



Quality Review Report

2015-2016

M.S.131

Middle School M131

**100 Hester Street
Manhattan
NY 10002**

Principal: Phyllis Tam

**Date of review: January 8, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman**

The School Context

M.S. 131 is a middle school with 420 students from grade 6 through grade 8. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 77% Asian, 8% Black, 14% Hispanic, and 0% White students. The student body includes 35% English Language Learners and 27% students with disabilities. Boys account for 56% of the students enrolled and girls account for 44%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 97.1%.

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	Well Developed
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	Additional Findings	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	Focus	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	Well Developed
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	Well Developed

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:	4.2 Teacher teams and leadership development	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

Teachers meet regularly in structured professional collaborations to promote Common Core Learning Standards implementation and strengthen their practice. Distributive leadership structures afford teachers the opportunity to make critical decisions about teaching and learning.

Impact

Team collaboration results in school-wide instructional coherence and increased student achievement for all learners. Teachers' integral role in instructional decisions improves their teaching capacity and impact student learning across the school.

Supporting Evidence

- All teachers take part in weekly professional collaborations both by content area and grade to strengthen practice and to plan and revise Common Core aligned curricula in all subjects. The English Language Arts (ELA) team, after analysis of benchmark assessments, is focusing on strengthening students' understanding of craft and elaboration criteria in grades 6 through 8 aligned to the Teacher's College writing rubric. Additionally, all grade team planning minutes highlight the Common Core writing standards addressed across content areas: in sixth grade informational writing; in seventh grade explanatory writing, and in eighth grade text-based analysis.
- During Monday's professional learning time, teachers share practices aligned to school goals to expand upon differentiated practices and assess student learning. Teachers meet in study groups, discuss ideas from professional journals, and experiment with strategies to address all student needs, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities. Topics range from student goal setting and self-assessment tools, to differentiating for high performing students and integrating meaningful feedback into lessons. This leads to peer observations and visits to model classrooms to observe how an approach is implemented and its impact on student learning. One teacher shared that she generated "explicit" strategies to support English Language Learners after visiting two colleagues' classrooms. A math teacher learned how to design station tasks after visiting a model classroom.
- The principal shared that all teams use the "ATLAS" protocol for looking at a range of student work to include all learners. In the math team meeting, teachers followed the protocol in looking at work from a student with disabilities, an English Language Learner, and a high performer. This resulted in the team's decision to target common mathematical vocabulary across grades and to track impact on student progress.
- The principal trained three instructional coaches, and two are special educators. They engage in ongoing professional learning to build their leadership capacity, plan and facilitate all professional workshops, coach teachers, and demonstrate differentiated practices that engage all learners in their "model" classrooms to support their colleagues. One teacher stated that over several visits, her coach noted when she used effective differentiated strategies. "This helped me to determine how my lesson is or isn't reaching all of my learners. Now I plan with a different lens and I am a better educator for it."

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

2.2 Assessment

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

The school uses common assessments to determine student progress toward learning targets. Assessment practices to check for student understanding promote student self-assessment and reflection on work.

Impact

Teachers routinely adjust curricula and instruction based on assessment data to meet the academic needs for all students. However, in class checks for understanding do not consistently lead to adjustments that promote, for all students, in-depth awareness of next learning steps.

Supporting Evidence

- ELA teachers maintain writing trackers to compare Common Formative Assessment (CFA) results throughout the year. The team also reviewed the ELA state results and this led to a focus on development and craft in writing. The current tracker indicates that most students in the seventh grade on average moved up three levels in development/elaboration and craft. Additionally, when the team studied state assessment data and learned that their eighth graders were not scoring well on short responses, they adjusted their Claim-Evidence-Explanation structure (CEE) to include a statement that connects back to the prompt. An English as a second language (ESL) teacher added that her department structure, Claim-Evidence-Reason, aligns to the school-wide focus on argument writing and, based on her data, is also focused on supporting her English Language Learners with making inferences and writing conclusions. The science and social studies departments adapted their assessments to address the school-wide focus on evidence-based writing, and the math department created their own rubric to highlight mathematical thinking in work products.
- In most classrooms, teachers conferred with students and recorded what students understood or completed as they circulated among small groups to check accomplishments or areas for further work such as: identifying a central idea, explaining evidence, or solving linear equations. The principal expects teachers to provide students with feedback through conferencing and questioning during small group or individual work time, and, therefore, created time during Monday's professional learning schedule for teachers to share strategies that work, or to get feedback to improve. All students regularly reflect upon their work at various stages in projects and tasks. Additionally, all teachers have access to their students' progress across content areas on a Google Docs and Teacher Ease, the online grading platform.
- In all classrooms lesson learning targets set the goal for the day's work, and students readily articulated that this was the learning expectation for the lesson. Students understood what they would be assessed on and their lesson's content. In discussions with students, some shared next steps for improving their writing: "I need to write more explanations and examples and be specific", or for computations: "I don't look closely enough, I have to slow down to avoid silly mistakes." However, several identified the learning target as the next step to improve their work. Additionally, in class check ins clearly support adjustments to the next day's lesson or initiate a team's focus, less consistent were checks to make sure all students understood content during the lesson.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

All curricula are strategically aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and cohesively integrate the instructional shifts. Curricula and tasks consistently emphasize rigorous habits for all students.

Impact

Given that school leaders ensure Common Core alignment, all students are prepared for college and career. Across grades and content areas, the curriculum offers multiple opportunities for all students to demonstrate high levels of thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- Unit plans follow a cohesive format that includes essential questions, academic vocabulary, modifications for students with disabilities or English Language Learners, transferable skills, and assessments. All teachers regularly expose students to close reading strategies for analyzing informational texts, writing evidence-based short responses, and reading complex texts as a whole class. Students build their reading fluency during independent reading time.
- The school's focus on writing is in evidence across curricula documents. A history task invites students to defend or refute the idea that America is the land of opportunity, or that "All men are created equal." In a science essay, students had the choice to argue for or against the safety of bottled versus tap water.
- Writing progressions provide clear steps for crafting an argumentative writing piece from crafting a claim and generating examples with targeted vocabulary, to elaborating on evidence using sentence starters such as: "it is clear that" or "this example proves that." This year teachers added a focus on audience in their approach to teaching the essay by asking students to strengthen their writing by restating claims in "new" words that "act as a transition into the next paragraph." This in turn keeps the "reader thinking with a powerful statement" to close. In a non-fiction and expository writing ELA unit refined for English Language Learners, students need to meet all requirements to analyze a variety of texts, incorporate relevant academic vocabulary into writing, and demonstrate a deep understanding of a topic. Students are also asked to focus on decoding and phonics strategies to support language acquisition.
- An eighth grade Algebra project requires students to research the best telephone plan for a family by analyzing comparative data. Students demonstrate understanding in several iterations: plane graph data; comparative table; written proposal; and in written responses to prompts that require them to apply what they learned to a new set of circumstances.

Quality Indicator:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Teaching practices reflect curricula goals and the school's belief in student-centered learning. Across classrooms, students engaged in high levels of participation reflected in work products.

Impact

As a result of teaching practices aligned to the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* and emphasis on the instructional shifts, discussions and work products consistently reflect student thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- The school leadership collectively decided to focus on student-to-student discussion and participation. In an ELA classroom, students engaged in a “fishbowl” discussion. To prepare, students researched their chosen topic of either “Legislating gun violence” or “Animal testing”. Students brought their evidence-based essays to argue for their side. Students did not read from their essays; they came with evidence-based arguments and referred to text annotations when they participated. They also challenged each other's thinking. When one student asserted that since many animals are hunted or starve, “Why not use them for testing?” A student disagreed. “Animal testing costs a lot of money” and cited the figure \$32,000 from a text, “It is too expensive.” A third student countered that if testing saves lives, this is enough of a defense. Students in the outer circle took notes to determine the strongest argument for each side, and teachers observed and recorded notes on conferring charts. Students took charge of the discourse, reflected on what they might do to improve the process, and then switched from the outer to the inner circle. All students were deep engaged.
- All students participated used accountable talk stems such as: “I agree” or “I would like to add to that” during class discussions. The sentence starters were posted in most classrooms, and captured in a seventh-grade history learning target: I will agree, disagree, explain my opinion, and encourage the participation of my peers. Students prepared for the discussion, “Challenges facing the colonists in the 1700s”, by first writing in response to several prompts. They also set goals such as: gather more evidence before the discussion “so I am ready to speak all the time, or “to speak at least once.” Students in the outer circle followed the reasoning of two peers to determine how to strengthen or counter the arguments. One student stated: “They had to cut down trees and move rocks to make space for farming,” and his peer built upon this by adding that this reflected the colonists lack of knowledge about the effects of winter weather on crops. A student in the outer circle offered feedback to the student he followed during the debate: “I would say I agree, because the more acts there were, the more frustrated colonists were.”
- Students in a sixth grade reading class engaged in close reading of a chapter from the novel, *The Lightning Thief*, and independently formulated gist statements for each paragraph. They joined triads to share their ideas, and then moved to generating details about the character in double entry notes.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

The school's leaders consistently communicate a set of high expectations grounded in the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* to the entire staff. Families receive ongoing communication articulating the path to college and career readiness.

Impact

School leaders provide many professional learning opportunities so that teachers are accountable for meeting expectations. Given teachers' commitment to their students, families fully understand their students' progress toward meeting the school's high academic expectations.

Supporting Evidence

- Teachers receive weekly updates from school leadership that provide information such as: upcoming professional learning topics, or a reminder that after teams look at student work to share what they learned so there is the opportunity to receive meaningful feedback and to collectively "strengthen our school practice." In the November update, the principal shared her expectations that for upcoming classroom visits: tasks that require all student to demonstrate high levels of thinking; students "making their thinking public to peers and teachers," and resources available for students who need additional support." Included as well are links to sources that offer strategies to support teachers' growth in aligning their practice to the school's focus on differentiation and assessing student learning.
- All teachers engage in professional learning to support them with implementing differentiated support to meet the needs of all students. To this end, teachers regularly participate in learning walks, meet in study groups, and receive ongoing and targeted feedback to improve their practice through observations and instructional coach visits. Observation documents reviewed indicate that feedback to teachers reflects the school's focus on differentiation. For example, "differentiated products can range from identifying a text example to paraphrasing evidence." Additionally, teachers' professional learning goals are memorialized on a Google Doc so that they are held accountable for meeting school-wide expectations.
- Parents shared that the school communicates expectations and student progress toward meeting them in Progress Reports, newsletters, a family handbook made available in English or Chinese, and through the online grading platform. All parents are invited to join weekly grade team meetings to discuss and strategize about supporting their children's progress. This, teachers share, gives parents a weekly opportunity to meet with all of their children's' teachers. Parents shared that they also learn about their students' accomplishments during student-led conferences wherein students, after planning and preparing a "Reflection Script" with their teachers, present work that demonstrates their academic strengths, work that reflects progress toward standards, and goals set for each subject. The principal shared that feedback from teachers and parents was "overwhelmingly positive" when this was first introduced last spring.