



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

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

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

NYC iSchool

High School M376

**131 Avenue of the Americas
Manhattan
NY 10013**

Principal: Isora Bailey

**Date of review: February 5, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman**

The School Context

NYC iSchool is a high school with 457 students from grade 9 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 7% Asian, 19% Black, 37% Hispanic, and 31% White students. The student body includes 0% English Language Learners and 14% students with disabilities. Boys account for 44% of the students enrolled and girls account for 56%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 94.0%.

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	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

All curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and strategically embed the instructional shifts across grades and content areas. All curricula and tasks reflect student engagement in rigorous habits and higher-order skills.

Impact

Given the ongoing work to create and refine curricula and tasks, all students are prepared for college and career, and are consistently required to demonstrate their thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- All curricula are teacher-created, and, as the principal shared, “we use no textbooks.” Teachers, therefore, have control over the skills targeted in tasks, and the accuracy of their assessments to measure student mastery. Additionally, the ongoing work to align all curricula and tasks to the Common Core and a review of Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test scores surfaced the necessity to prioritize the reading and writing standards across content areas. The principal noted, “We know that we can use writing as evidence of whether students understand what they are reading.” This emphasis creates instructional coherence across grades and subjects. For example, a ninth grade writing task requires students, after reading a selection of texts, to argue whether or not it is possible to separate art from the artist. A culminating physics mastery project asks students to create a superhero and to analyze the physics behind its power. In a course entitled “Feminism”, students are required to write an essay using their media diaries to inform a feminist analysis of one or two television shows, songs, or texts consumed for pleasure. The expectation for mastery is to include pertinent questions feminist scholars typically ask of texts and for students to connect this targeted lens to class discussions.
- The school provides opportunities for all students to apply for courses of interest and offers a wide array of electives that embody higher order thinking and practice in college-level habits. In the blended learning course, *Stars, Galaxies and the Universe*, students engage in probing the depths of the universe and learn how the Big Bang Theory leads to the determination of cosmological parameters. To achieve mastery, students formulate research questions regarding the continuously expanding universe, responsibly use Google Drive and the class web page for all assignments, and engage in cosmology laboratory group projects. A Modernism elective exposes students to the writing techniques engaged in and debated among scholars of the period. Students analyze poetry, engage in a cultural study of the Harlem Renaissance, and learn about psychoanalytical criticism. Anchor texts such as *The Great Gatsby* and the works of Langston Hughes, Ezra Pound and Robert Frost provide the means for producing a Harlem Renaissance project, a found poem, and an essay comparing thematic connections between two of the works read.
- A student shared that “our courses are real world, something I did not experience in middle school. It prepares us for the real world because what you learn matters outside of the classroom. That’s why you come here, to learn how to be critical thinkers.” A second student shared that she wrote an oratory speech on beauty standards, “A topic I believed in. The teacher really believed in all of us so we wrote and researched and memorized and performed. It made me think a lot more about the topic, and care more.”

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Proficient

Findings

Teaching practices align to the curricula and reflect a belief in student independence. Across the school, student work products reflect high levels of student thinking.

Impact

Across classrooms, teaching practices are informed by the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* and the instructional shifts. However, there were fewer opportunities for student-to-student participation.

Supporting Evidence

- The belief and vision for learning that fosters independence and empowerment were in evidence in most classrooms. In an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, for example, in preparation for students' independent work on a twenty-minute on-demand writing task to practice incorporating connecting words and phrases into writing, the teacher provided students with a sample argument to note the writer's use of this. The teacher circulated and responded to students whose hands were raised. In a history class, students engaged in a ten-minute free write prior to sharing ideas in triads to prepare for the upcoming presentation on religion, and in a module lesson on Fukushima and nuclear waste students conducted on-line research, annotated articles and posted new learning on a common Google Doc.
- Although student work typically reflects high levels of thinking and analysis and is well represented throughout the halls, in-class discussions did not provide enough opportunities for students to demonstrate this by sharing ideas, challenging each other's thinking, or taking the lead in generating discussion questions. For example, in a math class, the teacher posed a problem to the class, and asked a student to share his work on the interactive white board. Rather than pushing students to note the miscalculation, the teacher explained it for the students. In a science class, the teacher posed all of the questions and students readily offered their thinking voluntarily or in response to cold calls. When a student raised a question, the teacher answered it. The principal did point out that this was the phase in the module where students needed to pick up as much information as possible to ready them for preparing a museum display.
- Although opportunities were provided for students to engage with each other as they worked, there was less evidence of student-to-student interaction to push each other's thinking, or to demonstrate their thinking in a shared work product. In a science class, for example, the teacher introduced two contrasting theories regarding how the changing composition of our atmosphere has affected life on earth over the course of billions of years, the Gaia and the Medea theories. Students engaged in a review of a data table that showed the percentages of different atmospheric gases throughout earth's history. The teacher modeled and then instructed the students to create a graph to reflect which theory they supported. The teacher then offered a third theory, the Janus theory. This led to a whole class discussion during which the teacher posed questions and students responded to the teacher. Given the complexity of the content, and the time provided for independent study, there was a missed opportunity for students to grapple with the concepts collaboratively and construct substantial arguments based on the texts provided.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use and create assessments and rubrics aligned to the curricula that offer a clear portrait of student mastery. Teachers' assessment practices consistently reflect the varied use of checks for understanding across classrooms.

Impact

Students receive actionable and meaningful feedback on their progress, and teachers make purposeful adjustments to practice so that all students are aware of their next learning steps.

Supporting Evidence

- Student progress on mastery assignments, productivity, and work habits are captured on the school's online grading platform and students are kept abreast of this in weekly and bi-monthly classroom level reports that they access themselves. This platform is also a venue for communicating feedback to students across grades and subjects regarding steps needed to reach mastery in a specific target. Additionally, the school-wide practice of conferring with students during work time, asking probing questions, and pushing students to rethink an approach to a math problem or articulation of a thesis statement was in evidence across classrooms. As one teacher offered, "the work to raise the rigor in conferencing questions has been a focus this year."
- Conferring conversations continue during teacher's office hours where students, as they do in their advisory classes, reflect on their progress. All students receive ongoing feedback from teachers, but also take ownership of their next learning steps. As one student noted, "I get to make the decision of what I want to learn, to mold myself into the college student I want to be. I see the trends and patterns in my work and learn about myself." Another shared that in middle school teachers "threw information at us." He now recognizes the importance of learning, not just being taught. "We need to learn to build our own horizons." One student shared that she loved writing argument essays to inform her own thinking, but when she wrote about what is wrong in America, she "threw out examples, but did not push them further." Another student agreed, "Sometimes I struggle with what I need to focus on and focus on the wrong things. The teacher helps me to expand my ideas."
- The math department implements year long courses, and uses data, as one team member offered, to "build a story of students' math experience." Algebra students use a unit mastery chart to determine their mastery level, and teachers maintain an individualized mastery tracking spreadsheet that maintains a record of interventions provided. The ELA team broke down the writing standards into sub-categories to look at informative and argument writing skills, and created a common writing rubric. They did not focus on the Regents, they focused instead on what students need to be successful in college. This focus resulted in 100% of their students passing the ELA exam in their sophomore year, and repeated success this past January with the current sophomores. They attribute these results to their intentional work to create a common writing rubric that has implications across content areas.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

School leaders and teachers effectively communicate high expectations to families connected to a path to college and career readiness, and establish a culture of learning that communicates a unified set of high expectations to all students.

Impact

School leaders successfully partner with families to support student progress toward expectations. Students receive ongoing feedback on their progress that ensures their ownership of their learning, and preparation for the next level.

Supporting Evidence

- All parents were vocal in their recognition that all school staff is committed to preparing their children for college, and keeping them informed of their students' progress in ongoing communications. One parent shared that her son has come a long way because he "can't hide here." He has a dedicated advisor who remains with him for all four years and "helps us to understand that he needs to take responsibility for his learning." After months of support, the teacher shared the student's final exam, "it was the best writing he had done all semester. This challenged him in the best way."
- Accelerated classes offer students opportunities to engage in college level work. As one parent offered, the work products are "individually suitable" and teachers' office hours afford students additional support. Parents also noted that this is not a "stress factory," and that students are part of a community where they get support from each other. Though the courses are challenging, they are also "relevant and balanced." Students get a cross section of rigorous curricula without "forgetting their social and emotional needs." The principal, they shared, understands the importance of educating the "whole person." Another parent stated that the school makes a "conscious choice to send students out as emotionally and intellectually educated people who own their imminent adulthood" by creating online classrooms, and courses and curricula based in the real world. Additionally, during advisory, students participate in Wednesday college-related workshops facilitated by the college counselor who also sends monthly newsletters to sophomores, juniors, and seniors.
- During advisory students set goals, and reflect on progress. One student shared that after three essay drafts, she went back to her thesis to strengthen it, and noted that her diction and tone improved. When students receive their report cards, they complete an online reflection that supports them in preparing to discuss their achievements and areas for improvement in student-led conferences twice a year. Students follow a presentation protocol, and prepare for several weeks in their advisory period. Parents appreciate seeing their self-directed and proactive students. In one presentation, a student shared her pride in her physiology course, "I did not let the pressure get to me. I pushed through even though I never had to think so abstractly before." Another student wrote, "I made a study guide for every calculus test and passed either with a proficient or with honors." The best part of being a junior for one student was that "I get to choose my classes with more of a guarantee that I will get them."

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

All teachers are engaged in structured professional collaborations that promote Common Core implementation and improved practices. Teacher teams systematically analyze their work, and the work of students they share.

Impact

The work of teacher teams is reflected in school-wide instructional coherence and increased student achievement. Additionally, this work results in mastery of goals for targeted groups of students.

Supporting Evidence

- The math team’s goal is to track mastery data in year long courses, and to bring consistency in how data is communicated to students. In the meeting attended, teachers discussed the current disconnect between the department’s mastery level scores and those of the school’s on-line grading platform. One team member offered, “Students must receive accurate data on their performance”. The team agreed to research more effective systems for communicating with students. They next discussed revisiting the power standards. Questions posed included: “Do we still agree that these are the power targets we want for our longitudinal data?” and “Will this information be beneficial for teachers and students?” Additionally, the team shared their extensive work to track and analyze their student’s mastery that informs instructional moves. The work has included creating videos focused on concepts and example problems for AP Calculus students; using unit mastery charts to support students with determining their mastery level; and a longitudinal mastery data study where teachers get insight into what students understand in order to strengthen student awareness of what they have mastered throughout their high school career.
- The ELA team targets specific skills so that students have a manageable goal to work toward, and so that the reading and writing skills students master can be applied in other classes. To build on this work, the social studies department is in the process of implementing common writing rubrics across grades. The ELA team’s work began with aligning learning targets to the Common Core, creating core experience and Common Core-aligned rubrics, developing assessment cycles focused on explanatory writing, correctives and extensions, and a mastery assessment that requires students to identify a common theme in three texts. The team reflected on this work, posing questions to deepen their thinking such as, “How can we refine the rubrics and our methods for data collection and sharing?”
- The history team administers a diagnostic in September to evaluate student writing, and ranks students based on how they organize thoughts, include content, and perform on multiple choice. Progress is tracked, based on online weekly current event tasks and quizzes, and exposure to academic vocabulary. A department lead teacher offered, “This resulted in a 24% improvement in reading and writing which the team attributes to the online immersion. The tenth grade Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) team analyzed ELA Regents exams for their targeted group of students and noted that although many students were strong in writing argument and analyzing texts; they fell short in the multiple-choice sections. To address this, the team agreed to place greater emphasis on literary elements, and to offer guided comprehension questions.