



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

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March 30, 2015

VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL

Ms. Gail Golden, Chairperson
Icahn Charter School 7
1535 Story Avenue
Bronx, NY 10473

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Ms. Golden:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's ("the Institute's") observations and findings from its December 5, 2013 first year school evaluation visit to the Icahn Charter School 7 ("Icahn 7"). The visit team consisted of the Institute's former Executive Deputy Director for Accountability Ron Miller, Ph.D., and Senior Analyst Heather Wendling. First, please accept my most sincere apologies for the extended delay in sending this letter to you. I understand that certain details of the school's program have likely changed in the current school year, but I do hope that you find this record of information shared during the visit team's debrief with school leaders helpful. Allow me now 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 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 letters such as this, as well as reports provided in later years, forms the foundation of qualitative data on the school's educational program. At the conclusion of the school's charter term, the Institute provides the State University of New York's Board of Trustees (the "SUNY Trustees") an analysis of the school's performance. The Institute makes a renewal recommendation for the school based largely on two key components: the school's attainment of its academic 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

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to renewal, the Institute focuses on specific academic and organizational benchmarks (called Qualitative Education Benchmarks). These benchmarks 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 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 develop further 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 brief 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

Icahn 7 had strong instructional leadership in place at the time of the first year visit.

- Icahn 7 leaders instilled a culture of learning, scholarship and high expectations for teacher and student performance as evidenced by the universally held conviction that all students will not only exceed state proficiency standards but will also attend and graduate from college. Kindergarten students enthusiastically informed visitors that they will be the college graduating class of 2030.
- The school's principal and staff developer provided individualized support to improve the pedagogical practices of the teaching staff by identifying areas of weakness and addressing those growth areas with multiple techniques including modeling of instruction.
- Instructional leaders worked collaboratively with external consultants to establish sustained and systemic coaching and supervision procedures. Leaders utilized a clear observation rubric to conduct formal and informal classroom observations; instructional leaders also met with teachers weekly to provide constructive, actionable recommendations to further their pedagogical competencies. Additionally, leaders coordinated peer observations at other Icahn schools several times during the school year to expose teachers to an array of instructional best practices.

- The Icahn network provided 12 full days of pre-service professional development for teachers in all Icahn schools and supported comprehensive school-level professional development activities on a monthly basis.
- Instructional leaders identified teachers' professional development needs through assessment data results and classroom observations; school leaders also considered teacher requests for particular topics. Professional development activities interrelated with classroom practice and leaders' instructional priorities. Teachers reported that school leaders are responsive to their growth needs and that they find the workshops and activities helpful in improving instructional effectiveness. Following professional development activities, the principal and staff developer monitored classroom implementation of discussed strategies to improve student learning.
- The school had a formalized teacher evaluation process that included pre- and post-observation meetings four times per year. Teachers reported the feedback they received from these evaluations accurately identified their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses and further developed their pedagogical practice.

Use of Assessment Data

Icahn 7 regularly gathered and analyzed assessment and evaluation data and used it to improve student learning and instructional effectiveness.

- The school regularly administered a variety of standardized, curriculum-based and network-wide assessments to gauge student learning and inform instruction. Based on the results of these assessments, teachers adjusted pacing calendars and re-taught lessons as necessary to meet students' needs.
- The school made student performance and assessment data available to stakeholders. School and network staff members compiled assessment results to make performance comparisons between the seven Icahn schools. Teachers provided parents with weekly summaries and bimonthly progress reports detailing student performance in all subject areas.
- In consultation with school leaders, Icahn 7 teachers performed item analyses to determine students' mastery of skills and concepts in order to adjust instruction. The adjustments included re-teaching, grouping students by ability level and referring students for intervention services. School leaders and intervention providers met with classroom teachers monthly to discuss performance data and student progress.

Curriculum

Icahn 7 had a curriculum that supported teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.

- The school used the Core Knowledge curriculum framework as its scope and sequence to determine the skills students need to learn at each grade level. Icahn 7 teachers modified the pacing calendars in the school's English language arts ("ELA") and math commercial curricula to meet the needs of their students. Underscoring the school-wide commitment to parent involvement, teachers created monthly syllabi for students and parents detailing upcoming subject area topics.
- Teachers knew what to teach and when to teach it based on pacing calendars and develop daily lesson plans that aligned to the school's curriculum. School leaders reviewed lesson plans weekly.
- Teachers at Icahn 7 accessed an abundance of curriculum materials that supported them in meeting the needs of all students; the school placed a particular emphasis on integrating technology in the classroom.

Pedagogy

At the time of the first year visit, high quality instruction was evident in most Icahn 7 classrooms.

- Teachers delivered purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the school's curriculum while using clear, age appropriate language to communicate information and build on students' prior knowledge.
- Teachers regularly and effectively used a variety of techniques such as cold calling, circulating to check student work and monitoring peer sharing to check for student understanding. Some teachers made ad-hoc adjustments to instruction based on the results of these checks; adjustments included repeated modeling, providing additional examples and assigning additional practice for skill mastery. For example, after a check for understanding revealed students were having difficulty in meeting the learning objectives for an ELA lesson, a teacher quickly added ten nouns for students to sort into different categories.
- Some teachers, often using open-ended questions, included opportunities for students to apply newly acquired concepts to real life situations, thereby challenging students to develop depth of understanding and building problem-solving skills. Demonstrating the school's emphasis on developing students' higher order thinking skills, students in a math class created multi-step word problems related to their lives and peers used manipulative blocks to solve them.
- Icahn 7 teachers communicated a sense of urgency for learning through fast-paced and engaging activities that effectively focused student attention on lesson activities. Well-rehearsed transition rituals maximized learning time and allowed teachers to maintain classroom environments with consistent focus on academic achievement across the school.

At-Risk Students

Icahn 7 was meeting the educational needs of at-risk students at the time of the first year visit.

- The school had clearly defined procedures to identify English language learners (“ELLs”), students with disabilities and students at-risk of academic failure. Icahn 7 deployed sufficient resources to provide a range of services to meet students’ various educational needs.
- As is the case in other Icahn network schools, Icahn 7 served students at-risk of academic failure through its thorough targeted assistance (“TA”) program. One full-time TA teacher provided daily small group pull-out support in ELA and math for 39 students identified for academic interventions based on assessment results. The school also offered optional after-school tutoring. In addition to collaborating with classroom teachers on the creation of grade-level pacing calendars, the TA teacher participated in all professional development activities focused on curriculum implementation to assist classroom teachers in developing effective strategies to support at-risk students.
- One part-time, certified special education teacher provided special education teacher support services (“SETSS”) in individual pull-out sessions for students with identified disabilities on a daily basis. Classroom teachers reported sufficient time for communication and collaboration with the special education teacher, though meetings occurred informally.
- A certified bilingual education teacher provided instruction in small groups differentiated by grade and level of proficiency three times per week to develop English language acquisition skills for the eight ELLs enrolled at the time of the first year visit. Classroom teachers met weekly with the ELL teacher to discuss students’ classroom performance and monitor progress.

Organizational Capacity

Icahn 7’s organization effectively supported the delivery of the educational program.

- With network support, Icahn 7 put in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems support and procedures that allowed the school to carry out its academic program.
- The school established a safe and orderly environment that was conducive to student learning. Teachers generally utilized the same behavior management system across grades and classes, with minor modifications as needed to meet the individual needs of students.
- The school allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its academic goals, including significant investment in curriculum resources, supplementary material and technology such as interactive white boards and SMART tables. Instructional leaders expected teachers to leverage various instructional technology tools to develop students’ digital literacy; as such, teachers received individualized training from an external technology consultant to maximize the tools’ utility.

These conclusions constitute the beginning of your school's record of progress toward meeting the standards constituted 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 in meeting its 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 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 Icahn 7 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

c: Jeff Litt, Superintendent (*via email*)
Laura Sullivan, Principal (*via email*)