



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Hillside Arts and Letters Academy

High School Q325

**167-01 Gothic Drive
Queens
NY 11432**

Principal: Matthew C. Ritter

**Date of review: December 11, 2014
Lead Reviewer: Juan Mendez**

The School Context

The Hillside Arts and Letters Academy is a high school with 465 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 38% Black, 28% Hispanic, 4% White, and 30% Asian students. The student body includes 11% English language learners and 8% special education students. Boys account for 42% of the students enrolled and girls account for 58%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 86.1%.

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	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	Additional Findings	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	Focus	Developing
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	Proficient

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:

**3.4 High
Expectations**

Rating:

Well Developed

Findings

High expectations are consistently communicated to the staff, students and parents in a supportive learning environment. School leaders have established structures to ensure that all members of the school community meet established expectations.

Impact

Mutual accountability for expectations, a focus on college and career readiness, and successful partnering with families leads to school-wide shared commitment, and empowers students, staff and parents to reach established goals.

Supporting Evidence

- There is a highly structured school-wide advisory system which provides a small group setting, allowing social-emotional and academic matters to be addressed. Students, parents and staff share their appreciation for this program, and its impact on students' college preparedness.
- The school orchestrates events to promote a shared understanding of Common Core Learning Standards, and facilitates college and career readiness activities such as Senior Interview Day and Portfolio Day. Established professionals from various fields regularly participate in these events to share career insights with students and parents.
- All incoming ninth grade students were invited to participate in the Summer Bridge program in 2014, where clear expectations of college preparatory culture were communicated. Parent partnership with the school begins early as parents are expected to participate in parent orientation in the Summer Bridge program. Parents share ideas through the School Leadership Team (SLT), the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and in meetings with the principal. Parents highlighted the exceptional support provided by the school, saying, "The communication with the teachers is the best part of this school." The teachers call and email often, and I like it."
- The school has implemented a 10-credit sequence in visual arts and music so that students may graduate with a Regents Diploma in the Arts. Last year, a number of students graduated with this diploma distinction. In addition, in order to cultivate artistic endeavors, an external partnership with Queens Museum of Art has been established and provides students with opportunities to participate in internships.
- High expectations for staff are consistently communicated through frequent observations, peer-classroom visitations and weekly staff memoranda. For example, teachers receive professional development on specific components of the Danielson Framework for Teaching to inform pedagogical approaches. Teacher teams meet weekly to reflect and refine classroom practices resulting in improved student outcomes. Mutual accountability is evident in teachers facilitating weekly *Kid Talk* conferences. Students shared that they receive consistent support in preparation for college. A student stated, "Hillside Arts and Letters Academy (HALA) has taught me communication skills. I write my college essays in my teachers' room, and my teachers read it during their prep periods."

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

2.2 Assessment

Rating:

Developing

Findings

Common assessments are used to measure student progress, although the monitoring of student progress through tracking is inconsistent. Checks for understanding coupled with high quality feedback are varied across classrooms.

Impact

The school's systems of using assessment results to monitor student progress do not consistently inform instructional adjustments to meet the needs of all learners. Additionally, teacher feedback encourages the student's awareness of next learning steps.

Supporting Evidence

- Student written assessments on bulletin boards in the classrooms and in the hallways provide evidence that some tasks aligned to Common Core Learning Standards. For example, *Diálogos* in Spanish, *Skin Receptors Lab Conclusion* in Advanced Placement Biology, and *Exploring Quantitative Data* in mathematics are all Common Core aligned tasks and assessments. However, benchmark calendars for research papers are posted in some classrooms, but not in the vast majority of classrooms. For example, calendars for research papers appeared in Advanced Placement Biology, English and global history, but not in the majority of classes.
- The school has some systems in place to share feedback and monitor student progress. However, teacher feedback on student work posted is not consistent across classrooms. For example, teacher feedback on a student's persuasive paragraph consisted of comments such as, "good evidence," "strong intro" and "good point". In addition, although all teachers use Skedula as a school wide competency based grading system, evidence of analysis of subgroups is nebulous in connection to modifying instructional approaches.
- Across classrooms, teacher formative assessment and student self-assessment practices are inconsistent, with limited adjustments made to meet the learning needs of all students during class lessons. For example, in Global Studies grade 10 lesson, students were asked to identify positive or negative effects of the Industrial Revolution, although there was no criterion checklist or rubric provided to the students. In Algebra, the teacher was observed using methods of formative assessment such as conferencing, "show me with your arms: is the slope positive or negative?" and white board responses, although adjustments to the lesson were not observed.
- Although Design Your Own assessment cycles occur three times a year, data from multiple sources are not collected systematically and utilized consistently to inform curricula modifications. For example, the science assessment was modified after data inquiry was conducted and modifications were not evident in all subject areas. Teacher teams utilize student work in inquiry. However, the outcomes of the Design Your Own assessment cycles are not monitored consistently across content areas so as to be accurate predictors of student performance on state exams. In addition, teacher team analysis of student assessment data does not consistently improve student outcomes, as evidenced by an 18% decrease in weighted U.S. History and Government Regents examination pass rate as compared to the school's peer group.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across grades and subject areas, teacher –created curricula and project based learning tasks are aligned to Common Core Learning Standards. Curricula are planned and refined using student work to inform modifications.

Impact

The school’s curricular decisions build coherence and promote college and career readiness for all learners. Across grades and content areas, writing skills are embedded strategically to enhance student ownership.

Supporting Evidence

- Project based units in all content areas integrate Common Core Learning Standards and the instructional shifts. Strategies include the “I” (write with) Purpose/Annotate/Draw Conclusions (IPAD protocol), and the 6 A’s Project Idea Rubric from Adria Steinberg’s *Real Learning, Real Work* and Depth of Knowledge (DOK).
- Academic tasks across grades and subject areas reflect research-based skills essential for college readiness. Students complete research papers in Government and Economics and 12th grade English using Journal Storage (JSTOR) as a digital research database library. Furthermore, skills are scaffolded beginning in the ninth grade, with students completing an argumentative based essays using claims and counter claims in which they examine the effectiveness of famous public speakers. This task demonstrates alignment to instructional shift 1, (balancing informational texts), instructional shift 2, (writing from sources), and instructional shift 5 (academic vocabulary).
- Curricula is planned and refined across grade levels and content areas teacher teams with a focus on rigor. Teachers use Depth of Knowledge (DOK) and Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) instructional shifts in providing feedback to colleagues on unit tasks. For example, teachers revise tasks based on academic vocabulary in task language, criteria and format to ensure coherence across subject areas.
- Student work is examined against anchor papers, Common Core Learning Standards shifts and Depth of Knowledge. For example, ninth grade research papers on the topic, *Effectiveness of Public Speaking*, are examined with a focus on the use of rhetoric and text based evidence, which is aligned with the English Language Arts Common Core Learning Standard Literacy that expects students to write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Content area teacher teams create skills maps for each content area that identify the touchstone skills leading to capstone projects. For example, in an 11th grade Anatomy and Physiology course, students are expected to write a research paper on a disease or medical condition using scientific articles from Journal Storage (JSTOR).

Findings

Pedagogical approaches include strategies such as project based learning and collaborative inquiry informed by the Danielson Framework for Teaching Domain 3.

Impact

Across content areas, meaningful student work products reflect opportunity for student choice and an emphasis on critical writing skills, promoting student ownership while fostering higher order thinking in student work products.

Supporting Evidence

- In all classrooms visited, students were engaged in collaborative learning structures with a concentration on writing. For example, students in a Global Studies class were asked to evaluate the evidence gathered and answer the aim, "Has the Industrial Revolution had a positive or negative impact on England?" in a paragraph consisting of complete sentences.
- Writing is evident across classrooms as both culminating points and summary phases, and in classes where students respond to text and challenging prompts. As an illustration, in an Algebra integrated co-teaching class, students were provided with various graphs and asked to work in groups to craft a written response summarizing the key details.
- The project based learning approach promotes high-level student-centered learning in most classrooms. For example, in an Advanced Placement Biology class, students completed a *Cell Organelle Project* aligned with College Board and Common Core Learning Standards.
- Evidence based academic conversations imbued with rigor are evident in the most classrooms. However, although Socratic seminar was used in the 12th grade English classroom, student generated questions were not evident across classrooms. The seminar prompt invoked discussion focused on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and whether or not it is a feminist play, although the conversation did not require textual citations. Furthermore, in a 10th grade integrated co-teaching Global Studies class, students were assigned roles such as reader, questioner, discussion leader, evidence checker to analyze various primary source documents and determine if the impact on England during the Industrial Revolution was positive or negative, although extensions did not fully challenge all learners or encourage student initiated questions or contributions.
- Student folders in classrooms reflect ongoing processes of tasks nurturing critical thinking, analysis and problem solving connected to content specific themes. For example, in 9th grade Global Studies, student folders are organized by the names of Hindu castes, with roles and index cards for note-taking and writing prompts.
- Student work products reflect higher order thinking. For example, in an Advanced Placement Biology class, students were asked to write a comprehensive compare and contrast analysis of two cellular processes. However, the activity did not afford students the opportunity to take ownership of their thinking in student-to-student dialogue.

Quality Indicator:	4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

The majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based teams where they consistently examine student work products. Distributive leadership structures have been developed so that teachers plan and facilitate team meetings.

Impact

The work of teacher teams results in strengthening curricula and pedagogical approaches, with embedded Common Core Learning Standards, instructional shifts, Depth of Knowledge and Understanding by Design for Learning steering improved student progress. Teacher voice is effectively welcomed in group discussions, thus fostering shared leadership while building team capacity.

Supporting Evidence

- Grade-level teams meet weekly and engage in cycles of collaborative inquiry using student work samples to guide professional conversations. Teachers review tasks with a partner, search for evidence of academic rigor, and reflect on the ways in which the tasks and work products prepare students for college and career.
- Shared leadership is evidenced by team leaders, the curriculum coordinator, and co-facilitators serving as conduits in meetings with the administrative team bi-monthly to discuss team practices and outcomes.
- Teacher teams make curricular adjustments based on inquiry. For example, after reviewing students' argumentative essays that were incorrectly crafted in response to an informational essay task, teachers implemented a *Breaking Down a Task Protocol* where students circle content, restate the task in their own words, and choose a plan of action.
- Gains in writing skills are evidenced by increased weighted Regents pass rates. For example, English Language Arts Regents examination scores exhibited a 17% increase in the weighted Regents pass rate. In addition, Global History and Geography Regents examination pass rates showed a 19% increase in 2013-2014.
- School leaders meet weekly with teacher team leaders as well as curriculum coordinators to review upcoming agendas and debrief on prior meetings. These practices have contributed to an 86% ranking in citywide performance in closing the achievement gap among student with disabilities as well as 70% ranking for performance by Black/Hispanic males.