



First Year School Evaluation Report **Achievement First Voyager Charter School**

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Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

INTRODUCTION AND REPORT FORMAT

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its April 6, 2017 first year school evaluation visit to the Achievement First Voyager Charter School. The visit team consisted of Jeff Wasbes, Executive Deputy Director for Accountability, and Maureen Foley, Director for New Charters.

REPORT FORMAT

As with all SUNY authorized charter schools, on a periodic basis throughout the term of the school's charter the Institute conducts a number of formal site visits. The Institute reports in writing to the school on data gathered during these visits. Cumulatively, the information in reports such as this and those issued in later years, forms the foundation of qualitative data on the school's effectiveness. At the conclusion of the school's charter term, the Institute provides the State University of New York Board of Trustees (the "SUNY Trustees") an analysis of the school's performance over the term of its charter that includes this qualitative information. The Institute makes a renewal recommendation for the school based on two components: the school's attainment of its Accountability Plan goals and evidence of the quality of the school's educational program collected during school evaluation visits.

At renewal, the Institute evaluates the academic, organizational, legal and fiscal aspects of the school's program using the *State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks* (the "SUNY Renewal Benchmarks"; see attachment). For formal school evaluation visits conducted prior to renewal, the Institute focuses on specific qualitative benchmarks that provide a fixed standard for determining the quality of the academic program as the school progresses toward renewal.

Although the information provided in this report is not prescriptive, the Institute would expect school leadership to review thoroughly the issues highlighted below and, to the extent helpful, use them to assist in guiding the school's academic program or other aspects of the school. In this regard, please be aware that although the Institute takes very seriously the conclusions provided, staff members are cognizant of the fact that a one-day site visit may not yield information on all facets of a school's program.

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Achievement First Voyager Charter School

BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Achievement First Voyager Charter School (“AF Voyager”), a replication of existing Achievement First charter schools, on October 8, 2014. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2016, serving 66 students in 5th grade during the 2016-17 school year. Having received more applications for enrollment than seats available for the 2017-18 school year, AF Voyager held its enrollment lottery during April 2017, and established an active waitlist. The school operates in co-located space at 15 Snyder Avenue, Brooklyn, New York within New York City Community School District (“CSD”) 16. At scale, AF Voyager will serve 580 students in 5th - 12th grades.

The school’s mission statement states:

The mission of Achievement First Voyager Charter School is to strengthen the academic and character skills needed for all students to meet and exceed their peers in city and state assessments, excel in top tier colleges, achieve success in a competitive world, and serve as the next generation of leaders for our communities.

AF Voyager replicates the program in place at all 12 existing Achievement First middle schools, which opened in 2006 and currently serves 2,091 students in 5th – 8th grades. The school employs an analytical approach to writing that rigorously prepares students for high school. The program includes writing rubrics that prepare students for College Board materials and Advanced Placement exam performance expectations after they move on to high school. AF Voyager also enrolls middle school students in its First Generation Initiative, a mentoring program designed to support students who are the first in their family to go to college.

Students with special education needs receive support through the school’s integrated co-teaching (“ICT”) model. Co-teachers “push-in” to classrooms and “pull-out” small groups in order to effectively implement each student’s Individualized Education Program (“IEP”). Additionally, teachers at AF Voyager use these strategies to support general education students who struggle academically. Support teachers provide additional instructional time in core subjects during the school day as well as before school. Although AF Voyager does not currently enroll any English language learners (“ELLs”), the school would rely on resources provided by the network to implement a program for providing any ELLs language acquisition services.

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of AF Voyager at the above address on August 11, 2016, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Achievement First Brooklyn Charter Schools (the “Education Corporation”) with the authority to operate Achievement First Voyager Charter School, had completed substantially all of the Prior Actions required of it as defined in the

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Charter Agreement between the Education Corporation and the SUNY Trustees (the “Charter Agreement”) for the operation of the school. Therefore, per Section 3.1 of the Charter Agreement, the Institute permitted the Education Corporation to provide instruction at the school to students in accordance with the plan provided in the Charter Agreement.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, grounded in the body of research from the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University,¹ describe the elements in place at schools that are highly effective at providing students from low-income backgrounds the instruction, content, knowledge and skills necessary to produce strong academic performance. The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks describe the elements an effective school must have in place at the time of renewal.²

For first year visits, the Institute focuses on academic program benchmarks to establish a baseline measure of the quality of the school's systems and procedures which heavily affect the progress that a school is able to demonstrate in meeting its Accountability Plan goals during the charter term. The Institute expects a school to have moved from the beginning of implementation and the promise of future growth to full and effective implementation of a quality program by the time the school comes to renewal.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1E:

Does the school have strong instructional leadership?

AF Voyager is establishing strong instructional leadership to support the development of all instructional staff.

- AF Voyager began the school year with a principal and a dean of humanities as the school's instructional leaders. These two positions divided the responsibility for coaching teachers in the school along content area lines: the dean of humanities was responsible for observing and coaching the humanities (English language arts ("ELA") and social studies) teachers and the principal had responsibility to coach and observe the school's math and science instruction. During the school year, network leaders reassigned the dean of humanities to another school within the network to address an urgent instructional need leaving the principal at AF Voyager to coach and observe all instruction across the school. This personnel shift diminished the leadership's capacity to provide frequent coaching to every teacher in the school, but teachers report that the coaching they receive remains relevant and generally useful.
- Whereas the principal and dean of humanities provided observations and coaching to teachers at least once each week, after the departure of the dean of humanities, the principal has triaged coaching duties to provide consistent observation and coaching to all with more frequent observations for teachers who need more support. The principal observes teachers at least every two weeks; some teachers receive weekly observations.
- The principal uses Achievement First's Teacher Career Pathways ("TCP") benchmarks and rubrics along with clear expectations for absolute and growth performance on the

¹ An extensive body of research identifying and confirming the correlates of effective schools exists dating back four decades. Selected sources include: www.mes.org/correlates.html; scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie_fryer_revision_final.pdf; and, gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf.

² Additional details regarding the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, including greater specificity as to what the Institute looks for at each school that may demonstrate attainment of the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, is available at: www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

network's interim assessments to hold teachers accountable for high academic performance. The principal met with each teacher at the school year's midpoint to provide up-to-date progress on the TCP and to set clear performance expectations for the balance of the school year.

- AF Voyager provides consistent professional learning to its teachers. The principal and the network's instructional leaders identify topics for professional development sessions within the school from observation data. The network also provides a series of professional development "arcs". Each arc lasts for approximately six weeks and addresses a pre-determined topic. Topics at the beginning of the school year addressed student engagement and culture and have since progressed to increasing the rigor of student thinking and tasks. Teachers feel supported by the principal's coaching and by ongoing professional development.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1B:

Does the school have an assessment system that improves instructional effectiveness and student learning?

The school regularly gathers assessment data and uses it to improve instruction.

- The school regularly administers a variety of assessments developed by the network, including weekly mastery quizzes and 6-week interim assessments (the last 2 of which operate as mock state assessments). Data from these assessments allows teachers, school leaders and staff at the network level to monitor the effectiveness of the curriculum and make adjustments as necessary. The school also administers the STAR and Fountas and Pinnell Assessments at the beginning and end of each school year to assess students' proficiency and growth in reading and math.
- The school makes assessment results available to teachers and school leaders via the Illuminate platform, which aids instructional staff in the analysis and disaggregation of assessment data. Teachers upload weekly quiz results, which their coaches can access and utilize in their support of teachers. This system provides an additional benefit in that it enables teachers to see how their students performed relative to other students in the network. Teachers share data with students and set individualized goals and track students' progress towards standards mastery based on their performance on short quizzes.
- Teachers report that they use assessment data to identify trends in student performance, create re-teaching plans, and assign students to intervention groups. Teachers in each subject area (humanities and math/science) meet regularly to identify "cusp" students and assign ownership of intervention groups. For mock state exams, the principal provides a more extensive data analysis template designed to guide teachers in prioritizing standards and setting students' growth goals.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1C:

Does the school's curriculum support teachers in their instructional planning?

The school has a curriculum that supports teachers in their planning and delivery of instruction.

- The network develops all scope and sequences, unit plans, and lesson plans internally and provides them to teachers. Teachers have the flexibility to adjust materials as needed to suit the specific needs of their classrooms.
- Teachers understand what to teach and when to teach it. Each subject area team meets to unpack the units developed by the network 2 weeks before they are taught. However, some teachers found that early in the school year the materials provided were too advanced for their 5th grade students, who did not come from an Achievement First elementary school. Teachers attempted to make the necessary changes and report deficiencies to school leaders. Although teachers did not feel that the network responded in a timely fashion, teachers are now, later in the school year, using the network-developed lessons and curriculum materials without significantly adjusting the rigor of the content.
- Teachers can access curricular materials, including lessons plans, about a week before they are taught via an online hub managed by the network ("Many Minds"). Some teachers report that materials that are not lesson plans (scope and sequences and support documents) are sometimes difficult to locate.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1D:

Is high quality instruction evident throughout the school?

Instruction at Achievement First Voyager is generally purposeful and engaging, but not all teachers challenge students with questions that develop higher-order thinking and problem solving skills, and some lessons lack clear objectives . As shown in the chart below, during the first year visit, Institute team members conducted nine classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

| Content Area | Total 5 th grade Observations |
|--------------|--|
| | |
| ELA | 2 |
| Writing | 1 |
| Math | 2 |
| Soc Stu | 2 |
| Science | 2 |
| Total | 9 |

- Some teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (4 of 9 classrooms observed). Learning objectives, where discernable, build on students' previous skill and knowledge. In a few classrooms, despite teachers presenting

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

content clearly, the rigor of lessons is low. In classrooms with two teachers, one is responsible for leading instruction while the other circulates and provides support to students as needed.

- Most teachers regularly use a variety of techniques to check for student understanding (8 of 9 classrooms observed). Teachers utilize a variety of techniques to effectively check for understanding and to monitor student learning. A few teachers, however, did not respond effectively when student responses indicated a lack of understanding. This diminishes the effectiveness of checks for understanding because teachers do not make adjustments to instruction when it is apparent that not all students understand the material presented. Teachers consistently circulate around the classroom to monitor student work, and some provide oral and written feedback to students or narrate trends they observe in student work.
- A few teachers challenge students with questions and activities that develop depth of understanding and higher-order thinking skills (3 of 9 classrooms observed). While all teachers employ questioning techniques, the questions generally lack rigor and do not push students to defend and elaborate on their answers; rather, most questions focus on low-level tasks, such as factual recall and word definitions. While a few teachers encourage higher-order thinking by requiring students to reiterate a response and add on to it, others miss opportunities to have students develop and extend their and their classmates' arguments and explanations. Some teachers employ techniques, such as "turn-and-talks," that allow students to actively interact with peers when engaging in learning activities.
- Achievement First Voyager classrooms maintain a consistent focus on academic achievement (9 of 9 classrooms observed). Teachers clearly communicate expectations, class rules and procedures, such as having students respond to clapping when transitioning from independent work to direct instruction and letting students know how long they should spend on each part of a worksheet. Despite occasional minor misbehaviors and disengagement, most teachers scan classrooms regularly and identify student misbehaviors with minimal disruption to the pace of the lesson.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1F:

Does the school meet the educational needs of at-risk students?

AF Voyager is establishing systems to meet the need of students at risk of academic failure. Co-teachers provide services to students with disabilities in their classrooms. The school enrolled no English language learners during 2016-17.

- AF Voyager does not have a certified special education teacher on its teaching staff. No instructional leader currently at the school has a special education teaching credential. The network's director for special team services oversees the work of a teacher on special assignment at AF Voyager and together the two ensure that students with disabilities receive the services mandated by their IEPs.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

- Teachers received some training during the start of the year about supporting students with disabilities in their classrooms but do not receive regular updates or coordinate sufficiently with staff members identified to support students with disabilities to ensure that the strategies are successful. Some supports to students with disabilities take place outside of regular classroom instruction in small “pull out” groups during breakfast time and during other blocks within the school day.
- Instructional leaders identify several times prior to and during the school day when teachers provide additional academic support to students who struggle academically. Although school and network instructional leaders are able to describe these interventions, teachers are not consistently able to do so. Teachers also indicate that, although discussed during professional development sessions early in the year, the school has not implemented a tiered response to intervention program that provides increasing levels of academic support to those students who demonstrate a greater need. Although teachers and co-teachers are able to provide support to the school currently enrolled 5th grade students, the existing interventions will be insufficient to support the school’s growing population in later years.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2C:

Does the school’s organization work effectively to deliver the educational program?

AF Voyager is developing an organizational structure that will enable it to continue to effectively deliver the educational program.

- In its first year of operation, AF Voyager has established an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that enable clear and orderly operation of the school and delivery of the academic program. The school provides to teachers and other staff members a list that aligns each role to its key responsibilities. Based on the list, teachers and staff members know exactly where to go to address needs and other concerns.
- Teachers and instructional leaders at AF Voyager receive myriad supports from the network. These supports include leader and teacher development, facility maintenance, student recruitment, development and evaluation of the school’s curriculum and related resource documents, and analysis of assessment data. Because the school receives these supports, the school’s principal is free to concentrate on developing student culture and on improving teaching and learning.
- With a concerted focus on school culture early in the year, AF Voyager has established a safe and orderly environment. The school has a clear system and protocols for rewarded positive student behaviors and for reprimanding off task and distracting behaviors.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

Teachers understand the system and apply in their classrooms although application was not completely consistent across classrooms during the first year visit. Notwithstanding, students actively engaged in lesson tasks nearly all of the time the visit team observed classroom activities.

The network supports AF Voyager with its student recruitment efforts. AF Voyager and the network use the following strategies to meet enrollment and retention targets:

- Direct outreach to families of prospective students;
- School-based information sessions;
- Presentations at community based organizations including those organizations designed to provide services to families with children with special needs and families where English is not the primary language;
- Targeted mailings available in both English and Spanish; and,
- Indoor and outdoor advertising.

SCHOOL OVERVIEW

Board of Trustees³

| Board Member Name | Position | Board Member Name | Position |
|---------------------|-----------|------------------------|------------|
| Dr. Deborah Shanley | Chair | Lee Gelernt | Member |
| Jonathan Atkeson | Treasurer | Romy Coquillette | Member |
| Ambrose Wooden, Jr. | Member | Ted Coons | Member |
| Amy Arthur Samuels | Member | Hon. L. Priscilla Hall | Member |
| Dan Russell | Member | Andrew Hubbard | Member |
| Judith Jenkins | Member | Adrienne Loiseau | Parent Rep |
| Justin Cohen | Member | Angela Tucker | Parent Rep |
| Lee Gause | Member | Natasha Lewis | Parent Rep |

School Characteristics

| School Year | Chartered Enrollment | Actual Enrollment ⁴ | Actual as a Percentage of Chartered Enrollment | Proposed Grades | Actual Grades |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|--|-----------------|---------------|
| 2016-17 | 90 | 62 | 68.9 | 5 | 5 |

Key Design Elements

| Element | Evident? |
|---|----------|
| Unwavering focus on breakthrough student achievement | + |
| Consistent, proven, standards-based curriculum | + |
| Interim assessments and strategic use of performance data | + |
| More time on task | + |
| Principals with the power to lead | + |
| Increased supervision of the quality of instruction | + |
| Aggressive recruitment and development of talent | + |
| Disciplined, achievement-oriented school culture | + |
| Rigorous, high-quality, focused training for principals and leaders | + |
| Parents and community as partners | + |

School Leaders

School Year(s) Name(s) and Title(s)

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 2016-17 to Present | Priam Dutta, principal |
|--------------------|------------------------|

³ Source: The Institute's board records at the time of the visit.

⁴ Source: Institute's Official Enrollment Binder. (Figures may differ slightly from New York State Report Cards, depending on date of data collection.)

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School Visit History

| Date(s) of Visit | Evaluation Team Members | Title |
|------------------|------------------------------|---|
| April 6, 2017 | Jeff Wasbes Maureen Foley | Executive Deputy Director for Accountability Director for New Charters |