



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

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June 3, 2015

**VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL**

Pedro Alvarez, Board Chair  
Family Life Academy Charter School III  
296 East 140<sup>th</sup> Street  
Bronx, NY 10454

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Mr. Alvarez:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its May 13, 2015 first year school evaluation visit to the Family Life Academy Charter School III ("FLACS III"). The visit team consisted of Senior Analyst Aaron Campbell and Jennifer David-Lang, an external consultant. Allow me first 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**

*FLACS III has strong instructional leadership.*

- Instructional leaders promote a culture of learning and scholarship, emphasizing to teachers the importance of addressing students' academic needs and ensuring they meet specific grade-level benchmarks. Leaders and teachers clearly articulate student performance goals.
- The principal and assistant principal share teacher observation, coaching and curriculum development duties and adequately support the small but inexperienced teaching staff.
- Instructional leaders provide sustained coaching and supervision to teachers targeting specific instructional areas of focus. The principal and assistant principal informally observe each teacher at least once weekly and also conduct formal observations monthly in accordance with domains from the Danielson Framework. While leaders are intentional in providing regular coaching to teachers, they continue to develop systems around the intensity of coaching supports and the coordination of feedback.
- FLACS III provides teachers with set time during the school day to create lesson plans and discuss student data. However, instructional leaders do not consistently provide support for the largely inexperienced teaching team.
- In addition to two weeks of pre-service summer training, the school holds weekly after-school professional development sessions as well as half-day professional development sessions monthly. Instructional leaders primarily use classroom observations to determine teachers' professional development needs and engage external consultants to supplement the school's in-house development activities.

- FLACS III holds teachers accountable for performance with clear criteria that teachers receive in advance. Leaders plan to use the results of the final observation in concert with previous observations to comprise teachers' overall evaluation using all domains of the Danielson Framework.

### **Use of Assessment Data**

*FLACS III gathers assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve student learning.*

- FLACS III administers a variety of diagnostic, standardized and curriculum-based assessments to gauge student learning and inform instruction. To assess younger students' incoming skills level, FLACS III administers the Kindergarten Readiness Test at the start of the school year. All students take the Fountas & Pinnell ("F & P") literacy assessment three times a year and the norm-referenced, standardized Terra Nova twice a year. In addition to interim assessments for writing and mathematics, FLACS III administers packaged tests from ReadyGEN, Math in Focus and Foss Science.
- All assessment results are readily available to teachers and administrators. A data specialist at the Family Life Academy Charter Schools central office ("the network") compiles these results to monitor student performance and to assist teachers in making data-driven decisions.
- Leaders and teachers use the results of these assessments to place students in ability-based guided reading groups and to make adjustments in daily instruction.
- FLACS III regularly informs parents of student progress with report cards and progress reports, both three times a year.

### **Curriculum**

*FLACS III is developing a curriculum to support teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.*

- The school uses a number of commercial products such as Math in Focus and ReadyGEN, which both Family Life Academy Charter Schools I and II also use. In addition, FLACS III uses 6 + 1 Trait Writing and FOSS Science programs. Teachers adjust the commercial scope and sequence documents and pacing calendars to meet the needs of FLACS III students. However, this adjustment is often rudimentary and needs further development to ensure students meet all learning targets.
- Teachers work with grade-team colleagues to create unit and daily lesson plans. Instructional leaders do not systematically review these lesson plans to ensure alignment with state performance standards.
- Teachers access ample curricular materials that support them in meeting students' educational needs.



### **Pedagogy**

*High quality instruction is not yet evident in FLACS III classrooms.*

- FLACS III teachers deliver purposeful lessons (5 out of 7 classrooms observed), though some learning objectives are too broad for a single lesson. For example, the objective in one lesson plan stated “I can use words to express feelings.” In addition, lesson activities do not consistently correlate with stated objectives. In one Kindergarten class, the teacher never mentioned pictures while reading aloud to students despite the lesson objective being, “I can use pictures to help me understand the story.”
- With few effective questions asked during lessons, teachers do not check for students’ understanding of lesson concepts (2 out of 7 classrooms observed). In a notable exception, one Kindergarten teacher told students they all must pay attention to the story she was about to read because she would call on any one of them at any time to answer questions about the text. She paused regularly during her reading to ask pre-planned questions and regularly cold-called student to gauge student comprehension.
- Teachers do not consistently provide students with opportunities to engage with higher order questions or assignments (3 out of 7 classrooms observed). In one first grade class, the teacher presented challenging vocabulary, but allowed students to copy examples rather than use the words in sentences of their own creation.
- Most FLACS III classrooms maintain consistent focus on academic achievement (6 out of 7 classrooms observed) and are print-rich with abundant displays of student work. Nonetheless, low-level disruptions, unclear behavioral expectations, slow transitions and uneven implementation of the school-wide behavioral management system in some classrooms detract from lesson effectiveness.

### **At-Risk Students**

*FLACS III is addressing the educational needs of at-risk students.*

- FLACS III deploys sufficient resources to identify and serve English language learners (“ELLs”). The school administers the Home Language Identification Survey and the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (“NYSITELL”) to identify students in need of English language acquisition support. An English-as-a-Second Language (“ESL”) teacher provides push-in and pull-out services to the school’s 28 currently enrolled ELL students. The ESL teacher meets with grade teams during their weekly planning time to coordinate instruction and to discuss student progress toward meeting language acquisition goals. Student report cards include an ESL progress grade based on assessments the ESL teacher administers.
- FLACS III contracts with the school district to serve two students receiving mandated academic supports. While the contracted special education teachers are on-site four times

a week to work with students, formal collaboration with classroom teachers is rare. The contracted service providers notify the school and parents of student progress and growth through formal reports just twice a year.

- The school uses teacher-created assessments in addition to Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and F & P data to identify students in need of academic intervention services. After reviewing assessment data, leaders and teachers determine the type of interventions a student may need, guided reading group levels and if a student requires a referral for special education services evaluation. Teachers meet within grade levels and with leaders to monitor student data and progress through the use of intervention plans and assessment data.

### **Organizational Capacity**

*FLACS III's organization supports the delivery of the educational program.*

- FLACS III has put in place an adequate administrative structure, with staff and procedures to carry out the academic program. Before the school's opening and at the beginning of the academic year, the principal and assistant principal performed many of the operational duties in addition to developing most pieces of the academic program. The leadership team has since hired several operational staff members to allow them to focus more on the instructional program, although they still perform some operational duties.
- The school establishes a safe and orderly environment. In addition to the network manual, leaders enforce separate FLACS III policies for teachers and students. Although both leaders and teachers report using a "Clip-It" behavior management system consisting of three colors signifying student behavior, rewards and consequences, the visit team saw no evidence that teachers use this system in classrooms.
- FLACS III leaders have begun to create the systems and protocols necessary to ensure a well functioning organization, and the school has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. School leaders are reflective and responsive to curriculum needs, have a clear structure for teacher evaluation and are ensuring appropriate means of serving at-risk students are in place.

### **Board Oversight**

*FLACS III's board monitors student achievement and provides adequate oversight to the educational program.*

- The three FLACS network schools operate with one board consisting of members from the former FLACS I and II boards. Members possess a range of adequate skills including education, finance and management. The board also has a structure, including several

standing committees such as accountability and fundraising that allow it to adequately govern the school.

- The board receives sufficient information from the school leader to provide oversight. At each meeting the principal presents programmatic information including assessment results and services the school provides to at-risk students. The board monitors this data to track its progress to meeting academic goals.
- The network chief executive officer ("CEO") and chief operating officer ("COO") evaluate the school leader using a rubric and specific set of criteria. Although the board does not directly evaluate the leader, it is involved in the evaluation process and reports working with the CEO and COO to set professional goals they outline in the evaluation.

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 FLACS III 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: Andrea Hernandez, Principal (*via email*)