Department of Education
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

# Quality Review Report

# 2014-2015

**The Urban Assembly School for the Urban Environment**

**Middle School 330**

**70 Tompkins Avenue**
**Brooklyn**
**NY 11206**

**Principal: Kourtney Boyd**

**Date of review: January 29, 2015**
**Lead Reviewer: Alicja Winnicki**

# The School Context

The Urban Assembly School for the Urban Environment is a middle school with 57 students from grade 6 through grade 8. The school population comprises 61% Black, 33% Hispanic, 1% White, and 4% Asian students. The student body includes 7% English language learners and 32% special education students. Boys account for 54% of the students enrolled and girls account for 46%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 84.4%.

# School Quality Criteria

| **Instructional Core** | | |
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| *To what extent does the school…* | **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** | **Proficient** |
| 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** | **Developing** |
| 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** | | |
| *To what extent does the school…* | **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 | **Additional Findings** | **Proficient** |
| **Systems for Improvement** | | |
| *To what extent does the school…* | **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 | **Celebration** | **Proficient** |

# Area of Celebration

| Quality Indicator: | 4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development | Rating: | Proficient |
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**Findings**
Teachers have multiple opportunities to engage in professional collaborations to work towards the achievement of school goals and to analyze assessment data and student work. Leadership structures give opportunities for teachers to have a voice in key decisions regarding curriculum and teacher practices.

**Impact**
The work of teacher teams has resulted in improved pedagogy and better professional collaborations. These structures have enhanced capacity to improve the implementation of Common Core Learning Standards aligned curriculum and instruction for all learners.

**Supporting Evidence**

- All teachers, including a music teacher, meet daily, in addition to collaborations planned during extended day twice a week. Teacher teams are structured to provide ample time for collaborative inquiry, planning and refining units of study, and discussing instructional practices as evident in the school-wide common planning presentation schedule and a calendar for professional learning and team meetings. Additionally, teachers are engaged in a study group on research-based effective sentence writing that supports their work towards a school goal to close the achievement gap in literacy and strengthens the instructional capacity of teachers.

- Teacher teams are consistently using a protocol for looking at student work and analyze current student thinking against the desired goals. They also identify gaps between student achievement and grade level goals. A vertical team, for example, analyzed five samples of student writing on demand and discussed instructional commitments, such as teaching transitional words for different genre of writing. Teachers say that instructional recommendations they make for identified students, within a 6-week inquiry cycle, provides them with additional opportunities to discuss instructional practices and strategies to improve student achievement.

- Teachers and leaders constantly refine their inquiry process via the warm and cool feedback they give when they analyze the work of students they share and monitor for progress towards goals. As a result, all students have improved their stamina and can complete writing on demand tasks as evident in classroom visits and student work on bulletin boards and in writing portfolios. Furthermore, student writing improved from last September till now as evidenced in student portfolios.

- Interviews with teachers revealed that they play an integral role in actively contributing to the school's decisions about curriculum and professional learning. After attending a professional development workshop, teachers suggested adding the Word Generation program to supplement the English language arts curriculum and to support students in developing academic vocabulary. Similarly, teachers expressed their need in capacity building in questioning and teaching higher order thinking and are now regularly engaged in professional learning focused on the Depth of Knowledge.

## Area of Focus

| Quality Indicator: | 1.2 Pedagogy | Rating: | Developing |
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**Findings**
Teaching practices begin promoting differentiation of instruction, including student flexible groupings. The use of multiple entry points to support student thinking and participation is inconsistent across the school.

**Impact**
The uneven engagement in challenging tasks offers limited opportunities for all learners, including students with disabilities and English language learners, to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills in work products and classroom participation.

**Supporting Evidence**

- During a math lesson in grade 6, students worked in four groups on investigating the area of different triangles. They discussed answers to a question, “Do different types of triangles with same base and height have different area?” All learners, including students with disabilities, had graphic organizers for mathematical vocabulary and were expected to make their thinking visible by explaining their work using the words they circled or boxed on the organizer.

- In one class, a teacher asked probing questions, such as “Why is this information important to know?”, and encouraged students to turn and talk to explain their thinking. In another class, however, students were taking turns to re-read a passage from a hand-out to a class and a teacher called on individual students to list some words describing their strengths as a public speaker.

- Teachers in some classes provide students with task cards or questions prompts to start group discussions. In one class, for example, each group had a facilitator who was responsible to ask questions about text comprehension. In another class, however, students answered questions that a teacher asked the whole class.

- Conversations with the students revealed that even though they work in groups and sometimes get different tasks or problems to solve, there are often instances they complete them individually. Additionally, students said that when they finish their work, they wait for a teacher or review the work they completed.

# Additional Findings

| Quality Indicator: | 1.1 Curriculum | Rating: | Proficient |
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**Findings**
School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards. Teachers use student work analysis to plan and refine units and academic tasks for a diversity of learners.

**Impact**
Curricular decisions build coherence and promote college and career readiness by purposeful integration of instructional shifts. Student data analysis results in engaging all learners cognitively.

**Supporting Evidence**

- The school implements Common Core aligned curricula in English language arts (ELA), math, science and social studies. Instructional shifts are consistently integrated and evident in maps and plans. In a 7th grade math plan, there was evidence that students were expected to demonstrate deep understanding by solving problems using investigative strategies. In an 8th grade humanities plan students were asked to analyze and cite textual evidence to support an objective summary of life in the extreme environments portrayed in two texts.

- ELA teachers purposefully embed strategic reading instruction in unit plans with emphasis on reading skills and strategies. Math teachers plan to target prioritized skills and real life application in all units of study. Additionally, curriculum maps include enduring understanding, essential questions and thinking maps for organizing thinking in writing and problem solving as evidenced in a review of curriculum artifacts.

- The Word Generation program has been added to supplement the Scholastic Code X in literacy and to give students additional opportunities to learn and master academic vocabulary across grade levels and subjects. Additionally, this program gives students opportunities to read across the content areas, mostly informational text. It also supports listening, speaking and writing with explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills and academic vocabulary.

- The structure of teacher teams supports planning and refining academic tasks using student work and data. For example, vertical and horizontal teams make adjustments to units and lessons by using a planning protocol called “Unit, Lesson, and Assessment Analysis.” Teachers reflect on a question, “Have your lessons prepared students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills expected in the standards and the summative assessment?” They also list strategies to provide access for all learners, including grouping with collaborative learning roles, visual clues and graphic organizers, or leveled tasks.

- Teacher teams consistently include the work of diverse students, including English language learners and special education students, in their curriculum planning decisions. For example, after analysis of student writing on demand, teachers refined and differentiated tasks by adding thinking maps to engage identified learners.

| Quality Indicator: | 2.2 Assessment | Rating: | Proficient |
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**Findings**
Teachers and leaders purposefully use common assessments aligned to the school's curricula to adjust units of study and to monitor student progress. Deliberate instructional adjustments to meet all students' learning needs, and the use of on-going checks for understanding, vary across classrooms.

**Impact**
The school uses assessment results in actionable feedback to students and has a system for analyzing student work and tracking academic achievement. The daily adjustments to lessons and the use of ongoing checks for understanding sometimes miss opportunities for all learners.

**Supporting Evidence**

- The school analyzes the results of common assessments: diagnostic, formative and summative, and has identified gaps in argumentative writing, problem solving and academic vocabulary. Teachers also analyze student achievement using standardized 4-point rubrics to provide students with actionable feedback as evidenced in student portfolios and on student work displayed on bulletin boards across contents. Additionally, school leaders embed student achievement results in their feedback to teachers during teacher team meetings and in classroom observations.

- Teacher teams consistently monitor student progress towards grade level goals by tracking their results using detailed data from pre and post-unit assessments, the Achieve 3000 assessments for ELA, and reports generated by the web based math assessment site called IXL. Classroom visits and interviews with the students and teachers revealed that these assessments, combined with checklists and rubrics, are also used to group students for instruction and to adjust curricula by adding supplemental programs and materials, like the Word Generation program for weekly word study, or a web-based math assessment program called Ten Marks.

- Although all teachers constantly monitor their students' progress on benchmark and unit tests and outline next steps as evident in teachers' comments on task rubrics, this information and data are not always used in daily lessons and units. In one class, for example, students had differentiated tasks based on their performance in writing process. In another class, however, all groups worked on the same task.

- While teachers give students opportunities to self-assess or reflect on their work, classroom visits and conversations with students revealed that sometimes students are not clearly aware of their next learning steps. Some teachers, for example, prompt students to reflect on what and how they learned by completing exit slips or math journals. Similarly, teachers utilize thinking maps and other graphic organizers to engage students in self-assessing their work. Some students, though, expressed confusion about next steps in completion of tasks or improvements in the next unit of study.

| Quality Indicator: | 3.4 High Expectations | Rating: | Proficient |
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**Findings**
The principal consistently communicates high expectations for instruction through teacher teams, ongoing feedback and the school's participation in the Learning Partners Program. The faculty and staff collectively support students in preparation for the next level.
**Impact**
Structures that support the school's high expectations result in mutual commitment and accountability amongst staff and students. School stakeholders have a clear vision and are provides with supports towards a culture of learning and student academic success.

**Supporting Evidence**

- The participation in the Learning Partners Program, the school successfully applied for, underpins this year's high expectations for instruction and professional growth. Teachers join in enhanced professional learning via regularly scheduled inter-visitations with partner schools and are expected to implement innovative strategies for student academic interventions and share their successes.

- The principal visits the classrooms daily, and provides timely and actionable feedback in addition to on-going professional development to support teachers in their capacity development and growth. For example, the school has partnered with the National Center for Assessment to train teachers in purposefully employing cognitive rigor through the use of the rigor matrix and the Webb's Depth of Knowledge levels. Teachers use this knowledge to differentiate questions and tasks for students in their lessons.

- A collaboratively developed document called *The Urban Environment Expectations in Practice 2014-2015* guides the school "to increase intellectual engagement in challenging content and addressing gaps between where students are and the expectations of the Common Core". This document holds teachers and leaders accountable by setting clear expectations for monitoring and revising of action plans, collaborations, instruction and assessments. The expected outcomes are embedded in the "evidence in progress" section and driven by professional learning and capacity building in supporting students in social and emotional learning, in addition to the academic progress.

- A social worker provides on-going guidance and support for students in the area of developing rigorous habits that teachers are emphasizing during instruction. The expectations for collaboration and perseverance, for example, support students in their growth as independent readers and in their participation in group work during lessons. Additionally, all students in grade 8 meet with designated staff, whom in turn hold individual conferences to prepare students for successful transition to high school.

- All students participate in daily morning meetings when the faculty, staff and leaders recognize individuals for adhering to the Urban Environment code that sets high expectations for doing the right thing, coming to school prepared, reflecting on experiences and choices, and looking for solutions to problems. These morning meetings provide opportunities for the staff to support individual students in achieving these expectations and practicing rigorous habits. Students, for example, are recognized for being good school citizens, in addition to shout outs for academic achievement in the use of new vocabulary words or participation in math reasoning debates.