



# First Year School Evaluation Report Bronx Charter School for Better Learning II

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

(518) 445-4250  
(518) 320-1572 (fax)  
[www.newyorkcharters.org](http://www.newyorkcharters.org)



## INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute’s (the “Institute’s”) observations and findings from its June 8, 2016 first year school evaluation visit to the Bronx Charter School for Better Learning II. 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 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.

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.

## Bronx Charter School for Better Learning II

### BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Bronx Charter School for Better Learning II (“BBL II”), a replication of the flagship Bronx Charter School for Better Learning (“BBL”), on June 4, 2014. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2015, serving 75 students in Kindergarten during the 2015-16 school year. Having received more applications for enrollment than seats available for the 2016-17 school year, BBL II held its enrollment lottery on April 13, 2016, and established active waitlists for Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The school operates in co-located space at 2545 Gunther Avenue, Bronx, New York within New York City Community School District (“CSD”) 11. At scale, BBL II will serve 375 students in grades K-4.

The school’s mission statement states:

**The Bronx Charter School for Better Learning II provides its students with a solid foundation for academic success, through achievement that exceeds citywide averages and meets or exceeds New York State Standards and national norms in all curriculum areas tested, especially in mathematics and language arts. Our teaching constantly adjusts to the needs of our students, leading to independence, autonomy, responsibility and a sustained love of learning, all of which contribute directly to high academic achievement.**

BBL II replicates the program in place at BBL, which opened in 2003 and currently serves 495 students in K-5th grades. The schools’ pedagogical approach, the Subordination of Teaching to Learning, incorporates materials and techniques that constitute Gattegno’s<sup>1</sup> “Words in Color” program for instruction in English language arts. “Words in Color” addresses all five elements of scientifically-based approaches to reading and writing instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. To further support student learning in this area, the schools implement both Reader’s Workshop and Writer’s Workshop in all classrooms.

Special education services include both “push-in” and “pull-out” instruction in order to effectively implement each student’s Individualized Education Program (“IEP”). Additionally, BBL II provides supplemental support for all students identified as being “at-risk” academically. Support teachers provide additional instructional time in core subjects during the school day as well as after school. Also, the school provides support for ELLs through appropriately trained teachers and offers additional instructional time during the day and after school.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Caleb Gattegno developed the Subordination of Teaching to Learning pedagogical approach, along with specific curricula for reading, math and foreign language instruction. This methodology encourages teachers to challenge students to learn, rather than transit knowledge and content in a traditional way.

## INTRODUCTION AND REPORT FORMAT

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of BBL II at the above address on August 28, 2015, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Bronx Charter School for Better Learning (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,<sup>2</sup> describe the elements in place at schools that are highly effective at providing students from low-income backgrounds the instruction, content, knowledge and skills necessary to produce strong academic performance. The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks describe the elements an effective school must have in place at the time of renewal.<sup>3</sup>

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

### SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1E:

#### Does the school have strong instructional leadership?

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

- BBL II's instructional leadership team currently consists of the founding principal and an academic director, as well as three professional development staff members shared between both BBL schools. The team is establishing an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school with a clear emphasis on the learner-centered Gattegno model. Leaders and the majority of teachers can clearly articulate the school's student achievement goals of 75% grade level proficiency in reading and mathematics, although some report differing reading levels as being proficient.
- BBL II's instructional leadership team, as currently comprised, is more than adequate to provide personalized supports to its teaching staff. However, with numerous instructional leaders 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 near daily classroom walkthroughs, instructional leaders conduct four formal classroom observations per year, with pre- and post- observation meetings, during which the principal notes teachers' progress towards their individualized professional development plan goals. Teachers generally develop these goals during summer orientation, with leaders providing input for novice or less experienced teachers; these are revisited over the course of the school year as needed. Instructional leaders provide feedback to grade level teams at weekly meetings, based on informal observations, assessment data and student work products, but do not yet collect or distribute feedback

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<sup>2</sup> 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://www.mes.org/correlates.html); [scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie\\_fryer\\_revision\\_final.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie_fryer_revision_final.pdf); and, [gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf](http://gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> 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/](http://www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/).

## QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

in a well-documented or systematic way outside of the four formal observations. With support and oversight from instructional leaders, teachers utilize curricular materials developed and refined over time at the flagship BBL and work collaboratively to adjust lessons plan to meet the needs of their students.

- BBL II supports teachers' efforts to meet students' needs and holds teachers accountable for delivering high quality instruction through an embedded professional development model. School leaders hold a mixture of mandatory and optional pre-service workshops on a variety of topics throughout July and August with a weeklong orientation for all staff before the school year commences. Professional development continues with weekly sessions in addition to grade level meetings throughout the year.
- The instructional leadership team solicits teacher suggestions and uses classroom observation and assessment data to determine teachers' professional development needs. According to teachers, professional development activities effectively address school-wide issues, strengthen existing skills and reset school wide instructional priorities as necessary. The primary instructional priorities in the school's first year have been for teachers to implement the Gattegno method with fidelity and become more facile with integrating instructional technology tools into lessons and centers in meaningful ways.
- The principal evaluates all teachers and assistant teachers using a formal evaluation rubric, developed by and utilized at both BBL schools. 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 regularly gathers assessment data and uses it to adjust instruction.*

- The school formally administers the Fountas & Pinnell ("F&P") assessment four times a year to determine students' independent and instructional reading levels, and informally administers it monthly to monitor and document students' progress. The school also gives the AIMSweb assessment three times a year and the TerraNova twice a year, to assess students' proficiency in both ELA and math, and regularly uses Cloze assessments to assess progress with Words in Color.
- All assessment data is readily available to school leaders, the parents, the board, and teachers, who each maintain an assessment binder with all data in their classrooms for easy reference.
- Staff and leaders report that assessment data is used in several ways, such as to assign students to small groups, design learning stations, and adjust lesson plans. However, school leaders articulated conflicting assessment goals for F&P results.
- Together with the flagship BBL, the school holds monthly "Data Days" in which all staff get together for a number of assessment-related activities such as: examining assessment data, norming the grading of writing, adjusting curriculum to prepare for upcoming assessments, and updating assessment binders.

## QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

### SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1C:

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

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

- Through PerformancePLUS, an online curriculum management platform, teachers have access to the scope and sequence, pacing guides, and lesson plans from the flagship school, BBL 1.
- Teachers adjust the existing lesson plans, with feedback from the academic leader, to create their own lesson plans to meet the needs of their specific students. Teachers have regularly scheduled weekly meetings to plan, assess and revise the curriculum. Teachers are also expected to provide weekly written reflections on lessons taught.
- The ELA and math curriculum relies primarily on Gattegno's Words in Color and Visible and Tangible Math materials. In addition, the school uses a modified Teachers College Reading and Writing Project approach to supplement this work. Through the school's pedagogical approach, teachers encourage children's innate curiosity through multi-modal learning activities rather than directing all instruction as in most traditional classrooms.

### SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1D:

#### Is high quality instruction evident throughout the school?

*Instruction at BBL II is generally purposeful and engaging, but few teachers challenge students with higher-order questions and activities to drive deeper understanding of content. As shown in the chart below, during the first year visit, Institute team members conducted seven classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.*

	Total K Observations	
Content Area	ELA	3
	Math	2
	Soc Stu	1
	Writing	1
	Total	7

- Most teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (6 of 7 classrooms observed). Lessons consistently build on previously acquired knowledge and skills and teachers generally use age-appropriate language to present and explain content to students. In classrooms with multiple teachers, adults have clear roles and responsibilities for helping students meet lesson objectives.
- Most teachers regularly and effectively use a variety of techniques to check for student understanding and mastery (5 of 7 classrooms observed). Some teachers utilize a variety of effective questioning techniques to check their students' understanding, such as cold calling, selecting volunteers and non-verbal signals such as thumbs up and down. Most

## QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

teachers circulate around the classroom to monitor students' responses and written work during lessons but did not make ad hoc adjustments to instruction to address student misunderstandings. In many classrooms, student volunteers from Pelham Gardens Middle School, a co-located district school, provide additional assistance to small groups.

- A minority of teachers challenge students with questions and activities to foster students' depth of understanding and higher order thinking skills (3 of 7 classrooms observed). While some teachers challenge students to defend and elaborate on their answers, others rely primarily on binary yes/no responses monitoring students' progression through generally procedural lesson activities to gauge their understanding or difficulties. While all classes offer multiple opportunities for students to work cooperatively through rotating center groupings, assigned activities are often basic and foundational and do not challenge students.
- Most BBL II classrooms maintain a consistent focus on academic achievement (5 of 7 classrooms observed). While almost all teachers communicate a clear sense of urgency for learning and maintain high levels of student engagement during instruction and center based learning activities, some allow small numbers of students to opt out of participating without redirection. Teachers across the school generally maximize learning time with well-rehearsed, efficient classroom systems and transitions, such as having students respond to a chime or singing songs in a whisper voice while changing activities or location.

### SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1F:

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

*BBL II is addressing the educational needs of struggling students in need of intervention; in its first year of operation, the school enrolled no students with academic disabilities or English language learners.*

- BBL II uses appropriate procedures for identifying at-risk students including students with disabilities, those struggling academically and English language learners ("ELLs"). Teachers use ELA and mathematics assessments, such as F&P and AIMSweb, to identify areas of weakness or lack of sufficient academic progress, as well as observation notes to identify students in need of extra supports. BBL II uses the Home Language Information Survey and the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners to identify students in need of language acquisition support; though no ELL students are currently identified.
- The school employs several resources and processes to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure and students with disabilities. Leveraging the abundance of adults in classrooms, teachers organize struggling students into small leveled groups in their general education classrooms to provide targeted supports and reinforcement of concepts.
- While the school does not have any ELL students currently enrolled, the school is planning to hire an appropriately experienced and credentialed teacher to serve ELL students in the next school year.
- BBL II provides adequate time and support for on-going coordination between general education and support teachers, with weekly scheduled blocks; teachers report using this time to review data, discuss student progress, share instructional strategies and plan



## QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

lessons with input from special education staff. Teachers are generally aware of their students' academic needs.

### SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2C:

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

*BBL II 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, BBL II is implementing an administrative structure with staff, operational systems, and procedures that allow it to effectively carry out the academic program.
- The school is establishing a safe and orderly environment through a school wide disciplinary approach which utilizes Responsive Classroom<sup>4</sup> principles and an over-arching emphasis on respect for all students.
- 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.
- Leveraging their experience operating BBL, school leaders and shared staff have begun to implement academic and operational systems and protocols necessary to ensure a well-functioning school organization.

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

- Visiting numerous community Pre-K programs in the area to disseminate information about BBL and BBL II, including guidance on how to apply and the overall lottery process;
- Distributing 2,000 flyers to neighborhood zip codes via a Vanguard mailing;
- Hosting multiple open houses, question and answer sessions for the community and enrollment sessions at their existing school location;
- Canvassing areas in the direct school vicinity to hand out flyers in both English and Spanish;
- Providing school and enrollment materials translated into Spanish;
- attending Spanish language services at several area churches to give an overview of the schools and application processes;
- Placing advertisements in multiple Spanish language newspapers, such as El Diario and La Voz Hispana.

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<sup>4</sup> Responsive Classroom is a research-based approach to K-8 teaching that focuses on the strong link between academic success and social-emotional learning.

## 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 programs at BBL and BBL II.*

- Board members possess adequate skills and expertise with which to govern the school, including K-12 and higher education, law, and advertising. The board has identified a need for additional real estate and fundraising expertise on the board and is actively recruiting additional members to contribute those skill sets.
- The board receives plentiful information from the executive director as well as the school principal to provide rigorous oversight. In addition to weekly emails to each trustee containing assessment and discipline data, the executive director provides a comprehensive report to the board at each monthly meeting, the school's Charter School Business Management<sup>5</sup> representative provides a monthly fiscal report, and the principal gives a detailed report on campus happenings. 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 successful opening of BBL II and establishing high levels of parent engagement.
- The board and the executive director set annual goals collaboratively each year and the board evaluates his progress towards meeting them through a narrative format that includes significant self-evaluation. The board has yet to identify or develop a tool to evaluate its own performance; they generally rely on school performance as an indicator for their own effectiveness.

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<sup>5</sup> Charter School Business Management ("CSBM") is a financial consultancy focused on the growth and sustainability of the charter sector. BBL II contracts with CSBM for financial and operations services and training.

## SCHOOL OVERVIEW

### Board of Trustees<sup>6</sup>

Board Member Name	Position	Board Member Name	Position
Kimberly Kelly	Chair	Jefferyson A. Barnes	Trustee
Marvin Waldman	Vice Chair	Marjorie (Gregg) Swain	Trustee
William Bernhardt	Secretary	Robert Bata	Trustee
Marilyn Maye	Treasurer	Victor Zimmerman	Trustee
Andrew Waldman	Trustee	Charles Kim	Trustee
Herbert Swain, Jr.	Trustee	Maxine D'Oyley	Trustee

### School Characteristics

School Year	Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment <sup>7</sup>	Actual as a Percentage of Chartered Enrollment	Proposed Grades	Actual Grades
2015-16	75	75	100%	K	K

### Key Design Elements

Element	Evident?
Instructional Rigor: To ensure that every student receives an instructional program that is rigorous and enriching;	+
Data Based Decision Making: To ensure that all instructional decisions are based on student performance data;	+
Meeting Individual Student Needs: To ensure that the instructional program regularly adapts to meet the needs of each student; and,	+
Student Empowerment: To ensure that through an instructional program that emphasizes engagement, effort and efficacy, all students develop a personal sense of their own innate abilities.	+

### School Leaders

School Year(s)	Name(s) and Title(s)
2015-16 to Present	Kevin Brennan, Executive Director Nysheria Sims, Principal

<sup>6</sup> Source: The Institute's board records at the time of the visit.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Institute's Official Enrollment Binder. (Figures may differ slightly from New York State Report Cards, depending on date of data collection.)

## SCHOOL OVERVIEW

### School Visit History

Date(s) of Visit	Evaluation Team Members	Title
June 8, 2016	Heather Wendling	Director for New Charters
	Jenn David Lang	External Consultant

