



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

**The Urban Assembly School of Design and
Construction**

High School M300

**525 West 50th Street
Manhattan
NY 10019**

Principal: Matthew Willoughby

**Date of review: March 29, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman**

The School Context

The Urban Assembly School of Design and Construction is a high school with 410 students from grade 9 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 4% Asian, 28% Black, 63% Hispanic, and 3% White students. The student body includes 7% English Language Learners and 22% students with disabilities. Boys account for 72% of the students enrolled and girls account for 28%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 83.0%.

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 <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	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	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

The majority of teachers are engaged in structured, professional collaborations that promote school goals and Common Core Learning Standard implementation. Distributed leadership structures provide teachers with opportunities to build their leadership capacity.

Impact

Ongoing professional collaborations strengthen teachers' instructional capacity and include them in key decisions that affect student learning across the school.

Supporting Evidence

- The Instructional Rounds team strengthens their practice in targeted areas such as student-to-student discussion in small groups. A math teacher offered, "When I saw how my colleagues used a group work rubric, and seeing the same strategy across a grade level, it improved my practice." Another added, "Instructional Rounds have allowed the teaching staff to have more input into our professional development choices because we have used the data collected from observations to plan professional development." Teachers selected from topics such as questioning and discussion, planning for rigor, or small group protocols, and created problems of practice to focus the visits and their subsequent feedback sessions. One teacher noted that by visiting colleagues' classrooms she learned how to better support her students with disabilities, "I have learned that incorporating wait time will give students the opportunity to discover on their own and increase their independence." A science teacher also offered an additional impact of this work, students see a strategy used in social studies and in English and become more "confident in chemistry class."
- The principal noted, "We believe distributed leadership leads to raised expectations. Anything we set is not set in isolation; it is done through the work of teacher leaders." The school's instructional focus "planning for rigor" was determined in last summer's professional retreat. This was the impetus for a teacher-led initiative to set specific goals to align curricula and assessments to departments' essential skills. The English department is increasing student independence in reading, writing, and critical thinking and the math department is integrating essential skills into all lesson plans to move student pass rates on Regents exams. In addition, the science department is creating curricula tools to vertically align to the essential skills, and the special education team is tracking and supporting 18 students in the bottom third to meet annual math and English Language Arts goals. The principal shared that he is seeing the effects of their instructional work to build coherent practices during classroom observations.
- In the science team meeting, teachers assessed a chemistry unit on *Kinetics and Equilibrium* for "What are we noticing about the essential skills in the unit?" A noted strength was the increased focus on students evaluating and using data to defend an idea. The presenting teacher offered that he sees the results "pushing student thinking, analyzing, predicting, and applying concepts." Additionally, another teacher stated that literacy is now an integral part of the laboratory process wherein students read complex texts, learn academic vocabulary, and find central ideas in a text.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

Across most classrooms, teaching practices reflect an articulated set of beliefs about student engagement and students have multiple opportunities to show high levels of thinking in work products.

Impact

The school's focus on questioning and discussion is informed by the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*; however, there were missed opportunities for students to engage in high levels of student-led participation and thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- In a chemistry classroom, students calculated data point averages in groups. The lesson had been adjusted from independent work to a group laboratory. Groups were preplanned and group leaders selected the day before. Students checked answers with each other, and the teacher circulated to pose questions to students such as “How do you find an average?” or to remind students to “use data to defend what you say.” Although several students were unsure of why they were engaged in the process, one student offered that the class was setting up for a project about chemical reactions. This preceded students engaging in the analytical part of the lesson wherein they take on the role of scientists to determine whether Alka-Seltzer or Brioschi brand antacids worked the fastest. Most students worked independently, stopping to check in with each other after completing their calculations.
- During a tenth grade English class students discussed an event that “blew their mind” from a chapter in *Lord of the Flies*. Students were to “discuss, not write,” and the teacher circulated, noting when students used the text to ground their thoughts, or encouraging them to. One group discussed disrespect for the rules, and another the character's inability to change his image. When the room quieted, the teacher asked, “What can you do to push conversation?” A student offered, “Ask a question”, after which one student said, “Anyone can be a leader, so why didn't it work for Jack?” Similarly, in a twelfth grade class students engaged in a text-based discussion based on 23 questions they generated about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students were well versed in leading their own discussions, however, there was a missed opportunity for students to prioritize questions that would yield the richest discussion, and lead students back to the text to substantiate their ideas.
- Geometry students worked on a start-up activity to determine the area of three shapes after which a student was called to the interactive white board to share his work. The student made an error and rather than stepping back to see if students could figure out where the error was, the teacher corrected it, and moved on with the lesson, thus missing an opportunity for students to generate their own understanding and, as the principal noted, figure out a misconception for him or herself.
- Students in an English class were provided with leveled texts and several photographs of Nazi concentration camps. They were to independently gather evidence of how prisoners were dehumanized, and then engage with their group to prioritize the substantive evidence. The lesson culminated in written responses, and one student wrote that the identification tattoos “robbed prisoners of their identities, they were no longer looked at as people, but as numbers.”

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:

1.1 Curriculum

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

School leaders and teachers ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and integrate the instructional shifts across content areas. Curricula and tasks consistently emphasize rigorous habits.

Impact

The principal and teachers make purposeful decisions to promote college and career readiness and to ensure that all learners engage in higher-order skills across grades and subjects.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal shared that the school's ongoing unit planning is grounded in a set of learning targets. This year the work has been to align learning tasks to outcomes, and to increase rigor across content areas and grades. To this end, all learning targets are made accessible to students daily in "I can" statements aligned to Webb's *Depth of Knowledge* level three or four. All unit templates are uniform across the school and stored for feedback and ongoing revision in Google Drive. Additionally, department teams identified the essential content skills students are to achieve at the end of each grade across the school. For example, ninth grade science students will "infer patterns from observations made during experiments and use them to support conclusions," eleventh graders "evaluate and defend data (using specific evidence and terminology), reflect on inconsistencies in data," and "independently research scientific concepts." The impact of this work was reflected in the January English Regents results: of 79 students who took the test, 74 passed, a 93.67% pass rate, and 50 tested out of college remediation with a 75 or higher.
- Eleventh graders engage in several essay experiences over the course of a unit focused on the significance of the African-American experience. The unit plan indicates that they learn to synthesize ideas by annotating texts, exploring rhetorical devices, engaging in Socratic Seminar, and practicing on-demand writing.
- In an Art and Design task, students translate concepts of point, line, plane, form, space, and interrelationships of forms into three-dimensional representations of a furnished home. To prepare, students create scale drawings, floor plans, and elevations. Additionally, students create transformations of identical planes and puzzles into three-dimensional constructs that involve space planning, understanding of scale and dimension, and three dimension modeling. The semester culminates in a grade-wide presentation of student projects to professionals in the design, engineering, and construction fields. Similarly, an earthquake project requires students to design a prototype of a two-story building that can withstand an earthquake for one minute. This requires research in design principles for earthquake resistant structures, adhering to design requirements such as the structure must be at least two stories tall and the top must be enclosed. Students must then present their prototype sketch to their client, the Red Cross, for approval, and have proof that multiple designs were considered prior to the final decision.
- History students analyze an excerpt from Aristotle's "Politics" in order to determine the philosopher's political views, the way he envisions government, and how his use of rhetorical devices and syntactical structures strategically convey his message to his audience.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use common assessments aligned with the school’s curricula to determine student progress toward goals across grades and content areas.

Impact

Students and teachers receive ongoing feedback on student achievement, and teachers make effective adjustments to curricula and instruction to meet students’ learning needs.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal shared that the school uses three common assessments to track student progress, adjust curricula, and form strategic student groupings. First, the *Degrees of Reading Power* (DRP) assessments are given three times a year to move students to college reading levels. Assessment data review surfaced that students were not reading at grade level. This resulted in two decisions, for teachers to share results with students and targeted feedback for improvement in their English class, and for ninth and tenth graders to engage in *Drop Everything and Read* (DEAR). Second, the school administers three interim assessments that align to the Regents exams. Teachers review assessment outcomes to identify skills and content struggles to adjust curricula to student needs. Departments reflect on this together, make ongoing adjustments to curricula, and create student groupings for targeted support. Last, the school administers two performance tasks a year across departments and grades aligned to the school’s Essential Skills and curricula goals. This allows students to demonstrate their thinking in written and oral presentations.
- Exam reflections are an embedded practice across the school. This provides the opportunity for students to examine their assessments, reflect on their gaps, and track their progress toward learning targets. Students reflect on errors made and rethink their responses. One student wrote, “I made the answer more than it needed to be. The picture made me think of something other than the catalyst.” In rethinking, the student noted, “Adding more pressure changes the condition by depressing the space for collision.” Additionally, a math teacher asks students questions during the test correction process to help with clarity or to “get them started.”
- Actionable feedback on student work is in evidence across the school. Teachers embed comments online or in ongoing emails that offer students specific ways to improve their writing such as “This is a good argument but you should explain in more detail how higher incomes lead to more job creation,” or “How does this line show that they are clairvoyant?” Students stated that teachers support their writing through one-on-one conferences, and by offering student-friendly rubrics “so we understand what we need to do to improve our grade.” Another shared that he found it difficult to get his ideas out even when writing about something he loves – running, but his teacher provided ongoing feedback on Google Docs. Six drafts later, he was stuck on how to close, “my teacher gave me a quote” and he completed his college essay.
- In order to assess argumentative writing skills across grades, English teachers revised their midterm assessment to align to Regents exams. The accompanying rubric is aligned to the department’s essential skills. The rubric measured students from emerging to exemplary. As a result of this adjustment, students in the lowest third and English Language Learners reached “approaching.” This, the assistant principal shared, “accurately guides our work for the next unit assessment.”

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

The principal and his leadership team consistently communicate high expectations connected to a path to college and career readiness to all families and students.

Impact

Families receive ongoing feedback that helps them to understand their children's progress toward expectations set. All students receive ongoing feedback and guidance support to prepare them for their next level.

Supporting Evidence

- Parents access their children's progress on the school's online grading platform, Skedula, and the principal and teachers ensure that parents are provided with the training tools and resources to keep pace with progress. The principal noted, "We added in a rotation so that when all parents are in the computer room they learn how to access the data on their phones. Parents also have access to the progress to graduation tracker. As one parent noted, Teachers call, they text, and even if it is ten o'clock at night, if it will help your kids' future." Another shared that she loves the school for the close relationships students have with each teacher, given the importance of "knowing our kids." While the school offers communications through emails and Pupil Path, one parent shared that, "I like face to face during open door. We don't need an appointment."
- The principal shared his belief in preparing all students for life after high school. A dedicated college counselor takes students and their families through all phases of the college process from effective use of *Naviance's* self-assessment tools and a "True Colors" exercise to show students the skills they have, to having upperclassmen share lessons learned about the importance that academic performance has on shaping college options. Weekly meetings to support students with understanding what it takes to succeed in college are driven by the belief that "college is attainable and affordable." All ninth through eleventh grade students engage in a "College Day" facilitated by the college counselor, teachers and seniors. Additionally, students input their grades into the *State University of New York's* (SUNY) online Academic Record (SOAR) at the end of every semester and beginning in the ninth grade, and all students have the option to participate in *College Now* courses.
- The school's plan for early college awareness begins in the ninth grade where students research careers and educational pathways, learn financial literacy, and participate in summer programs such as Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and College Now. In the tenth grade, students build from this foundation to focus on post-secondary vocabulary regarding degree types and college offerings, and in the eleventh grade, begin preparing for the college application process from considering recommendations to writing the college essay. The path to college and career readiness is a priority in the school and the plan for all students is mapped out in an "Early Awareness Goals" document that indicates expectations at the close of each school year.