking students’ progression to skill mastery including students with disabilities and those performing in the lowest third. This focused attention on adjusting practice supports students in the lowest third has led to tenth graders showing a 6% increase in scholarship and eleventh graders an 11% increase on the 2012-13 Progress Report.
- The principal strategically utilizes resources to align to the school’s instructional goals, and ensure college and career readiness so that the learning needs of students are met. (1.3)
 - This year the principal has undertaken a number of initiatives to improve the quality of the instructional core across classrooms. One such initiative is their Curriculum Review Process (CRP). The principal and department coordinators review all curricula, essential questions, and performance tasks using established protocols from New York University’s Metro Learning Communities to ensure alignment to departmental scope and sequence. A Metro coach supports this process and works with the principal, assistant principal, and department leads to ensure the CRP protocol aligns to

mandated content in subjects. This results in teachers sharing a common understanding of what is being taught in grades nine through twelve and teaching the same course back to back over two semesters. Because the principal believes that courses must honor depth over breadth, students are programmed for courses thematically not sequentially, World Religion, Immigration and Economics, rather than Global or American History, so that students have more time to develop analytical writing skills as they prepare for the English language arts Regents exam and formal presentations of projects to a panel of teachers and outside evaluators. Additionally, the principal adjusted courses to focus more deeply on college-level writing; she replaced personal and narrative writing courses with a second section of Response to Literature in the twelfth grade. This results in student work products that reflect college-level sophistication in research, literary analysis, and scientific lab work wherein students consistently exceed expectations or reach honors levels on discipline-specific rubrics.

- The principal modified student programming to increase scholarship and provide teachers with more common planning time. In order to accomplish both of these goals the principal, using the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) school-based option voting process, lengthened class time to one hour, and introduced a third collaborative period into teacher's weekly programs to be used as a professional period. During this time integrated co-teaching partners collaboratively plan, and mentors support new teachers with planning and setting up routines. Department teams meet bimonthly to engage in protocols and provide feedback to each other during review and revision of projects. For example, team members discuss the open-ended nature of an essential question, or how much modeling is necessary for a project. Additionally, the Promotional Review Committee meets once a month to identify students at-risk and plan targeted interventions. The school's team work resulted in significant gains in tenth grade students completing round table requirements. Additionally, because teacher teams consistently provide feedback to each other to increase rigor in projects and tasks, students' evidence-based research papers reflect extensive revision to attain mastery aligned to the rubrics employed to achieve college level quality.

What the school needs to improve

- Continue strengthening questioning and discussion techniques across classrooms in order to consistently engage students in higher order thinking and ensure their ownership of the learning process. (1.2)
- The principal believes that students learn best when there is depth over breadth in curricula tasks, when relationships are built, and when teachers are coaches and students are workers. Teachers implement consistent strategies such as annotating text and marginal notes prior to a discussion or as part of in-class work time. Additionally, differentiated approaches are in evidence in all planning documents that include skill level groupings, student choice for in-class work products, tiered texts by level, and honors extensions. Additional scaffolding is provided in the use of graphic organizers and differentiated daily work products, and all students are held to the same high level required outcomes. For example, a student with disabilities might preview PBAT questions prior to a senior circle to provide them with needed additional time to successfully complete the task. In an

English language arts classroom visited, students annotated a Jhumpa Lahiri story for its detailed description and symbolic writing, and in a history class, students recorded margin notes connected to Truman's plans for atomic weapon use in Korea and identified positions to defend or refute. Daily work is focused on projects such as the Falling Ladders Lab, where students observe and record distance and rate of change, and a Thursday seminar class requires students to engage in discussion connected to a challenging text. In a World Religion class, students annotated a passage regarding the Jewish prayer practice of davening, and one student shared that this work enabled them to prepare for researching how two different religions are practiced in the same nation. Additionally, when students made errors, teachers pushed them to rethink their work rather than providing answers. All student work reviewed reflected high levels of thought. However, opportunities for students to challenge each other's thinking, expand on each other's ideas, or generate their own questions in whole group discussions were not in evidence in the portions of lessons observed thereby resulting in fewer opportunities for students to take ownership of or extend their learning and to attain greater levels of engagement.

- Continue to provide focused observation feedback that sets clear expectations, identifies strengths in practice, and holds all stakeholders accountable for implementing next steps to improve school-wide instructional practices. (4.1)
 - The principal provides specific and actionable feedback to all teachers and makes explicit areas necessary for professional growth and improvement. After a review of classroom visits, the principal identified areas of strength evidenced in teacher practice, maintained a descriptive stance, and identified next steps aligned to the Danielson framework. In order to shift instruction and in alignment to the principal's goal for 100% of teachers to engage in inquiry work, this year teachers pursue a problem of practice (PoP) specific to their classroom seven times a year and engage in a consultancy protocol to identify the root cause of their problem, revise it several times based on ongoing team feedback, collectively brainstorm approaches for improving practice, and, in the end, create a video representation of the learning that resulted in improvement in their practice. This results in a high level of teachers holding each other accountable for their practice and student achievement. The principal's feedback on these videos and in observations reviewed demonstrated her focus on student-led discussions, students generating their own questions, and the shift from teacher-led to student-centered instruction. However, school leaders' feedback is not always aligned to collaboratively or individually set teacher goals, or adjusted to reflect teacher's progress toward addressing actionable steps suggested in prior observations. This limits opportunities for school leaders to reflect more deeply on practice and support professional growth over time.

Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2013-2014

School name: Essex Street 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 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			
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 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			
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 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				
Quality Review Scoring Key							
UD	Underdeveloped	D	Developing	P	Proficient	WD	Well Developed