

# Quality Review Report 2013-2014

**Isobel Rooney School**

**Middle School X080**

**149 East Mosholu Parkway  
Bronx  
NY 10467**

**Principal: Emmanuel Polanco**

**Dates of review: March 18 – 19, 2014**

**Lead Reviewer: Melodie Mashel**

## **Part 1: The school context**

### **Information about the school**

Isobel Rooney School is a middle school with 661 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 17% Black, 67% Hispanic, 5% White, and 10% Asian students. The student body includes 32% English language learners and 25% special education students. Boys account for 60% of the students enrolled and girls account for 40%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2012 - 2013 was 90.0%.

### **Overall Evaluation**

**This school is developing.**

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well

- School leaders and faculty make meaningful curricula decisions aligned to Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) that build school wide coherence and engage students in rigorously demanding academic tasks. (1.1)
  - In response to the school's Quality Review that earned a "Developing" rating, conducted by the school's network, and recognizing the urgent need to adopt a well aligned Common Core curriculum in English language arts, the principal, in collaboration with the school's administrative team, decided to implement Expeditionary Learning units from EngageNY. To immediately embed CCLS shifts in the curriculum and engage students in challenging tasks, the school centered on strengthening students' knowledge and experiences with formulating opinions, expressing claims, counterclaims and citing evidence from text to support their verbal and written viewpoints. This was seen in a grade 7 social studies class, where students completed persuasive essays around which branch of government had the greatest power and presented their case to classmates. Similarly, in a grade 6 social studies class, in preparation for their written culminating task, students read short texts about Hindu gods and cited evidence from texts to justify which god was most significant in Hinduism. In addition, the school has also adopted EngageNY math modules and New York State scope and sequence units for social studies and science. As a result of these curricular decisions, students take part in a coherent curriculum across grades that prepare them for the challenges of college and career.
  - Teachers plan lessons that engage students in challenging tasks. Higher order questions are embedded into the school's written curriculum. Task expectations are the same for all students. To support English language learners, lessons include the use of texts on a particular topic across a range of text complexity levels; thus, the English language learners and special education students access lessons, gain content knowledge and understanding of units taught. In a sixth grade science class, students read texts about weather patterns and as a culminating task were expected to design a written plan that could serve as a guide in the event of a real natural disaster. In a seventh grade math class, students worked on solving multi-step algebraic equations and were required to justify their solutions in written form. As a result of the school's rigorous curriculum, students participate in challenging tasks that promote high level thinking and engages students in authentic learning experiences.
- School leaders use feedback from observations to elevate teacher practice and support teacher development. (4.1)
  - A sense of urgency to support teachers in raising the quality of instruction for students compelled the principal and administrative team to engage in a series of walk-through and instructional rounds that facilitated a school-wide common understanding of the Danielson's Framework competencies. Observation cycles by administrators were initially devoted to gaining an understanding of the challenges teachers were facing and providing them with feedback that addressed some of their concerns. Subsequent visits to

classrooms informed school leaders of the need to provide different levels of support to teachers around planning and preparation and elevating the level of student discussions. Consequently, new teachers participated in cycles of professional learning with lead teachers and other teachers worked in grade team meetings to develop a deeper understanding of the Danielson's competencies. As a result of these structures, teachers are reflective about their craft and receive targeted ongoing support that further improves the quality of their practice.

- The administrative team's observation feedback captures teacher strengths and areas for further development. A review of administrator's observation reports reveals targeted feedback that provides teachers with clear next steps. For example, in written feedback provided to a teacher, an administrator recommended the teacher design and pose open ended higher order thinking questions to spark more rigorous student discussions. Review of additional written feedback reveals a suggestion provided to a teacher to improve the classroom environment by working with students to define their roles as students and learners. In addition, the administrator directed the teacher to review a specific learning module from ARIS Learn. As a result of this precise feedback, there is a clear template of expectations for elevating teacher instructional practice.
- The principal strategically manages resources, student programs, staff time and assignments that align to school goals and promotes student progress. (1.3)
  - The school leader is committed to "bringing Middle School 80 into the 21<sup>st</sup> century" in part by equipping the school with state of the art technology. Subsequently, all classrooms have Smart boards. In addition, the principal has invested heavily in the purchase of iPads for student use. In a sixth grade social studies class, in preparation for a writing task, students were highly engaged in research and read articles about Hindu gods from an iPad. A wide range of books are accessible to students on the iPad. In addition, to further strengthen the school's science program, through the school's after school program, students engage in science, technology, engineering and mathematics classes including advanced courses in Earth Science and Integrated Algebra. To highlight student work and so students may see their progress throughout their middle school years, the principal purchased student portfolios in which they maintain their "best" work. Students shared their work proudly and state they often review their accomplishments. As a result of the principal leverages resources to support the fruition of the school goals, there has been a 15% increase in the quality of sixth grade student tasks in science.
  - School administrators engage in a carefully crafted hiring interview process that begins with a committee comprised of school administrators, coaches and dean interviewing perspective candidates. The process involves a set of established questions, a demonstration lesson and student feedback after the demonstration lesson. To support struggling students, a Saturday academy provides students with support in English language arts and math. After school programs targeted to students in specific grades lend support to students in the subject of science, English language arts and math. In addition, the school uses Achieve 3000, a reading software program, to provide additional support to English language learners and special education students. Moreover, a partnership with a community based organization provides extra-curricular courses and activities to students in

sports, dance and theatre production. To further prepare students for entrance into high school, rigorous science classes are offered to students in grade 8 that deepen their content knowledge in science. As a result of these decisions, students engage in a wide range of learning experiences that support their progress and prepare them for college and career.

### **Areas for improvement**

- Strengthen teacher practices so that students are engaged in deep group discussions that extend thinking and improve student performance. (1.2)
  - While the principal and teachers expressed that students learn best when they learn from each other in safe, risk free environments, this belief system was not reflected in some of the classrooms visited. Some classrooms observed exhibited teacher-directed activities and much of the class time was spent by students on note taking. This type of instruction, where much of the lesson is driven by the teacher, leads to limited interaction between the students, thereby impeding students from engaging in collaborative learning experiences and hampering efforts to support the school's belief system.
  - Students are encouraged to explain their thinking, share formulated opinions and describe how they arrive at answers to problems and questions posed. In some classes visited, several students described the process they used to reach their answers. However, explanations were directed primarily to the teacher. In addition, student work products were limited to writing arguments, thus restricting students from producing meaningful work in other forms of writing or mediums. Opportunities where students participated in exchanging ideas about their work in group discussions were uneven and evident only in some classrooms, hindering students from extending thinking beyond their own perspectives and producing quality work.
- Intensify the use of interim and common assessments to monitor student progress and further support students in the effective use of rubrics so they may self-assess and improve the quality of their own work. (2.2)
  - Lead teacher and teacher teams create and use assessments to gather information about student understanding of subject content and student progress. In math classes using unit tests, tasks assessments and simulated test results, teachers gather data about student progress toward mastery of key standards. However, in English language arts classes, assessments are loosely aligned to standards with a focus primarily on assessing students on citing evidence from texts read to defend a claim in written essays. Across English language arts and social studies classrooms, students engage in reading short texts and responding in a written essay to a question where they are required to justify a position. While this is a crucial standard in aligning to the shifts of the CCLS, the school has addressed assessing this standard at the exclusion of the others. In addition, while the school administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to gain information about student reading, the school has yet to implement a second administration of the DRA. Therefore, the school is missing the opportunity to gather relevant information about student progress in this critical subject. As a result,

teachers and students do not gain a clear picture of progression towards mastery of English language arts standards, thus impeding students from receiving feedback that could accelerate their mastery of CCLS in English language arts and social studies.

- School leaders, teacher teams and network team members have designed one rubric, the Interdisciplinary Learning Rubric (ILR) that is used to assess student performance across all grades and subjects. The school has developed the rubric based on the overarching big ideas of the CCLS. However, the rubric lacks task criteria that are specific enough to accurately evaluate progress that informs both teachers and students of the necessary next steps to improve the quality of their work. In addition, the rubric language is not student friendly, thus hindering students from using it as a tool to assess the quality of their own work and impeding teachers from using rubric results to guide their curricula and instructional adjustments.
- Continue to cultivate a cohesive environment of mutual respect that further develops student academic and personal behaviors and supports student learning. (1.4)
  - Parents expressed that the school is “getting better” in reference to students’ personal behaviors. Students state they feel safe in part because the school’s dean follows up on their concerns. The school’s newly formed student council conducts fundraising activities to support organizations of their choice. Students are active in organizing coat drives, food drives and provide support in the selection and planning of trips for specific grades. However, students interviewed overwhelmingly state their opinions are not heard sharing they have requested additional books to read as their choices are limited and spiritedly shared they want art, theatre and music to be part of the school’s courses. In addition, students state that respect has to “go two ways” as they often feel they are not heard or respected by adults at the school. As a result, the lack of the development of ongoing structures and professional development opportunities that genuinely honor a diverse cross section of student voice erodes efforts to truly cultivate a shared inclusive culture of respect.
  - In response to their School Survey and to ensure that safety in the school is a primary focus, the principal implemented Positive Behavior Interventions Systems (PBIS). This has provided teachers, parents and students with a shared understanding of the specific personal behaviors students need to display to be successful in school. The school’s PBIS matrix defines respectful, responsible and safe behaviors. However, clear communication to all stakeholders that identify specific traits to promote student academic behaviors essential for students to prepare for college and career are not yet fully evident school wide. Parents expressed the need for the school to offer additional workshops that identify specific strategies they can use with the children at home to develop that promote academic behaviors. A review of the school’s professional development plan reveals limited sessions devoted to providing teachers with on-going support for the full implementation of PBIS. While some students expressed that they understand they have to work hard, they were unable to articulate the specific academic behaviors to be effective learners. As a result, students do not yet fully understand the behaviors needed to self-regulate, be successful in school and throughout life, thus hindering their ability to adopt behaviors that accelerates their learning.

## Part 3: School Quality Criteria 2013-2014

School name: Isobel Rooney School	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>