



**Department of
Education**
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Office of School Quality
Division of Teaching and Learning

Quality Review Report

2015-2016

The Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters

Secondary School X551

**339 Morris Avenue
Bronx
NY 10451**

Principal: Brandon Cardet-Hernandez

**Date of review: May 20, 2016
Lead Reviewer: Clarence Williams Jr.**

The School Context

The Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters is a secondary school with 603 students from grade 6 through grade 12. In 2015-2016, the school population comprises 1% Asian, 30% Black, 66% Hispanic, and 2% White students. The student body includes 13% English Language Learners and 28% students with disabilities. Boys account for 48% of the students enrolled and girls account for 52%. The average attendance rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 90.2%.

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	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	Celebration	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	Focus	Proficient

Area of Celebration

Quality Indicator:

1.2 Pedagogy

Rating:

Well Developed

Findings

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

Impact

Students produce meaningful work products, and display higher order thinking skills.

Supporting Evidence

- Teachers and leadership have stated that students learn best from classroom discussions. In a grade 6 social studies class, students used Socratic Smack Down, a specific forum with clear protocols for student discussion. The topic posed was, “What challenges do people face identifying as Americans?” When students were presented with the laws of immigration, one student in the inner circle responded, “Finding work can be a problem for some immigrants.” One student asked, “Have you ever been in a situation where you couldn’t speak another language?” Another student responded, “I did not, but my mother came from the Dominican Republic so I can understand.” The teacher reminded students that personal examples should be limited and facilitated the return to the question posed.
- Students and teachers have stated that students also learn best from small group assignments. In a grade 8 Integrated Co-Teaching class, students were in heterogeneous groups based on their interest in topics, such as police brutality, sexual identity and orientation, and civil rights. The essential question for the lesson was “How can being aware of various perspectives and points of view change our thinking about different issues?” One group working on police brutality used a questioning formulation chart, which generated guiding questions based on a picture depicting police brutality. Students wrote questions such as, “Why is there a fist in the poster?” and “How do we define police brutality?” Thus, students were able to display their thinking at high levels and were cognitively engaged.
- Turn and talk was evident in the vast majority of classrooms visited. A grade 6 and 7 self-contained English class used accountable talk to analyze the writing techniques used by the author in the novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*. During a turn and talk, students discussed the definition of theme. A student response in one group led to the idea that the theme is the meaning of the story while another group shared that theme is what the story is trying to convey. The teacher and the class agreed to accept the second definition. Students also engaged in a think-pair-share to discuss how the writer used theme. One student responded, “The writer uses Bud’s thoughts to convey the theme.” Another student cited the chapter and page from the text to support the claim that, “He describes how ideas are like seeds that keep growing.”

Area of Focus

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, including the instructional shifts. Teacher teams consistently analyze assessment data and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused.

Impact

Teacher teams analyze data and student work resulting in improved teacher practice and progress toward goals for groups of students. However, the impact of their work has not as yet resulted in accelerated achievement for all learners, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Supporting Evidence

- The literacy team met to complete a skill analysis for a grade 8 informational writing task. They discussed student performance based on classroom observations. For example, the team stated that one group was able to paraphrase but not able to cite text to support statements. The group discussed next steps, which included each member bringing in one lesson that helps to support an instructional area identified in need of improvement. One team member shared that following the analysis the identified skill will be used to mold instruction and address the specific student needs that were revealed. For example, one student struggled to make connections when transitioning from paragraph to paragraph. The team decided to create a strong teacher model and use a mentor text to help bridge the deficit. From 2014 to 2015, the percentage of grade 8 students passing the English Language Arts (ELA) exam rose from 30% to 47% and the percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) passing rose from 0% to 14%.
- A teacher of ELLs discussed students taking the Living Environment Regents course in grade 9. She found that ELL students have a hard time with questions that require a great deal of reading. The team decided to incorporate a vocabulary box and context clues as supports. They also discussed other interventions for ELLs that included having native language speakers, including paraprofessionals, communicate with students during instruction to ensure extra support for understanding.
- Teachers participated in a “vision conference.” The purpose of this conference is to review the successes of the current year, to start planning for the next year and to look at student performance trends. One of the objectives of the meeting was to support initiatives regarding rigorous instruction and teacher collaboration. At the session, teachers identify areas of instruction, such as aligning the Common Core Learning Standards with the performance task and the assessments that will be used for the next year. Paired teacher teams will work on creating next steps for teachers to reflect on instructional strengths and weaknesses. Although teacher teams promote and strengthen teacher capacity, the impact of their work has not as yet resulted in increased student mastery for all learners.

Additional Findings

Quality Indicator:	1.1 Curriculum	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

School leaders and faculty ensure that curricula are aligned to Common Core Learning Standards and content standards, and strategically integrate the instructional shifts. Curricula and academic tasks are planned and refined using student work and data.

Impact

Coherence exists across grades and subject areas that promote college and career readiness for all students. Individual and groups of students, including the lowest- and highest-achieving students, English Language Learners and students with disabilities have access to the curricula and tasks and are cognitively engaged.

Supporting Evidence

- An English Language Arts unit entitled, “Between the World and Me, Writing to Liberate the Mind,” cites the objective that students will analyze a college level text for the themes of privilege and expression. Students will analyze the text and read supplementary texts to prepare students for the English Language Arts Regents exam and to develop college readiness skills. Attached to the unit is a New York State Regents rubric assessing text analysis with criteria to determine if student work demonstrates preparedness for the next level.
- Common Core Learning Standards are aligned to the curricula across all grades and subjects. A grade six argumentative writing unit includes tasks that cognitively engage students. For example, one task requires an essay that will address the question, “Should school uniforms be required?” Students are required to state a claim, their position regarding the claim, and list three reasons why the statement is true. All students are required to cite text-based evidence, use concrete details, and draw conclusions based on research. Lesson plans indicate that students will be paired in heterogeneous groups with low and high functioning English language learners and students with disabilities. Students will use specific content vocabulary and create their own graphic organizers for reading comprehension. A grade 7 science pacing guide requires students to cite textual evidence to support their learning about how cells make up tissues and organs.
- The inclusion of the instructional shifts is evident in all curriculum documents that were reviewed. In a grade 8 English language arts lesson plan the teaching point is that students will write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. An objective for another lesson states; “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient.” An algebra unit plan indicates that students will have unit conversions incorporated throughout the unit to ensure their understanding of the concept. In a unit on World War I, students are required to cite relevant textual evidence to support a claim and are required to write an argumentative essay on how the war was a turning point for people and nations.

Quality Indicator:	2.2 Assessment	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers use or create assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are aligned with the school's curricula and offer a clear portrait of student mastery. Across the vast majority of classrooms, teachers' assessment practices consistently reflect the varied use of ongoing checks for understanding and student self-assessment.

Impact

Classroom teachers provide actionable and meaningful feedback to students and teachers regarding student achievement. Teachers make effective adjustments to meet all students' learning needs and students are aware of their next learning steps.

Supporting Evidence

- Rubrics are used across all classrooms visited. A rubric used for an argumentative essay provided actionable feedback to the students as well as a score. In the notes section, the teacher stated, "strong claim – could have provided more background information for readers." In another section of the essay, the feedback addressed the need to ensure that the evidence is relevant to both the claim and topic sentence. The next steps provided to the student indicated that the teacher would work with the student on the skill of paraphrasing.
- A three-point rubric used in an Environmental Science class assessed a potential energy diagram. The rubric addressed the specific components of diagramming potential energy along with the aesthetics of the final work product. A review of one student's work indicated a score of three that demonstrated mastery. The student further demonstrated mastery by articulating how using a box oven will retain heat. She stated: "the paper inside will reflect the heat, the box will then absorb the heat. Positive feedback reinforces improved student work. For example, one teacher praised a student's work noting, "Labels are legible, diagram is colorful and neat, and axis are properly titled with units." Review of other work products indicated that the majority of students had achieved mastery of the content and concepts being tested.
- During a grade 8 English language Arts Integrated Co-Teaching class, the teacher used a five-finger assessment to gauge student comprehension of the subject matter. Students raise fingers to represent their level of understanding. For example, one finger would mean little understanding and five fingers would represent complete understanding. The teacher asked the class to indicate their confidence in generating their own questions about their topics based on the pictures presented and the articles read. The majority of the students raised five fingers. The teacher paired a student who had raised only one finger with another student who had raised five fingers. The teacher also reminded the students if they needed additional help they can fill out a help ticket. Help tickets are note cards that allow students to cite additional information from the text to enable the teacher to assess student understanding. One grade 6 student handed in a help ticket regarding information about the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. The information was correct and when asked why he handed in the ticket he shared that he wanted to make sure his information was correct.

Quality Indicator:	3.4 High Expectations	Rating:	Well Developed
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Findings

School leaders and staff effectively communicate expectations connected to a path to college and career readiness. Teacher teams and staff establish a culture for learning that systematically communicates a unified set of high expectations for all students and provide clear, focused, and effective feedback and guidance supports.

Impact

School leaders and staff successfully partner with families to support student progress toward those expectations. Teacher teams and staff ensure that students, including high-need subgroups, own their educational experience and are prepared for the next level.

Supporting Evidence

- The college office provides students and their families with information about their rights and responsibilities in the college application process. Students are expected “to be proactive in the college process and advocate for yourself,” and must have their college recommendation letter request in by September. The college office sends out a college to-do list to all students in their graduating year that includes applying to the college, applying for financial aid and then what is entailed in the actual college selection. To support parents as partners, the school incorporates senior college kick off night which allows parents to be involved in the application and admission process. Students stated during interviews that the program was successful in getting their parents involved. The principal and teachers have stated that parents are encouraged to play an active role in the high school and college process admission participating in a grade 8 high school night hosted by the guidance counselor. The meeting was designed to assist parents with high school selection an admissions process. Parents stated that the meeting was informative and helped them understand the high school application process.
- Teachers presented a power point presentation to the students entitled “Class of 2017 Junior Class Update.” Grade 11 students were provided with data on credit accumulation, information on why college is important and examples of grade averages and achievement test scores needed to go to specific colleges. For example, every student was advised to have at least an 80% grade average going into grade 12.
- Students take ownership of their educational growth by writing self-reflections on behavior and academics and they are required to check in with their advisors to go over credit accumulation and college admissions. All students, including those in middle school, spoke about the importance of this focus on college.
- The staff handbook outlines the principal’s high expectations for teachers to support student ownership of the learning process. It includes a form for students to use to request support, peer mediation, counseling or a teacher meeting. “These forms should be available to students in every classroom and all offices at all times.” Thus, students are provided the means to own their educational experience while they are preparing for college and career. The principal also discussed the clear expectations that the staff has for English Language Learners. For example, all staff receive a memo that includes Regents preparation supports, as well as conversations that ELLs must engage in to demonstrate college readiness.