

THE SUNY CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE

*FIRST YEAR SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT
FORTE PREPARATORY ACADEMY
CHARTER SCHOOL*

*VISIT DATE: FEBRUARY 28, 2018
REPORT DATE: JUNE 19, 2018*

SUNY Charter Schools Institute

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Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

A collection of colorful pencils and paper clips is arranged on a dark grey, textured background. The pencils, in various colors including green, blue, red, pink, orange, yellow, green, orange, blue, purple, and brown, are fanned out diagonally from the top left towards the bottom right. Several paper clips in colors like orange, light green, pink, blue, and black are scattered at the bottom of the frame.

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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 February 28, 2018 first year school evaluation visit to the Forte Preparatory Academy Charter School ("Forte Prep"). The visit team consisted of Keegan Prue, Program Analyst and Hannah Colestock, School Evaluation Analyst.

REPORT FORMAT

As with all SUNY authorized charter schools, on a periodic basis throughout the term of the school's charter the Institute conducts a number of formal site visits. The Institute reports in writing to the school on data gathered during these visits. Cumulatively, the information in reports such as this and those issued in later years, forms the foundation of qualitative data on the school's effectiveness. At the conclusion of the school's charter term, the Institute provides the State University of New York Board of Trustees (the "SUNY Trustees") an analysis of the school's performance over the term of its charter that includes this qualitative information. The Institute makes a renewal recommendation for the school based on two components: the school's attainment of its Accountability Plan goals and evidence of the quality of the school's educational program collected during school evaluation visits.

At renewal, the Institute evaluates the academic, organizational, legal, and fiscal aspects of the school's program using the State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks (the "SUNY Renewal Benchmarks"; see attachment). For formal school evaluation visits conducted prior to renewal, the Institute focuses on specific qualitative benchmarks that provide a fixed standard for determining the quality of the academic program as the school progresses toward renewal.

Although the information provided in this report is not prescriptive, the Institute would expect school leadership to review thoroughly the issues highlighted below and, to the extent helpful, use them to assist in guiding the school's academic program or other aspects of the school. In this regard, please be aware that although the Institute takes very seriously the conclusions provided, staff members are cognizant of the fact that a one-day site visit may not yield information on all facets of a school's program.

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INTRODUCTION & SCHOOL BACKGROUND

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

The SUNY Trustees approved the original charter for Forte Preparatory Academy Charter School on June 13, 2016. The school opened its doors in the fall of 2017, serving 90 students in 5th grade. The school leases space at 32-30 108th St, East Elmhurst, NY 11369 within CSD 30. At scale, Forte Prep will serve 360 students in 5th – 8th grades.

The mission of Forte Prep is:



Through rigorous academics, quality instruction, and a positive culture of individual and collective responsibility, Forte Preparatory Academy Charter School equips all students in grades 5 through 8 to excel in college preparatory high schools and use their leadership and voice to change the world.

Forte Prep implements a novel-based English Language Arts (“ELA”) curriculum, and has adapted additional reading and writing curricular materials from well-established high-performing schools such as Democracy Prep. In math, the school uses EngageNY for core materials, along with internally developed Cognitively Guided Instruction (“CGI”) problems and Zearn math as a blended learning component. This combination provides research-based materials that focus on both conceptual understanding and fluency with operations. In social studies, teachers use the Teacher’s Curriculum Institute (“TCI”) History Alive! curriculum, and in science, the school uses and adapts lessons from the well-established Uncommon Schools network. The director of curriculum and instruction (“DCI”) oversees the creation of all units to ensure alignment to the school’s educational design.

Forte Prep delivers special education services to students with disabilities by providing special education teacher support services (“SETSS”) and integrated co-teaching (“ICT”) in accordance with the services identified in students’ individualized education programs (“IEPs”). Students receiving SETSS work with a special educator in ELA or math for a designated period of time each week and students receiving ICT services are placed in a classroom in which a general education teacher and special education teacher provide instruction jointly. The school provides related services as mandated by students’ IEPs via outside providers. Forte Prep provides English Language Learners (“ELLs”) support via both push-in and pull-out instruction provided by the ELL Coordinator.

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Pursuant to the Institute’s inspection of Forte Prep on August 16, 2017, and documentation provided to or inspected by the Institute at that visit and prior/post thereto, the Institute determined that Forte Prep (the “Education Corporation”) had completed substantially all of the Prior Actions required of it as defined in the Charter Agreement between the Education Corporation and the SUNY Trustees (the “Charter Agreement”) for the operation of the school. Therefore, per Section 3.1 of the Charter Agreement, the Institute permitted the Education Corporation to provide instruction at the school to students in accordance with the plan provided in the Charter Agreement.



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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 FORTE PREP HAVE AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM THAT IMPROVES INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT LEARNING?

Forte Prep regularly gathers assessment data and uses it to improve student learning and instructional effectiveness.

- The school regularly administers standardized and curriculum-based assessments. Teachers administer the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress ("MAP") assessment three times per year to provide a baseline achievement level and to track growth over time. In addition to these standardized assessments, the school administers a variety of curriculum-based assessments, which are developed in-house. This includes unit assessments, which are developed by teachers with feedback from the DCI, and trimester exams, which are developed solely by the DCI. Wherever possible, the school uses released questions from prior state exams on assessments to ensure a sufficient level of rigor and alignment to state standards. Teachers score assessments as soon as possible after administering them, using shared rubrics to ensure validity.
- Forte Prep uses the online platform School Runner to compile, track, and analyze student data from internal assessments. Teachers enter data into School Runner immediately after scoring assessments, and can view data reports right away. In addition, leaders and teachers receive score reports on class-level and student-level results from the MAP assessment. The school keeps parents apprised of their students' progress through weekly Friday progress reports and through formal report cards which are delivered each trimester at parent conferences.

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 is available at: www.newyorkcharters.org/suny-renewal-benchmarks/.

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- The school's leaders and teachers frequently review student achievement data and use it to adjust their instruction. Leaders and teachers review MAP data each trimester, and use it to determine which students will receive extra support in small groups. After final exams each trimester, the entire faculty and leaders hold a formal data day. This full day professional development session is devoted to reviewing assessment results and collaboratively making action plans to better support student outcomes. The school uses a formal agenda and protocol for these days, wherein faculty review data at the class and individual level. The outcome of these days is that teachers create plans for targeted small group support based on standards where students struggled, as well as plans for whole-group reteaching where students across the grade struggled. At-risk staff attend these sessions with general education teachers to ensure that plans include supports for students with disabilities and ELLs.

DOES FORTE PREP'S CURRICULUM SUPPORT TEACHERS IN THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING?

Forte Prep is developing a clear curriculum planning process that supports teachers in their planning and delivery of instruction.

- Forte Prep's instructional leaders develop a scope and sequence and unit overview for each subject, which clearly outline what to teach and when to teach it. From these guiding documents, teachers create detailed daily lesson plans and supporting materials. Each week, teachers submit their lesson plans for the following week. After this, the DCI reviews and provides feedback on those plans before they are finalized and executed in the classroom.
- Teachers at Forte Prep have access to a robust variety of curricular materials, and report they have the resources and support needed to plan effective lessons. The school uses EngageNY and Zearn for mathematics, a novel-based curriculum for ELA, and TCI textbooks for social studies. For science and writing, school leaders curated curriculum leveraging resources from a variety of high-performing charter networks. Instructional leaders plan to engage consultants and high-performing teachers to support with curriculum revision and development leading into their second year of operation.
- The school has identified an opportunity to improve their beginning-of-year curriculum to better support students who arrive at the school with widely varying skill levels. As such, leaders and teachers plan to revise early units to ensure that scaffolds and differentiation plans are in place to fill any gaps in student learning.

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IS HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION EVIDENT THROUGHOUT FORTE PREP?

High quality instruction is evident in classrooms at Forte Prep. As shown in the chart below, during the first year visit, Institute team members conducted 7 classroom observations following a defined protocol used in all school visits.

GRADE		
Total 5th Grade Observations		
CONTENT AREA	ELA	1
	Writing	1
	Math	2
	Soc Stu	1
	Arts	1
	Science	1
	Total	7

- Most teachers at Forte Prep deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (6 out of 7 classrooms observed). Teachers post lesson objectives clearly for each component of the day, and restate the objective verbally within the lesson. Lesson materials are well-designed and support the lesson objectives. Some teachers also wrap up lessons by having students independently restate the objective to further reinforce and cement the day's learning. Classrooms with multiple teachers use all adults effectively; for instance, in a class with two lead teachers and a learning specialist, all three adults were actively engaged in coaching students during independent work
- Most teachers at Forte Prep regularly and effectively use techniques to check for student understanding (5 out of 7 classrooms observed). Teachers employ various methods to check for understanding throughout instruction, such as having students show a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to indicate their understanding, cold calling students, or using a "check in" procedure where students quickly evaluate an idea or another students' response to a question. Teachers circulate and observe students during independent work time, and use their observations to adjust instruction. For instance, in one

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

classroom a teacher noticed a common error that students were making and paused work time to address and correct the misconception. Most classes have well-established exit ticket procedures, and teachers report studying data from exit tickets regularly to adjust their small group instruction plans.

- Some teachers at Forte Prep include opportunities in their lessons to challenge students with questions and activities that develop depth of understanding and higher-order thinking skills (3 out of 7 classrooms observed). Most instruction consists of teacher-to-student talk with missed opportunities for students to interact, discuss, and critique each other's ideas. Teachers generally pose questions that are procedural or ask for fact recall, rather than pushing students to synthesize or do the thinking work independently. In classrooms where teachers do push student higher order thinking, lessons include planned turn-and-talks, or "brainstorming" moments where students discuss and critique their ideas with each other, as well as questions that push students to explain and defend their reasoning.
- Teachers at Forte Prep maximize learning time and utilize effective classroom management techniques that create a consistent focus on academic achievement (7 out of 7 classrooms observed). Teachers break down directions and routines clearly, and regularly use timers to keep lessons on pace and to communicate a sense of urgency. All classrooms utilize well-established classroom procedures and transition routines that ensure efficient use of learning time. Finally, teachers frequently notice and compliment students who are on-task, focused, and completing their work correctly, thus contributing to a positive atmosphere.

DOES FORTE PREP HAVE STRONG INSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP?

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

- Forte Prep's leadership promotes a culture of learning and scholarship. Staff consistently describe school culture as a strength and attribute this success to the clear mission and vision set by the leadership team. Expectations are clear for teachers and students which results in a school environment focused on academic achievement. In addition to the ongoing, frequent coaching that teachers receive, teachers regularly observe one another's classrooms, openly sharing feedback and collaboratively planning with one another.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- Instructional leaders support the development of the teaching staff through sustained and systematic coaching and supervision. Teachers submit their lesson plans weekly to the DCI and receive feedback within 48 hours. The DCI observes teachers two to three times per week and provides teachers with written feedback immediately following each observation. The DCI tracks this feedback in a Google Document and uses it to inform one-on-one coaching meetings that take place biweekly. The executive director also provides informal observations and feedback to teachers, as well as a one-on-one coaching meeting every three weeks that focuses on school culture and professional responsibilities. Leaders meet regularly to track and review the feedback they have given to teachers to ensure that supports are aligned. Going forward, the school plans to hire a Dean of Culture and create teacher leadership pathways such as a grade team lead to ensure the school can provide a high level of teacher support as it scales.
- Teachers receive a formal evaluation at the end of each trimester, which culminate into one formal evaluation for the entire year. Teachers complete a self-assessment using a common rubric and then compare their results with the instructional leadership team's evaluation. The DCI and the executive director co-lead the evaluation meetings with teachers. Teachers report the mid-year evaluation process was fair and aligned with the coaching they receive.
- Forte Prep provides teachers with ongoing professional development, tailored to meet the needs of the teaching staff. The school provides three weeks of professional development before the school year starts and weekly professional development on Fridays during the school year. Friday professional development topics are selected by the leadership team on a weekly basis in response to observation data and teacher feedback. The school also conducts several data days per year, which are full day professional development sessions devoted to data analysis and action planning.

DOES FORTE PREP MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS?

Forte Prep is developing systems to support the educational needs of its at-risk students.

- Forte Prep has clear procedures for identifying students struggling academically and students with disabilities. Teachers use various assessments such as MAP and trimester exams, as well as daily performance and observational data to identify students in need of extra support. The school did not administer the Home Language Identification Survey ("HLIS") at the beginning of the school year to identify students who are ELL. However, the school reviews the students' records from their previous school to determine which students were identified as ELLs.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

- The school has sufficient resources to support at-risk students; however, the school is out of compliance in the services provided to students with disabilities. When students are identified as struggling, teachers provide additional targeted support during the daily tutoring block. For students in need of more intensive support, the student supports coordinator pulls small groups to provide tier 2 and 3 intervention. For students with disabilities, Forte Prep provides an ICT classroom for students that require this setting. The maximum number of students with disabilities in an ICT class is 12 students with IEPs, however, the ICT classroom had more than 12 students with IEPs at the time of the visit. The Institute will work with Forte Prep to ensure the school is in compliance. The ICT classroom has a special educator that co-teaches core content areas alongside the ELA and mathematics teachers. The student support coordinator also provides SETSS to students that require this service.
- The school's ELL coordinator pushes into ELA classes to provide more individualized supports during whole class instruction to students who are ELL and also provides pull-out supports to these students weekly. At the time of the visit the school was unable to articulate its approach to supporting language acquisition skills for its ELL students aside from targeted support with the core ELA content. The school uses the NYSESLAT to monitor students' English language proficiency.
- Forte Prep provides appropriate training and support to instructional staff regarding academically at-risk students and students with disabilities. The school has not yet provided sufficient time and training to support ELLs. The student supports coordinator facilitates a weekly student support team meeting with all instructional staff to discuss students that are academically struggling. Aside from this meeting there is no regularly scheduled, structured time for collaboration between general education, special education, and ELL staff, but teachers frequently collaborate informally. At the beginning of the year the student supports coordinator reviewed students' IEPs with general education teachers and provided teachers with strategies to support each student. However, many teachers are unable to identify which students in their classrooms are ELLs and teachers have not received specific training on how to support ELLs in the general education setting.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

SUNY RENEWAL BENCHMARK 2C

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

Forte Prep is establishing an organizational structure that will enable it to effectively deliver the educational program.

- Forte Prep has in place an administrative structure with instructional and operational expertise that allows it to effectively deliver the academic program. The school's leadership team includes the executive director and DCI. The operations manager and student supports coordinator also support the instructional leaders with administrative responsibilities. There are clear lines of reporting and the leadership team meets regularly with each other and with their direct reports. Teachers consistently report that expectations within the school are clear and the leadership team is supportive and approachable.
- The school environment at Forte Prep is safe, respectful, and focused on academic achievement. Although the school facility is small, the space is sufficient to carry out the academic program and the instructional staff effectively utilize it. Student attendance and discipline data are reflective of the safe and respectful culture the school has developed. Daily attendance averages 98% and at the time of the visit the school had only had one occurrence of in-school suspension and one occurrence of out-of-school suspension during this school year.
- Forte Prep 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. There is an appropriate number of staff and the school worked with urgency to fill a mid-year vacancy following a teacher's resignation.
- The leadership team in partnership with the operations manager has started to develop systems necessary to support an effective organization at scale. Prior to the start of the year staff attended three weeks of professional development that included organizational onboarding sessions. The school has systems in place to support core functions such as coaching, evaluation, feedback, professional development, IEP coordination, and family engagement.

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

- Translating all enrollment materials to Spanish;
- Direct mailing marketing materials to all 4th grade families in Corona/East Elmhurst in CSD 24;
- Providing bilingual enrollment and registration support;
- Providing bilingual home visits to every student;
- Providing bilingual parent conferences; and,
- Making translation available for any parent-teacher meetings.

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

Forte Prep's school board monitors student achievement and provides oversight to the total educational program.

- The board has adequate skills, structures, and procedures with which to govern the school. As of the time of the Institute's visit, all eleven founding board members remain in service. The board operates with four committees: finance, governance, fund development, and academic achievement.
- The board meets regularly and receives sufficient information from school leaders on academic, organizational, fiscal, and operational data to provide rigorous oversight. For example, it recently reviewed January MAP assessment results to gauge the effectiveness of the academic program, and also recently reviewed staff and student recruitment goals for the 2018-2019 school year.
- As of the date of the Institute's visit, Forte Prep submits its board minutes to the Institute regularly and 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 and fundraising are on track to support the school's ability to execute its mission.

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

FORTE PREPARATORY ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD OF TRUSTEES³

CHAIR

Lisa Friscia

TREASURER

Daniel Ostroff-Moskowitz

SECRETARY

Alexie Rothman

TRUSTEES

Kyle Robinson

Hopeton Lindo

Richard Celestin

SCHOOL LEADERS

Graham Browne, Founder & Executive Director (2017-Present)

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL YEAR	CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT ⁴	ACTUAL AS A PERCENTAGE OF CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	PROPOSED GRADES	ACTUAL GRADES
2017-18	90	87	97%	5 th	5 th

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

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

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SCHOOL OVERVIEW

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

DATE(S) OF VISIT	EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS	TITLE
February 28, 2018	Keegan Prue	Program Analyst
	Hannah Colestock	School Evaluation Analyst

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS:

ELEMENT	EVIDENT?
High expectations for academic success	+
High expectations for structure and personal behavior	+
Emphasis on literacy	+
Teacher quality	+
Data drives instruction	+
Extended, purposeful learning time	+
Meaningful, integrated arts and digital opportunities	+