Quality Review Report

2015-2016

Talented Unlimited High School

High School M519

317 East 67 Street
Manhattan
NY 10065

Principal: Linda Hamil

Date of review: April 8, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Debra Freeman

The School Context

Talented Unlimited High School is a high school with 507 students from grade 9 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 4% Asian, 35% Black, 40% Hispanic, and 19% White students. The student body includes 0% English Language Learners and 11% students with disabilities. Boys account for 18% of the students enrolled and girls account for 82%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 93.4%.

School Quality Criteria

Instructional Core		
To what extent does the school…	**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 *Framework for Teaching*, aligned to the curricula, engaging, and meets the needs of all learners so that all students produce meaningful work products	**Additional Findings**	**Well Developed**
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		
To what extent does the school…	**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**	**Well Developed**
Systems for Improvement		
To what extent does the school…	**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	**Focus**	**Proficient**

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed

Findings
School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to the entire staff and provide training to meet set expectations. School leaders and staff communicate expectations connected to a path of college and career readiness to all families.

Impact
Faculty hold themselves mutually accountable for students achieving the high expectations set, and families successfully partner with the school to support their children in meeting expectations.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders expect all teachers to align curricula, tasks, and assessments, to the Common Core, to ground lessons in high-level essential questions, and to empower students to own their learning. Teachers are highly supported via professional learnings in the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* components. Further, curricula are revised so that the belief systems of teaching and learning align with the expected outcomes. Across classrooms students were provided opportunities to work collaboratively and to generate their own questions regarding lesson topics. As a result of the unified focus of staff and administration, teachers are held and hold each other accountable for student achievement.

- School leaders have established a school-wide awareness of how having a growth mindset impacts college and career readiness. This work was introduced to the community over the summer to increase the number of students participating in college-level classes. Parents introduced this theory to the Parent Teachers' Association, and students in the school's National Honor Society led six sessions of discussions for their peers about overcoming obstacles. This work has resulted in increased numbers of students remaining in college level courses.

- Several parents shared that the school effectively balances academics with the performing arts. "My child has been challenged since day one, all staff comes together to help a child excel." As a result, her child has been inducted into the Honor Society. Another parent shared that, "accessing teachers is easy" through the school's online grading platform that provides ongoing updates on student progress. A parent said that this platform encourages her daughter to own her progress and to "speak up for herself." Another parent shared, after reading a news story about a student whose disabilities in no way hindered his academic success at the school, "If they could accomplish this, I knew this was the only school for my child."

- Parents are partners in school-wide decision-making and credit the principal's responsiveness to their needs as the catalyst for change. The Parent Engagement Team planned Curricula Night, and expanded parent participation by adding a Skype link to the school's website. Additionally, when parents of students with disabilities approached the principal with concerns for their children's academic success, the principal created the school's first Parents of Special Needs Support Group (SEP).

Area of Focus

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

Findings
Most teachers engage in structured professional collaborations aligned to the school's instructional goals, and a distributed leadership structure is in place.

Impact
The work of teacher teams and teacher leaders strengthens teacher's instructional capacity, however, there is less evidence that these practices result in increased student achievement for all learners.

Supporting Evidence

- Department teams meet weekly to revisit their curricula for rigor and to ensure that tasks instigate student thinking. At the start of the year, teams deconstructed their lessons to identify the questions they had been asking, and the types that drive a task. This resulted in the decision to include essential questions in planning, and an inquiry into questions that yield students' higher-order thinking. The goal was to "develop a common language in questioning" that would also translate to students' ability to respond to essential questions. A member of the Teacher Effectiveness Team, (TET), who ensures that all curricula and practices align to Danielson's Framework for Teaching, leads each team. Thus, the work that led to a shared decision to implement three lessons that provide students with choice and engagement in higher-order questions has built teacher capacity around classroom pedagogy. However, there is not yet discernable evidence of the impact of the teacher teamwork on addressing the needs of diverse learners.

- The math team shares best practices weekly. For example, one teacher shared "What I know-What I wonder", a strategy that provided all students with entry points into determining angles in a parallelogram, and in describing graphs. A second math teacher shared the "Director and the Scribe" approach, which enables all students, even those for whom problem solving proved a challenge, to engage in learning by listening to how well the student scribe followed the student director's instructions. The team agreed to experiment with these strategies and to invite students to record thoughts and/or questions during the process. While a consistent practice for this team, in evidence across team documents, less evident was the impact of this practice on the achievement of all learners.

- The TET, comprised of content area, special education, and Integrated Co Teaching teachers, collectively inform school-wide professional learning to strengthen their colleagues' practice. The team designs and facilitates ongoing workshops to address Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* components, and how they translate into effective classroom practices. As a result all teachers and teams are held accountable for planning and implementing Common Core-aligned curricula aligned to the school's instructional focus. To ensure coherence and improve instruction, the TET follows up with visits to colleagues' classroom and provides actionable feedback.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Well Developed

Findings
School leaders and faculty ensure that all curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards, embed rigorous habits, include higher-order skills, and strategically integrate the instructional shifts.

Impact
Curricula and tasks that promote college and career readiness provide opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities and high performers, to demonstrate their thinking.

Supporting Evidence

- Tasks across lessons in the content areas are grounded in real world settings, invite students to collaborate with their peers during lessons, and are aligned to an essential question. For example, a Robotic task requires students to create a casino game with stated parameters, such as the user gets only five guesses, be told how may guesses they have left, and not be allowed to guess outside a given range. Throughout this project students learn how computers store information, communicate, and process information, the amount of unique storage possibilities, and they are introduced to a set of terms such as variables, and bytes versus bits. Additionally, students engage in "conceptual check point questions" aligned to the essential question, such as "How can we effectively communicate with a processor to create simulated autonomy?" An English Language Arts (ELA) writing task requires students to connect the theme of social mobility in America from the novel *The Great Gatsby* to our world today. Prior to writing, students work in small groups to generate ideas about how social class is determined and use text evidence from previously annotated chapters to support their claim.

- The school leadership took action in response to feedback received from the school's superintendent, where it was noted that although students were engaged in learning across classrooms they had a less clear understanding of the "the big picture" and purpose of what they were learning across subjects. This feedback compelled school leaders to require all units of study and all tasks to embed Webb's *Depth of Knowledge* in developing and aligning high-level essential questions. Consequently, teachers redesigned all curricula to include questions to drive both the study of the content and to engage students in high-level cognitive thinking about what they were learning, and to reflect on whether tasks make the big picture transparent. Essential questions such as "How do dictators exploit economic conditions for political gain?", "Should ballet history be influenced by a country's political climate?", or "What does it mean to be American?" align to the school's goal to raise rigor and students' cognitive engagement across all content areas.

- In a study of linear inequalities, a multi-stepped task requires students to translate summer babysitting and house cleaning earnings into inequality expressions, graphs, and a set of potential outcomes if the goal to earn $1,000 is to be accomplished. The prompt questions increase in complexity and two versions of the task were created to offer all students the opportunity to demonstrate their thinking. Despite providing differentiated task prompts, the final question to assess learning is the same for all students, thus holding them accountable for mastery.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient

Findings
Across classrooms, teachers use or create common assessments to determine student progress toward goals. Assessment practices reflect the use of ongoing checks for understanding and student self-assessment.

Impact
Teachers use the results of common assessments to effectively adjust curricula and instruction to meet the needs of their students.

Supporting Evidence

- Teachers agreed that in order for students to take more ownership of their learning, they would provide students with more choice in how they demonstrate understanding of the day's content. In this way, teachers attain data to inform their practice and students connect back to the essential question of the lesson. For example, at the close of a chemistry lesson students either responded to what made a question essential, or designed a graphic organizer to predict the essential question for an upcoming unit on acids, bases, and salts. A math exit slip required students to demonstrate their learning of systems of inequalities by either creating a word problem or a location puzzle. Similarly, after completing the fifth draft of their college essays, students reflected upon the writing skills they acquired in the process, stating, "I am starting to develop a voice in my writing," and "I have begun to understand how to create an image through description." Additionally, students in a Global History class demonstrated what they learned midway through the lesson by assuming the role of a teacher and either discussing the religious identify of the Ottoman Empire or the ethnic identity of the Ming Empire. Thus, students are held accountable for demonstrating what they understand from the lesson. Although in-class checks for understanding were less consistent in the portions of lesson observed, teachers spoke to their strategic use of these formative assessments to adjust instruction.

- A math teacher shared that she and her colleagues created a "skill-level diagnostic that students and teachers use to assess students' content understanding throughout a unit." The goal is to "employ this assessment and use the data to dictate interventions to support students." For example, when students are learning to translate and analyze graphs, they "use givens and smaller truths," match those descriptors to the graphs, and create a final graph based on their description to prove their understanding. Teachers then come together to reteach or group students based on their responses to ensure mastery of skills. Examples of skills teachers have retaught based on documents reviewed are rounding, factoring, or solving two- and three- dimensional problems with radicals.

- Ongoing opportunities allow students to assess their own level of understanding via the use of rubrics accompanying all work to determine if they "get it, get it with help, or are lost." For example, posted work in a history class highlighted students' self-assessing via "What I know" and "What I wonder." Additionally, students edited each other's college essays in an English class, and shared how rubrics help them to "avoid sidetracking from the topic in my writing." This enables students to be aware of their next steps for reaching mastery. Many further shared, "We also learn for more than a grade on our work or in a class, we are expected to keep asking more questions."

Quality Indicator:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Well Developed

Findings
Teaching strategies across classrooms provide opportunities for all students to engage in challenging tasks, and student work products reflect high levels of student thinking.

Impact
Across the vast majority of classrooms all students demonstrated higher-order thinking in work products and discussions, and took ownership of their learning.

Supporting Evidence

- Students in a twelfth grade Economic class, in response to the government's role in a mixed economic system, discussed previously researched government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or Welfare. Students shared the outcomes of their research, substantiated their talking points with evidence, and noted statistics that added further clarity and support for their argument. During ensuing group work students followed a protocol, used accountable talk stems, and, after each student presented, discussed the necessity of the program and the government's role in providing subsidies. Students listened to each other, and built on each other's ideas. In one exchange, a student stated, "The government is giving, but not asking for anything in return. People have no incentive to improve." A group member countered, "I disagree, the program is only helping children, getting more strict is not good. They are already not giving enough," to which the first student replied, "Removing children from welfare makes economic sense because kids have the potential to give back."

- As an introduction to a chemistry unit on formulas and equations, students worked at four stations to generate questions, tap into their prior knowledge, and to assess their understanding of the aims and essential questions targeted in the upcoming unit. The learning goal for the guided work was to support students with understanding what criterion is necessary to determine an essential question. At one station, students categorized student-generated questions such as "Even when the acid base was evenly mixed, it would still not completely turn to water, why?" or "How does this information affect/help the world (if it does)?" One student offered that the purpose of the sorting was to determine questions that are simple with one answer to resolve it, questions that require more in-depth study, or essential questions. At a second station, students matched unit aims to essential questions to predict learning outcomes, and at a third station students matched unit aims to a diagnostic exam. Teachers proposed that the purpose of this work is for students to gain a deeper understanding of how an essential question is generated, and to build student capacity and to build their capacity for creating their own. As one student shared, this activity is a preface to all units, and that it gives all students an appreciation of having their questions contribute to the focus for future learning.

- In a drama classroom, students performed a scene from *A Comedy of Errors*. Throughout the performance the teacher provided feedback to students in the moment, which students incorporated into their performance without shifting out of character or pausing. All students owned their learning experience as evidenced when students exited the stage to sit out of the lights and their facial and body language still expressed the rage or jealousy of their characters. The ability to sustain their emotional delivery evidenced a level of engagement and ownership of the activity.