



**Department of
Education**

Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

**Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning**

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Mark Twain I.S. 239 for the Gifted and Talented

**2401 Neptune Avenue
Brooklyn
NY 11224**

Principal: Karen Ditolla

**Date of review: May 13, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Neal Opromalla**

The School Context

The Mark Twain School for the Gifted and Talented is an intermediate school with 1,292 students from grade six through grade eight. The school population comprises 9% Black, 6% Hispanic, 54% White, and 28% Asian students. The student body includes .5% English language learners and 5% special education students. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 96.5%.

School Quality Criteria

Instructional Core		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	Area of:	Rating:
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	Additional Findings	Well Developed
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	Focus	Proficient
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	Additional Findings	Proficient
School Culture		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	Area of:	Rating:
3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations	Celebration	Well Developed
Systems for Improvement		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	Area of:	Rating:
4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning	Additional Findings	Well Developed

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
---------------------------	------------------------------	----------------	-----------------------

Findings

School leaders consistently communicate high expectations for instruction and create opportunities for professional learning and support, as well as, partner with families to ensure student progress towards college and career readiness by establishing a culture for learning that systematically communicates a unified set of high expectations.

Impact

The school's consistent conveying of high expectations and provision of quality supports ensure that students and families understand expectations and that students are prepared for the next grade level, as well as on a solid path towards college. The school's on-going effort to continually improve communication is resulting in new avenues of communication and new parent workshops to address opportunities for improving parents' comprehension of standards and curricula to expand their support of their children in school.

Supporting Evidence

- Parents indicate that the school has very high expectations and is committed to the academic and talents programs equally. They state that they have open communication with the teachers through Jupiter grades, texts, e-mails, letters, and parent meetings. Parents also indicated that the administration and teachers are proactive in addressing their concerns.
- School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to the entire staff and provide training resulting in a culture of mutual accountability for those expectations. One example of this shared accountability includes the professional learning opportunities conducted by the school's department heads and Coach centered on the school's identified focus on quality questioning. This has resulted in the development of a system by which students structure their paragraphs throughout the school year, across disciplines and grade levels.
- School leaders and staff effectively communicate expectations with families to support student progress toward achieving those expectations. At this school, every sixth grade student, for example, is assigned to a cluster headed by a coordinator and a guidance counselor who are responsible for ensuring the success of each child who is new to the school. Parents have access to teachers' websites, their child's grades and their performance in their identified talent area. Further, case conferencing is used as a mechanism to continuously share information on individual students' progress.
- Teacher teams and staff establish a culture for learning that communicates a set of high expectations for all students and ensures that all students, including high- needs subgroups, own their educational experience and are prepared for the next level. For example, starting in the seventh grade, the school offers students Specialized High School Admissions Test preparation work during their lunchtime as well as Regents prep courses. Another example includes visits to specialized high schools throughout New York City and partnerships with both Brooklyn and Staten Island Technical High Schools. Finally, the teachers work with students in the development of their talent portfolios, resulting in 97% of student applicants to LaGuardia earning acceptance into their talent program(s).

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Proficient
---------------------------	---------------------	----------------	-------------------

Findings

Across most classrooms, teaching strategies are aligned to the curricula, provide multiple entry points in order to ensure the success of all students including students with disabilities and student work products reflect high levels of thinking and participation.

Impact

Across classrooms, curricular supports allow students to produce meaningful work products, yet, there are missed opportunities to provide students strategic venues to extend and/or express their thinking so that all learners are able take ownership of their work and perform beyond the assignment at hand,

Supporting Evidence

- Across most classrooms visited, teaching strategies consistently provided multiple entry points to allow all students including students with disabilities to demonstrate thinking. In a sixth grade ICT Mathematics classroom, for example, the students were tasked with formulating statistical questions. Both the special education as well as the general education content specialist worked with students, applying informal strategies, to ensure that all learners could well articulate what they learned prior to the students completing their exit slips.
- While across classrooms visited scaffolds were provided for students, the opportunity to engage in deeper levels of discussion varied. In a sixth grade science class studying elements, for example, students were seated in rows and had no opportunities to think critically or be actively and cognitively engaged in the lesson. In a sixth grade social studies class, students were grouped based on the classroom seating arrangement and all students were given the same graphic organizer in order to collect information related to a research project on Ancient Rome resulting in students not being provided adequate extensions or supports into their learning.
- Across classrooms, teaching practices are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and reflect a school wide belief in how students learn best. In an eighth grade Living Environment classroom, for example, students were engaged, had opportunities to work with one another and were provided with extensions into the content. In a seventh grade English language arts classroom, the teacher used materials familiar to students in order to provide them access into the content being taught with all students demonstrating cognitive engagement and active participation.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Well Developed
---------------------------	-----------------------	----------------	-----------------------

Findings

School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the standards, emphasize higher order skills and are planned and refined using student work and data so that all learners have access to the curriculum and are cognitively engaged.

Impact

Lessons and tasks across content areas are developed collaboratively and are planned in a coherent way to provide all learners in all classrooms, including the school's small population of English language learners and students with disabilities, with opportunities to demonstrate high levels of thinking through rigorous curricula, cognitively engaging tasks, and rich discussions.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning and content standards and strategically integrate the instructional shifts resulting in coherence in across grades thus promoting college readiness. Review of one sixth grade social studies, one seventh grade social studies and one seventh grade English language arts lesson plans reflect English language arts and History/Social Studies standards aligned to the day's lessons as well as a focus on Shift 4: text-based answers.
- Rigorous habits and higher order skills are emphasized in curricula and academic tasks across grades and subject areas so that all learners including students falling within subgroups have opportunities to demonstrate their thinking. In a seventh grade English language arts lesson reviewed, for example, the teacher provided a rationale for the groupings formed which was based on the abilities of each student as measured by state assessment data, student modalities and their demonstrated academic abilities. Further, the lesson plan provided structured tasks for the three homogeneously formed groups, all of which were aligned to the identified standards and included rigorous, higher order challenges.
- Curricula and academic tasks are planned and refined using student work and data so that all students have access to the curricula and tasks and are cognitively engaged. In a sixth grade math lesson reviewed, for example, the teacher indicated that scaffolds would be provided to students during the lesson based on formative assessment occurring during the lesson. These scaffolds provided for both students with disabilities as well as high attaining learners. The same held true for a seventh grade math lesson where, again, the teacher indicated that scaffolds were in place to support students who need additional instruction or extensions based on formative assessment to occur during the lesson.
- The school offers core talent courses including: art, physical education, creative writing, dance, theater, computer math/software engineering, media, science, music and vocals. The expectations in these classes are also coherent across grade levels and within each discipline and students are given opportunities to be cognitively engaged through access to rigorous and high order tasks. In a seventh and eighth grade strings lesson reviewed, standards were clearly articulated; formative assessment practices were embedded and students were given opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
---------------------------	-----------------------	----------------	-------------------

Findings

Across classrooms, teachers create and use common assessments and rubrics to determine students' formative and summative progress towards the achievement of goals and also provide students with regular opportunities to self and peer assess.

Impact

The school ensures that students own their educational experience and provides students with many opportunities to reflect upon their work habits and their academic successes and weaknesses. Students regularly reflect upon their progress and take ownership and make meaning of their learning experiences.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, teachers create rubrics and grading policies that are aligned with the school's curricula. At this school, each student receives a classroom contract from each one of their content area teachers as well as from their talent teacher. These contracts clearly outline classwork and homework requirements as well as grading policies. However, while there is a school wide grading policy, with summative assessments representing 60% and formative assessments contributing 40% of a student's overall grade, course contracts show that the weights and criteria reflected in individual teacher grading policies vary across content areas. In English language arts on grade six, for example, one teacher's grading policy included 50% in tests and quizzes while in another sixth grade class, exams and quizzes counted for 30% of a student's overall grade. In seventh grade, one English language arts teacher included projects and other tasks including presentations towards 35% of a student's overall grade while another teacher counted projects as 60% of the overall grade.
- Across classrooms, teachers' assessment practices consistently reflect student self-assessment and peer assessment so that analysis combined with teacher analysis, assists teachers with making effective adjustments to meet the needs of all students. In all tasks reviewed, students were given opportunities to reflect upon and grade their own work using task specific rubrics. In many cases, these pieces also included peer assessment and feedback, again, aligned to the performance rubrics. During the student meeting, students expressed the value of peer feedback and self-reflection and assessment stating that teacher feedback often includes statements such as "excellent work", or, "good closing statement" but they sometimes do not know what specific strategies to work on.
- Teachers use data to track and monitor progress and growth paying close attention to students scoring in the lowest third. For example, at this school, students are very proficient in math but not making progress as measured by growth on the New York state mathematics assessment. As a result, teachers worked together to raise the rigor in the tasks in order to ensure higher levels of student engagement. One such adjustment includes visual presentations of student thinking. Teachers also use on line quizzes and Nearpod which provides pie chart data to help determine where students are and how to best support them.

Quality Indicator:	4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development	Rating:	Well Developed
---------------------------	---	----------------	-----------------------

Findings

Through distributive leadership structures, the vast majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based, structured teamwork on and across grades to increase teacher capacity and to promote the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards. Teams collaborate to revise curricula and pedagogy, to analyze student work, and to improve student outcomes.

Impact

Participation in teacher teams has resulted in increased instructional coherence, shared improvements in pedagogy, increases in student outcomes and mastery of goals.

Supporting Evidence

- Inquiry based and structured professional collaborations have strengthened teacher instructional capacity and promote the implementation of the Common Core Learning standards resulting in school-wide instructional coherence. During the English language arts department meeting observed, teachers worked to evaluate and update the curriculum for next school year by analyzing the end-of-year content goals. Teachers also addressed how to better scaffold text for students with disabilities. Finally, they worked to prepare summer reading packets in order to ensure appropriately complex texts were represented across all three grade levels.
- Teacher teams systematically analyze key elements of teacher work including assessment materials resulting in shared improvements in teacher practice and mastery of goals for groups of students. A review of Social Studies department professional development agendas from September 2014 up to and including April 2015 reflects ongoing analysis of rubrics and tasks. Further, each meeting concludes with an opportunity for teacher reflection.
- Teachers collaborate to analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or are focused on resulting in shared improvements in teacher practice and student outcomes. Two lead teachers at this school collaborated to analyze their students' task data in order to articulate their pedagogical areas of success and next steps. Their work was showcased as a model for their colleagues within and across departments. This work resulted in the majority of the students who were used in the study achieving an increase in student outcomes as measured by task data.
- Distributive leadership structures are embedded so that there is effective teacher leadership and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning. At this school, teachers use Intervisitations as a mechanism to share and observe best practices in order to build instructional coherence within departments. During these visits, teachers are tasked with taking low inference notes; sharing their notes with the colleague visited and use a debrief protocol in order to frame discussions centered on instructional choices and best practices observed.