



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

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July 13, 2015

VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL

Deborah Shanley, Ed.D., Board Chair
Achievement First Linden Charter School
800 Van Siclen Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11207

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Dr. Shanley:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its May 20, 2015 first year school evaluation visit to the Achievement First Linden Charter School ("AF Linden"). The visit team consisted of Heather Wendling, Director for New Charters, and an external consultant, Adam Aberman. Allow me to place this letter and the conclusions set forth below into context.

As with all SUNY authorized charter schools, on a periodic basis throughout the term of your 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 your school's performance over the term of its charter that includes this qualitative information. The Institute makes a renewal recommendation for your 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.

To Learn
To Search
To Serve



For this first year visit, the Institute narrows the expectation for each benchmark in recognition of the school program's limited development. The center of attention is on the quality of instruction and related benchmarks, 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.

Although the information provided in this letter is not prescriptive, the Institute would expect you to review thoroughly the issues highlighted below and, to the extent you find them helpful, use them to assist in guiding the school's leadership team to further develop 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, we are cognizant of the fact that a one-day site visit may not yield information on all facets of a school's program.

Please find the team's findings from the first year visit below.

Instructional Leadership

AF Linden has established a strong instructional leadership team that builds the pedagogical skills of all teachers through robust weekly coaching and feedback cycles.

- AF Linden's instructional leadership team, comprised of the founding principal, an academic dean and a dean of students, has cultivated and maintained an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school. Leaders, teachers and students regularly articulate the school's student achievement goals of 100 percent grade level proficiency in English language arts ("ELA") and mathematics, with an additional target of 50 percent scoring above grade level.
- AF Linden's instructional leadership team is adequate to support the development of its teaching staff. To maintain its capacity to provide intensive coaching for teachers, the school plans to add another academic dean to its instructional leadership team as it expands to serve 2nd grade next year.
- The principal and deans provide sustained and systemic coaching and supervision of all teachers at AF Linden. Each instructional leader supports a cohort of teachers through weekly, and often daily, observations and individualized coaching sessions that outline actionable next steps to improve the quality of instruction and strengthen classroom culture. School leaders also provide lesson planning guidance and review all instructional plans before implementation to ensure a consistent level of rigor across classrooms and content areas.
- AF Linden supports teachers' efforts to meet students' needs and holds teachers accountable for delivering high quality instruction through a combination of practice-based

coaching meetings and targeted professional development activities. With significant support from its charter management organization, Achievement First Inc. (the “network”), 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 sessions and network wide workshops several times per year.

- The instructional leadership team relies on classroom observation and assessment data to determine teachers’ professional development needs. According to teachers, professional development activities effectively address pedagogical weaknesses, strengthen existing skills and reset school wide instructional priorities as necessary.
- Instructional leaders conduct regular evaluations for all teachers based on a clear, network wide rubric that measures each teacher’s progress in a variety of competency areas, as well as identifies prospects for internal promotion according to the network Teacher Career Pathway system.

Use of Assessment Data

AF Linden gathers assessment information and uses it to improve student learning.

- AF Linden regularly administers a variety of assessments to monitor students’ academic progress. The school administers common assessments in reading and mathematics five times annually and three times annually in writing. Teachers also issue weekly quizzes and end of unit assessments. The school utilizes the network’s writing rubric to assess end-of-unit writing assignments as well as student performance on the three writing interim assessments.
- Teachers and school leaders readily access online and printed reports of assessment results and share a subset of available information with parents and students. Concomitant with its clear focus on establishing strong literacy skills in all students, the school sends reading assessment results in letters to parents five times per year. Students are aware of their results on reading assessments, and assume a high degree of ownership over their own progress towards meeting end of year reading goals, though teachers report some students remain unaware of their math assessment results.
- AF Linden’s administrators and teachers sometimes use assessment data to adjust instruction. Four times during the academic year, the school creates reading groups based on the results of reading assessments. The school holds data days four times annually during which teachers conduct in depth analyses of students’ assessment results. The school utilizes pupil-free Friday afternoons in part to analyze reading, writing and math to inform the subsequent week’s instructional plans.

Curriculum

With support from its network, AF Linden has a curriculum that supports teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.

- AF Linden has various documents to support the development of daily lesson plans. The network provides scope and sequences and unit plans for all core content areas to the school. Teachers and instructional leaders “unpack”, or analyze, each unit to discuss effective strategies for teaching each. Based on a checklist that entails essential elements, teachers submit reading and writing lesson plans to the principal and deans, who in turn comment on and modify those plans prior to the week when the lesson plans are to be taught.
- Teachers know what to teach and when to teach it based on scope and sequences, unit plans and leader feedback.
- Teachers have an abundance of instructional materials (e.g., curricular texts and online resources) that support them in meeting the academic needs of students.

Pedagogy

Instruction at AF Linden is purposeful and generally adequate, but few teachers challenge students with higher-order questions to drive deeper understanding of content.

- All teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school’s curriculum (10 of 10 classrooms observed). Lessons consistently build on previously acquired knowledge and skills. Teachers generally use age-appropriate language to present and explain content to students.
- Some teachers regularly and effectively use a variety of techniques to check for student understanding and mastery (6 of 10 classrooms observed). However, during whole class instruction, most teachers rely on a few student volunteers to answer questions, limiting teachers’ 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, but some focus more on addressing minor misbehaviors than on providing actionable feedback to drive high quality work products.
- Few teachers challenge students with well-crafted questions to foster students’ depth of understanding and higher order thinking skills outside of some small group instruction (4 of 10 classrooms observed). During whole class instruction, most teachers do not regularly challenge students to defend and elaborate on their answers, choosing instead to maintain the pace of lessons. In contrast, some teachers pose higher order questions to students during small group guided reading activities and require students to provide text-based evidence to support their answers. In one classroom, students conferred with partners to discuss how characters in a story became self-sufficient. This lone exception

notwithstanding, most classes offer limited opportunities for students to work cooperatively.

- AF Linden classrooms maintain consistent focus on academic achievement (10 of 10 classrooms observed). While most teachers communicate a clear sense of urgency for learning, a few focus more on activity or lesson completion and do not attend closely to students' work quality or understanding. A majority of teachers across the school maximize learning time with well-rehearsed, efficient classroom systems and routines. Teachers frequently communicate behavioral expectations and address misbehavior, which occasionally disrupts instruction in classrooms.

At-Risk Students

AF Linden is addressing the educational needs of most at-risk students; however, the school does not have a program in place to meet the needs of English language learners ("ELLs").

- AF Linden uses procedures for identifying at-risk students including students with disabilities, ELLs and those struggling academically. School leaders and teachers use results from reading benchmark tests, interim assessments and weekly tests to identify students in need of extra supports. AF Linden uses the Home Language Identification Survey and the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners to identify students as ELLs.
- The school employs several resources and processes to meet the needs of students at risk of academic failure and students with disabilities. Based on reading assessment results, the school creates intervention groups to receive intensive support in specific deficit areas. Leveraging a co-teaching model, teachers organize students struggling in reading and mathematics into small groups in their regular classrooms to meet specific skill deficits.
- AF Linden fails to address the language acquisition needs of the school's three identified ELLs. The school does not employ any staff appropriately trained to deliver a research-based, educationally sound program designed to support ELLs in achieving English proficiency.
- AF Linden provides structures for ongoing coordination between general and at-risk program teachers. School leaders create a schedule in which a student's homeroom or guided reading teacher is often the same as the reading intervention teacher. In addition, during data days, general education teachers and reading intervention teachers have opportunities to discuss the progress of students in reading interventions.

Organizational Capacity

AF Linden's organizational structure supports the effective delivery of its academic program.

- AF Linden has in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems and procedures that allow it to carry out the academic program. With the school's director of operations managing the day today business of the school, the principal maintains a singular focus on implementing effective instructional practices to produce strong student performance outcomes.
- AF Linden maintains a safe and orderly school environment. Students are familiar with behavioral expectations for classrooms and the hallways, as evidenced by well-rehearsed transitional routines. School leaders and teachers consistently implement the school wide disciplinary system.
- The school effectively employs a range of network resources to establish systems and protocols adapted to meet its particular needs. Both the principal and director of operations completed leadership residency programs with the network prior to founding AF Linden. The network also provides staff recruitment support as well as three weeks of professional development for staff prior to school opening.
- AF Linden is one of six current schools within the Achievement First Schools Brooklyn education corporation. Board meeting minutes, however, do not reflect discussion of AF Linden or AF North Brooklyn, the two newest schools governed by the education corporation. Though data dashboards and other meeting materials do include both new schools, the education corporation board should take action to correct the oversight in all future meeting minutes.
- The AF Linden third quarter financials for the first year of operation show a deficit of approximately \$850,000 with enrollment at chartered level. A deficit for a first year of operation is common, but this deficit is particularly high given that the school operates in free co-located space. The network is fiscally strong and has a history of fiscal health. With the proper fiscal oversight, AF Linden should be able to work out the fiscal shortfalls.

These conclusions constitute the beginning of your school's record of progress toward meeting the standards detailed in the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks. The Institute conducts formal evaluation visits at various times during each school's initial charter term and generally at least once during subsequent charter terms. The cumulative evidence collected during these school evaluation and renewal visits, as well as the school's record of success at meeting Accountability Plan goals becomes part of the record that informs the Institute's renewal recommendation to the SUNY Trustees.

The number of school evaluation visits the Institute will conduct before renewal depends on a variety of factors. Concerns raised in the conclusions of previous visits, the school's progress

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toward meeting its Accountability Plan goals and emergent legal and compliance issues may affect the frequency and timing of the visits.

The Institute looks forward to its next visit to AF Linden and is available at any time to discuss the results of the first year visit, future visits or other concerns you may have as the school moves through its charter term and toward renewal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Natasha M. Howard', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Natasha M. Howard, Ph.D.
Managing Director of Program

Enclosure

cc: Amanda Hageman, Principal (*via email*)
Heather Gayle, Director of School Operations (*via email*)
Peter Cymrot, Senior Counsel, Achievement First Public Charter Schools (*via email*)