



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

**M.S. 223 The Laboratory School of Finance and
Technology**

Junior High-Intermediate-Middle X223

**360 East 145th Street
Bronx
NY 10454**

Principal: Dr. Ramon Gonzalez

**Date of review: November 4, 2015
Lead Reviewer: Michael L. Schurek**

The School Context

The Laboratory School of Finance and Technology is a junior high-intermediate-middle school with 596 students from grade 6 through grade 11. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 0% Asian, 20% Black, 79% Hispanic, and 1% White students. The student body includes 8% English Language Learners and 22% students with disabilities. Boys account for 51% of the students enrolled and girls account for 49%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 94.8%.

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	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	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 Common Core-aligned and strategically integrate the instructional shifts, and emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order skills in academic tasks. Curricula and academic tasks are planned and refined using student work and data.

Impact

School leaders and staff have created a coherent curriculum and embedded rigorous tasks across grades and subjects that promote college and career readiness, providing access for all students to be cognitively engaged.

Supporting Evidence

- The school is a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium and as such believes that reading, writing and speaking are the guiding focus for every class across all content areas. Students must complete commencement level performance-based assessments tasks (PBATs) in lieu of Regents examinations in all content areas other than English, where students must pass both the PBAT and the Regents exam. All courses in grades six through twelve culminate in a Pre-PBAT or a PBAT in order to prepare students for the rigorous graduation requirements. Teachers use *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins to backwards plan from the final unit performance task aligning units and lessons with grade level Common Core Learning Standards while incorporating the instructional shifts. PBATs and Pre-PBATs in all content areas require students to work with appropriate texts and to develop writing that is grounded in text-based evidence and supported by domain specific vocabulary. The Common Core Learning Standards serve as a major focus of coherence across curricula. For example, a ninth grade science unit utilizes school-wide writing seminar practices to walk students through organizing background research into coherent paragraphs in which students form and support their respective personal bias hypotheses. The students utilize a school-wide organizational writing rubric that lays out expectations from middle school to college utilizing a six point template.
- Higher-order skills at the unit level are driven by big ideas posed in the form of essential questions while at the lesson plan level, questions and tasks are varied for groups of students with different levels of complexity. Teachers design higher-order level questions for each lesson and adjust the questions to include multiple entry points for their students. Questions are used to enhance student-to-student discussion and students are regularly involved in developing their own questions as part of their use of the school-wide Question Formulation Technique. For example, a seventh grade English Language Arts lesson plan requires student groups to form both open and closed questions to enable them to make connections between the fantasy/dystopian text they are reading and the real world to support their reading of complex texts that they analyze and discuss together.
- During a teacher team meeting, teachers and teacher assistants used samples of recent student work and a critical lens writing rubric to modify a literacy unit by purposefully deciding which individuals and groups of students would be re-taught, receive individual conferencing, and receive tailored instruction based on specific strands within the rubric. In addition, the staff uses a school-wide curriculum website to share numerous examples across grades and curricula of teacher teams using student work and data to customize lesson and unit plans to meet the instructional needs of students.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Well Developed

Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teaching practices are aligned to the curricula and reflect a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best as informed by the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. Classrooms reflect high levels of student thinking, participation, and ownership.

Impact

Instructional coherence, across all classrooms and grades, is evidenced by the high levels of student thinking, participation and ownership in student-to-student discussions and work products.

Supporting Evidence

- Across the vast majority of classrooms, student-to-student discussion takes place utilizing school-wide practices that include the Question Formulation Technique mentioned above, Socratic Method and the use of Socratic seminars. For example, in a ninth grade Integrated Co-Teaching class, students worked in six separate homogeneous book groups using their respective short stories to identify and articulate the writer's craft moves that they were going to use during the creation of their own short stories. Students in each group first described plot, characters, setting, and conflict before using personal annotation strategies to make connections, formulate questions, and identify big ideas and tone. Staff group leaders that included two teachers and four teaching assistants facilitated discussion during the plot and comprehension discussions by asking probing questions in each of their respective groups. Then, during the discussion of annotations, students took the lead with minimal teacher prompting.
- A vast majority of classes used strategic grouping as noted in the previous section to engage all learners. For instance, in a tenth grade geometry lesson that focused on using vertical angles to determine congruence, students were grouped into three tiers based upon their performance in the prior lesson's exit assessment. The lowest tiered groups received more scaffolding in the form of handouts and extra modeling to write geometric proofs and explain their thinking verbally. The support group used guided proof notes to write the proofs, orally explain, and write their reasoning for each proof. The upper tiered group worked together without guiding notes to complete the greatest amount of proofs while explaining and writing their reasoning. All three tiered groups demonstrated engagement in appropriate and challenging tasks. (b)
- School leaders believe that children learn best through the focus on higher order questioning and discussion (3b) procedures, by catering to students' needs through effective assessment (3d) practices and the use of school-wide instructional strategies and cultural awareness. School leaders have prioritized feedback in observational rounds and conferences to support growth in these areas. As a result of strategically prioritizing these components, school leaders have seen an improvement in teacher practice and effectiveness in these two components, and continue to focus on lifting the effectiveness in these areas.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers use common assessments, student work, checks for understanding and rubrics to track progress, determine student progress toward goals across grades and subject areas and adjust instructional decisions at the team and classroom level.

Impact

Well-coordinated and strategic use of ongoing checks for understanding, student self-and peer-assessment, and actionable and meaningful feedback results in effective adjustments to curricula and instruction and meets all students' learning needs.

Supporting Evidence

- As a member of the consortium school community, this school utilizes a consistent approach to assessment by incorporating content standards with Common Core Standards in the development of performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs) with accompanying rubrics for math, science, social studies, and English Language Arts. PBAT rubrics are Common Core-aligned and form a continuum of expectations that extend from middle school to college. Feedback provided to students informs them very specifically what they need to do to stay on track to reach twelfth grade expectations. For example, the school uses a school-wide organizational writing rubric that lays out expectations from middle school to college utilizing a six point template. Middle school students stated that they needed to achieve the overall goal of scoring a rating of 3.5 by ninth grade to be on target to reach level 6 by the twelfth grade, thereby providing them with a very clear portrait of mastery.
- Students take diagnostic assessments in all content areas three times each year; September, January and May so that teachers can effectively determine what students need to learn, how much they have learned and how to make adjustments to ensure that previous topics and skills are re-taught if needed. Teachers also routinely utilize pre- and post-assignments to further identify student understandings and misconceptions that are, in turn, used to identify instructional priorities, groupings, and interventions. For instance, a ninth grade English team analyzed an on-demand writing piece requiring students to make a claim, support it with evidence, and write a conclusion. Student work was scrutinized as the team identified trends to be directly addressed in six homogenous groups of students mediated by the two teachers and four teaching assistants working with this particular class. As a result, 79% of ninth grade students, including ELLs and students with disabilities, are on track to achieve the 3.5 rating goal for the organizational writing rubric this year.
- Teachers used a number of ongoing checks for understanding such as pre-planned questioning, problem-solving rubrics, exit tickets, and strategic grouping to support students' academic skills and to meet their learning needs. Students are familiar with rubrics and use rubrics as a guide for their self-understanding and expectations of the task. Students commented that they regularly use rubrics to self-assess their work and peer-assess the work of their classmates. For example, in a global history class students analyze an Egyptian law of their choice by identifying the problem the law is trying to solve and explaining whether or not the law is fair using the RATES (restate, answer, explain, summarize) format. Students exchange their papers and rate each other's response utilizing a social studies rubric.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

A school-wide culture for learning exists that consistently supports high expectations among staff and students. The school effectively communicates these expectations and supports professionalism, mutual accountability, instructional supports, and college and career readiness.

Impact

Accountability and collaboration are structures that support the school's high expectations for staff, families, and students, creating a link between next steps for learning and student achievement so that all students own their educational experience and are prepared for the next level.

Supporting Evidence

- School leaders hold an annual June planning retreat to build community and reflect on the past year and discuss and plan around initiatives for the upcoming school year. This year teachers developed two instructional goals with action plans aligned to domains 2 or 3 of the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. All teachers participate on grade, department, and co-planning curriculum teams numerous times each week. Ongoing professional development sessions are aligned to the Danielson *Framework* and frequently offer both an introductory version of a topic and a more advanced look at the same topic in which teachers can self-select. Four "model teachers" are available to model effective practices so that teachers get non-evaluative support on their practice and new teachers are mentored by an experienced teacher. Teachers also have the opportunity to visit other schools to observe their teaching practices and vice versa. The principal conducts anonymous online surveys of his own performance as part of the school's mutual accountability practices, resulting in the establishment of new teacher clubs that meet with the principal monthly.
- Multiple adults work together to support students academically and socially to establish a systemic culture for learning. In addition to the numerous grade and department teacher teams focusing on them, middle school students build culture through routines in their official classes that set and reflect on goals for the day, week or month while high school students build culture in their 10:1 ratio advisory classes designed to support individual goal setting. Two full-time guidance counselors oversee a team of interns to provide counseling services and guidance/advisement support. The college support team partners with numerous college-bound initiatives including *iMentor*, a program that pairs each eleventh grade student with a college-educated mentor through their first year of college. Middle school students are part of the *Expanded Day* program and receive supplemental instruction and enrichment until 4:45 p.m. daily. High school students receive chromebooks for technology integration and are offered a wide range of afterschool activities and additional academic support through tutoring. High school English and math classrooms each have a team of four Blue Engine teacher assistants which reduces the student-teacher ratio to as low as 4:1, allowing for individualized support and copious one-on-one conferences.
- During the parent meeting, parents described the high levels of communication by the school, including their access to the online grading system, a multilingual website, personalized phone calls and detailed student progress reports. Parents are able to support their students through curriculum days at Parent Association meetings, Saturday parent classes, college-bound initiatives, numerous family events, a community reads program, and weekly open houses for conferencing with teachers.

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

Distributed leadership structures are in place so that teachers engage in structured professional collaborations on teams, and they consistently analyze assessment data and student work so that plans and units are adjusted, meeting students' needs.

Impact

School-wide instructional coherence is evident throughout all classrooms and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect teaching and learning across the school resulting in increased student achievement and shared improvements in teacher practice.

Supporting Evidence

- The school's overarching goal is to increase student performance and teacher retention. During the leadership discussion, the principal stated his belief that building capacity among staff will increase student performance and teacher retention. He further stated that the work of the teacher teams plays a significant role in that belief. The school supports goal achievement through the following ongoing efforts; all teachers are a part of a grade team and a content area team that each meets three times per month to adjust curricula and pedagogy to meet the needs of their students. In addition, all teachers have two collaborative planning periods per week when they co-plan with colleagues, review student work or visit a peer's classroom. This structure enables teacher teams across grades and subjects to promote the implementation of the Common Core and the instructional shifts by working collaboratively to meet student needs. As a result, last year's credit accumulation rates for high school students stand at 96% for 10th graders and 99% for 9th graders.
- A strong collaborative, professional learning community exists at the school. For example, a middle school Integrated Co-Teaching team analyzed student work using a Skills and Supports Analysis Tool that identified specific challenges for students, targeted strategies to be used along with modifications and listed possible co-teaching strategies to be used. These practices enable teachers to be responsive to student needs while planning for instruction.
- The school maintains an online school staff website that enables teachers to access teacher team meeting notes, professional development resources, and yearlong curriculum maps with accompanying pacing charts and unit plans across grades and subject areas. School leaders use the staff site to review team and department minutes to respond to concerns and issues that are raised during meetings. These practices enable team members to implement strategies used by other teams within the school and establish transparency and coherence in the organization.
- Teacher leadership in the school community is essential and highly valued. To this end, teachers apply for roles such as: grade team leaders, model teachers, collaborative coaches for the New York City Residency Program, afterschool coordinators, technology coordinator, dual language coordinator, and special education coordinator. This emphasis on capacity-building practices has resulted in 12 staff members leaving the school over the past 13 years to serve as school leaders in other school sites.