



**Department of  
Education**  
*Carmen Fariña, Chancellor*

Office of School Quality  
Division of Teaching and Learning

# Quality Review Report

## 2014-2015

**Scholars Academy**

**Middle-High School Q323**

**320 Beach 104<sup>th</sup> Street  
Queens  
NY 11694**

**Principal: Brian O'Connell**

**Date of review: January 7, 2015  
Lead Reviewer: Mary Barton**

## The School Context

Scholars Academy is a middle-high school with 1,289 students from grades 6 through grade 12. The school population comprises 18% Black, 18% Hispanic, 41% White, and 22% Asian students. The student body includes 1% special education students. Boys account for 41% of the students enrolled and girls account for 59%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 96.5% for the middle school and 95.0% for the high school.

## School Quality Criteria

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

## Area of Celebration

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>3.4 High Expectations</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

The principal and school leaders share high expectations with all students, staff, and families with supports in place so that all constituencies can meet those expectations. Expectations for staff are shared through the use of the *Danielson Framework for Teaching*, the school's website, and through teacher teams. Technology programs, workshops, and feedback to students keep students and families aware of school and individual student goals and student progress toward college and career readiness.

### Impact

Staff, students and families benefit from the structures and systems that support high expectations through mutual accountability and a shared allegiance toward the school. All constituencies understand students' progress toward set expectations and students own their learning experiences and are prepared for their next level of education on a pathway to college and career.

### Supporting Evidence

- Students and families have access to student progress on Pupil Path, an online system, which is updated on a daily basis. Additionally, teachers use common rubrics and assessments providing students with timely and actionable feedback. Teachers plan together on teams across all grade levels and subject areas. Teachers identify Google sites for students and families to access learning materials, and use common rubrics and assessments with actionable feedback given to students. This transparency enables families to always know what their child is learning in school. All students stated that they can always access the units of study online they are studying and that the units are updated "all the time". Students were able to speak to their strengths and next steps in their work and shared that they receive clear feedback and effective support. They could speak to their strengths and next steps in their work.
- The school hosts multiple parent meetings and workshops throughout the year including topics including a curriculum overview night, a family math night, a science symposium, reading celebrations and workshops on understanding school reports, Pupil Path, and Naviance (a program supporting choosing possible college and careers based on interest and personality profiles). Additionally, the school hosts understanding school reports, reading celebrations, family math night, a science symposium, and multiple workshops on the college application process including ones on financial aid and college awareness, and conducts an annual March to College event.
- Teachers receive a myriad of supports around the high expectations in place across the school and for the expectations they place on themselves through mutual accountability. Among the supports available through the weekly professional learning in place are cycles of lesson studies. Team members meet to study and give feedback on colleagues' lesson preparation. Teachers conduct inter- visitations to see the lesson's execution of lessons and then meet to give feedback, assisting their colleagues in "rebooting" aspects of the lesson. Teachers spoke to appreciating the opportunities they have to learn from each other in an atmosphere of trust. One teacher stated, "There are so many opportunities for us to learn from each other. I really become a better teacher after each and every opportunity we are provided feedback from our team meetings."

## Area of Focus

**Quality Indicator:**

**2.2 Assessment**

**Rating:**

**Well Developed**

### Findings

The school consistently employs student self-assessment and uses a variety of common formative and summative assessments in all subjects, as well as rubrics aligned to curricula, to track student progress and performance and give feedback. Checking for understanding at the start and end of lessons takes place through a variety of modalities across the school and took place in most classrooms, but not all.

### Impact

Teachers and students have a clear picture of student mastery. Effective data driven lesson and unit of study adjustments enable all students to know their next learning and steps and demonstrate increased mastery.

### Supporting Evidence

- Teaching and learning displays throughout the school show the student's process and progress in getting to their final product. Rubrics are customized for specific tasks and created with clear expectations regarding expected outcomes so that students have actionable and meaningful feedback on their performance. Students spoke to knowing the expectations of their teachers and the school. One student stated, "I know going in to an assignment what I have to do to get a four. I also value teachers' feedback to me. I incorporate it into my future work."
- Common assessments, developed by teachers as teams, are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and the instructional shifts. Benchmark assessments are normed and teacher teams follow the same scoring process. Data profile sheets are used to collect State and benchmark assessment data to identify trends over time across grades and subgroups. Teacher teams make adjustments to units of study and lessons based on that information building skills into vertical maps that incorporate standards of focus for content areas. As a result, there has been a 22% increase in students scoring a level 4 on the New York State Science exam in grade 8. Additionally, there has been a 15% increase in the mastery rate for the Global Studies Regents exam, a 16% increase in mastery for Geometry and a 28% increase in students earning distinction on Advanced Placement college course passing rates.
- Students have continual access to rubrics for their work on performance based assessments and reflect on their work using self-assessment forms. Students were viewed across classrooms, assessing each other's work and providing oral and written feedback to one another. Using iPad and laptops, students also have the opportunity to support each other through an internal school email system communicating with students in other classrooms who are working on the same unit of study.
- Teachers use technology such as classroom response system student clickers and Google apps to check for understanding and provide on-going feedback and coaching during instruction. For example, in a math lesson, the teacher used a process where students complete an independent practice problem and submit their response via a Google form. She and the students assess the work done and a study guide is produced for a student around a skill or strategy they need to work on. Students in this class are also grouped for an individual or small group conference when necessary.

## Additional Findings

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>1.1 Curriculum</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

All curricula throughout the content areas are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and strategically incorporate the instructional shifts, emphasizing and embedding higher order thinking tasks in a coherent way. Teacher teams identify student gaps and misconceptions using student work and data to plan and refine academic tasks.

### Impact

All students engage in rich curricula demonstrating their thinking in cognitively engaging and demanding tasks that promote college and career readiness. Teachers meet all students at their entry points through exacting curricula work and gap analysis.

### Supporting Evidence

- In English language arts, teacher teams have created their own units of study using the standards along with multiple resources such as Engage New York and the work of the Literacy Design Collaborative to incorporate the instructional shifts. Teachers carefully select a variety of texts representing various literary genres looking at complexity and lexile levels. In Integrated Co-Teaching classrooms, teachers select texts on varying levels around the same theme to meet students at their entry points. Teachers meet vertically to ensure that texts are not repeated throughout the grades. Students grapple with complex text and continually write and do research providing evidence from text. Academic language is also a focus as students are exposed to words that appear on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) starting in grade 6. Students are encouraged to incorporate academic language in their speaking and writing.
- The school is part of the Math Design Collaborative. Teachers create Common Core aligned math curricula focusing on conceptual learning and deep understanding using resources from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics as well as Khan Academy. Students preview videotaped lessons the day prior to instruction and send work to their teachers electronically, who then analyze their students' understanding to refine lessons to address student errors in comprehension and misconceptions. Math curricula emphasizes student collaboration in the deconstruction of problems. Teachers, in planning units and lessons, assess and have an intimate knowledge of the prerequisite skills students need to have as well as the present learning taking place in order to be successful in completing a task. This was observed in a lesson on the Pythagorean Theorem around an unknown side length. Students and teachers use a fluency of skills checklist that supports student achievement of explicit lesson objectives.
- Science and social studies teachers collaborate with English language arts teachers and design units with performance based tasks incorporating the standards and the instructional shifts. Teachers emphasize the close reading of text in students' reading and researching to support their written work and oral presentations. Teachers also emphasize incorporating academic language into oral and written work. In science, for example, specific scientific language appropriate to the unit or lesson is introduced. The expectation is that students use more the sophisticated scientific language in their discussions and in their writing. This emphasis was seen in reviewing biology and chemistry units of study.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>1.2 Pedagogy</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teacher pedagogy reflects a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that are aligned to the curricula and informed by the *Danielson Framework for Teaching*. Students have the opportunity to engage in high levels of thinking through discussion and work products and have ownership of their work.

### Impact

Through discussions at the teacher team and classroom levels, teaching practices promote high levels of student engagement, thinking, discussion, and ownership, which extends student learning.

### Supporting Evidence

- The school's instructional focus for this school year is around the strategic design of tasks that encompass questioning and discussion techniques and assessments, which are differentiated for students' ability levels, learning styles, preference, or interests. Across the vast majority of classrooms, students' work in triads on tasks where they discuss and push each other's thinking. In a math classroom, students worked on real world problems around using unit rates to determine which the "better buy" is. After an initial mini lesson, students completed an independent practice problem and submitted it via a Google form. Students went about solving problems in triads, which required them to present their pathway and solution to each other. The teacher, aware of student misconceptions, coached students. Students had the option of using a student support center in the classroom, which provided hints and guiding questions to progress through the task. Toward the end of the period, students completed a self-assessment content form to identify their comfort level with the lesson material and assessed their group work using a four-point rubric.
- In an Integrated Co-Teaching English language arts classroom, students engaged in book clubs in which they made inferences, cited text evidence, analyzed characters and evaluated the importance of selected quotes. Students had selected the book they wanted to read but teachers guided students around making the appropriate choice looking at recent assessment data and knowing the students. Books studied included *The Giver*, *The City of Ember*, *The Last Book in the Universe* and *Among the Hidden*. All students had roles in the book club and had completed a planning sheet prior to the start of the book club. Task cards were provided to each group to enable students to keep on task and to enable all students to have a voice. Students used individual and peer rubrics to assess work while teachers pushed into groups and used a content tracker and a group rubric to assess.
- In a geometry class, students worked in triads on tiered tasks with questions and discussion prompts embedded. Students who did not need support worked on a menu of more challenging problems. Using I-pads, students who needed more support watched a video to see the lesson the teacher had taught previously. Additionally, there was a student support center available in the classrooms which students availed themselves of to receive additional support.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

Teacher voice and leadership plays a critical role across the school as teachers engage in inquiry based, structured professional collaborations that have strengthened teacher capacity.

### Impact

As a result of teacher collaboration, there is school wide instructional coherence and increased student achievement for all learners.

### Supporting Evidence

- Subject teams meet regularly to create and refine tasks that are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and the instructional shifts, which are posted on Google sites and accessible to all faculty, students and families. Teachers regularly have voice to make changes to curriculum and instructional practices and are encouraged to do so by school administrators.
- Grade level teams meet weekly to review common assessments and other artifacts of student learning in order to track progress and adjust instructional decisions to maximize student outcomes. At a seventh grade team meeting, teachers reviewed their most recent assessment data with specific core subject area teachers across the grade by sitting in triads looking at significant trends. They discussed the particular standards and concepts that they needed to work on with struggling students in their subject. Teachers planned formative assessments as well to monitor if the planned interventions worked. After a period of time, teachers share observed trends based on interventions as well and their next steps with students, which helps to inform cross curricula practices.
- Teachers engage in cycles of lesson studies. The cycle includes a host teacher whose lesson is the one being developed with input from the team as well as teacher inter visitation, in which teachers engage in inquiry based peer assessment using a protocol to drive improvements in teacher practice. Improved teacher practice has been viewed in observations by supervisors. Teachers spoke to the power of the lesson cycles. One teacher stated, "This work gives me a great opportunity to learn from my colleagues. I get a lot of new ideas." Teachers spoke of trust being in place in this process above all else. "With all of the sharing that we do and the very respectful feedback we provide for each other, I know that all of us look to make each other better." Another teacher said, "Our school provides constant learning not only for the students but for us as well. With each experience I have, I get better each day."
- There are many teams around academics, school activities and student social and emotional well-being. Teams include grade and subject level teams with leaders as well as a school level data inquiry team. The teaming structure in the school has enabled leadership to be cultivated. Staff members spoke of having an ownership of their work and practices, and having made significant contributions to the school community as well. One teacher commented, "We have very distributed leadership. It's not top down. We are always asked for our opinions whether through surveys after professional development or at meetings." Another teacher stated, "Everyone here supports you. We want to be a part of the work that is going on here. There is a culture of sharing here. The teams are an important part of that and that trickles down to the students who also willingly share with one another."