



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

Urban Scholars Community School

Elementary School X463

**1180 Tinton Avenue
Bronx
NY 10456**

Principal: Debra Jones

**Date of review: May 13, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Rod Bowen**

The School Context

Urban Scholars Community School is an elementary school with 327 students from grade pre-kindergarten through grade 5. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 1% Asian, 45% Black, 54% Hispanic, and 1% White students. The student body includes 17% English Language Learners and 18% students with disabilities. Boys account for 50% of the students enrolled and girls account for 50%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 91.9%.

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	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	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, inquiry-based professional collaborations that promote the achievement of school goals and the implementation of Common Core Learning Standards. Assessment data and student work are consistently analyzed.

Impact

The collaborative work strengthens the instructional capacity of teachers, enabling groups of students to make progress toward goals.

Supporting Evidence

- Grade teams meet weekly to plan lessons and revise curriculum based on their analysis of student work. The agenda for such a meeting clearly identified the following objectives: analyze student work using an on-demand piece of writing from a student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), indicate the student's strengths and areas for growth using the narrative rubric, discuss possible teaching implications that impact student growth, consider instructional implications for the grade (possible modifications to the curriculum), and discuss teaching points and materials for the upcoming week.
- During the team meeting observed, members noted the needs of the student whose work was being analyzed. One teacher said, "This was a straight narrative and there was no fantasy in there. She just wrote a story", as well as how that student's work was indicative of patterns across the grade. Another added, "Most of our [English Language Learners] ELLs are doing what she is doing in terms of just writing a narrative with no fantasy." This informed one of the talking points for the following week, which asked if the character's issue lends itself to the elements of fantasy. After referring to a fiction-writing rubric, they determined that their next step would be to teach students to develop the fantasy aspect of their stories when the problem is being introduced.
- Similar teamwork in the past regarding students' ability to write opinion pieces informed the implementation of strategies like using checklists, high interest topics, and linking skills taught during the personal essay unit in the persuasive essay task. A review of student work showed improvement in their ability to provide clear thesis statements and use evidence to support claims.
- All teams memorialize their collaborations by unit in a framework that requires that they note the power standard, concepts focused on in pre-assessment, tools used to analyze student learning, supporting materials needed to accomplish goals, outcomes that would demonstrate success, analysis of data, next steps, questions and concerns, and what needs to be brought to the subsequent meeting.

Area of Focus

Quality Indicator:	1.2 Pedagogy	Rating:	Developing
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Findings

Across classrooms, teaching strategies inconsistently provide multiple entry points into the curricula, and student work products reflect uneven levels of student thinking and participation.

Impact

There is uneven student engagement in appropriately challenging tasks and a limited demonstration of higher order thinking in resulting student work.

Supporting Evidence

- During a science lesson, groups of students brainstormed the definition of ecosystem prior to watching a video. In one group, students pushed each other's thinking. For example, after a student claimed that an ecosystem was "some kind of life cycle thing", a peer responded, "I disagree. I don't think it's a life cycle because we talked about that earlier in the year and that has to do with the food chain." This level of discussion was not consistent across other groups within the class where there was little effort to agree, disagree or build upon the thoughts of other students.
- Students were grouped based on ability in an English Language Arts (ELA) lesson focused on Chinese history and culture. Those who needed them were provided with large format texts and graphic organizers to be used for a box and bullets strategy to inform their writing. Those who did not need the scaffolds went straight from reading text to drafting paragraphs. The teacher provided students with time to turn and talk about something interesting they had read along with a question the text inspired. Students were overheard agreeing and disagreeing with one another. At one point, the teacher asked the class, "Who is wondering about a question that we can investigate with our materials?" Such levels of student-to-student interaction as well as questioning were not consistent across classrooms.
- A section of a lower grade math lesson consisted of pairs of students working on single-digit number sentences and then applying that understanding to groups of tens. When the teacher asked a student to help a peer, he merely provided her with the answer. All students were given white boards and counting blocks, yet most were unable to use them to solve four tens plus three tens. Students were compliant in following the directions of the teacher, but most were not able to meet the expectations of the activity with their partner.
- In another math class, students reviewed a coordinate plane via a series of low-level process oriented questions posed by the teacher such as, "Which number is the y, and which is the x?", "What is the next number?", "Is that true?" and "What is the y coordinate here?" All student responses were one to three word answers. There were no higher-order questions posed to assess student comprehension of the larger mathematical concepts of the unit of study.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

School leaders and teachers ensure that curricula are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards, State standards, and the instructional shifts. Rigorous habits and higher order skills are consistently emphasized across grades and subjects.

Impact

Curricular decisions build coherence and promote college and career readiness, as all students have access to rigorous and engaging tasks.

Supporting Evidence

- All math lesson plans reviewed contained sections focused on the instructional shift of fluency. Two of them appropriately required speed and accuracy with simple calculations. One was to “sprint” as they multiply decimals by 10, 100 and 1,000. The other engaged students in counting by equivalent fractions. However, the third math lesson asked grade one students to read a four-sentence long word problem, determine the appropriate operation, and solve.
- Math plans also contained student centered, Common Core Learning Standards aligned “I can” statements such as: “I can find common units or number of units to compare two fractions”; and “I can generate a number pattern from a given rule, and plot the points.”
- A writing workshop lesson plan in a lower grade class was designed to introduce students to academic terms such as materials, hypothesis, procedure and observation, as they would learn the steps of the scientific method by engaging in a guided experiment and completing a lab report.
- Informational text was the focus of two ELA lesson plans. In one, a desired outcome was to deepen student reading comprehension of the true stories of pioneer children while touching on the enduring understanding that informational text contains research from various sources. While engaged in the reading activity, students would be asked the comprehension question, “What new kinds of lives did the pioneers lead after migrating west?”, as well as the higher order question, “What central message is the author trying to convey?” The other plan required that students learn how to write informational text. The teaching point of this lesson was that writers organize information in different sections. The importance of connecting ideas with the transition words “like”, “because” and “also” would be emphasized. In this lesson, students would develop a topic of interest that could be developed in writing with facts, definitions and details.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

Across classrooms, teachers use and create assessments and rubrics aligned to the school's curricula. In addition, commons assessments are used to determine student progress across grades and subject areas.

Impact

Students and teachers receive actionable feedback regarding student achievement and teachers use this information to adjust curricula and instruction.

Supporting Evidence

- Students were consistently able to articulate an understanding of what they did well and what they could improve on while discussing specific assignments that had been graded. In sharing a math problem that she did not receive full credit on, a student pointed to her work and stated, "I chose the right formula, but I made errors in my calculations." Another student noted that though he included questions in his essay that were related to his topic, he should not have waited until the second paragraph to introduce the topic.
- Actionable feedback was seen on various types of student work. A student that had gotten the correct answer on a word problem was pushed to do better in his annotation of the problem with the comment, "Underline only key information." Another student received written feedback on a research project, which stated, "Great job identifying Nigeria's cultural traditions. Next time use evidence from the text. What page?"
- After a task involving word problems, a teacher realized that students were not consistently able to determine the appropriate math operation to use in order to get the correct answer. In response, she developed a visually accessible reference table broken into quadrants: one for addition, one for subtraction, one for multiplication and one for division. Each section provided a sample number sentence and a list of words that served as signifiers of that operation. In addition, the teacher created a seven-step checklist for students to remind them of the process they were to go through when solving word problems.
- Handwritten notes and post-its on curricular documents show revisions to unit plans based on student performance at the end of the previous unit. For example, notes on one document guided all teachers in a specific grade to focus their instruction on organization, establishing a thesis and using details to support opinions. Another plan contained a post-it that stated, "Spend time with exposure to mentor text (close reading)."

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Proficient
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Findings

School leaders consistently communicate high expectations to the entire staff. School leaders and staff consistently communicate expectations to families that are connected to a path to college and careers.

Impact

Teachers are held accountable for high expectations. Parents have an understanding of their children’s progress on a path to college and career readiness.

Supporting Evidence

- The principal has focused the staff on a few high-leverage instructional skill sets. They include questioning and discussion, student conferencing, and modeling. Professional development and classroom observations are the primary means for consistently communicating these expectations as well as holding staff accountable.
- A review of the notes from a consultant who provides support to teachers shows work aligned to questioning and discussion. Teacher next steps included charting student responses during instruction to further dialogue.
- A staff memo reminds teachers of a professional learning experience focused on conferring with students. It reads, “Today, various classes will be visited and our staff developer will model reading conferences. We will all meet to analyze data collected and plan for students that will be academically accelerated.”
- Written feedback provided to teachers shows a consistent message aligned to a school-wide focus on quality questions and discussions. In one such evaluation, the principal acknowledged that the teacher called on students and asked them to agree or disagree with each other. However, she recommended that the teacher work toward students having discussions without having to be called on with the written comment, “Teach them how to be in control of the discussion and you just facilitate.” Similarly, another teacher was encouraged to ask higher order questions, call on a student to start the discussion and have other students add on without having to be asked to do so.
- Parents agreed that school has various means of communicating with them regarding their children’s academic well-being. In addition to progress reports, they noted the on-line grading and communication system that parents can access. Many spoke of the staff’s willingness to call or text based upon the preferences of families. When asked how they are informed of the content their children are learning, they mentioned Curriculum Night and a workshop on the Common Core. One parent noted that when she attends such events, “I feel like I’m going to school to learn math.” A parent of a grade 5 student asserted that the school was integral in pointing her to middle school open houses in her search to find the best options for her child.