

# THE SUNY CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE

*FIRST YEAR SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT  
BRILLA COLLEGE PREPARATORY  
CHARTER SCHOOL VERITAS  
VISIT DATE: FEBRUARY 13, 2018  
REPORT DATE: JUNE 29, 2018*

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**Charter Schools Institute**  
The State University of New York



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# INTRODUCTION & SCHOOL BACKGROUND

## INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its February 13, 2018 first year school evaluation visit to the Brilla College Preparatory Charter School Veritas ("Brilla Veritas").

## 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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# INTRODUCTION & SCHOOL BACKGROUND

## SCHOOL BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Brilla Veritas, a replication of Brilla College Preparatory Charter School (“Brilla College Prep”), on April 13, 2016. Brilla College Prep began operation in August 2013 under the authorization of the New York City Schools Chancellor (the “NYC Chancellor”). On January 5, 2018, the SUNY Trustees approved the merger of Brilla College Prep and Brilla Veritas into a single education corporation called Brilla College Preparatory Charter Schools (“Brilla” or the “education corporation”).

Brilla Veritas opened its doors in the fall of 2017, serving 120 Kindergarten students during the 2017-18 school year. The school operates in privately leased space and is co-located with Brilla College Prep’s middle school grades at 500 Courtlandt Avenue, Bronx, NY 10451. At scale, Brilla Veritas will serve 450 students in Kindergarten – 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Brilla Veritas has a partnership with Seton Education Partners (“Seton” or the “network”), a charter management organization (“CMO”) that provides both Brilla Veritas and Brilla College Prep with support in the areas of administrative leadership, financial oversight and bookkeeping, recruitment and human resources, curriculum and instructional leadership, data and assessment, and facilities management.

The mission of Brilla Veritas is:



*Brilla College Preparatory Charter Schools, Kindergarten - 8<sup>th</sup> grade schools in the classical tradition, help students to grow intellectually, socially, and physically into young men and women of good character and spirit, and to be prepared for excellence in high school, college, and beyond.*

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of the Brilla Veritas facility at the above address on August 15, 2017, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Brilla Veritas had completed substantially all of the Prior Actions required of it as defined in the 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.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

## QUALITATIVE BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, grounded in the body of research from the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

## DOES BRILLA VERITAS HAVE AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM THAT IMPROVES INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT LEARNING?

Brilla Veritas regularly gathers assessment data and uses it to improve student learning and instructional effectiveness. Teachers utilize data from a variety of standardized and curriculum-based assessments to monitor student progress and adjust instruction and interventions accordingly.

- Brilla Veritas regularly administers standardized and curriculum-based assessments. Teachers administer the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress ("MAP") assessment four times per year to provide a baseline achievement level and track student growth throughout the year. Teachers also administer the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress ("STEP") reading assessment four times per year. In addition to these standardized assessments, the school administers a variety of curriculum-based assessments, including weekly Friday assessments that alternate between mathematics and ELA. Teachers score Friday assessments using shared rubrics to ensure validity. The school uses several computer based blended learning programs, which provide data on students' progress based on the work they complete each day.
- Brilla Veritas uses the online platform Illuminate to compile, track, and analyze student data. Teachers enter students' scores into Illuminate immediately after administering assessments and can view data reports the same day. Illuminate also allows school

## SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1B

1. An extensive body of research identifying and confirming the correlates of effective schools exists dating back four decades. Selected sources include:

<https://www.gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf>; and [http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie\\_fryer\\_revision\\_final.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie_fryer_revision_final.pdf).

2. Additional details regarding the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks are available at: [www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/](http://www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/).

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

and network leaders to track data easily within and across schools in the network. School leaders and teachers receive in-depth score reports on both class and student level results from MAP and STEP reading assessments.

- Brilla Veritas keeps parents apprised of student progress through quarterly formal report card conferences, as well as informally through phone, email, and in-person discussions at dismissal. Additionally, the school routinely sends Friday assessment results home to parents the Monday after administering them. Notably, the school reports 100% attendance at all report card conferences this year to date.
- The school's leaders and teachers frequently review student achievement data and use it to adjust instruction. Leaders and teachers review MAP and STEP data at the end of each quarter and use it to determine which students will receive extra support in small groups. Teachers look at individual student level data each quarter to diagnose particular struggle areas, allowing them to tailor their instruction to each individual student's needs. Leaders and teachers also collaboratively review the results of each Friday's curriculum based assessment and use the results to make immediate changes to their instructional plans for the following week. For instance, teachers noticed that students struggled with genre on an ELA assessment, so they adjusted subsequent lessons to ensure students master genre identification. Teachers also frequently study data from the blended learning programs that students access on computers, cross-referencing this data with formal assessment data to ensure they fully understand each student's academic needs. Finally, teachers frequently adjust students' small groups during data cycles based on student performance, rather than waiting for the next assessment, in order to ensure that students are receiving appropriate support at all times.

## DOES BRILLA VERITAS' CURRICULUM SUPPORT TEACHERS IN THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING?

Brilla Veritas has a clear curriculum development process that supports teachers in their planning and delivery of instruction. Network and instructional leaders provide ample support to ensure that teachers plan and execute lessons effectively.

- School and network leaders at Brilla Veritas develop a scope and sequence for each content area, thus providing teachers with a clear sense of what to teach and when to teach it. Before each unit, teachers have a "unit unpacking" meeting during which leaders provide an overview of the unit content and objectives in order to ensure alignment among teachers. Kindergarten teachers divide planning responsibilities so that one teacher owns the daily lesson planning for each subject. School leaders then provide feedback on lesson plans before finalizing and distributing them to the rest of the teaching team.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Teachers at Brilla Veritas have access to a variety of curricular materials. The school uses the Core Knowledge Language Arts curriculum for ELA and Eureka for mathematics, both of which are aligned to grade level standards. The network and teachers customize and adjust the scope and sequence and texts provided with these curricula to fit students' specific needs. The Brilla Veritas curriculum also includes several blended learning components throughout the day wherein a portion of the students receive instruction in small groups while other students use computer-based learning programs that adapt to their ability levels. These components allow for additional differentiation and personalization of learning. The computer programs for Brilla Veritas' blended learning components are STMath and Zearn for mathematics and Lexia for ELA.

## IS HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION EVIDENT THROUGHOUT BRILLA VERITAS?

High quality instruction is evident in classrooms at Brilla Veritas. As shown in the chart below, during the first year visit, Institute team members conducted eight classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

GRADE		
Total Kindergarten Observations		
<b>CONTENT AREA</b>	<b>ELA</b>	2
	<b>Writing</b>	2
	<b>Math</b>	3
	<b>Science</b>	1
	<b>Total</b>	8

- Most teachers at Brilla Veritas deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (6 out of 8 classrooms observed). Teachers post lesson objectives for each component of the day and state the objective at the beginning of a lesson to ensure students know what teachers expect them to learn. Some teachers conclude lessons by having students independently restate the objective to further reinforce the lesson's purpose. The blended learning components of Brilla's schedule allow teachers to work on multiple objectives simultaneously within one class period, such as a mathematics blended learning lesson in which part of the class works on number sense activities on laptops while small groups rotate to work on counting skills with teachers.

SUNY  
RENEWAL  
BENCHMARK  
1D

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- A majority of teachers at Brilla Veritas regularly and effectively use techniques to check for student understanding (5 out of 8 classrooms observed). Teachers use checklists during small group work to track whether students successfully achieve the day’s objective. Teachers also employ various methods to check for understanding throughout instruction, such as having students show a thumbs up or thumbs down, cold calling students, and having students evaluate each other’s responses to questions. However, some classes miss opportunities to maximize the multi-teacher model to check for understanding effectively; for example, during whole group instruction teachers in several classrooms exclusively employ a “one teach, one assist” model rather than implementing a collaborative teaching model that makes more effective use of the teachers in the room, such as parallel teaching, team teaching, or station teaching.
- Most teachers at Brilla Veritas include opportunities in their lessons to challenge students with questions and activities that develop depth of understanding and higher order thinking and problem solving skills (6 out of 8 classrooms observed). At the Kindergarten level, this entails creating opportunities for students to evaluate and respond to each other’s ideas and asking students to elaborate on their spoken and written answers. At Brilla Veritas, teachers consistently pose open-ended questions to students and challenge them to defend their answers. Students frequently interact with peers, analyzing and interpreting challenging information. Teachers strategically challenge students by asking them to refer back to prior knowledge and class activities and to evaluate each other’s work and ideas.
- Teachers at Brilla Veritas consistently maximize learning time and utilize effective classroom management techniques that create a consistent focus on academic achievement (8 out of 8 classrooms observed). All classes use the Love and Logic behavior management system, which creates consistent expectations across the school. Teachers break down directions and routines and regularly use timers to keep lessons on pace and to communicate a sense of urgency. Teachers notice and address off task behaviors quickly, thus minimizing distractions. Classrooms also exhibit positive behavior reinforcement, with teachers frequently noticing and acknowledging students who remain focused.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

## SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1E

### DOES BRILLA VERITAS HAVE STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Brilla Veritas has strong instructional leadership. School leaders consistently provide teachers with actionable feedback based on weekly observations, and teachers engage in regular professional development activities.

- Brilla Veritas promotes a culture of learning and scholarship, and the school's instructional leadership supports the development of the teaching staff. The principal and grade lead, an administrative team member who provides full-time coaching and support to teachers, are present in classrooms frequently and provide teachers with consistent and actionable feedback on their lessons and classroom instruction. Additionally, teachers receive support from external consultants who observe teachers and provide feedback regularly. Teachers and leaders from Brilla College Prep also observe those at Brilla Veritas and vice versa, which creates consistency as well as a strong culture of collaboration across the network. A dean of curriculum and instruction from Seton meets with the school's principal regularly and provides additional instructional support.
- Instructional leaders provide sustained and systematic coaching and supervision. The grade lead, who supervises all members of the instructional staff, observes teachers at least once weekly and meets individually with each teacher at least every other week. After the meeting, teachers are responsible for sending an email to the grade lead that identifies a goal based on what they discussed and two actions the teacher intends to undertake to achieve that goal before the next meeting. The grade lead employs a variety of techniques when observing teachers, such as videoing lessons, transcribing lessons, and jointly observing lessons and videos of colleagues with the teacher being observed. Brilla Veritas recently began using the online platform Sibme, which allows teachers and leaders to share and comment on teaching videos. Sibme enables teachers to upload videos and alerts them when the grade lead has viewed the video or provided them with feedback, thus increasing the grade lead's capacity to observe instruction regularly and shortening the time between feedback cycles.
- Brilla Veritas has regular professional development activities that assist teachers in meeting student academic needs. Teachers attend daily afternoon meetings while students attend specials classes. Each day teachers focus on a topic that closely aligns with the school's priorities for the year. On Fridays, staff from both Brilla Veritas and Brilla College Prep meet for network-wide professional development on timely topics, such as analyzing data or creating student groups based on ability levels. In addition, Brilla Veritas provides all teachers with three weeks of pre-service training before the start of each school year.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Leaders at Brilla Veritas determine teachers' professional development needs through the observation cycle. School leaders from Brilla College Prep and Brilla Veritas also meet regularly to discuss trends in teacher development and determine topics for network-wide professional development. The school is responsive to teachers' needs and provides professional development opportunities accordingly; for example, the school recently provided professional development workshops on how to serve students with disabilities and English language learners ("ELLs") based on data gathered from classroom observations and teacher requests.
- The school has an evaluation process based on clear criteria. In December, instructional leaders provide teachers with feedback based on observations, student performance data, and 360-degree surveys. Teachers also complete a self-evaluation of their own performance at this time. Instructional leaders then meet with teachers to compare their own ratings with those of the teachers and give teachers one to two specific action items based on identified growth areas. Leaders conduct a second, more specific evaluation in late March and provide teachers with feedback on progress toward meeting the individual goals set in the December evaluation. A network leader reviews each staff member's evaluation to ensure consistency across the schools.

## DOES BRILLA VERITAS MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS?

Brilla Veritas effectively addresses the needs of at-risk students. Despite the unexpected departure of its special education coordinator in December 2017, the school has sufficient staff and structures in place to ensure that students struggling academically and students with disabilities receive the supports necessary to be academically successful. While the school does not employ a teacher certified in English as a Second Language ("ESL") or implement an English language acquisition program, it does provide some language supports to ELLs.

- Brilla Veritas has clearly defined screening procedures for identifying at-risk students and providing them with the appropriate interventions. The grade lead and principal meet every other Wednesday to review assessment data and identify students who are low-performing. Based on these data and teacher input, the grade lead and principal determine which interventions struggling students need. Teachers are likewise aware of which students require additional support and employ classroom interventions accordingly, such as prioritized seating, strategic groupings, and pulling students for one-on-one support during whole class instruction. Based on its screening measures, Brilla Veritas has referred seven students to the committee on special education ("CSE") for evaluation during the 2017-18 school year.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Classrooms at Brilla Veritas utilize an integrated co-teaching (“ICT”) model, in which two or more teachers work in concert to provide instruction. The school is able to place three teachers in every classroom this year, thus allowing for a particularly high level of individualized support for at-risk students. Specifically, this arrangement enables teachers to employ proven techniques such as parallel teaching, in which multiple teachers provide direct instruction to strategically selected small groups of students in the same classroom simultaneously. However, teachers at Brilla Veritas also occasionally miss opportunities to maximize the low student to teacher ratio; for example, in some instances one teacher provides direct instruction while the others focus primarily on behavior management, rather than providing additional instructional support to students.
- Brilla Veritas’ special education coordinator unexpectedly transitioned out of the school in December 2017, but a new special education coordinator started shortly before the Institute’s visit. Despite the lack of a designated staff member to oversee special education for several months, the school continued to provide academic and related services to students as mandated by their IEPs due to a high level of coordination between the principal and grade lead. In addition to a special education coordinator, Brilla Veritas employs a school counselor to meet students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The counselor meets with students in small groups and one on one based on needs identified by teachers and/or students’ IEPs. Currently, the school does not employ a teacher certified in ESL. While the school implements instructional strategies to support the needs of its 42 ELLs and provides some teachers with professional development related to teaching ELLs, it does not currently implement a designated academic program for language acquisition.
- Brilla Veritas provides sufficient time and support for ongoing coordination between general and at-risk teachers, as well as other program specialists and service providers. As of the date of the Institute’s visit, the school’s recently hired learning specialist began meeting with teachers and reviewing students’ IEPs in order to become familiar with students’ needs. The learning specialist also has access to an online drive where teachers save their lesson plans, which enables her to familiarize herself with classroom content.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

## SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2C

### DOES THE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT THE DELIVERY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM?

Brilla Veritas' organizational and administrative structure supports the delivery of the educational program.

- Brilla Veritas has put in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that allow it to carry out the academic program. The school gains additional operational capacity from the network, primarily through the support of a school operations manager and school operations associate, both school based employees who report directly to the network's senior director of operations.
- Brilla Veritas has established a safe and orderly environment. The school implements the Love and Logic approach to behavior management, which emphasizes strong student-teacher relationships as foundational to student culture. Teacher support in this area varies depending on the individual teacher's specific needs and the students in his or her classroom.
- Brilla Veritas has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. The organizational staff distributes supervisory roles thoughtfully, and teachers have access to the curricular and other materials they need to meet students' needs.

The network supports Brilla Veritas in meeting its enrollment and retention targets by using the following strategies to recruit and retain students:

- Hosting multiple open houses at a variety of locations and times in order to provide prospective families with multiple opportunities to learn about the school;
- Providing regular updates about the school, including information about open houses and lottery dates, to families and followers via social media;
- Translating recruitment and outreach materials into Spanish and other languages in order to reach as many prospective families as possible;
- Holding community celebrations to develop relationships with families within and outside the school community; and,
- Utilizing an ICT model in all classrooms, which provides all students, particularly students at risk of academic failure and students with disabilities, with an additional level of academic support.

# BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

## SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2D

### DOES THE SCHOOL BOARD WORK EFFECTIVELY TO ACHIEVE THE SCHOOL'S ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN GOALS?

The Brilla Veritas school board monitors student achievement and provides oversight to the total educational program.

- The Brilla Veritas board has appropriate skills, structures, and procedures with which to govern the school. Board members possess a variety of backgrounds in professions such as education, finance, philanthropy, and law, which enable them to support the successful functioning of the school and oversee it effectively. Six of the board's seven founding members remain. Additionally, the board submits timely meeting minutes to the Institute.
- The board receives sufficient information from the principal to provide rigorous oversight of Brilla Veritas. Board minutes provided to the Institute indicate that network and school staff regularly attend board meetings and convey critical information to the board about student performance, school operations, parent relations, student and staff recruitment, and other topics critical to the school. The board also closely monitors Brilla Veritas's financial health by receiving monthly financial presentations from a consulting firm contracted by Seton.

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# SCHOOL OVERVIEW

## BRILLA COLLEGE PREPARATORY CHARTER SCHOOL VERITAS BOARD OF TRUSTEES<sup>3</sup>

### CHAIR

Eric Eckholdt

### CHAIR

Anthony J. de Nicola

### SECRETARY

Richard Ramirez

### TRUSTEES

Stephanie Saroki de Garcia

Brian Carty

Charles Bozian

Scott W. Hamilton

## SCHOOL LEADERS

*Zoranlly Castillo, Founding School Leader (2017-18)*

## SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL YEAR	CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT <sup>4</sup>	ACTUAL AS A PERCENTAGE OF CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	PROPOSED GRADES	ACTUAL GRADES
2017-18	120	115	96%	Kindergarten	Kindergarten

## CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

DATE(S) OF VISIT	EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS	TITLE
<b>February 13, 2018</b>	Maureen Foley	Director for New Charters
	Keegan Prue	Program Analyst

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 OVERVIEW

## KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS:

ELEMENT	EVIDENT?
Smart Start	+
Blended-learning	+
Paideia	+
Literacy x2	+
Core Knowledge	+
Power To Lead	+
Parent Involvement	+