



First Year School Evaluation Report Atmosphere Academy Public Charter School

Visit Date: June 9, 2016
Report Date: July 14, 2016

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 June 9, 2016 first year school evaluation visit to the Atmosphere Academy Public Charter School. The visit team consisted of Heather Wendling, Director for New Charters, and Jenn David Lang, external consultant.

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, 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.

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

Atmosphere Academy Public Charter School

BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Atmosphere Academy Public Charter School (“Atmosphere”) on June 4, 2014. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2015 serving 110 students in 6th grade and increased enrollment to 140 students in response to community demand. This level of enrollment, a 17% increase over the school’s chartered enrollment of 120¹, reflects the strong demand for the school within its district of location. Having received more applications for enrollment than seats available for the 2016-17 school year, Atmosphere held its enrollment lottery on April 13, 2016, and established active waitlists for 6th and 7th grades. The school operates in leased space located at 22 Marble Hill Avenue, Bronx, New York within the New York Community School District (“CSD”) 10. Atmosphere is currently authorized to serve 342 students in grades 6-8 in this charter term; school leaders intend to seek a grade expansion to serve currently enrolled students into high school before Atmosphere applies for initial renewal.

The school’s mission statement states:

Through the creation of a highly engaging school setting, Atmosphere Academy not only prepares students to be ready for college, career, and life, but to succeed once they get there. By actively contributing to the school’s shared learning community, Atmosphere students will acquire the character, skills, and knowledge they need to think, collaborate, and lead.

Atmosphere offers 250 minutes of critical reading and 250 minutes of critical writing per week for a total of 500 weekly minutes of instruction in English language arts (“ELA”). The school offers 400 weekly minutes of math. Students also partake in 250 weekly minutes of science and social studies instruction as well as foreign language, physical education, health, technology and art classes, and participate in a skills advisory class designed to strengthen life, study and 21st Century skills through activities such as community outreach and team building. Atmosphere utilizes Restorative Justice² principles to create and maintain a strong school culture.

Atmosphere offers a robust special education program including integrated co-teaching (“ICT”) classes, Special Education Teacher Support Services (“SETSS”), and self-contained classes for students with disabilities. An experienced English as a Second Language Specialist supports the language and literacy development of the school’s English language learners. The school is developing a comprehensive Response to Intervention process to support struggling students.

¹ There is a provision within each SUNY authorized charter school’s Charter Agreement (Section 3.3(a)) that allows each school operated by the Education Corporation to enroll a total number of students that does not exceed one hundred and twenty percent (120%) of the school’s projected total enrollment.

² Restorative Justice principles empower students to resolve conflicts on their own and bring students together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air their grievances to work collaboratively to arrive at solutions.

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of Atmosphere at the above address on August 17, 2015, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Atmosphere Academy Public Charter Schools (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.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, grounded in the body of research from the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University,³ 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.⁴

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

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1E:

Does the school have strong instructional leadership?

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

- Atmosphere's instructional leadership team currently consists of the founding principal, academic directors for both STEM and humanities, and a lead learning specialist. The team is establishing an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school with a clear emphasis on quality instruction and significant growth; however, in anticipation of the varying proficiency levels of incoming students in the school's first year, leaders have not yet developed or communicated specific or acceptable rates of growth.
- Atmosphere's instructional leadership team, as currently comprised, is adequate to provide personalized supports to its teaching staff. However, with numerous instructional leaders and external consultants observing and providing informal feedback to both teachers and assistant teachers, there is limited evidence of formal or systematic coordination of coaching efforts to target specific pedagogical skills for teachers to build upon.
- In addition to regular informal classroom observations, instructional leaders conduct four formal classroom observations per year with scheduled post-observation feedback meetings and comprehensive written documentation. Leaders also video record classroom instruction to view with teachers during post-observation conferences in order to reflect on strengths and weaknesses.
- Instructional leaders provide informal feedback in the moment or via email, but do not yet collect or distribute feedback in a well-documented or systematic way outside of the four

³ An extensive body of research identifying and confirming the correlates of effective schools exists dating back four decades. Selected sources include: www.mes.org/correlates.html; scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie_fryer_revision_final.pdf; and, gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf.

⁴ Additional details regarding the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, including greater specificity as to what the Institute looks for at each school that may demonstrate attainment of the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, is available at: www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

formal observations.

- Atmosphere supports teachers' efforts to meet students' needs and holds teachers accountable for delivering high quality instruction through regular professional development. School leaders use observation notes and solicit teacher requests to determine topics and often employ external consultants or organizations to supplement in-house trainings, such as the NYC Special Education Collaborative and Fordham University Graduate School of Education's Office of Educational Partnerships. Stipends are also available for teachers to attend external conferences for professional learning.
- The principal evaluates all teachers and assistant teachers using a formal evaluation rubric, based on the Danielson⁵ framework. Teachers and staff are familiar with the criteria by which they are evaluated and find the tool fair and transparent.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1B:

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

The school gathers assessment data but does not yet use it to systematically improve student learning.

- The school administers a variety of assessments including the iReady, Rally Rehearsal (mock ELA and math state practice tests), the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress ("MAP") assessment, as well as teacher created mid-terms, finals, and other classroom-based assessments to monitor and document students' progress towards grade level proficiency.
- The school makes data available to teachers, parents, board members and the students themselves. Teachers have access to data online through PowerSchool and reports that are also sent home. Teachers report having access to iReady and MAP results, but not mock test or the previous year's state assessment results. There is also a prominent "Data Wall" on the second floor of the school, displaying growth and visual representations of students' academic achievements. Board members report having access to all data including all information on the school's shared drive.
- The school does not provide specific expectations or a systematic structure for how teachers should regularly use data to adjust instruction. While some teachers do analyze data and use it to form groups and adjust instruction, they report doing so based on their own initiative. School leaders report there is no overarching approach and little oversight of the use of assessment data; they acknowledge the importance of driving students to proficiency to be ready for rigorous high school coursework and identify this as an area for growth.

⁵ The *Framework for Teaching*, created by Charlotte Danielson, is a comprehensive and coherent framework that identifies those aspects of a teacher's responsibilities that have been documented through empirical studies and theoretical research as promoting improved student learning. The Framework for Teaching is a validated⁵ instrument; that is, studies have shown that teachers who receive higher ratings on their evaluation produce greater gains in student test scores.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1C:

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

The school is in the process of creating a curriculum to support teachers in their planning.

- During pre-service, teachers, with guidance from administrators, began to create scope and sequence documents, unit plans, and lesson plans for the beginning of the year.
- Teachers develop lesson and unit plans throughout the year. Teachers all upload their lesson and unit plans to a shared drive, and while school leaders have access to this drive, teachers report they do not always upload their lessons ahead of time and school leaders do not systematically review lesson and unit plans.
- Teachers have access to online resources through sites such as EngageNY and History Alive and the school leaders will purchase class sets of whatever books they need.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1D:

Is high quality instruction evident throughout the school?

Instruction at Atmosphere is generally purposeful and engaging, but not all teachers maximize instructional time through effective pacing and classroom management techniques. 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.

		Total 6 th Grade Observations
Content Area	ELA	3
	Math	3
	Soc Stu	1
	Writing	1
	Total	8

- Most teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (7 of 8 classrooms observed). Lessons consistently build on previously acquired knowledge and skills and teachers use age-appropriate but challenging language to present and explain content to students, with a strong focus on building academic vocabulary.
- Some teachers regularly and effectively use a variety of techniques to check for student understanding and mastery (4 of 8 classrooms observed). Some teachers utilize a variety of effective questioning techniques to check their students' understanding, such as cold calling, but most rely solely on student volunteers to answer questions. This limits their ability to monitor all students' level of understanding before moving on with lessons. Some teachers circulate around the classroom to monitor students' responses and written work during lessons, but some focus more on addressing minor misbehaviors than on providing actionable feedback to drive high quality work products.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

- Half of the school's teachers challenge students with questions and activities to foster students' depth of understanding and higher order thinking skills (4 of 8 classrooms observed). While some teachers challenge students to defend and elaborate on their answers to gauge the depth of their understanding and to facilitate classroom discussions, others rely on monitoring students' progression through lesson activities. In a notable example of the former, one class featured small groups of students working cooperatively to design and construct a roller coaster out of paper and cardboard, utilizing concepts from both mathematics and science. In response to the teacher's prompt, students engaged in deep peer to peer discussions about what adjustments they could make to increase kinesthetic energy within their designs.
- Most Atmosphere classrooms maintain a consistent focus on academic achievement (5 of 8 classrooms observed). While some teachers communicate a clear sense of urgency for learning and maintain high levels of student engagement, some tolerate low level misbehavior in order to proceed with lessons as planned. While some teachers across the school maximize learning time with well-rehearsed, efficient classroom systems and transitions that are age-appropriate for middle schoolers, others do not consistently or effectively implement classroom management techniques to redirect off-task behaviors that impact the pacing of lessons.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1F:

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

Atmosphere is investing significant resources to address the educational needs of struggling students in need of intervention, students with academic disabilities and English language learners.

- Atmosphere uses appropriate procedures for identifying at-risk students including students with disabilities, those struggling academically and ELLs. Teachers use ELA and mathematics assessments, such as the iReady and MAP exams, and observation notes to identify students in need of extra supports. Atmosphere uses the Home Language Identification Survey and the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners to identify students in need of language acquisition support.
- The school employs several resources and processes to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure and students with disabilities. Classroom teachers provide supplementary academic supports before and after school for students who require remediation. Atmosphere employs three full time special educators, a full time counselor and provides several different settings to serve its 37 students with disabilities as per their IEPs, including several ICT classrooms, SETSS and a self-contained 12:1:1 classroom. Notably, leaders identified the need for the latter midway through the school year and took prompt action to provide a structured and highly personalized educational setting for the school's most struggling students, rather than have the students return to district schools for placement.
- The school employs an appropriately experienced and credentialed teacher to serve the school's 21 ELL students and provide professional development for all teachers in meeting the language acquisition needs of their students in the general education setting.
- Atmosphere provides adequate time and support for on-going coordination between

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

general and special education teachers, with multiple scheduled staff meetings per week; teachers report using this time to review data, discuss student progress, share instructional strategies and plan lessons with input from special education staff. Teachers are aware of their students' academic needs.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2C:

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

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

- With a clear division of instructional and operational responsibilities amongst leaders, Atmosphere is implementing an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that allow it to effectively carry out the academic program.
- With support from the school's Director of School Life, Atmosphere is establishing a safe and orderly environment that caters to the unique developmental needs of adolescent middle school students, through a school wide disciplinary approach based on Restorative Justice principles.
- The school is allocating sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals, such as extensive professional development opportunities for staff and well-resourced classrooms with abundant libraries, manipulatives and instructional technology to support classroom instruction and high levels of student engagement.
- School leaders and shared staff have begun to implement academic and operational systems and protocols necessary to ensure a well-functioning school organization; leaders have identified the need to utilize data more systematically to inform programmatic decisions as they school scales.

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

- Visiting numerous community elementary programs in the area to attract incoming middle school students and disseminate information about Atmosphere, including guidance on how to apply and the overall lottery process;
- Hiring Democracy Builders, a local organization committed to parent training and school advocacy, to recruit students in the Marble Hill neighborhood;
- Canvassing areas in the direct school vicinity to hand out flyers in both English and Spanish; and,
- Providing school program and enrollment materials translated into Spanish.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2D:

Does the school board work effectively to achieve the school's Accountability Plan goals?

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

- Board members possess adequate skills and expertise with which to govern the school, including K-12 education, law, finance, executive management and development.
- The board receives plentiful information from the school principal to provide rigorous oversight. In addition to biweekly conference calls regarding cash flow outlook, the principal provides a comprehensive report to the board at each monthly meeting that include assessment, attendance and other timely data. This information is adequate to inform the board's strategic planning and goal setting; in its first year of operation, they have focused on the school's successful opening and monitoring financials. In the school's second year, the board intends to contract with a new accounting firm in order to access more predictive tools with which to monitor finances and also seek approval to serve students beyond 8th grade during this charter term.
- The board will use the Marshall Principal Evaluation Rubric⁶, a clear and comprehensive set of criteria to evaluate the school's founding principal at the end of the school year. The board has not yet identified or utilized a tool to evaluate its own performance.

⁶ Kim Marshall is an experienced teacher and school administrator; he now coaches principals, consults, and speaks on school leadership and evaluation. The Marshall Principal Evaluation Rubric is organized around six domains covering all aspects of a principal's job performance, including "Diagnosis and Planning" and "Priority Management and Communication."

SCHOOL OVERVIEW

Board of Trustees⁷

Board Member Name	Position
Dr. H. Evan Powderly	Chair
Jesse J. Greene, Jr.	Trustee
Mervin A. Burton	Trustee
Michael A. Lagas	Trustee
Alan Dillon	Trustee
Reverend Thomas A. Lynch	Trustee

School Characteristics

School Year	Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ⁸	Actual as a Percentage of Chartered Enrollment	Proposed Grades	Actual Grades
2015-16	120	140	120%	6	6

Key Design Elements

Element	Evident?
Shared culture and values;	+
Rigorous Standards-Aligned Curriculum;	+
Student-Centered and Differentiated Instruction;	+
21 st Century Learning;	+
Support for At-Risk Students; and,	+
Distributed Leadership.	+

School Leaders

School Year(s)	Name(s) and Title(s)
2015-16 to Present	Colin Greene, Founding Principal

School Visit History

Date(s) of Visit	Evaluation Team Members	Title
June 9, 2016	Heather Wendling	Director for New Charters
	Jenn David Lang	External Consultant

⁷ Source: The Institute's board records at the time of the visit.

⁸ Source: Institute's Official Enrollment Binder. (Figures may differ slightly from New York State Report Cards, depending on date of data collection.)

