



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

**Holcombe L. Rucker School of Community
Research**

High School X332

**965 Longwood Ave
Bronx
NY 10459**

Principal: Sharif Rucker

Date of review: April 14, 2015

Lead Reviewer: Joshua Good

The School Context

Holcombe L. Rucker School of Community Research is a high school with 229 students from grade 9 through grade 12. The school population comprises 41% Black, 57% Hispanic, 1% White, and 1% Asian students. The student body includes 10% English Language Learners and 25% special education students. Males account for 56% of the students enrolled and females account for 44%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013 - 2014 was 84.0%.

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	Developing
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	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	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	Celebration	Proficient

Area of Celebration

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

School leaders ensure that teachers across grade levels engage in structured professional collaborations where a distributive leadership structure is in place. Teacher teams consistently analyze student work and data for groups of students on whom they are focused.

Impact

A consistent inquiry approach, across the teacher teams, is used to improve instructional practices and implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, with teacher leadership capacity being intentionally built across grades and content areas. The analysis of student work and data fosters improvement in teacher practice and levels of student achievement.

Supporting Evidence

- The school has developed department-based Curriculum Leadership Teams (CLT). The CLT meets weekly and is jointly led by the instructional assistant principal and a teacher leader. The CLT reviews teacher work and student work, using protocols to promote alignment to Common Core Standards and ensure that appropriate modifications and revisions get built into the work. Evidence of this work was observed in the rigorous instructional aims used by teachers. As an example, in the Advanced Placement World History class, the aim was, “How did the political, social, and economic structure of the Mughal Empire lead to its prominence and eventual decline?” During the CLT meeting, teachers shared that collaborating on this team has helped them grow in their knowledge of the Common Core Standards and instructional shifts as they learn from each other.
- The school is also organized around Grade Level Teams (GLT). The ninth grade GLT is using the “Writing is Thinking through Strategic Inquiry” (WITsi) model which provides students with a frame (because....but....so) for organizing ideas for writing. Teachers have strategically identified a subgroup of targeted students. In the meeting observed, teachers used a protocol to closely look at student work generated by the prompts “because, but, so,” and identified student skill gaps. The teachers used a chart to tabulate student performance and determined that the next step was to explicitly teach the strategy using the “but” stem and then bring additional student work the following week to evaluate the impact of that intervention. In order to differentiate for certain groups of students, they also decided to begin introducing more complex academic vocabulary, such as “therefore” and “however” in lieu of the conjunctions noted above.
- Teachers stated that they contribute to ongoing revisions to curricula and instruction and professional development planning and implementation. The professional development committee is composed of teacher leaders who design and deliver weekly sessions. The principal meets regularly with the teacher leaders to provide ongoing professional development around facilitation skills. Additionally, the teacher leaders and administration jointly create agendas and select protocols. On the 9th grade GLT WITsi team, the teacher leader, along with a School Renewal Initiative (SRI) coach, is given intense support through bi-weekly full day training sessions. The coach works alongside the teacher leader to build his capacity in WITsi and the teacher leader turnkeys this training to peers.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Developing

Findings

Although teaching practices are beginning to reflect a clear set of beliefs around student learning, teachers are not consistently asking high level questions that result in cognitive engagement of students in rigorous tasks or sustained student-to-student interaction during lessons.

Impact

Students are not consistently able to develop deep conceptual understanding of the primary learning objectives across grades and content areas and student responses in discussions and written work are not always at a high level.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal noted that every year staff members develop a slogan to anchor their beliefs about how students learn best. This year, in collaboration with the School Renewal Initiative (SRI) team, he stated that they chose, “persistence.” The principal stated, “We believe that students learn by doing and then demonstrating that to us. Our instructional focus is accountable talk, annotation, and the essence of the work is the emphasis on rigor. Students should be participating in popcorns, accountable talk and Socratic seminars.” The classroom visits demonstrated that students are participating in focused annotation of texts across the school. Nine of eleven students who participated in the interview spoke about how teachers require them to annotate texts. Four students recalled that they had recently participated in Socratic Seminars in an English class.
- Accountable talk prompts are posted throughout the classes and are used by some teachers. Evidence of the school’s focus on accountable talk was observed in the Advanced Placement (AP) English class. Students discussed the question, “Is American culture male-dominated or have women achieved equality?” This question was examined through reading of the text, “The Respectful Prostitute.” After a focused annotation of the text, students, using accountable talk prompts, had a sustained conversation regarding how misogyny, feminism, and patriarchy play out in the text. In a ninth grade Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) English language arts class however, the teacher asked single response questions, with no student-to-student interaction. The teacher asked, “What kind of tone is this?” to which a student responded, “excitement.” In a tenth grade English language arts class, students in small groups discussed whether they thought imperialism was beneficial or detrimental. Some groups were engaged in the text-based discussion, using accountable talk stems, while others shared individual beliefs with evidence but did not discuss, agree, or disagree.
- In an Economics class, students were given multiple entry points to access the learning objective, “How is consumer behavior influenced by advertisements?” The new learning was presented through a short video and a brief period of direct instruction followed by a tightly structured group-learning protocol around a text. The class culminated in a gallery walk of student work products which facilitated another entry point for students to learn from each other. In other classes visited, however, multiple entry points were not as evident. For example, in a geometry class all students were given an identical geometric translation exercise involving a multistep process. Many of the students could not complete the task and the lesson ended abruptly, without a summary.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Developing
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Findings

The school community has begun the process of creating and adapting Common Core aligned curricula across the content areas; however curricular tasks inconsistently provide opportunities for students to engage in higher order thinking across grades and content areas.

Impact

In the four core disciplines, some unit plans show rigorous and Common Core aligned tasks that result in high levels of student engagement. In other cases however, low level tasks result in missed learning opportunities.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal stated that, feedback from a previous Quality Review indicated that the school had a ‘mish mash’ of curricula and needs to get more systematic curricula. This past summer, curricula experts associated with the Common Core fellows program, partnered with a cross curricular team of eight teachers from the school and began the process of creating units, using a uniform template aligned to Common Core Learning Standards. Feedback on the units was initially given by the Common Core fellows and is currently being reviewed by the SRI coaches. The units seen during the Quality Review, however, did not consistently include specific, embedded, Common Core-aligned tasks, rigorous lesson objectives, and relevant learning activities across content areas. For example, a unit map from the 11th grade English Language Arts curriculum included the essential question, “How do stereotypes affect the roles we fill in society?” and a unit specific objective, “What does it mean to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman?’” This was not the case in some other content areas.
- In partnership with SRI, the school developed a “Rigor Checklist” that enumerates the “look fors” in high-quality rigorous tasks. The teachers use the document to design tasks that emphasize rigorous habits. Further, in order to develop strong academic behaviors, the school has implemented a weekly “struggle day” when teachers focus on ensuring that students are provided with cognitively engaging high-level tasks that require “persistence”, (the school’s motto word this year) for successful completion. Tasks for some students, however, do not consistently reflect high levels of rigor. As an example, in an Algebra II lesson plan all students were assigned identical low level tasks that did not reflect opportunities for high levels of student thinking and engagement.
- The school is beginning to modify the Common Core-aligned units to ensure that all students, especially English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, have access to the learning and rigorous tasks. While the curricula in social studies and English provide examples of rigorous writing assignments, the principal wanted to design structures that would also create tasks that allow for improved access to learning through speaking and listening activities. Consequently, he visited another high school, with his English teachers, to observe Socratic Seminars and bring the practices back to his school. The teachers are beginning to implement the Socratic Seminar across the school and are using video to document and refine the protocols and tasks. In math and science, however, units do not yet consistently provide access to learning for all groups of students.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Developing
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Findings

Teachers create assessments, rubrics, and grading systems that are loosely aligned to the curricula. Teachers inconsistently use assessment data to provide students with feedback on their performance and to adjust curriculum and instruction as needed to improve student achievement.

Impact

Data that is collected from assessments provides limited feedback to students and is inconsistently used to adjust curricula and pedagogy, leading to missed opportunities to accelerate learning by all students.

Supporting Evidence

- In collaboration with teacher leads, department teams created, discipline specific rubrics to analyze student work products. Teachers and students agreed that an annotation rubric is implemented schoolwide. The Principal has purchased Skedula, an online gradebook and data warehouse, to capture and disseminate student data in real time, to parents and students. Teachers are beginning to use “Looking at Student Work” (LASW) protocols in the team meetings to discover patterns and trends across the data, ensure that the departments are calibrated on their use of rubrics, and that feedback provided to students is actionable. Some of the student work collected, however, showed a “check” or a “check-plus”, rather than actionable feedback.” In other cases, such as on a reading comprehension assessment and a “Socratic Seminar Evidence Organizer” document, students received ratings such as “20/20” or “9/12” without additional specific feedback, including clear next steps.
- The principal noted that, “Mock Regents are given twice per year towards the end of the semester.” In addition, the school uses the New York City Department of Education’s assessments in English Language Arts and math in the 9th and 10th grades. Individual teachers are expected to mark their own assessments, identify patterns and trends in the data, and document the results in a data binder. This process remains a work in progress. As an example, though one school wide strategy, annotation, could be identified by school leaders as a leverage point and an instructional strategy, for Regents data, discipline specific content and skill gaps are not consistently and clearly articulated and thus are not addressed via regular and effective adjustments to curricula and pedagogy.
- Some teachers engage in effective ongoing checks for understanding. For example, in a living environment class the teacher asked specific questions, with extended wait time, before calling on specific students to assess their level of comprehension. In addition, in two social studies classes students were required to answer the aim, as an exit slip, in a 6-8 sentence paragraph, using evidence from the documents to support their answers. In several other classes, however, ongoing assessments were inconsistent. As an example, in a math class, the teacher asked students if they “knew how to compute the slope of a line.” Several students responded “no” but instead of clarifying their understanding, the teacher continued with the lesson.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

School leaders have created a culture of high expectations for staff members and students, and collaborate with families in implementing initiatives for supporting all members of the school community in meeting the expectations set for and with them.

Impact

High expectations are clearly and consistently communicated to staff, families and students, via policies and support systems designed that create high levels of accountability for learning across the school community.

Supporting Evidence

- High expectations for teachers are aligned to Danielson’s Framework for Teaching and provided through a cycle of formal and informal observations. For example, to ensure all students are cognitively engaged in rigorous tasks, the principal, in a written observation, directed a teacher to “set up optional structures, giving them (students) choice in how they engage in a task”. Additionally, to increase student learning, the assistant principal provides teachers with weekly emails detailing high expectations as a summary of trends observed during classroom visits and aligned to Danielson’s Framework for Teaching. On March 9th, 2015, he wrote to all teachers, “Move away from surface level comprehension questions and engage students with higher level questions”.
- School leaders dedicated a specific goal in the 2014-15 School Comprehensive Educational Plan (SCEP), around communicating college and career readiness expectations for students. As part of this initiative, students in each grade go on multiple college trips throughout the school year and eleventh and twelfth graders take at least two AP courses. College Now courses are also provided to students as a route to early college. The principal organized a program that ensures all seniors have a college seminar class embedded in their daily schedule. A senior student interviewed stated she was “challenged at school” and felt “well prepared for college.” Students stated the senior seminar was the most helpful class as it has helped them understand career opportunities, college application and entrance process, financial aid, and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). They agreed that the seminar helped them understand how to get to college and shared, with pride, the names of schools that have accepted them. They also noted that high expectations for college and career readiness are main topics at grade level town hall meetings.
- School leaders hold a number of events focused on communicating high expectations to families, around college and career readiness. The school community hosts a new student orientation at the beginning of the school year for families to learn about graduation and college preparatory requirements. In September, the guidance department hosted a “Seniors Night”, where families were provided with detailed information on the college application process. In addition, the guidance department presented a “Financial Aid Night” in February 2015, where parents received assistance in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) online. The college counselor constantly communicates with families on the college application process via phone and/or emails. Several families also participated in college trips with their students and the school community. During the parent interview, a parent of a senior noted, “I believe the school prepared my son for college...I was helped a lot by the school [personnel] in the college process.”