



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

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April 13, 2015

VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL

Stephanie Mauterstock, Board Chair
Canarsie Ascend Charter School
9719 Flatlands Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11236

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Ms. Mauterstock:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its April 24, 2014 first year school evaluation visit to the Canarsie Ascend Charter School ("Canarsie Ascend"). The visit team consisted of Natasha Howard, Ph.D., the Institute's Director of School Evaluation; Heather Wendling, Senior Analyst; and Jared Boyce, an external consultant. 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 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

To Learn
To Search
To Serve



“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 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

Canarsie Ascend had strong instructional leadership in place at the time of the first year visit.

- Canarsie Ascend leaders communicated the expectation that all students will one day graduate from college in large and small ways including the inclusion of “college bound” as a category on students’ weekly progress reports.
- The school director and dean served as the instructional leadership team and supported the development of the Canarsie Ascend teaching staff. The dean worked primarily with kindergarten teachers while the school director provided primary support for 1st grade teachers.
- With weekly individual coaching sessions, instructional leaders provided sustained and systematic coaching and supervision of all teachers. The leaders followed classroom observations with timely and actionable feedback and used the findings of these observations to plan future coaching and professional development activities, which they in turn followed up on by assessing teachers’ implementation during classroom observations. In addition to discussing classroom observation findings, the weekly coaching sessions provided an opportunity for teachers to practice specific instructional techniques prior to classroom implementation. Teachers reported that the feedback they received from instructional leaders helped them in developing their pedagogical skills and in meeting students’ academic needs.

- Canarsie Ascend participated in some network-wide professional development sessions and supplemented these activities with school-specific activities based on instructional leaders' assessment of teachers' specific needs. The network and school provided three weeks of pre-service training for teachers. Instructional leaders used classroom observations as the primary determinant of weekly school-specific professional development activities but also considered assessment data.
- Instructional leaders used a network-wide rubric to conduct teacher evaluations using clear criteria including student achievement data. Teachers understood these criteria and received it in advance. According to teachers, the evaluations school leaders conducted were largely consistent with the ongoing feedback from classroom observations and coaching meetings.

Curriculum

In its first year of operation, Canarsie Ascend used a commercial curriculum that supported teachers in their delivery of instruction, but school leaders were dissatisfied with the level of rigor.

- The school had a licensing agreement with the SABIS Educational Systems, which provided pacing calendars and curricular materials to all Ascend schools. Across the network, master teachers and academic deans collaborated to develop daily lesson plans for teachers to implement. Teachers made minor revisions and adjustments to the lesson plans as necessary to meet their students' needs under supervision from instructional leaders.
- Teachers knew what to teach and when to teach it based on the aforementioned documents.
- Teachers accessed ample curriculum materials that supported them in meeting the educational needs of Canarsie Ascend students.

Use of Assessment Data

Canarsie Ascend had in place a system to gather assessment data and used the data to improve student learning to a limited degree.

- The school regularly administered a variety of standardized and other assessments to monitor each student's academic progress over the course of the year. Instructional leaders supplemented the curriculum-based assessment program with additional tests to pinpoint students' performance levels in phonics and literacy.
- Canarsie Ascend made student performance data available to teachers, school leaders and parents after each assessment cycle and distributed formal report cards three times per year. At each board meeting, a network representative presented an overview of student performance, enrollment and discipline data to the board. According to the school director,

the board focused primarily on older schools that serve testing grades during these meetings.

- To the extent possible given the rigidly structured curriculum materials, teachers regularly used assessment data to inform instruction by adjusting the pacing of lessons and forming small groups for re-teaching. Teachers also utilized assessment data to identify students in need of targeted interventions.

Pedagogy

Most teachers at Canarsie Ascend delivered rudimentary, skill-building instruction and included few opportunities to challenge students during lessons.

- Teachers delivered purposeful lessons with clear objectives aligned to the SABIS curriculum.
- Teachers utilized several methods of checking for student understanding. These techniques included a well-rehearsed peer review system, circulating around the room to monitor student work and individual questioning.
- Few teachers included opportunities in their lessons to challenge students with questions and activities that developed depth of understanding and higher-order thinking and problem solving skills. Teachers' questions focused on factual recall and did not require or encourage students to defend or elaborate on their responses.
- Teachers at Canarsie Ascend inconsistently employed classroom routines and practices to establish and maintain engaging academic environments in their classrooms. While the majority of students actively and enthusiastically participated in culture-building classroom rituals, teachers allowed some students to opt out of participation in learning activities. For example, teachers allowed students to sleep on their desks during lessons.

At-Risk Students

Canarsie Ascend adequately addressed the educational needs of students with disabilities and students at-risk of academic failure to the extent that the school's internal assessment data suggested at-risk students were performing as well as their general education peers.

General Education Students Receiving Targeted Interventions

Program	Academically struggling students received supports through a three tiered intervention system, which ranged from in-classroom interventions to daily pull-out small group or individualized support from general or special education teachers. The school's social worker supported students with behavioral needs through a daily behavior modification program.
Staff	The intervention staff consisted of three special education teachers,

	one guidance counselor, and all general education teachers based on the level of students' need.
Identification Process	The school used SABIS-created periodic exam and standardized reading assessment results to identify students for targeted interventions.
Coordination	School leaders, special education and general education teachers relied on informal weekly or biweekly meetings to review and discuss struggling students' progress. Canarsie Ascend provided no formal, regularly scheduled coordination.

Students with Disabilities

Program	The school served 14 students with disabilities through integrated co-teaching ("ICT") classrooms at each grade level and pull-out special education teacher support services ("SETSS") if mandated by student Individualized Education Programs ("IEPs").
Staff	Three certified special education teachers and six crisis management paraprofessionals provided services for students with disabilities.
Identification Process	School leaders and special education teachers recommended strategies, provided additional supports and reviewed classroom data prior to referring students who did not demonstrate adequate progress towards grade level proficiency for special education evaluations.
Coordination	School leaders, special education and general education teachers relied on informal weekly or biweekly meetings to review and discuss the progress of students with disabilities.

English Language Learners ("ELLs")

While Canarsie Ascend had a clear identification process in place, the school did not have any ELLs enrolled at the time of the first year visit.

Organizational Capacity

The Canarsie Ascend organization supported the delivery of the educational program at the time of the first year visit.

- With support from the Ascend network's central team, the school had put in place an administrative structure with staff and procedures that allowed it to carry out the academic program. The school director addressed early problems in developing adequate operational systems with a personnel change.

- Overall, the Canarsie Ascend environment was one of enthusiasm for learning. However, behavioral issues in classrooms detracted from a sustained focus on academic achievement.
- The school had allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. Well-stocked classrooms featured an abundance of learning materials such as leveled libraries and manipulatives, and teachers reported having adequate resources to support student achievement. Unlike many first-year schools, Canarsie Ascend had a multitude of staff. The abundance of personnel notwithstanding, the school did not leverage its personnel efficiently or effectively, as evident in observed problems with classroom management.
- At the time of the first year visit, the school was diligently developing the systems and protocols necessary to ensure a well-functioning school organization in the future.

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 Canarsie Ascend 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,



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

Enclosure

c: Elena Day, Chief Operating Officer, Ascend Learning (*via email*)
Arlise Carson, Acting School Director (*via email*)