



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

Essex Street Academy

High School M294

**350 Grand Street
Manhattan
NY 10002**

Principal: Erin Carstensen

**Date of review: May 19, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Rod Bowen**

The School Context

Essex Street Academy is a high school with 353 students from grade 9 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 6% Asian, 38% Black, 43% Hispanic, and 8% White students. The student body includes 3% English Language Learners and 27% students with disabilities. Boys account for 50% of the students enrolled and girls account for 50%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 86.3%.

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	Celebration	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	Focus	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	Well Developed
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	Additional Findings	Well Developed

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:

1.1 Curriculum

Rating:

Well Developed

Findings

School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards, strategically integrate instructional shifts as well as emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills in a coherent way across grades and subject areas.

Impact

Curricula and learning tasks across grades and subject areas are coherent and promote college and career readiness for all students, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities, as they require them to demonstrate their thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- All departments articulate promotional and graduation requirements informed by the performance-based assessments that all students are expected to complete. These requirements are divided into two-year arcs, ninth-tenth grade and eleventh-twelfth grade. Departments ensure coherence of skills that are to be emphasized throughout all four years. For example, the science department's ninth and tenth grade promotional requirements include students having to observe, hypothesize and discuss, whereas the eleventh and twelfth grade expectations include inquiry, hypothesis, research and presentation.
- The promotion and graduation requirements inform the design of curriculum maps. A review of curriculum maps across subject areas showed that they all include higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, substantive conversation, and world connectedness as pedagogical values. The curriculum maps note essential questions, brief descriptions of each unit along with content and skills to be taught, learning challenges most relevant to the project, and accommodations or modifications that will be available to address student needs.
- All lesson plans reference the connection between the main learning activity and the semester's culminating performance task. A math lesson plan stated that the lesson's task of finding a new way to package Amazon products would help students practice the use of volume and surface area formulas, which would also be used in the final project.
- In the curricular documents for an English Language Arts (ELA) lesson entitled *Author Experts*, students would have to investigate and identify how various authors use the literary devices of setting, narrator/voice, point of view, characterization and symbolism in their writing. In addition, students would need to explain why the author used the elements in the manner that he or she did.
- The lesson plan for a science class would allow students to either work in small groups to engage in student-designed investigations where they would collect data and perform calculations, or use teacher feedback to do background writing, describe the significance of their independent and dependent variables and relate their hypothesis to the science content.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers consistently implement strategies that reflect the belief that students learn best when they are engaged in higher order thinking and substantive conversations.

Impact

In many classes, students are engaged in curricula-aligned challenging tasks and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills in their work products. However, in a few classes, evidence of higher order thinking was inconsistent and student ownership of their learning was not yet evident across classrooms.

Supporting Evidence

- A social studies class discussed how and why the United States immigration policy changed between 1986 and 2016. To inform the discussion, students annotated text from various sources, developed a hypothesis and cited evidence and quotes from text to support it. Throughout the discussion, students referenced text while utilizing knowledge of current events. To support her hypothesis, one student said, "I used this quote, but I crossed out the word immigration, and wrote 'U.S. border security changed to become more strict for the safety of people living in the U.S.'" Students were clear this topic was the one that their end of term research paper would be focused on and that the discussion would inform their writing.
- Students in a writing class were engaged in a debate based on informational text regarding whether or not citizens should be required to inform a potential employer of a criminal record. Students spoke from their own perspective as well as from those of potential employees and employers. One student said, "I agree, even if they went to jail, they should still get the same opportunity to work." Another commented, "If you're applying for a job in a day care center, and you're a pedophile, that could be a real problem." They also referenced the article during the debate. One student noted a quote that stated that the actions of one worker could end the business. Though the discussion met many of the school's expectations for substantive conversation, the teacher guided, re-directed and paraphrased throughout, limiting student ownership of the process.
- During a math lesson, students worked in groups to determine which geometric shapes they should use to design packaging for a candy bar that would minimize surface area while maximizing volume. Although students were able to identify the problem and determine what they were to measure, most were unable to select the most efficient shapes or provide an appropriate rationale for their selection. For example, a student stated that she would use a cube because it was closer to a circle, but could not explain how or why.
- Students in a science class had the choice of selecting one from three previously completed experiments to refine and build upon for their final projects. Small groups assigned by their choice of experiment were all able to articulate the relevance of their efforts toward the desired final work products. A group working on their lab reports used appropriate, content specific language. Students referenced independent research done on YouTube that informed their writing. Another group explored which compounds would maximize the luminescence of a glow stick, while another group investigated which alcohol gives off the most heat when used as a fuel and the impact of its use on the environment.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, assessment practices are aligned with the school's curricula and offer a clear portrait of student mastery. In addition, teachers use common assessments to create a clear picture of student progress toward goals across grades and subjects.

Impact

Teachers and students receive actionable and meaningful feedback regarding student achievement. Teachers make curricular adjustments and instructional decisions so that all students demonstrate mastery.

Supporting Evidence

- Students indicated that they find feedback provided to them meaningful and they clearly articulated next steps that would improve their performance. Their self-reflections on their work included "I could have explained my process better and made connections to how the math could be used in personal experiences", "I forgot to add key evidence to support my argument", "I did a good job of capturing the voice of the author", and "My references to Greek mythology could have been clearer." Student work contained written teacher feedback such as, "You included all the detailed information you completed in your project", "I'd like to see more analysis and more justification using math", and "Can you think of a constant that is the same for both groups?"
- In science, a review of student work showed that they were not effectively analyzing data sets in their writing. In response, teachers implemented data based discussions. Specific strategies included making the goals of the discussions explicit in terms of how students would engage verbally, setting clear learning goals, and using facilitation strategies that support the desired outcome. After such discussions, students would write about their understanding of the data. Student work after these data based seminars showed marked improvement in data analysis. For example, in the conclusion of a lab write up, a student was able to write about how test results showed no correlation between competitive and reaction times.
- Project 1 student work and data in social studies showed that students were not proficient in identifying and using evidence to illustrate a point. A graphic organizer helped students by listing facts and key terms before their formal writing. Another strategy was to implement a process where students had to connect details from text in response to prompts, such as, "According to ...", "As ... states...", and "... claims that..." Data showed that in Project 2, students made noticeable gains in this particular skill.
- All staff constantly uses the school's on-line grading and communication system to track student progress and by students and their families to stay abreast of student achievement. Organization of data is by overall skill mastery. For example, a student's achievement in creative writing is tracked by focusing on seven skills that include, for example, "Investigates the purpose and meaning of writing including its structure", and "Makes connections between writing and the outside world." Under each skill are the assignments used to assess it along with a grade of honors, exceeds standards, meets standards, approaching standards, and incomplete. Chronologically listed assignments facilitate the ability for all to follow student progress within each skill over time.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

School leaders consistently communicate high expectations and provide training to the entire staff. A culture of high expectations provides feedback, guidance and support to all students.

Impact

A culture of mutual accountability for high expectations is well established. Students own their educational experience and are prepared for the next level.

Supporting Evidence

- The school’s instructional priorities center around a research based framework that promotes students’ meeting or exceeding standards relating to higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, student understanding, substantive conversation and connectedness to the real world. These high expectations are embedded throughout the school’s professional culture and were evident in curricular documents, collegial and supervisory feedback as well as classroom instruction. Staff members hold themselves accountable for these expectations, primarily through collaborative work done in teacher teams, known as “beehives.” For example, the math beehive engaged in an inquiry process to explore how to get more students to participate in substantive mathematical conversations using appropriate content specific vocabulary. Together, they looked at transcripts of recorded class conversations and strategized facilitation practices that would address their goal.
- Students spoke of the school’s College Bound course. In this class, they noted that they learn how to write resumes and college essays, practice applying for colleges on line and selecting people to write recommendations. They also said that they select 30 colleges, 10 easy, 10 moderate schools and 10 “reach” schools. Students attend trips to college campuses of various sizes, both private and public. A senior who will attend DePaul University in the fall said that she picked the school because she is confident that she would do well at a small, intimate, liberal arts college. She also noted that she felt prepared for college because the description of some of the courses being offered had similar content to classes she had taken at Essex Street Academy.
- When asked about the other ways that the school prepares them for college and careers, students agreed that teachers assign challenging tasks where they always have to think and make connections to the outside world. One student remarked, “We have a lot of discussion based classes where we have to be critical thinkers, have opinions and take a stand, and ask for help if we need it.”

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

The vast majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based, structured professional collaborations. Distributed leadership structures are embedded so that there is effective teacher leadership.

Impact

Teacher instructional capacity has strengthened through the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, resulting in school-wide instructional coherence and achievement for all students. Teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning across the school.

Supporting Evidence

- Beehives are department based and focus on teacher practice, student performance, curriculum planning, and content knowledge. With support from administration, beehives identify areas of focus for their inquiry work and select areas to improve their collective instructional practices. The beehives work in professional development cycles that include a tuning consultancy, storyboarding, working on videos, vetting presentations and a showcase whereby they share best practices.
- During the science beehive, teachers watched a video of a lesson taught by one of the hive members. The team designed the plan, which focused on engaging students in substantive conversation. They viewed the video three times. The first time was to gather noticings. The second time was to look for evidence of control of the shared conversation between the teacher and students. The third viewing was to look for the degree to which students were engaged in higher order thinking related to the topic, and whether their dialogue was building on shared ideas. They observed that students were having text-based conversations, their debate began with a point that a student had made, and a student raised a question about the text without sharing his ideas about it.
- Teachers spoke at length about their contributions to various school wide decisions as well as initiatives that were completely teacher driven. Teachers facilitate the promotional review committee that establishes and holds students accountable to high academic expectations. The idea of using department specific beehives to facilitate more individualized professional development was teacher generated.
- Teachers also serve on the hiring committee, run the “Big Sib” mentoring program, and design Curriculum Night. Teachers are also responsible for advisory planning. This year they have been focused on inclusivity and diversity as they work with students to create opportunities for processing upsetting personal and current events.