

THE SUNY CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE

*FIRST YEAR SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT
ELM COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL
VISIT DATE: APRIL 11, 2019
REPORT DATE: MAY 16, 2019*

SUNY Charter Schools Institute

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Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York



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INTRODUCTION & SCHOOL BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its April 11, 2019 first year school evaluation visit to the Elm Community Charter School ("Elm Community").

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 first year 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.

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INTRODUCTION & SCHOOL BACKGROUND

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the original charter for Elm Community on June 8, 2017. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2018, serving 100 students in Kindergarten – 1st grade during the 2018-19 school year. The school leases space at 149-34 35th Avenue, Flushing, New York 11354 within New York City Community School District (“CSD”) 24. At scale, Elm Community will serve 394 students in Kindergarten – 5th grade.

Elm Community’s mission states:



As a school seeking to invest in District 24 long-term, our vision is to see every child in Elmhurst discover their passions, talents, and power to enrich their community. We believe that in order to truly invest in this community’s growth and development, we must aim high, committing to reaching every child that walks through our doors. Thus, our mission is to cultivate student leaders with the character and capacity to form their own identity, seize any opportunity, and shape the world around them through integrated studies and collaborative learning. Our goal is to provide a rigorous and holistic academic program that will enable our students to choose a middle-school program of their choice.

Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of Elm Community at the above address on August 10, 2018, and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto, the Institute determined that Elm Community (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.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

QUALITATIVE BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

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.

DOES ELM COMMUNITY HAVE AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM THAT IMPROVES INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT LEARNING?

Elm Community is developing a strong assessment system that improves instructional effectiveness and student learning. Leaders establish a comprehensive battery of assessments and communicate clear expectations for how teachers utilize data to drive instructional practices and strategic small student groupings.

- Elm Community administers valid and reliable assessments that align to state standards and the school's curricula. For ELA, the school administers F&P running records, interim assessments, and the SFA phonics Reading Roots assessment. For mathematics, Elm Community administers interim assessments and other basic skills diagnostic assessments based on TERC and CGI materials. The principal and curriculum and data coordinator develop internal assessments with input from consultants such as Stephanie Smith, who advises the school on CGI implementation. School leaders conduct a final review of internally developed assessments to ensure proper alignment to state standards.
- Elm Community has a valid and reliable process for scoring and analyzing assessments. The school utilizes consistent rubrics for ELA and mathematics. For F&P, the school dedicates time before each administration to review expectations and practice administering the assessment to ensure teachers are normed. Similarly, teachers grade interim assessments together to ask clarifying questions when disagreements arise.

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1B

1. An extensive body of research identifying and confirming the correlates of effective schools exists dating back four decades. Selected sources include: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/80/77488.pdf>; and http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/dobbie_fryer_revision_final.pdf.

2. Additional details regarding the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks are available at: www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- The school utilizes a shared online GoogleDocs to ensure data are accessible to teachers, leaders, and board members. With the online database, teachers can easily filter results to see the achievement of students with disabilities and English language learners (“ELLs”). Teachers access data for all students after each administration of interim assessments and F&P. Leaders also easily access student data to review results and analyze student subgroups to make adjustments to the academic program. Leaders share student achievement results with board members on a monthly basis through the academic committee.
- For the beginning of the school year, leaders used student achievement results from all assessments to create small groups leveled by skill. Leaders recognize a need to develop teachers’ skills to do this independently and, at the time of the visit, began training teachers to use data to make student groups and drive instructional decisions.

DOES ELM COMMUNITY’S CURRICULUM SUPPORT TEACHERS IN THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING?

Elm Community is developing practices to regularly reflect upon and adapt its curricular resources to support teachers with instructional planning. Leaders closely analyzes student achievement data and adjusts curricular programs as necessary.

- Elm Community’s curricular framework provides teachers with performance expectations that ensure a clear structure and alignment to state standards. In English language arts (“ELA”), the school implements a balanced literacy approach consisting of Success For All (“SFA”) phonics, the Fountas and Pinnell (“F&P”) Guided Reading program, and Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project (“TCRWP”). The school also uses curricular materials from the Lavinia Group, an instructional consultant, for ELA components such as interactive reading, shared reading, and guided reading, as well as the Leveled Literacy Intervention (“LLI”) curriculum to support struggling readers. Elm Community’s math program uses both Cognitively Guided Instruction (“CGI”) as well as TERC Investigations (“TERC”) to develop students’ conceptual understanding and problem solving ability. In science, technology, engineering, and math (“STEM”) class, teachers use an internally developed curriculum. For humanities, a component which integrates social studies and literacy, Elm Community bases its design on EL Education (formerly known as “Expeditionary Learning”), a well-regarded project-based curriculum. The principal and curriculum and data coordinator oversee the creation of all units to ensure alignment to the school’s educational design and state standards.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Leaders provide teachers with supporting curricular materials including scope and sequence documents, pacing guides, and unit plans. Teachers are responsible for creating lesson plans using the school's lesson plan template, which includes required components of objectives, differentiation strategies, questioning techniques, and checks for understanding. Based on these materials, teachers know what to teach and when to teach it.
- Elm Community leaders have a process for reviewing and adjusting the school's curricular program based on student achievement results. After the first administration of a mathematics interim assessment, leaders recognized a need to adapt the school's mathematics curricular program to meet the needs of students; leaders then worked with teachers to introduce differentiation strategies within TERC lessons to meet specific needs of their students.

IS HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION EVIDENT THROUGHOUT ELM COMMUNITY?

Elm Community is developing instructional practices that lead to high quality instruction. Teachers implement the curricular programs with fidelity and include clear, standards-aligned objectives and opportunities to check for understanding. To create more opportunities for students to engage in higher order thinking, leaders recognize a need for teachers to do more intellectual preparation prior to delivering lessons. As shown in the table below, during the evaluation visit, Institute team members conducted 12 classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

		GRADE		
		K	1	Total
CONTENT AREA	ELA	2	4	6
	Math	2	1	3
	Science	2	1	3
	Total	6	6	12

- Teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school curriculum (12 out of 12 lessons observed). Teachers post learning objectives and consistently refer to them throughout lessons. Teachers plan and execute clear activities that align with the learning objective. Throughout lessons, teachers consistently remind students of

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

success criteria and evaluate at the end of each component. With two teachers in each classroom, both teachers know their roles and focus instruction through small groups to meet students' individual needs.

- Teachers consistently check for student understanding to make in the moment teaching adjustments (9 out of 12 lessons observed). Because most instruction occurs in small groups, teachers have ample opportunities to check every student's understanding, then make corrections and challenge students to understand and remedy their misconceptions. In whole group lessons, teachers similarly leverage the second teacher to ensure that all students are on track to gain mastery of the objective. When students demonstrate confusion, teachers work in other small group learning activities throughout the day or week to address and resolve student understanding.
- Most teachers challenge students with higher order thinking questions and problem solving activities (7 out of 12 lessons observed). The school's key design elements include a balance of inquiry and mastery based instruction to allow students to explore and deeply conceptualize content. While recognizing that several Kindergarten and 1st grade components focus largely on skill mastery, teachers still regularly include opportunities for students to grapple with difficult concepts, collaborate with other students, and question peers.
- Most teachers maximize learning time and create classroom culture with a consistent focus on academic achievement (9 out of 12 lessons observed). Teachers demonstrate high levels of urgency when transitioning between lessons and throughout the building. Teachers use many engagement strategies such as class chants and routines to keep students focused on lesson activities, and many activities are hands on and discussion based.

DOES ELM COMMUNITY HAVE STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Elm Community has strong instructional leadership. School leaders consistently provide teachers with actionable feedback based on frequent observations, and teachers engage in regular and robust professional development activities. The school has a formal evaluation system and is developing systems to implement it with consistent structure.

- Elm Community's leadership promotes a culture of learning and scholarship. Instructional leaders present staff with clear academic goals and expectations, which results in a school environment focused on academic achievement. The principal and curriculum and data coordinator provide consistent support to teachers in the form of regular informal and

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

formal observations, meetings, and regular one-on-one check-ins. Elm Community also engages several external consultants such as Stephanie Smith for CGI and the Lavinia Group for ELA to provide leaders and teachers with additional instructional development. The school engages consultants to build capacity in particular high-leverage academic components.

- Instructional leaders provide sustained and systematic coaching and supervision. The principal observes each teacher at least once per week, and provides feedback either verbally or in writing. Each teacher also has a weekly one-on-one meeting with instructional leaders during which leaders provide feedback based on classroom observations, conduct more targeted data analysis on student outcomes, and in some cases support teachers in strengthening lesson plans. Leaders customize the content of each teacher's one-on-one meeting to that teacher's individual goals and growth areas.
- Elm Community has regular professional development activities that support teachers in planning and implementing lessons. The school provides several weeks of professional development before the school year starts and weekly professional development on Wednesdays during the school year. The leadership team pre-selects and designs professional development topics to align with school-wide goals or focus areas, while they choose other topics in response to observation data and teacher feedback. The school also engages with consultants who provide additional professional development several times per month. For instance, a consultant who is an expert in CGI visits to coach teachers and leaders on effective implementation of that component. Elm Community also conducts several data days per year at the end of assessment cycles, which are full day professional development sessions devoted to data analysis and action planning.
- Elm Community has a formal teacher evaluation system with a rubric that has clear criteria. Teachers receive a formal evaluation at the beginning, middle and end of the year. For each evaluation, teachers complete a self-assessment on the common rubric and then compare their results with the leadership team's ratings. The principal and curriculum and data coordinator co-lead the evaluation meetings with teachers. The school recognizes an opportunity to implement this formal evaluation in a manner that coheres more closely with ongoing teacher coaching.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 1F

DOES ELM COMMUNITY MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AT-RISK-STUDENTS?

Elm Community meets the education needs of at-risk students through the implementation of a variety of supports, including frequent targeted small group instruction.

- Elm Community has clearly defined screening procedures for identifying at-risk students and providing them with appropriate supports. Leaders meet regularly to review student assessment data and identify students who are low-performing. Additionally, the school holds monthly formal Kid Talk meetings for each homeroom, which instructional leaders, teachers, and the social worker attend; at these meetings, the team reviews recent data and work samples for low-performing students and plans or adjusts interventions. At the end of each assessment cycle (every 4-6 weeks), the curriculum and data coordinator assesses the progress of at-risk students and recommends which students need more support. Should interventions fail to yield sufficient progress, the school consults with parents and refers the student to the Committee on Special Education (“CSE”) if necessary. Based on this screening process, Elm Community has referred nine students to the CSE for evaluation during the 2018-19 school year. The school uses the Home Language Identification Survey at the beginning of the school year to identify ELLs.
- The school has sufficient resources and structures to support at-risk students. Elm Community provides robust small group supports across subjects at multiple points within the day. Teachers use the LLI curriculum to support ELA instruction for struggling students. The curriculum and data coordinator forms and assigns teachers to the small groups to ensure that struggling students, students with IEPs, and ELLs receive an appropriate level of intervention and support each day based on each students’ specific needs. Additionally, the school leverages its data days to provide dedicated time for teachers to plan customized differentiation strategies for the students in their small groups.
- Elm Community meets the needs of its ELLs. The school’s current approach to English language instruction is a full immersion model coupled with frequent integration of small group teaching across subjects. Teachers are aware of which students are ELLs and use a variety of strategies to support them such as modeling activities, using visual cues, providing sentence starters, and teaching vocabulary. While this approach provides appropriate support, leaders and teachers do not consistently articulate the components of the school’s ELL program. Instructional leaders intend to provide more comprehensive training to ensure that the school’s approach to supporting ELLs is clear to all staff.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- General education and special education teachers leverage multiple opportunities to coordinate planning to support at-risk students. The curriculum and data coordinator has led several all staff professional development sessions throughout the year, such as a session on how to understand an IEP and sessions on how to support at-risk students. The school also consistently disaggregates student achievement data for students with IEPs and ELLs and studies outcomes with teachers during data days. This ensures that leaders and teachers use the existing data day structure to monitor achievement levels for these subgroups of students and to adjust supports as needed.

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2C

DOES THE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT THE DELIVERY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM?

Elm Community's organization works effectively to deliver the educational program. The school has systems and procedures in place to ensure that teachers can focus on meeting the needs of students.

- Elm Community's leadership team includes the principal, curriculum and data coordinator, and director of operations. The operations associate and social worker also support instructional leaders with some administrative responsibilities. There are clear lines of reporting and the leadership team meets regularly with each other and with their direct reports.
- The school environment at Elm Community is safe, respectful, and focused on academic achievement. Student attendance and discipline data reflect the respectful and safe culture within the school. Daily attendance averages 95% and at the time of the visit the school had no occurrences of in-school or out-of-school suspensions during this school year.
- The school facility has sufficient space to carry out the academic program as of the time of the Institute's visit. Elm Community is actively seeking a larger, permanent space to house the school upon expansion to include 3rd grade students during the 2020-21 school year. The facilities committee of the board is leading the search for a permanent space and leverages resources appropriately to ensure that the search is successful.
- Elm Community has allocated sufficient resources to implement the academic program. Teachers have access to curricular materials that support high-quality instruction, and they know who to go to for any additional curricular requests. Instructional leaders engage consultants to provide additional targeted support to teachers in certain areas such as CGI and literacy instruction.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2D

DOES THE SCHOOL BOARD WORK EFFECTIVELY TO ACHIEVE THE SCHOOL'S ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN GOALS?

Elm Community's board is developing structures that will allow it to oversee the school effectively. The board possesses a variety of skills and implements a committee structure that allows it to exercise rigorous oversight.

- The board has adequate skills, structures, and procedures with which to govern the school. As of the time of the Institute's visit, eight of the eleven founding board members remain in service. The board operates with four committees: finance, executive, academics, and facilities. The board is currently seeking to add additional members, particularly ones with strategic planning experience, to increase its capacity as the school grows.
- The board meets regularly and receives sufficient information from school leaders on academic, organizational, fiscal, and operational data to provide rigorous oversight. For example, the board reviews academic achievement data after each assessment cycle to gauge the effectiveness of the academic program.
- Elm Community's board is developing clear criteria for both the school leader's performance and its own performance as a board. The executive committee developed an evaluation rubric for the school leader, and plans to modify and finalize that rubric after this year's evaluation to ensure that it accurately encompasses all school leader core competencies. Board members are developing a process to evaluate the board's own performance by leveraging resources such as the expertise of experienced charter school boards.
- As of the date of the Institute's visit, Elm Community submits its board minutes to the Institute on time. The school's minutes suggest that the board allocates its time wisely, reviewing the health of the school while ensuring that future plans such as facilities, board development, and fundraising are on track to support the school's ability to execute its mission.

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

ELM COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD OF TRUSTEES

CHAIR

Christopher Kong

VICE CHAIR

Debbie Thomas

TREASURER

Anupa Jacob

SECRETARY

Michael Dorcelly

TRUSTEES

Grace S. Yun

Karishma Desai

Lawrence Zhou

Prijo Thomas

SCHOOL LEADERS

Priscilla Walton, Principal (2018-Present)

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL YEAR	CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL AS A PERCENTAGE OF CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	PROPOSED GRADES	ACTUAL GRADES
2018-19	100	102	102%	K-1	K-1

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

DATE(S) OF VISIT	EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS	TITLE
April 11, 2019	Keegan Prue	Program Analyst
	Andrew Kile	Director of School Evaluation

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS:

ELEMENT	EVIDENT?
Collaborative learning	+
Student-led integrated studies	+
Data-driven small group learning	+
A focus on self-exploration and self-awareness	+
Creative courses: doing and making to think differently	+

