



First Year School Evaluation Report Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School

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Report Date: July 14, 2016

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INTRODUCTION AND REPORT FORMAT

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its April 21, 2016 first year school evaluation visit to the Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School. The visit team consisted of Heather Wendling, Director for New Charters, and Jeff Wasbes, Executive Deputy Director for Accountability.

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 each 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.

Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School

BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the charter for Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School (“Finn Academy”), an Expeditionary Learning¹ school, on June 4, 2014. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2015 serving 220 students in Kindergarten through 3rd grades. This level of enrollment, a 19% increase over the school’s chartered enrollment of 180², 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, Finn Academy held its enrollment lottery on April 7, 2016, and established active waitlists for Kindergarten through 4th grades. The school operates in leased space located at 610 Lake Street, Elmira, New York within the Elmira City School District. At scale, Finn Academy will serve 396 students in grades K-7 in this charter term.

The school’s mission statement states:

At Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School, we seek to increase the number of college and career ready scholars our community launches into a life and a future – by preparing them for the demands and the rigor of high school.

Finn Academy takes an interdisciplinary approach to planning and implementing its academic program with curriculum aligned to the New York State Common Core Learning Standards and designed thematically around the National Geography Standards, emphasizing connections with the local community and designed in partnership with local organizations such as the Friends of the Chemung River Watershed, whose staff work with Finn Academy staff to design curriculum linked to the Chemung River. The school partners with Expeditionary Learning to provide professional develop and support on implementing Common Core aligned inquiry based learning modules throughout the curriculum. Students receive between 525 and 675 weekly minutes of integrated English language arts (“ELA”) and social studies instruction depending on their grade level. Students also receive between 595 and 675 weekly minutes of integrated math and science instruction. Students also receive weekly art, music, fitness and advisory, as well as after school activities that allow students to choose from additional art, music, fitness, community and service learning.

Finn Academy offers integrated co-teaching classes and employs an on-site special education coordinator. The school’s Response to Intervention (“Rtl”) process consists of not only

¹ In 1991, Expeditionary Learning Education was created from a partnership between Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound, USA. Today, the national organization partners with schools to provide training, coaching and curriculum development expertise. There are currently 20 Expeditionary Learning schools in New York State, including three SUNY authorized charter schools.

² 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.

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

intervention and special education teachers, but also the academic director and general education classroom teachers to ensure that all elements of the intervention and at-risk program are aligned with the general academic program.

Pursuant to the Institute's inspection of Finn Academy at the above address on September 1, 2015, (and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto), the Institute determined that Finn Academy: An Elmira Charter School (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.

In its first year of operation, the school encountered facility related problems with the infrastructure and the school's internet access was deemed inoperable, which directly impacted the school's ability to compile and transmit timely district billing documentation which resulted in delayed receipt of per pupil aid monies. The same limitations resulted in Charter School Program fund reporting and drawdown requests to be late which created a lag in grant fund cash flow. Quarterly financial reports prepared for the school by an outside financial service provider and due to the Institute have been timely. Board minutes and some prior action checklist items lingered, with reminders going unanswered, until recently when the school submitted the remaining documents due to the Institute just prior to the school site visit in April.

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 1B:

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

Finn Academy is developing an assessment system that improves instructional effectiveness. The school administers assessments to monitor student reading levels and mathematics achievement. Teachers use this information to adjust instruction and the composition of small student groups. The school communicates frequently with the board and student caretakers making relevant academic data accessible to them throughout the school year.

- Finn Academy's teachers use reading and spelling inventories to monitor student achievement in ELA. To assess writing, teachers provide prompts and score students' on demand writing with a common rubric across each grade level. Teachers use this battery of information to assign students to small groups and to identify those needing extra support. Finn Academy teachers administer the unit assessments that are part of the school's commercial mathematics curriculum. They use this data to identify standards that require whole group re-teaching and to identify students who struggle academically.
- Daily quick checks for understanding at the end of each lesson allow teachers to monitor students' day to day acquisition of skills and knowledge required to master the learning targets. Weekly quizzes allow teachers to assess the students' performance against state standards and performance expectations. These assessments come directly from the school's ELA and mathematics curriculum materials and align to state standards.
- Teachers analyze the data resulting from each assessment to identify students who qualify for extra support through pull out literacy instruction. On a 6 week cycle, literacy

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

specialists monitor student growth and progress in reading and, as a result, either intensify interventions or scale back interventions until students no longer need them.

- In the startup year, Finn Academy administered the Terra Nova test for the first time in January and will administer again in June. In future years, the school plans to administer the test three times per year.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1C:

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

Finn Academy has clear frameworks for core content area instruction that support teachers in delivering the school's academic program.

- Finn Academy relies on the Expeditionary Learning curriculum as a framework for ELA, science, and social studies instruction throughout the school. The Expeditionary Learning curriculum is organized into chunks of material that teachers deliver to students over set period of time. Expeditionary Learning's modules and units enable teachers to know what to teach and when to teach it. Teachers backwards plan their instruction and use daily assessments to ensure each lesson, unit, and module address the required subset of standards to ensure coverage of all of the standards throughout the year. Music, art, dance, and fitness teachers can review teachers' plans in the school's online database and incorporate relevant connections into their lessons.
- The school partners with local wildlife and history organizations, such as the Friends of the Chemung River Valley, and engages experts, such as a national apiology advocate to supplement the curriculum. The latter visited the school in concert with Finn Academy's unit on honey bees to stress the importance of conservation efforts and pollination within the local ecosystem. These partnerships enable students to create strong links between school and home and encourage students to link their learning in the classroom to events in their everyday lives.
- The JUMP Math curriculum provides a framework and resources for mathematics instruction. Although the publisher asserts that the curriculum and its associated materials align to state standards, the school has not fully vetted them to ensure total alignment.
- Teachers develop learning targets for each lesson and assess students daily to ensure they have mastered the target. An external consultant who is an expert in the Expeditionary Learning curriculum works with grade level teachers to ensure the alignment from grade to grade and helps to norm teacher expectations for the rigor of student work products. The school displays high quality student work products in the hallways and in portfolios that students compiled over the course of the school year.

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1D:

Is high quality instruction evident throughout the school?

Instruction at Finn Academy 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 eight classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

		Grade				Total
		K	1	2	3	
Content Area	ELA	1			3	4
	Math		1	1		2
	Science		1	1		2
	Total	1	2	2	3	8

- Most teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school’s curriculum (5 of 8 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, most 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 8 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. A few observed teachers rely on solely student volunteers to answer questions, limiting their ability to monitor all students’ level of understanding before moving on with lessons. Most teachers circulate around the classroom to monitor students’ responses and written work during lessons, with providing actionable feedback to drive high quality work products and others focusing on addressing minor misbehaviors.
- A minority of teachers challenge students with questions and activities to foster students’ depth of understanding and higher order thinking skills (2 of 8 classrooms observed). While some teachers challenge students to defend and elaborate on their answers through interactive discussions, others rely on monitoring students’ progression through generally procedural lesson activities to gauge their understanding or difficulties. In a notable example of the former, a third grade teacher facilitated a small group discussion about the novel Peter Pan where students had to explain whether or not they would have made the same choices as a main character and provide justification from both the novel and their own experiences. While all classes offer multiple opportunities for students to work cooperatively through rotating center groupings and project based learning experiences, assigned activities are often basic and foundational and do not challenge students.
- Most Finn Academy 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

QUALITATIVE EDUCATION BENCHMARK CONCLUSIONS

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, such as having students sing a song that reinforces behavioral expectations for walking in the hallways while lining up, others do not consistently or effectively implement classroom management techniques to redirect off-task or distracting student behaviors which disrupt instruction.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1E:

Does the school have strong instructional leadership?

While school leaders at Finn Academy are establishing an environment of high expectations for both teachers and students, staffing constraints limit their capacity to provide individualized coaching supports to build upon the pedagogical skills of all teachers.

- Finn Academy's instructional leadership team currently consists of the founding principal, a director of culture and academics and a special education coordinator. The team is establishing an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school with a clear emphasis on learner-centered instruction and growth. However, teachers are not yet able to clearly articulate the school's student achievement goals beyond meeting state standards in each content area or specific expectations for their performance.
- Finn Academy's instructional leadership team, as currently comprised, is not adequate to provide personalized supports to its teaching staff. Early in the school year, one of the two identified directors of culture and academics transitioned into a full time classroom position in response to an unexpected vacancy. This reduction in leadership staffing, combined with the operational and organizational responsibilities the head of school has assumed, has impacted the team's inability to provide intensive, clinical coaching for teachers. The school plans to add another member to its instructional leadership team as it expands to serve 4th grade next year and plans to implement formalized coaching cycles.
- Notwithstanding weekly grade level classroom walkthroughs, instructional leaders do not yet conduct regular classroom observations or provide sustained and systemic coaching and supervision to individual teachers. Instructional leaders provide feedback to grade level teams at weekly meetings, based on informal walkthroughs, assessment data and student work products, but do not yet collect or distribute feedback in a formal or systematic way; not all teachers understand what leaders perceive to be their strengths and weaknesses or what they should focus on to improve instruction to meet the needs of all students. With support from a contracted school designer from Expeditionary Learning, instructional leaders provide guidance for teachers developing expedition plans, which serve as a curricular framework for intensive units of study that span three to five months, and provide feedback and suggestions. Teachers report working collaboratively to craft daily instructional plans and have considerable autonomy over lesson plan format. Leaders do not review daily lesson plans based on the expeditions prior to implementation to ensure a consistent level of rigor across classrooms and content areas.
- Finn Academy supports teachers' efforts to meet students' needs and holds teachers accountable for delivering high quality instruction through an embedded professional

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development model. School leaders hold several weeks of pre-service professional development in August and continue with weekly school wide professional development sessions in addition to grade level meetings throughout the school year. In response to teachers' requests, leaders have increased professional development from one afterschool session per week to three sessions per week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. These weekly sessions typically focus on school-wide issues, Response to Intervention data and assessment analysis, and expedition planning, respectively.

- The instructional leadership team relies on classroom walkthrough notes 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 develop deep understanding of content and standards and ensure that all lesson activities directly relate to learning targets. Leaders review expedition plans and analyze student work products at weekly meetings to monitor each grade level teams' progress towards these initiatives.
- Instructional leaders have not yet instituted a formal evaluation system for all teachers based on a clear rubric that measures each teacher's strengths and weaknesses. The head of school plans to utilize the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model⁵ framework to fully evaluate each teacher before the end of the current school year, but has not yet communicated those criteria to staff.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 1F:

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

Finn Academy is addressing the educational needs of students with disabilities and establishing a comprehensive Response to Intervention process to support students struggling academically and/or behaviorally.

- Finn Academy uses appropriate procedures for identifying at-risk students including students with disabilities, those struggling academically and English language learners ("ELLs"). Teachers use diagnostic exams in ELA and math and informal assessments to identify students in need of extra supports. Finn Academy 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 supports, though no ELL students have been identified.
- The school employs several resources and processes to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure and students with disabilities. Based diagnostic assessment results in both ELA and math, the school creates intervention groups in which some students receive intensive pull out support to remediate skill deficits. Leveraging the co-teaching model, teachers report organizing at-risk students in math and writing in small leveled groups in

⁵ Robert J. Marzano, PhD, has been a speaker, trainer, and author of more than 30 books and 150 articles on topics such as instruction, assessment, writing and implementing standards, cognition, effective leadership, and school intervention. The Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model is widely practiced by school leaders and administrators; the framework assesses four domains, containing 60 elements collectively, that build on each other to support teacher growth, development, and performance. Additional information may be found at: <http://www.marzanoresearch.com>.

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their general education classrooms to provide targeted supports. The school's director of culture and academics also provides behavioral support to individual students as needed.

- While the school does not have any ELL students currently enrolled, one teacher at the school has Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language ("TESOL") certification and another has prior experience working with language learners; these staff members would provide targeted services for students in need.
- Finn Academy provides adequate time and support for on-going coordination between general and at-risk teachers, with weekly scheduled blocks; 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 generally aware of their students' disabilities and academic needs.

SUNY Renewal Benchmark 2C:

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

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

- The school lacks a director of operations. In light of this vacancy, the principal acts as both the school's operational and instructional leader. The school's diminished capacity across these crucial leadership roles resulted in missed opportunities in both areas. For example, as the principal had to manage on-going facilities issues throughout the school's first year, she was unable to frequently observe classrooms or personally coach teachers. In addition, early turnover on the teaching staff caused the principal to reassign the instructional coach to a classroom teaching position, further limiting the scope and effectiveness of the instructional leadership staff. School leadership identified the need for additional instructional support to develop teachers' pedagogical skills.
- Although the school has documented routines and a structure of consequences for certain behaviors, teachers do not uniformly implement the consequences throughout the school. Notwithstanding, the school's environment is safe and orderly and enables a consistent focus on academic attainment.
- Though financial constraints have impacted staffing decisions, the school has allocated resources sufficient to support classroom instruction. Classrooms are well stocked with reading and other learning materials. Enrollment is near the top of the allowable collar under Education Law.
- Finn Academy established several academic systems during its first year that are sufficient for a school early in its operation; however, business and operations processes suffer because of the lack of a director of operations. The school was not actively pursuing candidates at the time of the visit.

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

- Hosting multiple open houses, question and answer sessions for the community and enrollment sessions;
- Developing relationships with organizations serving the disabled in the Elmira region through providing individual advocacy and services;
- Utilizing team-teaching and Special Education Teacher Support Services (“SETSS”) to meet the needs of students with disabilities; and,
- Providing school and enrollment materials translated into Spanish, although the percentage of ELLs within the Elmira City School District is currently 0.

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 education, law, startup and executive management. Using a self-created rubric that categorizes their collective skill sets, the board has identified a need for additional finance expertise and is actively looking to recruit an additional trustee.
- The board receives sufficient information from the school principal to provide rigorous oversight. At each monthly meeting, the principal provides both academic and operational data dashboards, and standing committees report out on pertinent issues. Two non-voting parent representatives attend each meeting to communicate concerns from families. This information is adequate to inform the board’s strategic planning and goal setting; in its first year of operation, it has focused on resolving facilities issues and stabilizing cash flow.
- The board has identified clear and comprehensive criteria for evaluating the school leader; it will utilize the Marzano School Leader Evaluation Model⁶ framework, but had not yet done so at the time of the first year visit in April. The board has yet to identify or develop a self-evaluation tool to evaluate its own performance.

⁶ Marzano’s School Leader Evaluation Model integrates with the teacher evaluation tool, but assesses leaders with distinct criteria across 24 categories of principal actions and behaviors organized into five domains, including “data driven focus on student achievement” and “school climate”.

SCHOOL OVERVIEW

Board of Trustees⁷

Board Member Name	Position	Board Member Name	Position
Martina Baker	Chair	Lynn H. Winner	Trustee
Jill Koski	Trustee	Anna Catherine Stowell	Trustee
Kevin Murphy	Trustee	Maya Patel	Trustee
Alice Sutton	Trustee		

School Characteristics

School Year	Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ⁸	Actual as a Percentage of Chartered Enrollment	Proposed Grades	Actual Grades
2015-16	180	220	120%	K-3	K-3

Key Design Elements

Element	Evident?
College preparation and awareness at every grade level;	-
STrEaM (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts and Math) curriculum;	+
Extended Day, Extended Year, & Summer Learning Experience;	+
Dedicated time for promoting physical and socio-emotional wellness;	+
Advisory program (“Crew”) for teacher-student and small group mentoring; and,	+
Professional Learning & Teacher Support.	+

School Leaders

School Year(s)	Name(s) and Title(s)
2015 to Present	Maggie Thurber, Principal

School Visit History

Date(s) of Visit	Evaluation Team Members	Title
April 21, 2016	Heather Wendling	Director for New Charters
	Jeff Wasbes	Executive Deputy Director for Accountability

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.)

