



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

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July 14, 2015

VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL

Stephanie Mauterstock, Board Chair
Central Brooklyn Ascend Charter School
1501 Pitkin Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11212

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Ms. Mauterstock:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its May 28, 2015 first year school evaluation visit to the Central Brooklyn Ascend Charter School ("Central Brooklyn"). The visit team consisted of Heather Wendling, Director for New Charters; Natasha Howard, Ph.D., Managing Director of Program; and Tiffany Bailey, an external consultant. Allow me to place this letter and the conclusions set forth below into context.

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 letters such as this, as well as reports provided 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.

To Learn
To Search
To Serve



For this first year visit, the Institute narrows the expectation for each benchmark in recognition of the school program's limited development. The center of attention is on the quality of instruction and related benchmarks, 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.

Although the information provided in this letter is not prescriptive, the Institute would expect you to review thoroughly the issues highlighted below and, to the extent you find them helpful, use them to assist in guiding the school's leadership team to further develop 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, we are cognizant of the fact that a one-day site visit may not yield information on all facets of a school's program.

Please find the team's findings from the first year visit below.

Instructional Leadership

Central Brooklyn is developing strong instructional leadership to support its teachers' pedagogical development.

- Central Brooklyn's instructional leadership team, comprised of the founding school director and founding dean of students, is cultivating an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school with a strong emphasis on the network's core values and instilling a joy for learning in all students. However, leaders and teachers cannot consistently articulate the school's end of year student achievement goals for English language arts ("ELA"), suggesting either a lack of clear messaging or a lack of focus on measuring students' academic achievement.
- Although the founding school director assumed additional responsibilities to oversee lesson planning and coordinate school wide interventions in the school's first year of operation, the instructional leadership team is currently adequate to support the development of its teaching staff.
- The school director and dean of students provide sustained and systemic coaching and supervision for all teachers at Central Brooklyn. Each instructional leader supports a cohort of teachers through weekly observations and individualized coaching sessions that outline key levers to improve future instruction; at some points during the year, coaching meetings occur less frequently due to competing demands for leaders' attention. The school director also provides lesson planning guidance and reviews all plans prior to implementation, regularly providing written feedback.
- With significant support from its charter management organization, Ascend Learning ("the

network”), Central Brooklyn implements weekly professional development programming in addition to three weeks of pre-service training in August. While the majority of professional development workshops focused on effectively implementing the various new curricula in the school’s first year, instructional leaders also utilize classroom observation and assessment data to determine teachers’ professional development needs. Teachers report that professional development activities effectively address their weaknesses and strengthen their pedagogical skills, as well as build upon the school’s focus on personal and professional growth.

- Instructional leaders complete a comprehensive mid-year evaluation for all teachers based on a clear, network-wide rubric that measures each teacher’s progress in a variety of competencies, as well as identifies personalized goals for each teacher.

Use of Assessment Data

Central Brooklyn is developing a system to gather assessment data and is beginning to use data to improve student learning.

- Central Brooklyn administers a standardized reading assessment four times a year. The network provides all weekly, middle and end of unit reading, writing and math exams teachers administer throughout the year.
- Teachers rely solely on network-provided teacher directions or rubrics to score assessments. The school has not established performance exemplars against which to score student work, which may limit the reliability of assessment results. The school makes data available to school leaders, teachers and parents. The school director analyzes performance data prior to distributing a simplified version of class performance data to teachers. Teachers receive data for their individual class only; the school director does not provide teachers with grade level and school wide data. Parents receive progress reports outlining their child’s academic achievement every five weeks, and formal report cards two times a year.
- The school director and teachers use data to develop guided reading groups and identify students in need of targeted ELA and math interventions. Teachers also used data from unit assessments to dictate areas of re-teaching.

Curriculum

Central Brooklyn curriculum supports teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.

- The school relies primarily on commercial curricula used across Ascend schools. Central Brooklyn uses Singapore Math as its primary mathematics instructional program and Number Stories for its problem-solving mathematics blocks. The school uses Core Knowledge for social studies and Closer Look for science. In English language arts, Central Brooklyn uses Foundations, a phonics and spelling program for primary grades, which it supplements with teacher-scripted

guided reading. In Kindergarten, the school follows the Lucy Calkins writing program; in 1st grade, the school uses Voyages for writing instruction.

- In addition to commercial curricula products, the Ascend network provides teachers with scope and sequence documents, pacing guides, unit plans and supporting teacher guides for core subject areas. Teachers use these documents to tailor daily lesson plans with questions and activities suited for Central Brooklyn students. Though the school leader reports that teachers do thoughtful planning of questions and differentiated activities/assignments, the visit team found little evidence in classrooms to support this assertion.
- Teachers know what to teach and when to teach it based on the above documents and additional planning in weekly grade team meetings. According to school staff, all curricula align to rigorous standards and prepare students to meet grade level performance expectations.
- Central Brooklyn classrooms abound with leveled libraries, mathematics manipulatives and other supplemental materials that support teachers in addressing students' academic needs.

Pedagogy

Adequate instruction is evident in classrooms across the school.

- Central Brooklyn teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (10 of 11 classrooms observed). Teachers communicate clear learning objectives, often referring to them as students' "thinking jobs," and present concepts in age-appropriate language. In several classrooms, assistant teachers do not play an essential role in instruction or helping students master lesson material.
- Most teachers regularly and effectively use techniques to check for student understanding (9 of 11 classrooms observed). Teachers use a variety of questioning techniques across classrooms, including non-verbal whole class checks, calling on student volunteers and cold calling. Most teachers circulate around classrooms to monitor students' written work but few make spontaneous adjustments to instruction based on students' level of mastery or misunderstandings.
- Few teachers 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 of 11 classrooms observed). Most teachers do not require students to defend or elaborate on their responses, and most independent practice activities are basic and foundational. There is little, if any, evidence of differentiated assignments to meet the needs of struggling or advanced students. Students have limited opportunities to interact with their peers during whole class instruction. In one math lesson, students were given 10 seconds to do a cursory turn and talk to compare answers to a given problem. In the brief time allowed, students could not share how they arrived at their answers or investigate why they may not agree.

- All Central Brooklyn teachers establish and maintain classroom environments with a consistent focus on academic achievement (11 of 11 classrooms observed). Students are generally highly engaged and enthusiastic during classroom activities; teachers utilize school wide, well-rehearsed chants and routines to orchestrate smooth transitions and maximize learning time. Teachers across the school utilize Responsive Classroom management techniques to redirect off-task students, focusing on developing students' social and emotional capacities through positive framing and incentives, but minor misbehaviors still disrupt instruction in some classrooms.

At-Risk Students

Central Brooklyn is addressing the educational needs of some at-risk students, but demand for academic supports outpaces the school's current staffing and scheduling capacities. The school does not have a program in place to meet the needs of English language learners ("ELLs").

- Central Brooklyn uses procedures to identify at-risk students including students with disabilities, ELLs and those struggling academically. Teachers use benchmark assessments, standardized reading tests and informal assessments to identify students in need of extra supports. Central Brooklyn uses the Home Language Identification Survey and New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners to identify students as English Language Learners.
- The school employs several resources and processes to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure and students with disabilities. However, the percentage of students currently reading below grade level far outpaces the availability of intervention supports during the school day. Based primarily on reading assessment results, the school creates intervention groups in which some students receive pull out support twice per week to remediate skill deficits in reading and mathematics. Teachers report organizing at-risk students in math and writing in small groups within their regular classrooms for re-teaching and extra help, and after-school tutoring is available. The school coordinates with district or external speech, occupational and other service providers as mandated to meet student needs.
- Central Brooklyn does not currently deploy resources to meet the needs of its two identified ELLs. While all students are eligible for additional interventions in reading or math, there is no educational program or staff member dedicated to meeting the specific language acquisition needs of ELLs.

Organizational Capacity

With support from the network, Central Brooklyn's organizational structure supports the effective delivery of its academic program. The network, as a whole, has experienced cash flow problems across the schools, which affects decision-making.

- The school has in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems and procedures that allow it to carry out the academic program. With the school's director of operations managing the day-to-day business of the school, the founding principal maintains a singular focus on implementing effective pedagogical coaching to strengthen teachers' abilities to meet students' needs.
- Central Brooklyn maintains a safe and orderly environment throughout the school. Students are familiar with behavioral expectations for classrooms and the hallways, as evidenced by smooth transitional routines in most classrooms. School leaders and teachers consistently and effectively implement the school-wide disciplinary system.
- Central Brooklyn has allocated sufficient resources to achieve its goals. Classrooms are well-resourced and have a focus on quality instruction, high student engagement, literacy and college awareness.
- The school effectively employs a range of network resources to establish systems and protocols that are adapted to the school's needs. The network also provides staff recruitment support as well as pre-service professional development for staff prior to school opening.

Board Oversight

The Central Brooklyn school board monitors student achievement and provides effective oversight of the total educational program. The board is actively making loan structuring decisions to improve the overall financial stability.

- Central Brooklyn's board members generally possess adequate skills, including non-profit management, human resources and education expertise, and are putting in place structures and procedures with which to govern the school effectively. Having recently completed a needs assessment, the board has recognized it would benefit from additional legal and fiscal presence to improve oversight activities. The board expects to add at least two new trustees shortly.
- The board receives sufficient information from school leaders to stay up-to-date on Central Brooklyn's academic program and finances. At monthly meetings, leaders and network personnel provide operational and fiscal dashboards as well as student performance presentations that take an in-depth look at on-going assessment and progress data to measure the efficacy of the network's new curriculum.
- The board is developing clear criteria for evaluating school leaders and the network, as well as its own performance.
- In May 2015, the board authorized the President and/or Treasurer to negotiate the specific terms of a loan with Non Profit Finance Fund (NFF). Central Brooklyn's loan portion is up to \$1,350,000 of the total package of up to \$5.85 million for four schools to finance the renovations of four leased facilities.
- In May 2015, the board approved a revision to the management agreement to apply management fees to facility rental assistance.

These conclusions constitute the beginning of your school's record of progress toward meeting the standards detailed in the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks. The Institute conducts formal evaluation visits at various times during each school's initial charter term and generally at least once during subsequent charter terms. The cumulative evidence collected during these school evaluation and renewal visits, as well as the school's record of success at meeting Accountability Plan goals becomes part of the record that informs the Institute's renewal recommendation to the SUNY Trustees.

The number of school evaluation visits the Institute will conduct before renewal depends on a variety of factors. Concerns raised in the conclusions of previous visits, the school's progress toward meeting its Accountability Plan goals and emergent legal and compliance issues may affect the frequency and timing of the visits.

The Institute looks forward to its next visit to Central Brooklyn and is available at any time to discuss the results of the first year visit, future visits or other concerns you may have as the school moves through its charter term and toward renewal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Natasha M. Howard', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Natasha M. Howard, Ph.D.
Managing Director of Program

Enclosure

cc: Michelle Flowers, School Director *(via email)*
Frances DeWindt, Director of School Operations *(via email)*
Elena Day, Chief Operating Officer, Ascend Learning *(via email)*