



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

Academy for Social Action

High School M367

**509 West 129th Street
Manhattan
NY 10027**

Principal: Josephine Van-Ess

**Date of review: December 10, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman**

The School Context

Academy for Social Action is a high school with 186 students from grade 9 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 1% Asian, 45% Black, 47% Hispanic, and 5% White students. The student body includes 19% English Language Learners and 25% 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 77.2%.

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	Developing
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	Developing
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	Celebration	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:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

The school leader consistently communicates high expectations to her staff aligned to the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. The school leader and her staff consistently communicate to parents the school's academic expectations and students' progress toward meeting them.

Impact

A system of accountability is in place while ongoing professional learning opportunities support all faculty in meeting high expectations. Parents receive timely feedback that supports their children's progress toward college and career readiness.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal, new to the school community, quickly introduced a set of expectations regarding cohesive curricula and lesson planning, and structures for team meetings to consistently analyze student performance. To this end, she has provided multiple professional learning opportunities in lesson and unit planning using the *Understanding by Design* model. She introduced protocols that all teams are expected to use including looking at student work and "data talks" wherein teachers take ownership of the progress of ten of their lowest performing students. Teachers are fully aware of the new expectations and are reminded through ongoing self-reflection opportunities, surveys, and professional goal setting. Teachers shared that they get continuous and immediate feedback on their practice from learning walks conducted by the principal. This, all teachers agreed, is "very representative of her style; she is approachable in and out of classrooms." Additionally, in order to make her academic expectations clear to all, the principal created the "Academy for Social Action (ASA) Instructional Road Map 2015-16" that is articulated in three phases so that teachers have time to internalize the new instructional expectations.
- The principal sends out a monthly staff newsletter that reiterates expectations, and highlights upcoming professional learning events to support teachers. For example, in the November newsletter, professional development focused on literacy anchors in each content area. Math teachers agreed to focus on exploratory tasks that provide students with multiple entry points, and the English department to norm their rubrics and create formative assessment checklists. Additionally, the principal started the year with a round of informal observations to offer "soft" feedback. These observations, the principal shared, did not contribute to teachers' ratings; she saw this as a way to learn about school practices, and gather trends to inform professional development and set expectations.
- During Parent Meet and Greets, the principal distributes reflection questions to learn about what parents appreciated. For example, in response to the experience at the school, one parent wrote, "It was nice to see how hard teachers are working to provide my child with a good education," and another wrote "most important, I learned how my granddaughter is doing in all of her classes. During the parent meeting, a parent shared the importance of "Learning Alongside your Child Days" at the end of every unit. This, the parent shared, "gives us a hands-on experience with our children." Additionally, parents shared that communication from teachers and the principal is ongoing, and that they are provided with strategies to understand the logic in how their children are taught; this, they agreed, is very different from the way they learned."

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Developing

Findings

The principal holds a strong belief about how students learn best that is beginning to surface in classrooms across grades and content areas. Teaching strategies that provide multiple entry points into curricula for all students are inconsistent across classrooms.

Impact

Some teaching practices align to the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* and include a focus on the instructional shifts, and several lessons provided supports for students to engage in challenging tasks. However, these practices were inconsistent across most classrooms resulting in uneven levels of student engagement.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal believes that providing multiple entry points and engaging all students in higher-order thinking and questioning is how students learn best. To this end, most lesson plans include higher-order questions, however, such questions did not often surface in discussions during the portions of lessons observed. Teachers posed all questions. For example in one history class, students were to jot responses to why governments tax citizens; few students wrote, and when the discussion ensued, all students responded to the teacher. Therefore, student engagement in small or whole group discussions, where they might demonstrate higher-order thinking, was inconsistent across classrooms.
- Teachers are beginning to provide scaffolds so that all students have an entry point into challenging content. For example, in a grade 10 history class, students annotated informational texts regarding gun control; translated texts were available in Haitian, Spanish, and English. Most students were provided with note-taking charts, and all students received a packet of resource materials. This, the principal shared, is so that they understand what they are working toward. Additional supports for students with disabilities, English Language Learners, or high performers were not yet consistent across classrooms, although teachers discussed this in their team meeting, and are committed to experimenting with strategies to improve in this area.
- Teachers are making attempts to engage their students. In most classrooms, students sat in groups. However, student engagement and task collaboration were uneven. Even when encouraged to interact, students predominantly worked independently. They would occasionally talk to each other, but largely, discussion was with the teacher. For example, in an grade 11 English class, students were required to annotate and respond to seven questions regarding four criticism types such as: archetypal or feminist. The teacher encouraged students to discuss what they learned, provided a vocabulary bank for additional support, and, as indicated in the lesson plan, this was to prepare them for demonstrating their thinking in written critiques. Similarly, in a math classroom where the teacher provided a video to represent function and reactions, and referenced a baseball pitcher to further clarify the concept, when the time came to apply this new learning to a set of problems in the “Big Ideas” workbook, there were no additional supports provided. The lesson plan indicated that students who were not grasping the concept would work with the teacher on index cards, but, as the principal indicated, we did not see scaffolds in use.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:

1.1 Curriculum

Rating:

Developing

Findings

The school leader and staff are in the process of aligning all curricula and tasks to the Common Core Learning Standards. The work to embed rigorous habits and higher order thinking in all tasks across content areas is ongoing and focused, but not yet consistent across the school.

Impact

As a result, curricula and academic tasks are beginning to embed the instructional shifts, but have not built the instructional coherence to promote college and career readiness across all grades and content areas. Although curricula and tasks are beginning to emphasize rigorous habits, this does not yet consistently engage English Language Learners or students with disabilities.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal has laid the groundwork for full Common Core alignment in units of study and lesson plans and expects essential questions and performance tasks to drive lessons. Teachers collaboratively develop their curricula with support from a consultant who provides feedback in evidence on curricular documents reviewed. Also, teachers get feedback from the principal and the assistant principal. For example, one teacher shared that “the feedback we receive on unit tasks, [helps us to] figure out what we need to trouble-shoot.” Another teacher shared that the feedback she received helped her to make adjustments to her start-up activity, and a third teacher reflected on the clarity in her task instructions, “I gave a loose description of what students needed to do, but I should have gone deeper.”
- Given that students have not been meeting proficiency on State exams because of incomplete responses to written tasks and zeros and ones on short responses, the principal brought this to her staff. She posed the question: How can the task impact our students’ learning? This led to a focus on creating challenging performance tasks that embed written components throughout. To generate ideas and next steps, teachers looked at two performance tasks, one aligned to the standardized test, and the other a performance-based model. Teachers were split on which task would engage students most. The principal shared that “we blended” to come up with the Academy for Social Action (ASA) performance task template. Additionally, it was decided that tasks with relevance to students’ lives would best support learning and strengthen rigorous habits and higher-order skills for all students.
- The current focus on formative and summative assessments as the guide to creating performance tasks is informing task design with attention to scaffolds and modifications for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Teachers are in their second round of feedback on units of study and the culminating performance tasks.
- Tasks are beginning to focus on higher-order thinking. For example, an English task requires students to think like a set designer for an Off-Broadway show to pitch an idea for a “small moment” from one of the stories they read. A Pre-calculus task asks students to apply exponential functions of growth and decay in real-world settings.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across classrooms teachers use assessments, rubrics and a common grading policy that align to the school's curricula. The school uses common assessments to determine student progress toward goals across grades and content areas.

Impact

Actionable feedback to teacher and students regarding student accomplishment is consistently evident in school documents and on all student work. Information yielded from assessment data is used to adjust curricula and instruction.

Supporting Evidence

- Students consistently receive actionable feedback on their work and this is evident on every work product across content areas, in classroom displays, in portfolio folders that hold student self-reflections on work, and in clear next steps aligned to the task rubric. In the student meeting, students shared the feedback for next steps for their written work: "To earn a four, I would have to have a stronger claim." A second student stated that he needs to revisit his approach to converting units.
- Teachers use assessment data to adjust curricula, to create student groupings and to provide opportunities for students to reflect on their progress. Teachers track student progress on an online grading platform, and use this information to create goals with their students, and action plans for achieving them. All teachers maintain a data binder to track student performance, and students store their work in a portfolio where they respond to reflective questions to determine their progress toward academic goals. Additionally, student goals are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards, and are created as "I can" statements.
- When a teacher looked at a student's paragraph about the Cuban Revolution she realized that the student had not identified what was specified in the task. She made an immediate adjustment by creating a graphic organizer to help the student reevaluate what he wrote. Another teacher shared that "just yesterday, I had to go back to my geometry lesson and change the class work and mini lesson to focus on proofing." The teacher created tiered questions.
- The portfolio process provides students with opportunity to assess their work and progress, and teachers with information from which to target instructional adjustments. While students collect and assess their scores across subjects, and review their teacher's feedback, their progress is tracked over time. This reflective process provides the opportunity for students and teachers to collaboratively create Specific-Measurable-Achievable-Realistic-Time-bound (SMART) goals and for teachers to determine the instructional adjustments necessary to support individual students.

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

All teachers engage in professional collaborations to promote the school's instructional goals. Teams analyze student work and assessment data for students they share.

Impact

The school's professional collaborations have strengthened teacher practice and the implementation of the instructional shifts, while also supporting student progress toward academic goals.

Supporting Evidence

- At the start of the school year, the principal restructured team meeting time so that teachers consistently work collaboratively to look at and analyze student work, and to target students for extra support or tutoring. This time is dedicated to planning Common Core-aligned curricula. Teachers agree that this formalized structure has focused their work on student progress. For example, after analysis of assessment data, the STEM team realized that students struggled with analyzing charts and graphs. When teachers examine student work, they not only look for areas students need to work on, but also the tasks' alignment to the Common Core and rubric criteria. Additionally, the principal shared that she asks her department teams to use the language of the standards to norm, for example, what a level 4 would look like in their content area.
- In both team discussions, it was clear that all teachers hold themselves accountable for the progress of their ten students. Additionally, one teacher stated that "we are collaborating to create curricula, something that did not happen before. This has allowed us to think about our English Language Learners in a different way." Another teacher noted that in creating Algebra curricula with a special education teacher, "I go into the lesson with the mindset of creating an entry point for all of my students." She now purposefully creates flow charts and graphic organizers on her own. A special education teacher shared that she comes to teaching and learning with a "different lens, sometimes I lack the content knowledge, but talking and working on curricula collaboratively; I get a deeper view of the content."
- In the Humanities team meeting, teachers discussed their performance task feedback. One teacher noted that she had not provided entry points or scaffolds into content to support all students. She realized she would need to model expectations more consistently. Teachers identified next steps for this work: have ongoing conversations before, during and after task implementation to identify what "we really want students to demonstrate;" provide multiple entry points; and use the Webb's *Depth of Knowledge* research to inform planning. Additionally, in previous minutes reviewed, this team analyzed Regents data to determine patterns of student error to adjust their instruction.
- Team minutes reveal that teachers are working to address the needs of a targeted group of students in the lowest third who were selected based on several assessment data points: transcripts; State assessments; and Individualized Education Plans (IEP). From this, teachers identified their highest need students and are creating academic action plans to support them. Teacher-led professional learning opportunities have helped teachers to "structure goals for where students need to be at the end of a given time period."