



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2014-2015

Cornerstone Academy for Social Action

Middle School X462

**3441 Steenwick Avenue
Bronx
NY 10475**

Principal: Jamaal Bowman

**Date of review: January 9, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Debra R. Lamb, Ed.D.**

The School Context

The Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) is a middle school with 253 students from grades 6 through 8. The school population comprises 65% Black, 33% Hispanic, and 2% White. The student body includes 4% English language learners and 19% students with disabilities. Boys account for 46% of the students enrolled and girls account for 54%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2013-2014 was 91.0%.

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	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	Celebration	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	Focus	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:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teaching practices are aligned to the curricula and reflect a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best that is informed by Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the instructional shifts, and school and team discussions. Across classrooms, teaching strategies consistently provide multiple entry points into the curricula.

Impact

All learners, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities (SWDs), are engaged in challenging tasks and demonstrate higher-order thinking in student work products.

Supporting Evidence

- "Questioning is key, in terms of scaffolding of content to understand how to approach a question. Following a student's reading of her essay on *Lord of the Flies* in her humanities class, the teacher asks, "Does everything she said represent savagery? What words did she use?" A student responds, "riot and chaos." Teacher: "Good, those words clearly represent savagery. How can she make her paper better?" Thus, the interconnectedness across the Danielson Framework's components, particularly with questioning and discussion techniques (3b) and the use of assessment in instruction (3d), allows staff to ask fewer questions, but better questions that stimulate deep thinking. A student remarked, "At first I thought it was hard but teachers made us comfortable to ask questions. It challenges your brain."
- "When we talk about multiple entry points, the goal is to get all kids to meet the grade-level standards," said Principal Bowman. "Because we're rooted in writing across the curriculum, it's naturally differentiated." Students in a sixth-grade humanities class discuss in literature circles the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. One student has been identified in each group to lead the open discussion and ensure all voices are heard. Students are encouraged to refer to accountable talk stems as they participate in discussion and then respond to differentiated writing prompts. Principal Bowman shared that this class "...used to be much more teacher-directed and now there's more student-centered group work. Conferencing this year has been big for us. Also grouping with guidance and support from the teacher. I want to see teachers sitting with students, not at the head of the class."
- "Project-based multidisciplinary learning is what we're moving towards," said Principal Bowman. Math teachers said they "tie math tasks to the real world" and spoke of a lesson during which students read an article regarding inequities in salaries. In a sixth-grade math class, the "Do Now" activity focused on examining integers in different real world settings required students to respond to the following questions: "(a) Julian made a deposit of \$45 into his bank account. What number represents this situation? and (b) The rainfall in New York City in 2014 was 6.8 inches less than 2013. What number represents the rainfall in 2014?" Teachers shared that they often attempt math tasks before teaching them, then present the task to students followed by questions about the students' thinking processes. From this conversation, teachers are able to tier student groupings. ELLs in grades 6 through 8 are supported by the English as a second language teacher. "If I'm having difficulty with my school work, I can speak to the teacher after class," said a student. "There's also tutoring afterschool and sometimes during lunch."

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

3.4 High Expectations

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

School leaders consistently communicate high expectations and provide training for the entire staff. While school leaders and staff consistently communicate expectations that are connected to a path to college and career readiness, families need assistance to understand student progress toward those expectations.

Impact

The school's existing system of accountability that supports the preparation of students for the next level is not yet fully strengthened by successful parent partnerships.

Supporting Evidence

- CASA's vision statement is: "To graduate dignified scholar-activists who are mentally and socially prepared for high school and beyond." Consistent with this vision statement, the halls of this school are lined with photos of positive role models and college banners. Each class is named after a university, such as Oxford, Columbia, Cornell, and Harvard. Books are highlighted that inspire leadership development like Stephen Covey's *The Leader in Me* and Sean Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, which include such habits as being proactive, planning, and prioritizing responsibilities. In the Columbia classroom, there are rules posted "for a safe and fun learning environment." The rules include but are limited to: "Follow the seven habits, respect and listen to others, work as a team and everyone wins, use positive and encouraging language, and keep trying even if you fail." "Teachers try to push you more and more so that you can learn better," said a student. "Goals? Yes, we take steps to reach them. We make goals at the beginning of the year and revisit them at the end of the year." "Every Friday we get together to talk about a serious topic, like crimes against black people and police getting away with it," said another student. "It can't happen anymore." "Education is important in life," said a third student. "A friend is not there forever."
- Posted are 10 "CASA Middle School Staff Values," which include: (1) demonstrate respect; (2) no person is an island; (3) be warm but strict; (4) do what's right, not what's easy; (5) be a role model; (6) support your colleagues; (7) think before you act or react; (8) practice efficacy; (9) learn from mistakes; and (10) deliver results. "CASA participates in the Teacher Incentive Fund initiative, which funds two peer instructional coaches on staff who support colleagues to improve instruction and student learning.
- "Regents prep is in place for some eighth-grade students," said Principal Bowman. "Many of our students took the specialized high school exam." CASA's "Genius Hour" (www.geniushour.com) is a school-wide initiative, during which creativity of students is promoted. Genius Hour is described as follows: "For two 60-minute blocks per week, students get to study whatever topic they choose, generate big idea questions, and conduct research to create products. During Genius Hour, students assess their ability to manage ambiguity inquisitiveness, ideas, adaptability, self-reflection, risk taking, and expertise." In a meeting held during the Quality Review, the sole parent in attendance said that her daughter is building a website during her Genius Hour as a tool for incorporating art into education. "She reads on the twelfth grade level and wants to go to Stuyvesant High School or Bard High School Early College." However, the parent added, the school would be even better if there were more workshops for parents and foreign language classes for students.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Curricula are aligned to the Common Core and integrate the instructional shifts. Academic tasks are planned and refined using student work and data and consistently emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills.

Impact

Purposeful decisions are made to build coherence and promote college and career readiness for all students, including ELLs and SWDs.

Supporting Evidence

- CASA's 2014-2015 instructional focus is writing across the curriculum. "Writing helps us to be more interdisciplinary," said Principal Bowman. "Every six weeks students are writing, either expository, narrative, or argumentative writing. Differentiation is embedded in that process. What we've done with curriculum is more authentic and comprehensive. The Common Core lends itself to rigorous lesson objectives. Students work on a rigorous task either independently or collectively, which leads to better student writing products. This has transformed our students' writing in humanities and I'm excited about that." Students in a seventh-grade Writer's Workshop are engaged in expository writing using the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Themes identified for discussion are "civilization versus savagery," and the task requires students to construct an essay explaining how these two themes develop as the central idea in the book.
- Performance tasks are from the city's Common Core library, and the State's *EngageNY* website. Teachers reported that they also use *GOMath*, *CMP3*, *i-Ready*[®], *TenMarks*, and the online Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.com) as curricular supplements. "With high rigor and lesson objectives aligned to the standards and performance tasks, we're constantly pushing towards college and career readiness," said Principal Bowman. While this is CASA's goal, performance task development will need to be strengthened to ensure rigor and clarity of purpose. For example, the task in an eighth-grade ELA class on a handout to students stated: "Identify a possible theme that is starting to present itself in the *Assata* chapter 5. From that theme, create a thematic statement that can be proven/supported by details in the book."
- Teachers design lessons that enable kids to be hands-on. For example, students in an eighth grade science class are engaged in a controlled experiment related to a lesson on Isaac Newton's three laws of motion, which describe the relationship between a body and the forces acting upon it and its motion in response to those forces. The task requires groups of students to design and construct a straw rocket. To do this, students must determine the fin shape, number of fins, rocket length, and nose cone shape, and must comply with the stated design constraints related to the amount of fins, straw, and clay to be used. Students formed a hypothesis, describing how the independent variable, such as the fin, would affect the dependent variable, such as the distance the rocket will travel.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

The school uses common assessments to determine student progress toward goals across grades and subject areas and the results are used to adjust curricula and instruction. Across classrooms, teachers' assessment practices consistently reflect the use of ongoing checks for understanding and student self-assessment.

Impact

Teachers make effective adjustments to meet all students' learning needs.

Supporting Evidence

- “The use of assessment data is an organic process that happens day after day,” said Principal Bowman. “Checklists are used during conferencing weekly. We also have teachers that use clickers.” The use of checklists was evident in most classrooms and in a sixth-grade humanities class, students used clickers to respond immediately to multiple choice questions about the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.
- Rubrics are aligned to the school's curricula. For example, students in a seventh-grade math class created a flipbook on rational numbers. The associated grading rubric clearly specified the requirements for achieving a high grade, as (a) including five original written problems involving rational numbers; (b) solving the problems correctly with explanations; (c) including two or more properties and one or more complex fractions; (d) using relevant vocabulary in all areas of the flipbook; and (e) providing evidence of the tools used to solve the problem, such as a ruler. As a final check for understanding, students outlined in writing at least two takeaways from completing this rational numbers project.
- “Students are on *i-Ready*[®] (Curriculum Associates) a lot during class,” said Principal Bowman. “This program gives students immediate feedback.” The *i-Ready*[®] diagnostic and instruction report provides data on student growth by grade and class as well as school-wide data, and tracks progress towards targeted growth for all students. A seventh-grade student confirmed, “We got our *iReady*[®] test scores back yesterday. If you got Level 7, then you're on grade level. If you got below Level 7, then you need to work harder.” “We also see grades for each class on *Engrade Pro* (McGraw-Hill Education),” said another student. Teachers maintain data binders documenting each student's progress. Weekly data trackers are posted in classrooms reflecting whole class performance in percentages on various assessments. Students working in groups regularly check each other's work using a rubric and provide feedback to their peers. .

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

Teacher teams consistently analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused. Distributed leadership structures are embedded within the school.

Impact

Teacher practice has improved and there has been progress towards goals for groups of students. There is effective teacher leadership and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning across the school.

Supporting Evidence

- CASA’s collaborative teams have established meeting norms, including a note taker and a weekly rotation of the facilitator—who is also responsible for creating and disseminating the meeting agenda. Discussion protocols that focus on gap analysis are used when engaged in looking at student work. This process of surfacing gaps engages teachers in an examination of the relevant Common Core Standards to understand what students are required to know and be able to do, and how these demands change from grade to grade. A prompt provided to teachers for “current student thinking” is: “This work reveals that the student(s)…” An example of “desired student thinking” would be: “Students need to develop the skill of using evidence to support their arguments/opinions in discussion.” An example of “implications for teacher planning and preparation” would be: “Plan for more explicit focus on classroom discussion by modeling the use of evidence from a text to support an argument during classroom discussion.” “Teachers are looking at better ways to support each other,” said Principal Bowman. “We’ve seen tremendous growth because of such practices as the use of protocols, particularly in English language arts.”
- Using this gap analysis protocol, the grade 6 humanities team comprised of four teachers discussed current and desired student thinking and relevant gaps between current and desired thinking, and the implications for teacher planning and preparation. The humanities team’s approach involved participants (a) reading student work and taking notes on what they notice, (b) describing student work without judgment or predictions, (c) interpreting the reasons for a student’s approach to the task, (d) discussing the implications for instruction, and (e) developing next steps and goals. Teachers discussed how sensory detail was lacking in a lot of student narrative writing. “We created an objective that addressed that issue,” said one teacher. “We found that we needed to use more graphic organizers. The goal now is to improve expository writing by focusing on organization and citing textual evidence.”
- Teachers create their own agendas and facilitate their own meetings. “Teachers contribute to every decision we make,” said Principal Bowman. “We meet on a bi-weekly basis with teachers to update them on what is happening and receive their feedback.” “It’s a shared responsibility,” said a teacher.