



# Charter Schools Institute

The State University of New York

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

September 6, 2013

**VIA ELECTRONIC AND FIRST CLASS MAIL**

Graeme Daykin, Board Chair  
Explore Exceed Charter School  
443 St. Marks Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11238

Re: First Year School Evaluation Visit

Dear Mr. Daykin:

This letter outlines the State University of New York's Charter Schools Institute's ("the Institute's") observations and findings from its May 17, 2013 first year school evaluation visit to the Explore Exceed Charter School ("Explore Exceed"). The visit team consisted of Natasha Howard, Ph.D., the Institute's Director of School Evaluation, Liz Genco, Director of Charter School Information at the Institute, and Eileen Coppola, Ed.D, an external consultant. Allow us 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 SUNY Board of 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 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 SUNY Charter Renewal Benchmarks (see attachment). For formal school evaluation visits conducted prior to renewal, the Institute focuses on specific academic and organizational Renewal Benchmarks (called Qualitative Educational Benchmarks). They 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. As a first year school is in its formative stage and has not yet completed an annual cycle, the visit focus is on the initial implementation of basic practices and procedures in each benchmark area. The center of attention is on the quality of instruction and related benchmarks, which heavily affect the progress that a school is able to

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demonstrate in meeting its Accountability Plan goals during the charter term. By the time a school comes to renewal, a school is expected to have moved from the beginning of implementation and the promise of future growth to full and effective implementation of a quality program.

Although the information provided in this letter is not intended as a prescription, 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.

#### **Use of Assessment Data**

***The school gathers assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve student learning.***

- Explore Exceed administers a variety of assessments throughout the school year. The school administers the Fountas & Pinnell three to four times a year at all grades to measure students' reading levels; the school also administers the Terra Nova across grades in the spring. Explore Exceed administers Journeys unit tests five times a year in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The school also administers Achievement Network interim assessments for English language arts four times per year in grades 2-3 as well as math interim assessments created by the Explore network every six to eight weeks across all grades.
- Explore Exceed teachers meet regularly in grade-level teams to analyze assessment data, using it to adjust student groupings and develop re-teaching plans. The school also participates in four network-wide "Data Days" during which instructional teams review achievement data.
- The school has five terms, each lasting approximately six weeks, and distributes report cards at the end of each of these five terms during the school year.

#### **Curriculum**

***Explore Exceed has a curriculum that supports teachers in their planning and delivery of instruction.***

- The school utilizes scope and sequences as well as pacing guides provided by the Explore network; teachers work together to develop unit plans. Supported by instructional leaders, teachers collaborate on development of daily lesson plans for reading, writing and mathematics in weekly grade team meetings.
- Explore Exceed utilizes Journeys for ELA instruction and Full Option Science System for science. Explore Exceed uses the TERC Investigations as its math curriculum and supplements it with resource material from a number of commercial sources including Context for Learning, My Math, Envisions and Do the Math. Teachers continue to develop instructional materials for social studies.

- Teachers have access to ample curriculum materials that support them in meeting the educational needs of students. These include leveled libraries of trade books, smart boards and computers.

### **Pedagogy**

***Adequate instruction is generally evident throughout the school during whole group instruction; however, students tend to disengage during independent practice.***

- Teachers deliver purposeful lessons focused clearly on learning objectives that reflect deliberate planning; however, lessons do not consistently include opportunities to challenge students with questions and activities that develop depth of understanding and encourage higher-order thinking.
- Teachers routinely circulate around classrooms to check students' written work, which is frequently open-ended and allows students latitude to create their own writing or math problems. Although checks for understanding are frequent, teachers miss opportunities to deepen students' understanding through higher level questioning.
- Teachers are diligent in reinforcing school-wide behavioral norms; however, frequent redirects for low-level misbehavior reduce instructional time and distract from a focus on academic achievement in some classrooms.
- Students are often off-task when not being directly engaged by a teacher. Low student engagement in lessons is common during independent practice.

### **Instructional Leadership**

***Explore Exceed has strong instructional leadership.***

- The school leadership effectively promotes an environment of high expectations for teacher performance and student success. Explore Exceed actively involves families in promoting high expectations for students and requires parents to check students' homework daily to reinforce the school's focus on a positive learning environment; the school reports 100 percent participation in both rounds of parent-teacher conferences held during the school year.
- In addition to the principal, two academic directors comprise the instructional leadership team, which is adequate to support the development of the school's 31 teachers.
- Explore Exceed has implemented a sustained and systematic coaching program, in which the instructional team provides targeted coaching to five to eight teachers at a time during each of the school's five terms. Academic directors conduct weekly one-on-one coaching meetings during which they provide feedback on recent classroom observations, linking these conversations to progress on areas of growth in instructional practice identified at the start of the year. Instructional leaders determine focus areas for each teacher based on school-wide expectations for pedagogical practice. The school principal also coaches the academic directors in a sustained and systematic manner, often reviewing videotaped sessions of the academic directors coaching teachers and providing feedback on the coaching sessions during weekly one-on-one meetings.

- In addition to rotating targeted coaching, Explore Exceed's instructional leaders conduct frequent classroom observations of all teachers and determine priorities for professional development activities based on trends in pedagogical practice noted during these observations. Student performance, as reflected in assessment data, also drives decisions about professional development needs.
- Explore Exceed conducts ongoing professional development activities that assist teachers in meeting students' academic needs. In addition to three weeks of pre-service training held over the summer, the school conducts weekly professional development sessions throughout the school year.
- The school's principal has begun to conduct teacher evaluations based on clear criteria.

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

***The school is beginning to implement systems to address the educational needs of at-risk students.***

- Explore Exceed deploys sufficient resources to provide academic intervention services to address the needs of students with disabilities and students who are struggling academically. The school currently enrolls 23 students with Individualized Education Plans requiring academic services with one collaborative teaching classroom at each grade and with SETTS provided by a full-time student support services coordinator.
- The school currently enrolls 13 English language learners ("ELLs") whom it serves without a formal program in place. According to the school leader, eight of these students are performing at or above grade level. Several ELL students receive academic intervention services in pull-out groups with students who are struggling academically.
- The school does not provide a scheduled time for on-going coordination between general and at-risk teachers.

#### **Organizational Capacity**

***The school organization supports the delivery of the educational program.***

- With a director of operations leading an operations team that provides considerable support, the school has created an administrative structure that allows instructional leaders to focus on teaching and learning. The operations team manages enrollment and assessment data as well as the majority of day-to-day administrative tasks. The Explore network collaborates with the school's operations team to provide additional support for the school.
- Explore Exceed has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals. Classrooms are well staffed and well stocked with two assigned teachers and ample resource materials.
- The school has established a safe and generally orderly environment. Hallway transitions are notably quiet and efficient.
- Explore Exceed has begun to implement the systems and protocols necessary to ensure a


well functioning school. The school benefits from its relationship with the Explore network, which has developed a number of systems and procedures during other school start-ups. The principal and director of operations work together effectively to implement network protocols and adapt structures as necessary to meet the school's needs.

These conclusions constitute the beginning of your school's record of progress toward meeting the standards constituted in SUNY's Renewal Benchmarks. The Institute conducts formal evaluation visits multiple times during each school's initial charter term and 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.

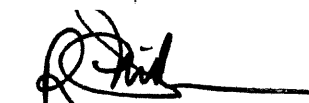
The number of school evaluation visits the Institute will conduct before renewal depends on a variety of factors. In addition to adhering to a regular schedule of visits, concerns raised in the conclusions of previous visits, the school's progress toward meeting Accountability Plan goals and emergent legal and compliance issues may affect the frequency and timing of the visits.

The Institute looks forward to its next visit to Explore Exceed 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,



Susan Miller Barker  
Executive Director



Ron Miller, Ph.D  
Executive Deputy Director for Accountability

c: Curtis Palmore, Principal  
Ken Baum, Chief Academic Officer, Explore Schools