



First Year School Evaluation Report Amber Charter School II

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Report Date: August 18, 2017

State University of New York
41 State Street, Suite 700
Albany, New York 12207

(518) 445-4250
(518) 320-1572 (fax)
www.newyorkcharters.org



INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute’s (the “Institute’s”) observations and findings from its May 31, 2017, first year school evaluation visit to Amber Charter School II (“Amber II”).

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.

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Amber II, a replication of the existing Amber Charter School (“Amber I”), on June 4, 2014. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2016, serving 118 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade during the 2016-17 school year. Having received more applications for enrollment than seats available for the 2017-18 school year, Amber II held its enrollment lottery on April 4, 2017, and established active waitlists for Kindergarten – 2nd grade. The school operates in co-located space at 652 West 187th Street, New York, within New York City Community School District (“CSD”) 6 and will relocate for the 2017-18 school year to 3120 Corlear Avenue, New York within CSD 10.

The school’s mission statement is:

To provide our students an academically rigorous and well-rounded education, along with strong character development, that will enable them to prosper in top middle schools and beyond.

Amber II replicates the academic program in place at the existing Amber I, which opened in 2000 and currently serves 491 students in Kindergarten – 5th grade. Both schools implement the Journeys curriculum in English language arts (“ELA”). Amber II also incorporates Superkids into its ELA curriculum because the program’s emphasis on phonemic awareness benefits its high population of English language learners (“ELLs”). The school utilizes the GO Math! curriculum for mathematics and McGraw-Hill for science and social studies. Amber II also provides Spanish instruction to students through a teacher-developed curriculum.

Amber II offers special education teacher support services (“SETSS”) to students with disabilities whose Individualized Education Programs (“IEPs”) mandate these services. SETSS teachers utilize push-in and pull-out instruction to implement each student’s IEP effectively. A child study committee convenes on a regular basis to discuss the effectiveness of interventions currently in place for students deemed “at risk” academically. Amber II provides support for ELLs through instructional pull-out time based on students’ English language proficiency. Each classroom has an teaching assistant who adds an additional layer of support for at-risk students.

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of Amber Charter School II at the above address on August 31, 2016, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Amber II (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.

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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 1B:

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

The school gathers assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve student learning.

- Amber II regularly administers standardized and curriculum-based assessments. Teachers administer baseline assessments to all students at the beginning of the school year as well as the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress ("MAP") assessment in the fall, winter, and spring. The school also administers the Terra Nova as a summative assessment at the end of the school year. In addition to these standardized assessments, the curriculum for each subject area incorporates regular assessments. The school compiles, tracks, and analyzes all assessment data using the online platform Illuminate.
- The school makes assessment data accessible to parents primarily through parent-teacher conferences and regular communication. Teachers send home tests for parents to sign accompanied by a parent letter generated in Illuminate that includes information about how to interpret their child's data. Teachers also share information about student performance with parents informally via phone, email, and in person during dismissal.
- Teachers access data on student assessment results via Illuminate, which creates detailed reports that allow them to analyze student performance by doing an item analysis based on individual test questions, or by disaggregating data based on subgroups, such as ELLs or students with disabilities. During weekly team meetings, teachers collaboratively review and discuss the data and compare results among classes. Based on this analysis, they determine how to provide remediation to students who need additional support. Teachers sometimes request that the SETSS teacher work with students on particular content areas, or if it is

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; http://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/.

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apparent that the whole class has not met a particular standard, teachers reteach the corresponding lesson.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1C:

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

The school's use of commercial curriculum with adjustments supports teachers in their planning and delivery of instruction.

- School leaders work with teachers to develop guiding documents, including scope and sequences and pacing guides, based on the materials provided with each content area's curriculum. Teachers review the pacing guides for each content area every two months to determine if students are progressing as expected or if adjustments are necessary. The school stores curriculum materials on a shared drive that all staff members can access, which enables teachers and instructional leaders to retrieve and share resources easily.
- Teachers know what to teach and when to teach it according to the scope and sequence and pacing calendar for each content area's curriculum. Teachers use curricular materials to create lesson plans, which they submit to school leaders through an online system every two weeks. At the beginning of the school year, the principal and staff developer consistently provided lesson plan feedback, ensuring each lesson had clear objectives, a desired work product, and resources teachers could use to support the learning objective. However, lesson plan feedback has been less consistent in recent months; lesson plans include aligned standards, learning targets, and essential questions, but the remaining portions of the template are frequently incomplete.
- Teachers at Amber II have access to a multitude of curricular materials, all of which school leaders chose thoughtfully. The school uses Journeys for reading and literacy instruction and, after considering its students' specific needs, chose also to implement Superkids for phonics instruction to support its high population of ELLs.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1D:

Is high quality instruction evident throughout the school?

Instruction at Amber II is generally purposeful and engaging, though there are inconsistencies with regard to higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. As shown in the chart below, during the first year visit, Institute team members conducted 12 classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

	Grade			
	K	1	Total	
Content Area	ELA	4	2	6
	Writing	0	1	1
	Math	1	1	2
	Soc Stu	0	1	1
	Science	2	0	2
	Total	7	5	12

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- Most teachers at Amber II deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (8 of 12 classrooms observed). In classrooms where the objective is not clear, students engage in activities related to the academic content, but it is not evident how these activities align to a specific learning objective. In classrooms where the objective is clear, lesson activities align closely with the stated objective. All classrooms have a lead teacher as well as a teaching assistant and, if push-in support is taking place, a SETSS teacher. In general, teachers have clear roles in helping students reach lesson objectives.
- Most teachers at Amber II regularly and effectively use techniques to check for student understanding (8 of 12 classrooms observed). In classrooms where teachers effectively check for understanding, they circulate consistently and use student work to identify trends and adjust instruction as appropriate. In classrooms where teachers do not effectively use techniques to check for understanding, they circulate and identify occasional errors but miss opportunities to adjust instruction accordingly, or they focus on behavior management and offer little substantive feedback to students on their work.
- Few teachers at Amber II 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 12 classrooms observed). While most teachers utilize questioning techniques, the questions are frequently low in rigor and require students to recall basic facts or repeat a concept the teacher has supplied. In classrooms where teachers use questioning techniques effectively, they consistently encourage students to interact with peers by asking and responding to each other's questions.
- Most teachers at Amber II maximize learning time with efficient transitions and have effective management techniques and routines that create a consistent focus on academic achievement (10 of 12 classrooms observed). Teachers consistently utilize effective techniques such as clapping to bring students back together or transition from one activity to the next within a lesson. Teachers also effectively redirect minor student misbehaviors without interrupting the lesson or wasting learning time, which generates a sense of urgency in classrooms.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1E:

Does the school have strong instructional leadership?

Amber II is establishing strong instructional leadership to support the development of all instructional staff.

- Amber II's leadership promotes a culture of learning and scholarship. Leaders make themselves available as needed and are present in classrooms often. Teachers regularly observe one another's classrooms and share ideas freely. Staff describe the school culture as supportive and "family-like" and feel comfortable going to school leaders for help when needed.
- Amber II's instructional leadership supports the development of the teaching staff, and instructional leaders consistently provide coaching and supervision. Both the principal and staff developer observe teachers informally and formally, providing lesson feedback on a regular basis. Instructional leaders observe teachers at least once per week and enter observation notes and feedback into the online platform TeachBoost every other week, which

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allows instructional leaders and teachers to track, share, and discuss classroom observation data. The principal conducts formal beginning-of-year, mid-year, and end-of-year observations and meets with teachers prior to each of their formal observations to help them prepare by offering lesson plan feedback.

- Amber II has regular professional development activities that assist teachers in meeting students' academic needs. The school provides two weeks of professional development before the school year starts and conducts weekly team meetings as well as daily professional development sessions in the afternoon. Network staff and external presenters, including curriculum representatives, have led professional development sessions for teachers. Teachers also attend professional development sessions from external sources such as the New York City Charter School Center. Together, teachers and school leaders identify professional learning goals that align with the Danielson framework, which the school uses to conduct formal teacher evaluations, and work together to track their progress toward these goals over time.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1F:

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

Amber II is addressing the educational needs of struggling students, students with disabilities, and ELLs.

- Amber II has clear procedures for identifying at-risk students, including students struggling academically, students with disabilities, and ELLs. Teachers use various assessments such as the NWEA MAP and the Diagnostic Reading Assessment ("DRA"), as well as in-class performance, behavior, and teacher observations to identify students in need of extra support. The school uses the Home Language Identification Survey and, when appropriate, the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners ("NYSITELL") to identify students in need of English language acquisition support.
- The school has sufficient resources to support a range of learners. Every classroom has a lead teacher and a teaching assistant. When the child study team identifies students who are low performing, teachers provide interventions such as creating leveled student groups and conducting after school tutoring sessions. The SETSS teacher may also provide individual or small group in-class support. If the student does not show sufficient progress after six weeks, the school begins the referral process for special education services. Amber II provides SETSS services to eight students, which includes push-in and pull-out in mathematics and ELA based on the needs described in the students' IEPs. The school's Spanish teacher supports its 25 ELLs with pull-out listening, writing, and speaking instruction twice per week. General education teachers also use the ELL differentiation strategies provided in the curriculum to support ELLs in the classroom. The school uses the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test ("NYSESLAT") to monitor students' English language proficiency.
- There is no structured time for collaboration between general education, special education, and English as a new language ("ENL") teachers, but teachers frequently collaborate informally. At the beginning of the year, the special education coordinator, who also serves as the school's dean, met with every teacher to review each student's IEP. General education teachers meet with SETSS and ENL teachers on an ad hoc basis to discuss teaching strategies

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and student support, ensuring general education teachers are aware of their students' academic needs. While most teachers report that this system is sufficient, some request formal collaboration time to ensure support is sustainable as the school grows.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2C:

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

Amber II is developing an organizational structure that will enable it to deliver the educational program effectively.

- Amber II has put in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that allow it to carry out the academic program. The school's leadership team includes a principal, dean of operations, special education coordinator/dean of students, and staff developer. There are clear lines of reporting, and school leaders meet regularly with their direct reports both individually and as a team. The leadership team also meets at least weekly. Teachers indicate that communication from leaders about priorities and initiatives at the school is reliable and transparent.
- Amber II has established a safe and orderly environment. The school facility is clean and well-organized, and there is adequate space for teachers and other school staff to carry out the activities required to ensure that they are meeting students' instructional needs.
- Amber II has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. Teachers have access to the curricular materials necessary to deliver high-quality instruction, and they know whom to go to should they need additional resources for their classrooms. There are an adequate number of staff present to meet students' academic and other needs, as evidenced by the presence of both a lead teacher and a teaching assistant in every classroom.
- The leadership team at Amber II has begun to create the systems and protocols necessary to ensure a well-functioning school organization. Prior to the start of the school year, the dean of operations developed schoolwide systems and procedures and compiled them into manuals shared with staff during the school's two-week summer training. The school has systems in place for its core functions, such as compiling student assessment data and making it accessible to staff and parents, providing feedback and professional development to teachers, supporting students with special needs, and providing teachers with the curricular materials necessary to support high-quality instruction.

Amber staff members use the following strategies to meet enrollment and retention targets:

- Advertising the school in print media in the school's district of location;
- Canvassing door to door in the school's district of location;
- Maintaining an updated website and regularly using social media to share updates and information about the school; and,
- Hosting group meetings to disseminate information about the school to members of the community in which the school is located.

SCHOOL OVERVIEW

Board of Trustees³

Board Member Name	Position	Board Member Name	Position
Soledad Hiciano	Chair	Amedor Centeno	Trustee
Ann Wiener	Vice Chair	Beatriz Gonzalez Day	Trustee
John Gutierrez	Secretary	Jenna Pantel	Trustee
Frank Aldridge	Treasurer	Anthony Harris	Trustee
Chantal Frazier	Parent Representative	Elena Goldberg Velazquez	Trustee
Juvanee Bedminster	Teacher Representative		

School Characteristics

School Year	Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ⁴	Actual as a Percentage of Chartered Enrollment	Proposed Grades	Actual Grades
2016-17	120	118	98%	K-1	K-1

Key Design Elements

Element	Evident?
90 minutes of literacy instruction per day;	+
90 minutes of mathematics instruction per day;	+
90 minutes of science instruction per week;	+
90 minutes of social studies instruction per week;	+
All students will learn Spanish language and culture;	+
Students will have opportunities to learn art, music, physical education, and technology;	+
A strong culture of respect for learning is fostered through the infusion of the Amber Way throughout the student and adult culture. The Amber Way teaches the following character traits: Achievement, comMunity, responsiBility, honEsty and Respect; and	+
Every student is required to complete a community service project every year. In this way, students begin to know their community, its needs and strengths, and see themselves as a vital contributor of their community.	+

School Leaders

School Year(s)	Name(s) and Title(s)
2016-17 to Present	Veronica Almedina, Principal

School Visit History

Date(s) of Visit	Evaluation Team Members	Title
May 31, 2017	Maureen Foley	Director for New Charters
	Kerri Rizzolo	School Evaluation 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.)