



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Explorations Academy

High School 12X251

**1619 Boston Road
Bronx
NY 10460**

Principal: Susana Hernandez

**Date of review: December 16, 2014
Lead Reviewer: Kristine Mustillo**

The School Context

Explorations Academy is a high school with 360 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 27% Black, 70% Hispanic, 2% White, and 1% Asian students. The student body includes 18% English language learners and 31% special education students. Boys account for 59% of the students enrolled and girls account for 41%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 83%.

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	Celebration	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	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	Additional Findings	Proficient
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:

1.1 Curriculum

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

All curricula are aligned to Common Core Learning Standards. Higher-order skills are consistently emphasized for all learners across grades and content areas.

Impact

The school's curricula decisions build instructional coherence and promote college and career readiness for all learners. Academic tasks, across grades and content, are designed to push student thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- The school uses Universal Backwards Design for Learning along with the New York Tri-State rubric, Common Core Learning Standards and Instructional shifts to assess and revise curricula across grades and content. Planned strategies include tiered questioning, multi-step problem solving argumentative writing and text-based responses.
- Lesson plans across grade and content areas follow a coherent format, including learning targets, Depth of Knowledge questions, criteria for success, and assessment, primarily in the form of an exit ticket. Unit plans include learning targets designed to address Depth of Knowledge levels 3 and 4. For example, students studying the Civil War were asked to examine primary sources documents to explore the complexities of the circumstances and consider the perspectives of the individuals and groups involved.
- Coaches, teachers, and guidance all meet collaboratively to embed scaffolds in the content in order to give all students access to rigorous tasks. Teachers use Engage New York resources to strengthen task design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to design instructional scaffolds. For example, a 9th grade global history unit on ancient empires required students to research topics that included Pax Romana, Pantheon, Roman Aqueducts and the Law of the Twelve Tables, and then participate in a jigsaw activity to share learning and apply the learning to a deeper understanding of the development of other civilizations. Leveled text and visual supports were utilized to support comprehension.
- Students participate in college and career readiness learning in advisory and content courses. For example, in an economics class, student participated in a budget project that asked them to develop a budget based on three different income estimates; high school graduate (\$22,000 per year), associate's degree (\$32,000 per year) and college graduate (\$52,000 per year). Students had to take into account student loan debt, housing, cell phone, food, clothing, entertainment, and internet costs in the creation of the budget.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

While pedagogy provides consistent instructional supports, such as questioning and discussion techniques, the strategic planning for learning extensions varies across classrooms.

Impact

Across classrooms, curricula supports enable students to create meaningful work products, however there are missed opportunities to extend learning and increase student ownership.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, teachers used a variety of strategies to give students access to rigorous curricula, often relying on pairing, graphic organizers, and some tiering in mathematics. In addition, the use of spacing text for students to include margin notes while engaging in close reading was observed. However, limited extension strategies were observed and it was not evident that all students were engaged in productive struggle.
- In humanities courses, teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogue around text and create presentations where they use text based evidence, examine claims and counter claims, evaluate information and apply learning to world events. In mathematics, students are given the opportunity to explore various ways to solve problems through real world applications. In several history classes, students were engaged in high level conversations around the complexities of war and the impact of government on developing civilizations. However, in one class where students were discussing the Columbian exchange and selecting priority food items to exchange between the old and new world, there was low level student engagement and limited student ownership of the discussion.
- Across classrooms student work products evidenced students being asked to research, analyze and evaluate information across content areas. However, students had little choice in self-selecting topics or presentation style and limited opportunities for self-assessment thereby limiting student ownership.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use common assessments and checks for understanding to make instructional adjustments.

Impact

Teachers' consistent use of formative and summative assessment data to adjust curricula and instruction to meet student learning needs results in students' progress towards learning goals.

Supporting Evidence

- Across classrooms, teachers were observed using *Fist to Five* to pair students and identify students for small group re-teaching. Teachers regularly use questioning and conference notes to assess student understanding during independent and group work.
- Teachers track and monitor regents exams using item analysis to adjust time spent on content skills. As a result, students have made gains in passing rates for Regents exams in science, social studies, English language arts and mathematics.
- Teacher teams collaborate on modifying classroom assessments to determine if students demonstrate improved comprehension when assessment items are grouped by skill. Teacher teams then discuss strategies for re-teaching concepts in alternate delivery systems to strengthen knowledge in order to remove such exam scaffolds.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

High expectations are communicated to staff through the use of the Danielson Framework for Teaching, and through embedded observation and feedback cycles and professional development opportunities. Regular parent meetings provide families with feedback regarding student progress towards college and career readiness.

Impact

Frequent feedback and professional development aligned to the school's goals support teachers' professional growth. Systems of reciprocal communication ensure that families understand student progress.

Supporting Evidence

- Frequent classroom observations, peer-visitations, and student data reviews hold teachers accountable to improving their practice and for student performance. Feedback from school leaders makes direct links from practice to performance.
- Teacher team meeting structures with shared information on Google drive results in a shared accountability for teacher practice and student performance. Team meetings involve student work and student data reviews and discuss instructional implications for teachers based on student performance. Teams share effective practices for student engagement as well as tools for strengthening curriculum and task design. School leaders and teachers participate in instructional rounds and team meetings to assess implementation.
- The principal and guidance counselor meet with all families of students who are not on track for graduation to collaboratively develop action plans. These meetings help families understand the requirements for course and exam work so that families are able to effectively support their child in progressing towards those expectations.
- Parents have access to live student data and to communication with teachers through the Jupiter on line grade management program. In addition, parents receive report cards and regular outreach via phone, as well as opportunities for weekly meetings with teachers on Tuesdays.

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

The majority of teachers are engaged in regular structured collaborations aligned with the Common Core learning Standards and the instructional shifts, with a focus on improving teacher practice and student learning.

Impact

The collaborative work of teacher teams results in improved teacher capacity, and improved outcomes for student groups.

Supporting Evidence

- Teacher teams meet in structured professional collaborations five times each week. Each day the team meeting has a different focus; department team, assessment, parent and student conferences, looking at student work, and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) progress. A 9th grade teacher team used a presentation protocol from *Looking Together at Student Work*, to examine an assignment the economics teacher had given around creating a budget for varying income levels. The team reviewed the assignment, rubric and student work from varying performance levels. The team gave feedback to the presenter on instructional strengths and next steps.
- Team members from cross school teams expressed that working during structured meeting times utilizing rubrics and protocols to reflect on planning and practice has resulted in an increase of higher order questioning embedded in lesson plans and increased rigor in tasks. Teacher teams continue to work to collaboratively to expand their collective resources to meet the needs of a diverse population of learners.
- The instructional team, noticing the achievement gap in graduation rates between male and female students, began a support group for males which includes early morning sports and academic advisements. In the past year these students have shown a 1% increase in attendance rate and a 2-8% credit accumulation increase as well as a 22% decrease in suspensions.
- School teams focus heavily on supporting special education students, as they comprise nearly 30% of the school's population. Teams track special education student progress towards graduation and collaboratively develop plans of support for students who are not on track to graduate in four years. For example, in 2014, 13 out of 20 special education seniors graduated on time, two moved to a Young Adult Borough Center and five remain at the school and are on track to graduate this year.