



**Charter Schools Institute**  
The State University of New York

41 State Street, Suite 700  
Albany, New York 12207

[www.newyorkcharters.org](http://www.newyorkcharters.org)

June 3, 2015

**VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL**

Deborah Shanley, Ed.D., Board Chair  
Achievement First North Brooklyn Prep Charter School  
200 Woodbine Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11221

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 19, 2015 first year school evaluation visit to the Achievement First North Brooklyn Prep Charter School ("AF North Brooklyn Prep"). The visit team consisted of Heather Wendling, Director for New Charters; Andrea Richards, Program Analyst; and Adam Aberman, an external consultant. 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.

For this first year visit, the Institute narrows the expectation for each benchmark in

To Learn  
To Search  
To Serve



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 North Brooklyn Prep has established a strong instructional leadership team to further the pedagogical skills of all teachers through intensive, real time coaching and weekly feedback meetings.*

- The founding principal, an academic dean and a dean of students comprise AF North Brooklyn Prep's instructional leadership team. The leaders promote an environment of high expectations for both teacher and student performance across the school. Leaders and teachers regularly articulate the school's student achievement goals for English language arts ("ELA") and mathematics. AF North Brooklyn Prep leaders deliberately set these goals significantly higher than the proficiency standards of its charter management organization, Achievement First Public Charter Schools ("AF" or the "network"), to ensure all students enter the next grade prepared to succeed.
- The principal and deans provide sustained and systemic coaching and supervision for all teachers. 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 pedagogy and raise students to grade level proficiency. School leaders also provide lesson planning guidance and review all plans before implementation to ensure a consistent level of rigor across classrooms and content areas.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep supports teachers' efforts to meet students' needs and holds teachers accountable for delivering high quality instruction through a combination of proactive and reactive professional development activities. The school holds school-wide professional development sessions weekly in addition to tailored grade level sessions and

network-wide workshops several times per year.

- The school's instructional leadership team utilizes classroom observation and assessment data to determine teachers' professional development needs. Teachers report that professional development activities effectively address their weaknesses and strengthen their pedagogical skills, as well as successfully maintain the school's growth- and goal-oriented culture.
- Instructional leaders conduct regular evaluations for all teachers based on a clear, network-wide rubric that measures each teacher's progress on a variety of competencies, as well as identifying teachers for internal promotion according to the network's Teacher Career Pathway system.

### **Use of Assessment Data**

*AF North Brooklyn Prep gathers assessment information and uses it to improve student learning.*

- AF North Brooklyn Prep regularly administers a variety of assessments to monitor students' academic progress. The school administers common assessments in mathematics and reading five times per year and in writing three times annually. Teachers also issue weekly quizzes.
- The school makes some assessment results available to all stakeholders. The school scans common assessment results and, through its online data management system, provides reading, writing and math results for viewing by teachers and administrators. Parents have online access to reading. AF North Brooklyn Prep also sends reports of students' reading progress to families via mail. Students are aware of their results on the common writing assessments as well as their performance on weekly math quizzes.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep's administrators and teachers regularly use assessment data to adjust instruction. Every six weeks, the school creates reading groups based on common reading assessments. Additionally, during weekly Friday professional development time, teachers analyze conferencing notes and other anecdotal information to create individualized reading plans for students for the following week. Teachers also analyze Friday quiz results and workshop notes to create small groups for the following week. In addition, AF North Brooklyn Prep holds data days four times per year during which teachers conduct in depth analyses of students' reading and math interim assessment results. The school is in the process of developing a systematic approach to analyzing student writing.

### **Curriculum**

*AF North Brooklyn Prep has a curriculum that supports teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.*

- AF North Brooklyn Prep has a curriculum framework and additional documents to support the development of daily lesson plans. The network provides scope and sequences and unit

plans for all core content areas and also provides lesson plans in math. The school's teachers develop lesson plans in other subjects with the assistance of school leaders; for example, teachers submit reading and writing lesson plans to the academic dean, who provides comprehensive written feedback. Teachers subsequently finalize the lesson plans five days before implementation.

- Teachers know what to teach and when to teach it based on the above documents.
- Teachers report having 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 North Brooklyn Prep is generally adequate to prepare students to meet grade level expectations and includes elements of high quality instruction that challenge students with higher-order questions and hands-on activities.*

- Teachers deliver purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum (8 of 8 classrooms observed). Lessons consistently build on previously acquired knowledge and skills. Students can articulate what they are learning and what teachers expect them to do to "show what they know."
- Teachers regularly and effectively use a variety of techniques to check for student understanding and mastery, including whole class and individual questioning and non-verbal hand signals (8 of 8 classrooms observed). Teachers continually circulate around classrooms to monitor students' responses and written work during lessons, to take notes on students' progress towards individualized reading goals and to make immediate adjustments to instruction based on student misunderstandings.
- Some teachers challenge students with well-crafted questions to foster students' depth of understanding and higher-order thinking skills (5 of 8 classrooms observed). Most teachers regularly challenge students to defend and elaborate on their answers, particularly during small group activities such as guided reading or word work. For example, a teacher required a first grade student to support his assertion that a character felt sad with specific evidence from the text. The student located evidence and read it aloud to his peers, explaining how those specific sentences supported his conclusion. In some classes, students briefly interact with peers to share or compare answers or ideas, but most classes offer limited opportunities for students to work cooperatively. In one notable exception, students in a science class worked together to explore a variety of objects and tools, manipulating them to create the forces of push and pull. The teacher conversed with each small group, asking them to determine what force caused the motion, how to recreate it in a different way and what they could do to generate the opposite effect.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep teachers maintain classroom environments consistently focused on academic achievement and communicate a clear sense of urgency for learning (8 of 8

classrooms observed). Teachers are well prepared with materials for lessons. A majority of teachers across the school maximize learning time with well-rehearsed, efficient classroom systems and routines. Teachers clearly and frequently communicate behavioral expectations and address misbehavior with non-verbal redirections, or one-on-one conferences, as necessary to avoid disruptions to instruction.

### **At-Risk Students**

*AF North Brooklyn Prep is addressing the educational needs of some at-risk students but does not have a program in place to meet the needs of English language learners ("ELLs").*

- AF North Brooklyn Prep uses clear procedures for identifying at-risk students including students with disabilities, ELLs and those struggling academically. Teachers use interim assessments, standardized reading tests and informal assessments to identify students in need of extra supports. AF North Brooklyn Prep uses 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 interim assessment results, the school creates intervention groups in which some students receive intensive pull out support to remediate particular reading deficit areas such as comprehension and decoding. Leveraging the co-teaching model, teachers organize at-risk students in math and writing in small groups in their regular classrooms to meet students' specific needs.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep does not deploy resources to support its 39 identified ELLs in reaching English proficiency. While all students are eligible for reading support, the school has no staff properly trained to meet the specific language acquisition needs of ELLs. The school identifies this as an area for improvement upon which to focus resources in the next academic year.
- The school does not provide sufficient time and support for on-going coordination between general and at-risk teachers. There are some opportunities for general education teachers to discuss the progress of students in reading interventions yet teachers report that this is a less formal process than examining the overall progress of students' reading at the end of every cycle following administration of interim assessments. Some general education teachers are unable to articulate the process by which the school identifies students for referral for special education services.

### **Organizational Capacity**

*AF North Brooklyn Prep's organizational structure supports the effective delivery of its academic program.*

- The school has in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems and procedures that allow it to effectively carry out the academic program. With the school's director of operations managing the day-to-day business of the school, the principal maintains a singular focus on implementing effective pedagogical coaching to produce strong student performance outcomes.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep has established a positive learning and professional environment with a clear emphasis on ambitious goal setting and attainment at the school, leader, teacher and student level.
- The school is effectively retaining high quality staff. All founding teachers received positive midyear evaluations and have indicated their intent to return to the school for its second year of operation.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep maintains a safe and orderly environment throughout the school. Students are familiar with behavioral expectations for classrooms and the hallways, as evidenced by smooth transitional routines. School leaders and teachers consistently and effectively implement the school-wide disciplinary system.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep allocates sufficient resources to achieve its goals. Classrooms are well resourced and focused on high quality instruction, high achievement and college awareness. Leaders leverage staffing effectively to support student learning and hiring plans for the coming year are proportionate to, and aligned with, the school's proposed growth.
- AF North Brooklyn Prep effectively employs a range of network resources to establish systems and protocols to meet the school's needs. Both the principal and director of operations have completed leadership residency programs with the network. The AF network also provides staff recruitment support as well as three weeks of professional development for staff prior to school opening.

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 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 North Brooklyn Prep 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: Elena Knappen, Principal (*via email*)  
Samantha Sanacore, Director of School Operations (*via email*)  
Peter Cymrot, Senior Counsel, Achievement First Public Charter Schools (*via email*)