



**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)

April 13, 2015

**VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL**

Mr. Samuel Cole, Board Chair  
Success Academy Charter School-Union Square  
40 Irving Place, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10003

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Mr. Cole:

This letter outlines the SUNY Charter Schools Institute's (the "Institute's") observations and findings from its June 2, 2014 first year school evaluation visit to the Success Academy Charter School-Union Square ("Success Union Square"). The visit team consisted of Institute Senior Analysts Heather Wendling and Aaron Campbell. 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's 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 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 to renewal, the Institute focuses on specific academic and organizational benchmarks (called

To Learn  
To Search  
To Serve



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. Because Success Union Square is a replication of an established high-performing school model and in keeping with its ongoing oversight of replicated programs, the Institute presents an abbreviated first-year evaluation of the school.

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**

*Success Union Square had strong instructional leadership in place at the time of the first year visit.*

- Success Union Square promoted a culture of learning and scholarship with walls and bulletin boards that celebrated high student achievement. Teachers and students internalized the "no shortcuts" concept that is a key value held by the school's not-for-profit charter management organization, Success Academy Charter Schools, Inc. (the "Success network").
- With support from the Success network, the school principal developed the skills and competencies of the teaching staff with sustained and systematic coaching based on a network-wide rubric. The principal conducted weekly informal observations of classes and provided feedback through emails, in one-on-one meetings and during weekly grade level planning meetings.
- Success Union Square implemented the network's comprehensive professional development program. Professional development activities at both the school and network levels interrelated with classroom practice and prepared teachers to meet the needs of all students.
- Success Union Square's principal used data from observations and coaching, as well as school-wide student performance trends, to determine additional professional



development needs of teachers.

- The school held teachers accountable for high performance and student achievement with mid- and end-of-year evaluations with clear criteria that teachers understood.

### **Use of Assessment Data**

*Success Union Square gathered a variety of assessment and evaluation data and used it to improve student learning and instructional effectiveness.*

- Success Union Square regularly administered standardized tests and network-created interim assessments across grade levels to monitor student progress. With an online student management system, Success Union Square made assessment results widely available to school stakeholders. The principal and education coordinator analyzed assessment results at the individual, class, grade and school level; additionally, Success Union Square compared its student achievement results to those of other schools within the network in order to improve student learning and to evaluate program effectiveness.
- Success Union Square's teachers regularly made instructional adjustments such as regrouping students by ability level based on assessment data. Teachers and instructional leaders also used assessment results to identify students for academic intervention services.

### **Curriculum**

*Success Union Square had a curriculum that supported teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction.*

- The Success network provided the school with a curriculum framework, scope and sequence documents, unit plans, lesson objectives and daily lesson plans for teachers to use in most subjects areas. Teachers created their own lesson plans for shared text and read aloud blocks, which the principal reviewed.
- Using these documents, teachers knew what to teach and when to teach it throughout the school year.
- Teachers used ample curriculum materials, such as math manipulatives and storybooks, to support them in meeting the educational needs of students.

### **Pedagogy**

*At the time of the first year visit, high quality instruction was evident throughout Success Union Square classrooms.*

- Teachers delivered purposeful lessons with clear objectives that align to the school's curriculum. Teachers integrated units across content areas and lessons reflected themes in multiple subjects. For example, a Kindergarten "supermarket" unit included lessons on food prices in math and writing about favorite foods in writer's workshop blocks.

- Teachers regularly used techniques such as cold-calling and one-on-one conferencing to check for student understanding. Teachers also used formative assessment to guide students in the completion of high quality work products on a daily basis.
- Teachers included opportunities in their lessons to challenge students with questions and activities that developed depth of understanding and higher-order thinking skills. The school focused on peer-to-peer interaction in classrooms and promoted accountable talk among students as illustrated by students working together to program miniature robots. While sharing conclusions from the lesson activity, a student remarked, “just pushing the go button only makes the robot move, but it does not automatically know which direction to go in unless you tell it and that is what programming is.” This emphasis on pushing students to have a deeper understanding of concepts was evident in all classrooms.
- Teachers highlighted student work in print rich classroom environments fully focused on academic achievement. Teachers also communicated behavioral expectations and maintained appropriate pace to maximize learning time.

#### **At-Risk Students**

*Success Union Square adequately addressed the needs of at-risk students in its first year of operation.*

- The school had clearly defined procedures for identifying students struggling academically, students with disabilities and English language learners (“ELLs”). All Success Union Square staff shared a common understanding of available interventions.
- Success Union Square provided small group push-in and pull-out special education teacher support services (“SETSS”) to students at risk of academic failure as well as to those with Individualized Education Programs (“IEPs”) mandating academic interventions. All Success Union Square teachers had or were working toward special education certification.
- As is the case in other network schools, Success Union Square served the three ELL students enrolled at the time of the first year visit in its core, general education English language arts program, which was print rich, writing focused and emphasized student-to-student interaction.
- The special education team met weekly to discuss all struggling students. During these weekly meetings, instructional staff reviewed student data on interim assessments and discussed teachers’ classroom observations of students to monitor progress.

#### **Organizational Capacity**

*With assistance from the network, Success Union Square effectively delivered its educational program.*

- Success Union Square had in place an administrative structure with staff, operational systems and procedures that allowed it to carry out the academic program. The school’s

business manager handled all operational issues at the school, freeing the instructional leadership, with network support, to focus on teaching and learning.

- In collaboration with the Success network, the school established a safe and orderly environment for students and staff.
- Success Union Square allocated an abundance of resources to support student achievement. Teachers used technology such as SMART boards and iPads in classrooms to facilitate lesson activities, to increase student independence and to reach students with multiple learning styles.
- The Success network worked closely with school leadership to put in place systems and protocols such as procedures to identify at-risk students to ensure the school develops as a well-functioning organization.

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 Success Union Square 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: Paola Zalkind, Principal (*via email*)  
Eva Moskowitz, CEO, Success Academy Charter Schools, Inc. (*via email*)