

THE SUNY CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE

*FIRST YEAR SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT
PERSISTENCE PREPARATORY
ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL
VISIT DATE: APRIL 18, 2019
REPORT DATE: JUNE 4, 2019*

SUNY Charter Schools Institute

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Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

A collection of colorful pencils and paper clips is arranged on a dark grey, textured background. The pencils, in various colors including green, blue, red, orange, yellow, green, orange, blue, purple, and brown, are fanned out from the top left towards the bottom right. Several paper clips in colors like orange, light green, pink, and blue are scattered at the bottom of the frame.

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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 April 18, 2019 first year school evaluation visit to Persistence Preparatory Academy Charter School (“Persistence Prep”).

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 first year 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 original charter for Persistence Prep on June 8, 2017. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2018, serving 108 students in Kindergarten – 1st grade during the 2018-19 school year. The school leases space at 833 Michigan Avenue, Buffalo, New York 14203 within Buffalo City School District. At scale, Persistence Prep will be chartered to serve 324 students in Kindergarten – 5th grade.

The mission of Persistence Prep is:



Through rigorous academics, high quality instruction, and positive leadership development, Persistence Preparatory Academy Charter School ensures that all scholars are firmly on the path to succeed within a four year college and create positive change within their communities.

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of Persistence Prep at the above address on August 10, 2018 (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Persistence Prep (the “education corporation”) 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,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.

DOES PERSISTENCE PREP HAVE AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM THAT IMPROVES INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT LEARNING?

Persistence Prep regularly administers assessments and uses the resulting data to improve instruction with some inconsistency in utilization of assessment data across content areas. The school reliably communicates assessment results and other information with families.

- Persistence Prep regularly administers standardized and other assessments. Students take the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress ("MAP") at the beginning and end of the school year, which provides a benchmark by which teachers and school leaders can measure student growth over time. The school also administers the STEP reading assessment approximately every eight weeks to monitor student reading levels. In addition, the school regularly administers internally developed interim assessments that provide data on student mastery of subject area content. Teachers also utilize a variety of formative and summative curriculum-based assessments including exit tickets, quizzes, and projects. Teachers differentiate curriculum-based assessments based on students' individual abilities; for example, Kindergarten students who are not yet able to write provide responses to English language arts ("ELA") prompts by drawing pictures, thus allowing teachers to assess their comprehension skills.
- Teachers at Persistence Prep use assessment data to adjust instruction, but the consistency with which teachers make instructional adjustments based on assessment data varies across content areas. In ELA, teachers rely primarily on STEP assessment data

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.

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

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

to determine student groups; however, teachers have not used mathematics assessment data to tailor instruction to students' needs with the same level of consistency. Early in the school year, ELA teachers identified a need for more frequent formative assessments to evaluate student skills on a day to day basis, so teachers began requiring students to complete daily exit tickets aligned to the STEP assessment, which enables teachers to adjust instruction as needed between STEP assessment cycles. Persistence Prep has regular data days during which teachers analyze recent assessment results and assign students to instructional groups based on mastery of content area skills.

- Persistence Prep makes assessment results accessible to families through report cards, which the school distributes at the end of each academic quarter. Report cards indicate whether students have attained the level of skill and standard mastery expected by that time in the school year. Teachers regularly call families and send classroom information home with students so that families know what is happening in the classroom on a day to day basis. Additionally, the school holds family fun nights, which, along with monthly coffee chats held by the head of school, encourage parents and guardians to participate actively in the school community.

DOES PERSISTENCE PREP'S CURRICULUM SUPPORT TEACHERS IN THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING?

Persistence Prep has a curricular framework that supports teachers in planning and delivery of instruction. Teachers utilize a variety of commercial and open source curricula but often adjust or change unit and lesson plans without referencing scope and sequence documents and other resources; as a result, daily lesson plans do not always align to curricular guidance material. Instructional leaders are responsive to teachers and provide support with adapting curricular materials to meet students' needs.

- Persistence Prep utilizes a variety of commercial curricula and open source resources to support the development of daily lesson plans in ELA classes including Reading Mastery, Teachers College Reading and Writing Project ("TCRWP"), and materials from Uncommon Schools, a high-performing SUNY-authorized charter school network. In mathematics classes, teachers implement a curriculum from Achievement First, another SUNY-authorized charter school network with open source materials, supplemented by resources from EngageNY and Cognitively Guided Instruction ("CGI"). In science classes, teachers implement the FOSS curriculum, a research-based program that incorporates topics in engineering. Teachers have access to ample curricular materials that support them in meeting the educational needs of all students.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Teachers at Persistence Prep generally know what to teach and when to teach it based on the guidance documents that accompany the various curricula, such as scope and sequence documents, pacing calendars, and unit plans. Instructional leaders are responsive to teacher feedback on curricular materials, and teachers have had increasing flexibility since the beginning of the school year to adapt unit and lesson plans to meet students' specific needs with regard to cultural relevance, pacing, and/or age appropriateness of curricular materials. In some classrooms, teachers have developed their own unit plans because students did not demonstrate the skills necessary to move on to the subsequent unit in the curriculum. While these adjustments sometimes result in lessons that are more responsive to student needs, other adjusted lessons stray from the school's long-term state standards goals and overall scope and sequence. Teachers submit lesson plans to instructional leaders for review on a weekly basis but do not consistently receive substantive feedback on lesson plans. Leaders acknowledge that this is a growth area and intend to make lesson plan feedback a priority in the school's second year of operation to ensure that all lessons move students toward mastery of state standards.

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1D

IS HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION EVIDENT THROUGHOUT PERSISTENCE PREP?

Instruction at Persistence Prep is generally purposeful and engaging, but some teachers do not consistently maintain a classroom environment with a consistent focus on academic achievement. Additionally, teachers frequently miss opportunities to check for student understanding and challenge students with questions that develop higher-order thinking and problem solving skills. 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.

CONTENT AREA	GRADE		
	K	1	Total
ELA	3	2	5
Math		2	2
Science	1		1
Total	4	4	8

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Teachers at Persistence Prep consistently deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (7 of 8 lessons observed). Teachers routinely post the learning objective in the classroom and communicate it to students at various points during the lesson, often connecting the objective to a previous lesson. Additionally, students consistently have opportunities to interact with peers. Most classrooms have more than one teacher present to support students. While most classrooms utilize each adult effectively, in a few classrooms, the second or third teacher circulates and occasionally redirects students but does not provide effective academic support.
- Few teachers at Persistence Prep regularly and effectively use techniques to check for student understanding (2 out of 8 lessons observed). Most teachers employ questioning techniques and provide support to students when requested but do not consistently utilize the information gathered from these interactions to adjust instruction according to students' needs. In classrooms where checks for understanding are effective, teachers circulate during independent work and prompt students to explain their thinking in order to ascertain students' understanding of the objective, or teachers utilize techniques such as cold calling in order to gauge whether all students are able to answer questions accurately.
- Less than half of teachers at Persistence Prep 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 (3 out of 8 lessons observed). While teachers consistently employ questioning techniques, the majority of questions require students to recall basic facts or complete simple calculations rather than analyze or interpret information. Though teachers encourage students to participate in class, most teachers call only on students who raise their hands, which limits the number of students teachers can actively engage during lessons.
- Less than half of teachers at Persistence Prep establish and maintain a classroom environment with a consistent focus on academic achievement (3 out of 8 lessons observed). In several classrooms teachers spend a significant amount of time addressing student off-task behavior, which limits the amount of time teachers are able to devote to instruction. Although the school has a "clip stick" management system, which entails placing a clothespin on a colored yardstick according to individual students' behavior, teachers and school leaders report that this system is ineffective and therefore do not implement it consistently. School leaders identify classroom management as an area of focus for the upcoming school year.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1E

DOES PERSISTENCE PREP HAVE STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Persistence Prep is developing strong instructional leadership. While the leadership team articulates clear goals for teachers and students that have the potential to create an atmosphere of high expectations, leaders inconsistently implement systems and structures for coaching, supporting, and evaluating teachers. As a result, classrooms at Persistence Prep vary in their success at achieving the school's culture and academic goals.

- Persistence Prep's leadership team is working to establish an environment of high expectations for teacher and student performance. Instructional leaders present staff with academic and school culture goals and expectations. The head of school and dean of culture are the primary instructional leaders at the school and provide support to teachers in the form of informal and formal observations as well as weekly professional development meetings.
- Persistence Prep's instructional leadership supports whole group professional development structures. All staff members attend weekly meetings during which leaders provide professional development on selected topics. The head of school selects targeted topics for these meetings based on classroom observations and data; during Year 1, these sessions have primarily focused on classroom management and culture-building techniques. Persistence Prep also engages consultants from the STEP reading assessment to provide teachers with additional professional development on implementing the assessment with fidelity, and using assessment data to adjust instructional plans.
- Instructional leaders are developing consistent coaching and supervision structures. The head of school generally observes in each class several times per week, provides feedback either via email or through in the moment coaching, and then meets with individual teachers weekly to review the observations and feedback. However, leaders acknowledge that last minute occurrences such as supporting student behavior issues often interrupt planned coaching schedules or one-one-one meetings. As a result of this inconsistency in teacher supports, the quality of classroom management and instruction varies significantly between classrooms.
- Persistence Prep has a teaching evaluation rubric based on clear criteria, but the school has not yet begun to conduct formal teacher evaluations. Instructional leaders use the teacher performance rubric from Uncommon Schools to conduct evaluations and have introduced the rubric to teachers, but do not consistently reference the rubric in their coaching of teachers. Leaders evaluate teacher performance through frequent informal observation. The head of school identifies this as a growth area and plans to introduce and implement a more formal evaluation system using the rubric in year two and beyond.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1F

DOES PERSISTENCE PREP MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AT-RISK-STUDENTS?

Persistence Prep has systems in place to meet the educational needs of at-risk students. The school deploys sufficient resources and appropriate interventions for students who already have identified disabilities and has clear screening procedures to identify at-risk students. The school is developing structures to train instructional staff members in strategies for supporting at risk students, as well as systems for ongoing coordination between general education and at-risk teachers.

- Persistence Prep has clearly defined screening procedures for identifying at-risk students. The scholar supports coordinator has primary responsibility for overseeing supports for at-risk students. Leaders review data from the STEP and MAP assessments to track student growth over time and identify students in need of additional support. Leaders assign students to small groups throughout the day both within their home classroom and with a dedicated pullout Response to Intervention (“RTI”) teacher in order to provide targeted support in areas where students are struggling. After administering each STEP assessment and math interim assessment, leaders review student data and adjust supports based on student progress; leaders and teachers also regularly update parents of at-risk students on their child’s progress. If a student still struggles after several cycles of intervention, the head of school, scholar support coordinator, teacher, and parent collectively determine whether to request evaluation for an individualized education program (“IEP”) through the district Committee on Special Education (“CSE”). Persistence Prep has implemented this screening process during the 2018-19 school year, and has not yet referred any students to the CSE for evaluation. Persistence Prep does not currently enroll any English language learners (“ELLs”), but the school follows clear procedures to identify ELLs, administering the Home Language Survey and New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (“NYSITELL”).
- Persistence Prep deploys sufficient resources including staff, classes, and settings to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The scholar supports coordinator, who is a certified special education teacher, ensures that the school implements interventions and settings in accordance with students’ needs and students’ IEPs. The school implements a mix of in-class integrated co-teaching (“ICT”) services and pullout special education teacher support services (“SETSS”). Persistence Prep employs four full-time special education certified teachers; two of these teachers work primarily as the special education teachers in ICT classrooms, while the other two primarily lead small groups for students with IEPs or who are receiving RTI support. Additionally, the school contracts with an external provider for related services such as occupational and speech therapy.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- The school does not yet implement formal systems and supports for ongoing coordination between general education teachers and special education teachers and service providers. General education and special education teachers at Persistence Prep collaborate primarily through informal conversation during preparation periods or before and after school. During pre-service summer training, the coordinator of special education led several sessions on reading IEPs, making and tracking RTI goals, and monitoring student progress toward IEP goals. However, leaders recognize the opportunity to integrate more professional development throughout the year aimed at improving teachers' ability and knowledge of strategies to support at risk students.

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

Persistence Prep is developing administrative systems to ensure that the organization effectively delivers the academic program. School leaders adapt operational structures and shift resources as necessary to ensure that systems such as student transportation and after school care support the school in carrying out its mission. Leaders recognize opportunities to improve classroom culture and behavior management, and to expand student recruitment efforts in order to increase enrollment for students with disabilities and ELLs.

- Persistence Prep has an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that allow it to carry out the academic program. The leadership team includes the head of school, dean of culture, director of operations, and scholar supports coordinator. Leaders have responded to several operational challenges by adapting systems as needed to meet the needs of the school. For instance, the district's bus schedule necessitates early morning drop off and late afternoon pick up times for students; as a result, Persistence Prep runs a rotating volunteer schedule for staff members to provide after school care for students until all buses arrive. While these adjustments have met the school's needs in its first year, leaders are working to create more stable systems for Persistence Prep's second year and beyond.
- The school is establishing a safe and orderly environment. Persistence Prep's facility is clean and well-organized, and there is space for teachers and other school staff to carry out the activities required to meet students' instructional needs. Leaders and teachers identify classroom culture and behavior management as areas in which the school has struggled; this resulted in slightly elevated suspension rates during the school's first year.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

Recognizing culture as a growth area, school leaders have largely focused professional development on classroom management techniques. Teachers implement whole-school behavior management system called the clip stick, in which teachers move students names through colored segments on a yardstick to represent behavior throughout the day; however, teachers implement this system inconsistently. The school plans to implement responsive classroom practices next year in order to ensure that the behavior management system develops a positive and restorative school environment. Average daily attendance at the time of the Institute's visit was 89%; the school attributes this to the aforementioned challenges with student bus schedules and transportation.

- Persistence Prep allocates sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. Teachers have access to curricular materials that support high quality instruction and know the process for requisitioning additional materials. Leaders are responsive and aware of teacher needs; for instance, leaders started to send out more frequent weekly email digests mid-year in response to teachers' request for more communication about each week's events and schedule.
- Persistence Prep is authorized to serve 108 students during the 2018-19 school year; the school's enrollment at the time of the Institute's visit was 97 students, which includes nine students with IEPs and zero ELLs. School leaders recognize that enrollment of students with IEPs and ELLs is a necessary focus area in order to meet enrollment and retention targets.

Specific strategies the school is using to increase enrollment and retention include:

- Sending targeted enrollment mailers to specific zipcodes with a higher proportion of new immigrant families;
- Contacting and working with refugee resettlement agencies to connect with new immigrant families;
- Visiting a variety of pre-school, daycare, and after-school care facilities within the community to meet prospective families;
- Working with the district to explore bus and transportation schedules that are more sustainable for families and the school; and,
- Maintaining robust communication with families after they are accepted in the lottery.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2D

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

The Persistence Prep board monitors student achievement and provides oversight for the total educational program. Board committees convene regularly and receive timely information on the school's performance from the head of school.

- The board of Persistence Prep has sufficient skills, structures, and procedures with which to govern the school. Board members possess professional and other experience in a variety of areas relevant to school governance including education, financial oversight, law, and real estate. The board operates with a committee structure, and committees convene regularly to review applicable data and school information. Six of the board's eight founding members remain, and the school has added five new board members since its authorization for a total of 11. The board has actively worked to develop its oversight capacity by participating in training sessions with organizations such as Charter Board Partners and Building Excellent Schools ("BES"). Board members indicate that they intend to continue to develop the board's governing capacity by adding members with expertise in the areas of human resources and/or financial literacy.
- The board receives assessment results from the head of school through a dashboard, and the board's academic committee closely analyzes assessment results broken down by student subgroups. The academic accountability committee analyzes detailed academic data including STEP, MAP, and interim assessment results and reports out to the whole board, which also reviews attendance and enrollment information particularly as it pertains to student subgroups. In addition, the school contracts with an external provider for financial reports that the board utilizes to oversee the school's fiscal health. The board likewise received the results of parent and staff surveys that the school conducted in the fall and spring.
- The Persistence Prep board has developed clear criteria for evaluating the head of school. The board utilizes an adapted rubric from BES that evaluates the head of school in several domains related to school success. The head of school received an evaluation using the rubric at the end of the school's planning year; the board will use an expanded rubric at the end of Year 1 that takes into account the head of school's additional responsibilities now that the school is in operation.

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

PERSISTENCE PREPARATORY ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD OF TRUSTEES

CHAIR

Daniel Greene

VICE CHAIR

Marta Clark

TREASURER

Kenneth Newsom

SECRETARY

Jillian Suttell

TRUSTEES

Derrick Parson

Cord Stone

Amanda Winkelsas

Catherine Roberts

Kevin Celniker

Misha Russo

Darnell Haywood

SCHOOL LEADERS

Joelle Formato, Head of School (2018-Present)

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL YEAR	CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL AS A PERCENTAGE OF CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	PROPOSED GRADES	ACTUAL GRADES
2018-19	108	99	92%	K-1	K-1

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

DATE(S) OF VISIT	EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS	TITLE
April 18, 2019	Maureen Foley	Director for New Charters
	Keegan Prue	Program Analyst

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS:

ELEMENT	EVIDENT?
Extended day and year	+
Emphasis on literacy	+
Data-driven instruction	-
Teacher development	+
Structured and joyful environment	-
Positive leadership development	+
College preparatory	+
Social justice teaching	-
Enrichment	+
Increased family engagement	+

