



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

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

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

The Young Scholars Academy of the Bronx

Middle School X289

**3710 Barnes Avenue
Bronx
NY 10467**

Principal: Jeanette Vargas

**Date of review: May 27, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Debra R. Lamb, Ed.D.**

The School Context

The Young Scholars Academy of the Bronx is a middle school with 318 students from grades 6 through 8. The school population comprises 71% Black, 24% Hispanic, 1% White, 3% Asian and 2% other students. The student body includes 8% English language learners and 25% special education students. Boys account for 53% of the students enrolled and girls account for 47%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 88.9%.

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 | 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 | | |
| <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 | 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 | Developing |

Area of Celebration

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| Quality Indicator: | 3.4 High Expectations | Rating: | Proficient |
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Findings

School leaders and staff provide feedback to families and encourage their input and participation. Teacher teams and staff have a firm belief in a culture for learning that communicates high expectations for all students but as yet is not sufficiently embedded throughout the entire learning community.

Impact

Families receive information regarding student progress toward meeting their goals. Feedback and guidance supports address what is needed to help prepare students for the next level.

Supporting Evidence

- The school's instructional focus reads as follows: "Young Scholars Academy will focus on building a culture and community that promotes student-centered learning by engaging students in higher-order questioning leading to student discussions that will help our scholars develop the oral and written communication skills critical for high school, college, and career readiness." Teachers have conversations with students regarding the work they are assigned to support high school readiness. One teacher said, "We try to connect our lessons to real life to address the common question from students, 'Why do we need to know this?' We also need to challenge our higher achieving students across the board." Three of the school's students are participating in the specialized high school institute called the DREAM program, a prep program for high-achieving, low-income middle school students aimed at bettering their chance for acceptance to one of the city's specialized high schools. "A former student came in the early spring and spoke with students about the PREP 9 program, a boarding high school program for academically gifted African-American and Latino students," said the principal. "Some students filled out the application and are now going through the final stages of the application process."
- Concerning the Common Core Standards, a parent said, "Everyone has their own opinions. The country I came from has high standards. I learned differently and I teach my son that way too." Parent Teacher Association meetings are sometimes well attended, said a parent. Two workshop sessions to accommodate parents—one in the morning and the other in the afternoon were held this term. The topics presented during recent parent workshops include "Internet Safety" and "How to say no to your child."
- "When I started working, my son felt I wasn't there for him as much and started cutting class," said a parent, adding that her son's teachers made a positive difference in his behavior. "The teachers are wonderful. They know our kids and their weaknesses." Students were eager to speak about what they want to be: One student shared wanting to be a doctor, while another wants to be an engineer like his brother.

Area of Focus

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| Quality Indicator: | 1.2 Pedagogy | Rating: | Developing |
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Findings

Across classrooms, teaching strategies are inconsistently provide multiple entry points into the curricula. Across classrooms, student work products and discussions reflect uneven levels of student thinking and participation.

Impact

There is uneven engagement in appropriately challenging tasks and uneven demonstration of higher-order thinking skills in student work products, including the work of ELLs and SWDs. Some students do not have ample opportunity for student-to-student dialogue and evidence-based accountable talk.

Supporting Evidence

- The school participates in the Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI). Teachers are acquiring various language acquisition strategies that can be utilized in conjunction with the Word Generation curriculum as well as in the school's general content area classes. The school has provided professional development on Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) to support the degree and complexity of knowledge standards that assessments require. Teachers are working to consistently include DOK levels 3 and 4 and text-dependent questioning within their lessons.
- The school has three teachers with Teacher Improvement Plans this year, which are individually designed to pinpoint pedagogical weaknesses and support the teacher's professional growth. Students shared many positive thoughts about their teachers. One student stated "Some teachers have a fun way of teaching. It makes sense to think about how to make learning fun." Another said, "Our teacher breaks concepts down so we can understand." Yet, another student felt that sometimes teachers give up when students misbehave and don't care to learn.
- Strategic Reading Time (SRT) is scheduled in the course of the week's instructional time with the goal of enhancing instruction. The learning objective in a 7th grade Reader's Workshop was, "How do we use close reading to analyze how an author structures a text to develop a claim?" The essential question that guided the work was, "How can we make a positive impact on the world?" Students read Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," and then engaged in a group "React & Write" activity. An 8th grade science teacher asked students, "What did you understand after reading about the concept of stimulus?" Students were then able to share out their understandings. Checking for understanding concepts were not consistently practiced.

Additional Findings

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| 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 and integrate the instructional shifts. Curricula and academic tasks consistently emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills.

Impact

The school makes purposeful decisions to build coherence and promote college and career readiness for all students across grades and subjects including English language learners and students with disabilities.

Supporting Evidence

- The school is implementing Scholastic's *Common Core CODE X* program for English language arts (ELA) and *Teachers College Reading & Writing Project (TCRWP)*. Teachers who have been involved in the Teachers College trainings and have turn-keyed the trainings for their colleagues, prioritized student writing as an area for focused improvement, particularly in the 7th grade. Revisions to the math curriculum are based on unit assessments, the Common Core Standards, and the work that students produce. Teachers make adjustments to pacing calendars as needed. Also used in classes is *Word Generation*, a supplementary curricular resource that offers a series of discussable dilemmas designed to promote students' academic language and argumentation skills.
- The math department has been stable compared to the ELA team, which has experienced teacher turnover. Teachers receive professional development on the Understanding By Design[®] (UBD) framework and use UBD to develop unit plans. Resources from other curricular programs and resources are used to supplement *CMP3*, including *Impact Math*, *Math-in-Focus*, Engage NY, and *Ready*. The school generates a *Math Topics Weekly Guide* for each grade. The *Weekly Guide* is in calendar form and includes the targeted Common Core Standards, learning objectives, unit assessments, and instructional resources. The integration of real-life examples and experiences within the curriculum is a design priority. Teachers look at curricular maps across the grade and lesson plans and fine tune generic templates to make it their own. "We have been writing our own math curriculum," said a teacher. "We did not see a question on the state exam that we did not teach." The school participated in two curricular surveys conducted by the American Institute for Research [AIR], a behavioral and social science research and evaluation organization partnering with the NYC Department of Education to conduct on-site School Renewal Assessments aligned with the Framework for Great Schools. In a report of its key findings, AIR determined that the school's math curriculum was aligned to the Common Core.
- "There are many definitions of rigor, but only one connected to the Common Core," said a teacher. "Rigor requires all seven shifts. We need a clear and deep understanding of all standards and how they're connected to real life. Students need to be able to use it and to take it to another level."

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| Quality Indicator: | 2.2 Assessment | Rating: | Proficient |
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use or create assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are aligned with the school's curricula. The school uses common assessments to determine student progress towards goals.

Impact

Actionable feedback is provided to students and teachers regarding student achievement. Results of assessments are used to adjust curricula and instruction across grades and subjects.

Supporting Evidence

- The school uses a wide-variety of assessment tools, including unit assessments, Common Core ELA and math performance-based assessments, benchmark assessments, and exit projects in science and social studies. *Degrees of Reading Power* is used to measure reading comprehension. *Word Generation* essays are used in all grades to assess vocabulary acquisition and the use of text-based evidence. Teachers receive *Word Generation* Standard Item Analysis reports that detail areas of strength and weakness for their class. Following every Common Core assessment, teachers receive a report detailing each student's mastery of standards. One student said, "My teacher gave us an item analysis and we were assigned activities around things that we got wrong." Another student shared, "Every week we have a quiz. My teacher changes my seat and puts me with other students who got the same grade and are at the same level." Another student said, "Teachers allow you to do test corrections for more credit."
- Teachers use checklists as they circulate among students engaged in a task or group discussion to make note of areas of strength or challenge. Feedback is provided to students in terms of "glows" and "grows" and next steps and are presented in the language of the rubric. For example, a math teacher's feedback to students was as follows: "Excellent! Shows understanding of order of operations. Next step, graphing from an equation. A student said, "I used to struggle with math but I got a 4 on the PEMDAS (parentheses, exponents, multiply, divide, add, subtract) assignment about exponents." Another student said, "I was proud of my work on the math coordinates task because I understood everything and got all questions correct." Another student said, "I'm usually a math person but people say I'm good at writing. I got a 3 on my black history essay about Gordon Parks in my writing class. Now I'm good at two subjects."
- Teachers and students create their own rubrics. "We use rubrics to see if we met the standard," said a student. "Some teachers give us the rubric before grading and some after grading." "We do peer editing and Pair/Share," said another student. Exit slips and accountable talk practices are used throughout the school to check for understanding. Students and their parents track student performance using progress reports and Jupiter Grades. A parent stated that she goes onto Jupiter Grades every other day to check her son's behavior and if any assignments are missing. Student work samples in portfolios are expected to be at DOK levels 3 or 4.

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| Quality Indicator: | 4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development | Rating: | Developing |
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Findings

Teacher teams are strengthening their ability to analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused. Distributed leadership structures are developing to support capacity building.

Impact

The work of teacher teams has not yet resulted in improved teacher practice for all staff or progress towards goals for groups of students. The school's efforts to include teachers in key decisions that affect student learning across the school are evolving.

Supporting Evidence

- “Our inquiry is focused on making inferences and citing evidence,” said a teacher team member. “Most of our sessions are spent looking at student work to enhance that particular skill.” “Our professional learning community has been focused on individual students, troubleshooting and learning from one another,” said another teacher.
- During their weekly meeting, a teacher team comprised of the literacy coach, social studies teacher, two ELA teachers and an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) special education teacher discussed a 7th grade student’s essay entitled, “Hero’s Journey,” which dealt with the comedy film “Night at the Museum 3.” A discussion protocol used by the team engaged teachers in looking at evidence of student thinking, listening to their colleagues’ thoughts, and reflection. The teachers shared their thoughts and noted that the scaffolds put in place helped him in the writing assignment. The teachers further shared their belief in scaffolding and reaffirmed their belief in providing graphic organizers for targeted students. The team agreed that they “hope to pull away the scaffolds for the next test.” The team did not share the task nor use a rubric for the task as they discussed this student’s work. They said that rubrics are usually used during the third part of their protocol, “which is when we discuss what we’d like to see in the student’s work.”
- The Demonstration Teacher and the Peer Instructional Coaches provide varied supports for teachers and allow for distributed leadership. The Teacher Incentive Fund provides the resources for these positions which enhance teacher practice.