



**Department of  
Education**  
*Carmen Fariña, Chancellor*

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

# **Quality Review Report**

## **2015-2016**

**Academy of Arts and Letters**

**K-8 School K492**

**225 Adelphi Street  
Brooklyn  
NY 11205**

**Principal: John O'Reilly**

**Date of review: February 5, 2016  
Lead Reviewer: Gary Knight**

## The School Context

Academy of Arts and Letters is a K-8 school with 512 students from grade kindergarten through grade 8. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 7% Asian, 39% Black, 17% Hispanic, and 31% White students. The student body includes 1% 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 2014-2015 was 95.2%.

## School Quality Criteria

<b>Instructional Core</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
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	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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 <i>Framework for Teaching</i> , aligned to the curricula, engaging, and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
<b>School Culture</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
3.4 Establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations	<b>Celebration</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
<b>Systems for Improvement</b>		
<i>To what extent does the school...</i>	<b>Area of:</b>	<b>Rating:</b>
4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning	<b>Additional Findings</b>	<b>Proficient</b>

## Area of Celebration

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>3.4 High Expectations</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

The school leader consistently communicates high expectations to the entire staff and provides training. The school leader and staff effectively communicate expectations connected to a path to college and career readiness.

### Impact

The consistent communication regarding high expectations has resulted in a culture of mutual accountability for those expectations. The school successfully partners with families to support student progress towards expectations.

### Supporting Evidence

- The school communicates high expectations by reinforcing the importance of building a culture of thinkers, focused on time, opportunities, interactions and relationships and high learning expectations. Expectations are communicated to staff in a myriad of ways, including but not limited to, memos, letters, classroom observations and feedback, professional development sessions and through a partnership with a research-based organization that works with schools to develop a culture of thinkers. The school's summer institute, also addressed expectations and covered the following topics: mission and vision statements, making learning visible, and the infusion of thinking routines into lessons to maximize thinking time for every student. The school leader holds staff accountable through meetings held with team leaders and observations and feedback. Shared accountability among teachers has developed through teacher roundtables. Teachers are expected to demonstrate their learning from professional inquiries, by sharing of pedagogical practices with colleagues and get specific feedback to use for future instruction.
- The school also conducts roundtables for teachers with specific goals and suggested protocols for each teacher. The intended goals of roundtables are for staff to share pedagogical practices and implications to build their repertoire of strategies. As a result, different activities can be applied to their classroom practice. Teachers are also provided a rollout plan for student-led conferences that clearly detail what is expected for each month and that align with the school's approach. For example, the months of September and October indicate that teachers must develop 3 to 4 major learning targets for each subject area and are to revise/create benchmarks that measure those learning targets. Administration meets with vertical team leaders who in turn meet with colleagues to disseminate information. In addition, teacher leaders, via grade level teams, share expectations. Grade and vertical level teams are structured so that collegial accountability is present and ongoing. Teachers conduct intervisitations to each other's rooms centered on learning expectations. Teachers share findings and provide feedback regarding each visit.
- The school and staff consistently communicate expectations with families through a handbook, student roundtables, and co-planned parent curriculum night workshops to help families better support their children with academic expectations. In addition, Jupiter grades and weekly two-way communication parent newsletters highlighting events, such as, the school's read-a-thon and high school information night are in place. The home-school partnership is further reinforced with classroom parent volunteers.

## Area of Focus

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>1.2 Pedagogy</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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### Findings

Teaching practices across classrooms are aligned to the curricula, reflect an articulated set of beliefs about how students learn, and consistently provide multiple entry points into the curricula.

### Impact

Classroom practices are informed by the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* and offer appropriately challenging tasks to engage all learners. However, there were missed opportunities for higher-order thinking questioning and strategic use of high quality extensions.

### Supporting Evidence

- The school leaders and staff believe in the development of a culture of thinking in the classrooms. This belief is demonstrated across most classrooms through the teachers' instructional practices and teacher moves. For example, in a grade 8 humanities lesson, students were working on a social justice unit and were expected to actively engage in student led conversations; listening, speaking and questioning each other, while annotating non-fiction texts differentiated by reading levels, to offer evidence to support their claim. The teacher reminded them to think of the "big claims" they really wanted to advocate for in the economic justice reading piece. All students were engaged in the academic task. Some students posed questions, while others responded citing text. Some examples of student-generated questions were: "How does classism affect racism and other social injustices; do you think this applies to our social pyramid?" and "Why do they try to convince people that welfare recipients are more materialistic?" and "What would the world be like without classism?"
- Teachers infused the use of technology, graphic organizers and questioning to address the needs of various learners. A grade 5 math lesson provided visuals, via a document camera, as the teacher modeled during the mini-lesson. This device was later used to also capture student responses. Students were then asked to explore several big ideas related to multiplication of fractions through investigating a playground problem. As students worked in pairs with the use of an organizer, one question they had to consider was whether or not there was more blacktop space in one space versus another. Students worked diligently to solve the problem. Some students were heard saying, "Even though measurements are different, the playground would still be the same size in terms of blacktop space," while others continued to be cognitively engaged diagramming on paper, the dimensions of the lots to determine an answer. Students were also making connections to a humanities lesson previously taught.
- Multiple entry points and scaffolding were present in classrooms; however, in a few classrooms, higher-order questioning and high quality extensions were not observed. Extensions to lessons to consistently engage students and further push thinking, was evidenced in one class, a grade 3 math lesson, where students were provided work at the fluency station upon completion of given task. In another lesson, students were conducting peer assessments on their poems. However, while some students were having their poems assessed, they were not actively engaged in a task. When one student was asked, "What do you do in the meantime?" she responded, "We just wait." In a grade 2 lesson on motion, limited questioning was evidenced. At time of visit, the question asked was, "What are you actually doing with snow? Pulling or pushing?"

## Additional Findings

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>1.1 Curriculum</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Well Developed</b>
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### Findings

School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and strategically integrate the instructional shifts. Rigorous habits and higher order skills are emphasized in curricula.

### Impact

The alignment of curricula has resulted in coherence across grades and subjects, and academic tasks are embedded in a coherent way across grades and subjects so that all learners demonstrate thinking.

### Supporting Evidence

- A grade 4 humanities curriculum map details academic tasks the students would engage in, such as, text annotation to help form and support an argument, analyze a counterargument, offer a rebuttal, and persuade others. In one math planning document, students are expected to apply and extend previous learning to deepen their understanding of fractions through a fraction investigation activity involving the use of Cuisenaire rods.
- The school's curricula consists of lesson plans that enable middle school students to demonstrate their thinking, and cognitively engage in learning through Socratic seminars. An example of how the curricula further ensures the inclusion of rigorous habits is evidenced in a grade 4 unit plan on water that specifically addresses essential questions such as, "What makes water so unique?", "How are living things dependent on water?", "How has water played a role in exploration and discovery?" and "How do the properties of water affect living things and the natural environment?" All requiring critical thinking in order to respond. Big ideas and broad concepts such as water changing shape and adapting to the space it occupies and three states of water in the cycle were also included to further push students' thinking. Real world connections were integrated throughout the planned student investigations. Additional curricular documents show that the school integrates the habits of mind and project-based learning tasks with student-led presentations as the culminating activity.
- In an effort to further build cohesiveness, teachers use a common framework for all unit plans, which, along with curricula maps, are reviewed regularly by the vertical team, for alignment with the school's goals and Common Core Learning Standards. Lesson studies in every grade, focus on nonfiction text and all grades develop 4 units of study each year that allows students to investigate a topic. The investigation units of study combine math and literacy content standards. Similarly, there is a combination of standards in Humanities with the blend of social studies and English Language Arts. In addition, there has been an increase in text complexity across subjects at the upper grades.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>2.2 Assessment</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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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 toward goals across grades and subjects.

### Impact

The use of assessments and rubrics provides actionable feedback to students and teachers, and the results are used to adjust curricula and instruction.

### Supporting Evidence

- In addition to Performance-Based Assessments (PBA), Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) at the upper grades and *Fountas and Pinnell* reading at the lower grades, the teachers designed tri-annual benchmarks at every grade. The benchmarks have developed over time as teachers conduct gallery walks to analyze each assessment by grade. Teachers reviewed the grade 2 and 3 writing benchmarks, and the results were used to make adjustments to the quantity of items as well as the formatting and structuring of paragraphs. Similarly, revisions were made with the grade 7 benchmark as well. To adjust the level of text complexity and to further build the cohesiveness of assessments, the kindergarten through grade 2 team was brought into planning process.
- The review of common benchmarks documents revealed that they are based on content standards, grade specific learning targets, and overall content level skills covered during instruction. The staff shared that results of these assessments are used to monitor student progress by identifying students below, on, or above grade level, and are used as the springboard for student-led conferences, where students' strengths and areas for growth are shared. For example, in the lower grades students have shown growth in language development.
- The school has an overall grading process that includes rubrics and goal sheets used as a means of providing feedback to students. For example, a grade 7 student articulated that she received feedback on her abolitionist writing assignment that stated, "Rich in details, triggered emotions, continue to work on building transitions."
- Assessment data are color coded and tracked. A grade 3 math benchmark assessment tracker indicates 66% of students can round numbers to the nearest 100 and 63% can use place value to compare numbers. Similarly, a humanities colored tracker captured students' names and the following skills: focus and position, elaboration, textual analysis, organization and conventions. Class of 2019 data revealed that approximately 42% of students scored 2.5 or less on the skill of elaboration, out of a total score of 4. As a result, teachers identify next steps such as targeting specific students for additional practice, the modification of teaching practices.

<b>Quality Indicator:</b>	<b>4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development</b>	<b>Rating:</b>	<b>Proficient</b>
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### Findings

The majority of teachers are engaged in structured, inquiry-based professional collaborations that promote the achievement of school goals. Teacher teams consistently analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused.

### Impact

The structured, inquiry-based professional collaborations geared toward the analysis of assessment data and student work have strengthened the instructional capacity of teachers while typically resulting in progress toward goals for groups of students.

### Supporting Evidence

- Teacher teams meet weekly to engage in professional collaborations both vertically and at the grade level. As part of a 6-8 week cycle that includes data analysis, intervisitation, and sharing of findings and feedback, the vertical team pays particular attention to teaching strategies and practices, and strengthening the curricula in terms of alignment and cohesiveness. The grade level teams work to support the overall culture and climate of the school. Both teams have a lead person who shares with administration information discussed during meetings to ensure further collaboration school wide. Although teachers are engaged in inquiry-based, structured collaborations, there was little evidence to show how the impact resulted in increased student achievement for all learners.
- A vertical inquiry team conducted a sample data dive on grade 2 writing benchmark data, which captured information in the See/Think/Wonder format. Teachers saw that the data revealed; 17 students were below average; 11 were at or above average; and conventions scores were lowest. Teachers' thoughts included but were not limited to, students are able to brainstorm ideas; more than half the class is below grade level on organization, word choice, fluency and conventions, and the widest range of scores falls in word choice. Wonderings included, "How are ideas measured?", "Would focusing on conventions and sentence fluency earlier on be helpful?", "What should the team focus on next?" and "Is the intervention different for a child with scores of all ones, versus only a single score of one?" Professional collaborations provide the opportunity to share best practices in an effort to increase the effectiveness of lesson delivery. It also affords teachers to be more cohesive in the execution of lessons across grades and subjects through teacher led conversations.
- In a special education inquiry meeting, teachers were concerned with math content and differentiating tasks to further develop independence and engagement with big ideas. Data collected included classwork, student interviews, unit 1 assessments and pre-assessments for Unit 2. Next steps included, focusing on one type of learning activity, determining length of activity, providing math menus such as Expeditionary Learning or bingo, and a benchmark study tracing one skill or cumulative set of skills and tracking growth visually. In a general education inquiry meeting, one area identified as a weakness in grade 6 science was the ability to make conclusions based on data. Only 6 students scored a 3 or higher. A possible inquiry focus and next steps were to check to see that standards are being covered from k-8 with projects included in each, and to determine how non-fiction texts are being taught. Based on review of evidence, teacher teams' analysis of assessment data and student work does not consistently result in mastery of goals for groups of students.