

THE SUNY CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE

SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT
**BUFFALO COMMONS CHARTER
SCHOOL**

VISIT DATE: MAY 14, 2025

REPORT DATE: JULY 24, 2025

SUNY Charter Schools Institute

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Charter Schools Institute
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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This School Evaluation Report offers an analysis of evidence collected during the school visit to Buffalo Commons Charter School (“Buffalo Commons”) on May 14, 2025. While the SUNY Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) conducts a comprehensive review of evidence related to all the [State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks](#) (the “SUNY Renewal Benchmarks”) near the end of a charter term, most mid-cycle charter school evaluation visits focus on a subset of these benchmarks addressing the academic success of the school and the effectiveness and viability of the charter school organization. It provides a framework for examining the quality of the educational program, focusing on teaching and learning (e.g., curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and services for at-risk students), as well as leadership, organizational capacity, and board oversight. The Institute uses the established criteria on a regular basis to provide schools with a consistent set of expectations leading up to renewal.

The Appendix to the report contains a School Overview with descriptive and historical information about the school, as well as background information on the conduct of the visit. Together this information puts the visit in the context of the school’s current charter term.

This report serves as a summary of the school’s program based on the Qualitative Education Benchmarks. The Institute intends this selection of information to be an exception report in order to highlight areas of concern. As such, limited detail about positive elements of the educational program is not an indication that the Institute does not recognize other indicators of program effectiveness.

While the Institute posts the evaluation report on its website and makes it publicly available, the Institute encourages school leaders to share the report with its stakeholders including, but not limited to, the full board of trustees, staff members, and families.



CHARTER BACKGROUND

BUFFALO COMMONS CHARTER SCHOOL

833 Michigan Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14203 | Grades: K-3 | Buffalo City School District



MISSION

Buffalo Commons is an academically rigorous, creative, and collaborative Kindergarten – 8th grade learning community that uses research-based teaching practices and innovative programming to eliminate the opportunity gap and prepare a diverse student body for successful lives that strengthen their communities.

CURRENT CHARTER

Opened:
2022

Serves:
Kindergarten – 3rd

Chartered Enrollment:
200

Charter Expiration:
July 31, 2027

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS

Rigorous, research-based curriculum	—	Robust social emotional learning program	+
Effective instruction	—	Partnering with families	+
Data driven approach	+	Summer professional development	+
Creative problem solving	+	Small professional learning communities	+
Value-driven school culture	+	Individualized coaching	—

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Buffalo Commons, in its third year of operation, is working toward developing effective components of its academic program to offer a diverse-by-design model to Buffalo families. The school's leadership team reflects on program implementation in its first few years and is adjusting its academic program to best meet student needs. For example, the school recently swapped phonics programs to provide teachers with more resources to ensure that they have a clear sequence and tools to offer foundational reading skills aligned with the Science of Reading. Due to lower than expected enrollment, the school operates with a slim leadership team of three members who manage multiple responsibilities and serve as the primary staff members to manage behavior and step in when a substitute teacher is needed. In the absence of a staff member dedicated to student culture, leadership team members rotate support of the reset room and are on call when teachers request in classroom assistance. These actions pull leaders away from implementing the intended coaching cycles for teachers.

Buffalo Commons is working to develop high quality teaching and learning across the school. Teachers deliver purposeful lessons in consistent ways across the program. Each classroom features two teachers, and each teacher has a clear sense of purpose during lessons. Classroom instruction focuses on small group instruction, and teachers excel during this time by conducting checks for understanding and working closely with students. However, management skills vary from classroom to classroom, and some teachers struggle with minor disruptions throughout lessons. A few teachers also exhibit low expectations for what students are capable of, reporting that they do not use resources from the curricular program because the materials are too challenging for students. The school has not developed teachers' skillsets in a way that combats this mindset to ensure that student learning is accelerated with a balance of both remediation and grade level teaching to meet the rigor of the grade level standards.

BENCHMARK SUMMARY

QUALITATIVE BENCHMARK ANALYSIS

The SUNY Renewal Benchmarks, grounded in the body of research from the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University,¹ describe the elements in place at schools that are highly effective at providing students from low-income backgrounds the instruction, content, knowledge, and skills necessary to produce strong academic performance.

ASSESSMENT

Buffalo Commons is developing its assessment system to improve instructional effectiveness. The school regularly administers valid and reliable assessments aligned to state standards. However, teachers do not consistently use the suite of required assessments from the curricular programs because they deem the assessments too difficult for Buffalo Commons students, indicating low academic expectations.

The suite of assessments provides teachers and leaders with a robust set of data, and teachers access via the assessment platform or in school-created spreadsheets. Teachers reported a desire to have a system for sharing informal data from small group phonics instruction across teaching groups. Teachers are at the beginning stages of using data systems to drive instructional decisions, and leaders recognize specific areas to improve teachers' overall use of assessment results to adjust instruction and group students. While benchmark assessments help inform groupings, teachers report using observations and anecdotal data to adjust groupings in between testing administrations.

Leaders have not provided teachers with regular touchpoints to analyze data or build data analysis skills. As a result, teachers lack the support needed to use assessment data to guide instruction effectively. The school has not yet fully implemented a system to ensure that assessment data drives purposeful instructional planning and delivery.

CURRICULUM

Buffalo Commons is developing its curricular programs to support teachers with instructional planning. The school has a clear curricular framework with commercial curricular programs aligned to the rigor of the state standards. While the school is clear in its curricular programs and usage for teachers, such as the EL Education for English language arts ("ELA"), Really Great Reading for phonics, and Bridges in Mathematics for mathematics, teachers have autonomy to make choices in using materials especially given the current school schedule does not accommodate the time necessary to deliver the full EL Education experience. Therefore, teachers must decide which components to use for lessons. With limited guidance from leaders, this sometimes leads to teachers making decisions informed by low expectations for what students are capable of and students not experiencing teaching at the level of rigor required by state standards.

Buffalo Commons provides teachers with supporting tools to bridge the curricular framework and lesson plans. For the 2024-25 school year, the school introduced pacing guides to support teachers' sequencing of topics and timing throughout the year. Teachers use the commercial program's unit plans and teacher guides to

1. An extensive body of research, including a [report from Harvard](#) and a [report from the United States General Accounting Office](#), identifying and confirming the correlates of effective schools exists dating back four decades.

BENCHMARK SUMMARY

support planning individual lessons. With these tools in place, teachers know what to teach and when. With leaders managing multiple responsibilities daily, the instructional leader does not have capacity to provide close oversight over the pacing or quality of materials teachers select for lessons.

Teachers do not yet plan purposeful and focused lessons. While the school provides a lesson template with required components expected in each lesson, leaders do not require teachers to use the template. Therefore, classrooms vary in the quality of purposeful planning. Teachers' planning does not consistently reflect high expectations for student learning.

PEDAGOGY

Buffalo Commons has some aspects of high quality instruction evident across the school. Teachers deliver engaging lessons that vary in rigor due to some teachers' low expectations for student learning. While students engage in tasks, the Institute observed activities well below grade standard in some classrooms. Lessons align with a common topic and skill, and teachers have clear roles and responsibilities for active teaching. The school uses a diversity of co-teaching strategies, and teachers generally support students through small group instruction, which allows teachers to provide regular support to students. Teachers regularly and effectively check for student understanding in the small group format. Some teachers use these opportunities to facilitate questions to students to help build their knowledge, and some teachers would directly give the answer and move on.

Teachers do not yet consistently provide students with opportunities to challenge themselves through critical thinking tasks. Some teachers use effective questioning strategies during small group instruction, but the Institute did not observe this same practice being translated to whole group instruction. Teachers consistently use station teaching to provide small group instruction, and in some classes, teachers did not effectively differentiate station work to meet students' needs.

Teachers do not yet have effective management and pacing strategies to create a consistent focus on academic achievement. Many teachers have clear strategies to manage classroom discipline, and most rooms demonstrate calm, welcoming learning environments. Teachers struggled with managing minor behaviors in a few classrooms, which often led to more disruptive behaviors. In many classrooms, teachers' pacing did not demonstrate high expectations for what students could complete. Teachers report spending more time on concepts that focus on remediation, and may not have completed aspects of the curricular program to provide students a fulsome, rigorous grade level experience.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Buffalo Commons is establishing structures to facilitate strong instructional leadership, but has not yet dedicated sufficient resources to ensure leaders can support the development of the whole teaching staff. The director of teaching and learning and the school community ("DSC") meets weekly with each set of co-teachers and conduct cross-grade meetings dedicated to Kindergarten – 1st and 2nd – 3rd grade needs. Teachers use the time to work with one another under a leader's supervision to review work samples or data trends and design student groupings, plan collaboratively, and discuss concerns. While teachers value the opportunities

BENCHMARK SUMMARY

to receive guidance from instructional leaders, some require more targeted coaching and observation cycles to develop the capacity to deliver high quality instruction. Further, the monthly professional development sessions leaders deliver are not consistently aligned with high-leverage classroom needs, such as effectively adapting the curricula, managing classroom behaviors, or incorporating specific strategies to support English language learners (“ELLs”) and students with individualized education programs (“IEPs”) in their classrooms. Despite opportunities to meet and plan collaboratively, teachers struggle to prepare high quality lessons using the school’s curricula.

Buffalo Commons does not demonstrate an environment of consistently high expectations in which teachers believe all students can succeed and instructional leaders hold teachers accountable for student achievement. While leaders observe lessons and provide feedback to teachers through the SchoolMint Grow platform, their ability to improve the overall quality of instruction is hindered by a lack of leadership development and competing demands on leaders’ time, including covering lunch duty, overseeing the school’s reset room, and attending to other operational tasks that detract time from coaching teachers. Teachers feel that the school’s leadership team is responsive to feedback and generally helpful. Still, leaders have not yet proactively created the systems of support and development needed to improve instruction across the program, given the differentiated needs of the school’s teaching staff.

AT-RISK PROGRAM

Buffalo Commons’s at-risk programming does not meet the needs of all students. Although leaders are developing systems to serve students with IEPs, ELLs, and students struggling academically, the lean staffing model limits the school’s capacity to implement a dedicated, comprehensive system of supports for all learners.

At the time of the visit, Buffalo Commons was adjusting its intervention programming due to staffing constraints. The school began the year with a tiered response to intervention (“RTI”) program for reading and mathematics in which Americorps service members delivered small group instruction to students based on STAR results, classroom assessments, SIPPS Beginning Reading performance, and Bridges Interventions data. However, leaders paused much of the intervention programming when two corps members departed midyear, and the Americorps partnership was ultimately terminated due to federal spending cuts. Buffalo Commons uses daily reading foundation blocks to deliver literacy interventions in response to interruptions. Leaders create cross-grade student groupings based on phonics and reading skills, and teachers work with small groups, collecting data on a four week cycle. However, classroom teachers cannot readily access data to understand what students are working on in one another’s small groups. Additionally, the school lacks any codified mathematics support for students below grade level beyond in-class station teaching and use of IXL during independent practice. Leaders recognize the need to restructure intervention in the next school year to ensure quality and consistency in teachers’ implementation and accuracy in the school’s evaluation of students’ progress.

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The DSC and the executive director each oversee aspects of the school's special education services, but do not coordinate effectively to ensure a compliant, consistent program for identifying, supporting, and monitoring students with IEPs. The school does not yet facilitate adequate systems, staffing, or guidance to ensure teachers have strategies to support students within the general education program. In the third year of operation, the DSC developed systems to facilitate data collection, referrals, and timely communication with the districts' committees on special education ("CSE") to identify students with disabilities, but the school lacked these structures in previous years of the charter term. While the DSC implements a process to gather information from teachers to assess present levels of educational performance ("PLEPs") as part of the referral process following parent conferences, ongoing progress monitoring for students with existing IEPs is an area of need. Some teachers are unfamiliar with their students' IEP goals, and the school lacks a clear process to monitor the success of at-risk students.

Buffalo Commons is in the process of identifying a small number of students as ELLs based on the results of the home language questionnaire, but the school has not administered the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners ("NYSITELL"), citing delays in the receipt of testing materials. At the time of the visit, the school did not implement any ELL programming, and it was not evident that leaders had a plan to deliver a compliant program once students were officially identified.

While Buffalo Commons provided professional development on special education and intervention services during summer training, leaders have not delivered ongoing professional development related to at-risk programming, nor have they taken steps to ensure mid-year hires have access to their students' IEPs. Given the school's small size, teachers and leaders communicate regularly on an informal basis about student concerns and efforts to meet their academic and behavioral needs. However, at the time of the visit, individuals across the school lacked the resources, training, monitoring capabilities, and coordination necessary to deliver effective, compliant programs to support at-risk students.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Buffalo Commons is developing the organizational capacity necessary to deliver an effective educational program. The school has been limited in adding administrative positions due to financial constraints stemming from low enrollment. Buffalo Commons has operated at about 50% of its chartered enrollment throughout the charter term. It lacks dedicated leadership roles for operations and student support, including at-risk programming, which it planned for in the school's charter application. Recognizing that teachers lacked clarity on each administrator's role in the program delivery, leaders took action ahead of the 2024-25 school year to delineate an administrative structure with clear lines of accountability and prescribed responsibilities. While staff members generally understand who to go to within the organization for needs relating to academics and student culture, Buffalo Commons's operational systems, policies, and procedures to support the function of the school are deficient. Specifically, Buffalo Commons has struggled to maintain fiscal and operational compliance in its reporting to the Institute and the New York State Education Department ("NYSED") and systems to support programming for ELLs and students with IEPs.

BENCHMARK SUMMARY

Buffalo Commons does not maintain adequate student enrollment, and neither the board nor the leadership describes specific strategies to rectify the school's issues. Given the impact of enrollment on the school's ability to expand staffing, Buffalo Commons must strengthen its operational systems to increase enrollment and enable the academic programming outlined in the school's charter agreement.

Buffalo Commons implements a clear behavior support and discipline system, although some teachers require additional development to manage student behaviors effectively within the classroom setting. The school integrates the Caring School Community social emotional learning curriculum and expects teachers to use tools such as classroom calming corners to help students regulate their emotions while remaining engaged in the day's learning. Buffalo Commons uses a reset room, overseen by the DSC, to guide students in reflecting on their behaviors, repairing harm, and practicing positive social skills when they are removed from the classroom. The DSC, with the support of two social work interns, is a resource for teachers in developing their capacity to support students' social emotional learning. However, the DSC has limited opportunities to observe and coach teachers in the classroom to understand the root causes of student issues because of the all-day schedule of the reset room. Teachers indicate that the DSC's coaching and training are valuable but limited due to the competing demands on the role.

Despite the administrative challenges, Buffalo Commons worked to improve staff culture in response to issues surfaced from a staff survey at the end of the 2023-24 school year. Most teachers are new to the school but report strong relationships and a positive dynamic with school leaders. To encourage staff retention, leaders have implemented retention bonuses to discourage midyear exits, which caused disruptions in the previous school year. Leaders are reflective about the profile of a successful Buffalo Commons teacher and are determining how best to adjust the hiring process to identify strong candidates who will align with the school's priorities. However, as of the May 2025 visit, leaders have not yet clarified which roles outside of teaching staff the school will add in the 2025-26 school year, creating uncertainty for staff members about the trajectory of the school and what to expect regarding leadership support in future years.

BOARD OVERSIGHT & GOVERNANCE

Buffalo Commons's board is developing its skills to work effectively to achieve the school's Accountability Plan goals. Board members possess the necessary skills to provide oversight to the school effectively. The board is seeking additional members with experience in facilities maintenance and marketing, and an additional member with finance experience. The board experienced some turnover during the current school year, including one member dissatisfied with how the school handled a disciplinary action against a student. The situation spurred more communication across the leadership team. At the time of the visit, the board reflected on how it would increase opportunities for all leadership team members to have clear communication with board members to foster a trusting and open environment for when school issues need to rise to the level of the board. The board is exploring how it will most effectively use staff survey results and looking at more ways in which all leaders have lines of communication with the board.

The board requests and receives sufficient information to oversee the school's program and finances. The academic excellence committee meets regularly to review the academic results dashboard and reports to the full board. In addition to academic achievement, the board regularly reviews enrollment, discipline, and

BENCHMARK SUMMARY

finances. The board would like more input from other school-based staff members, the community, and families. The board establishes clear priorities and long-range goals. For this school year, the board prioritizes fundraising and facilities in addition to strong academic results. The board set a fundraising goal of \$40,000, higher than the prior year's goal, and reported about \$15,000 raised as of the Institute's site visit. For facilities, the board is determining a timeline to secure a new facility.

The board is aware of the school's tardiness in submitting reports and information in a timely fashion to both the Institute and the NYSED. The board recognizes a need to expand the leadership team's capacity by building out its operations team. It has plans to review this for the upcoming school year based on the school's budget for the 2025-26 school year. It also recognizes the need to build up the operational team to increase capacity with the current team and focus on their respective roles. The Institute also issued its second violation to the school due to the late submission of its annual audit for two years. The board has engaged a new auditing firm to rectify the timeliness issues.

Buffalo Commons

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APPENDICES

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BUFFALO COMMONS CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD OF TRUSTEES¹

CHAIR	TRUSTEES
Trey Thompson	Kevin L. Southern
VICE CHAIR	Zakiyyah Missert
Jesi Miller	Latricia Davis
TREASURER	Ruqayyah Simmons
Mark Baetzhold	
SECRETARY	
Krystle Hinton	

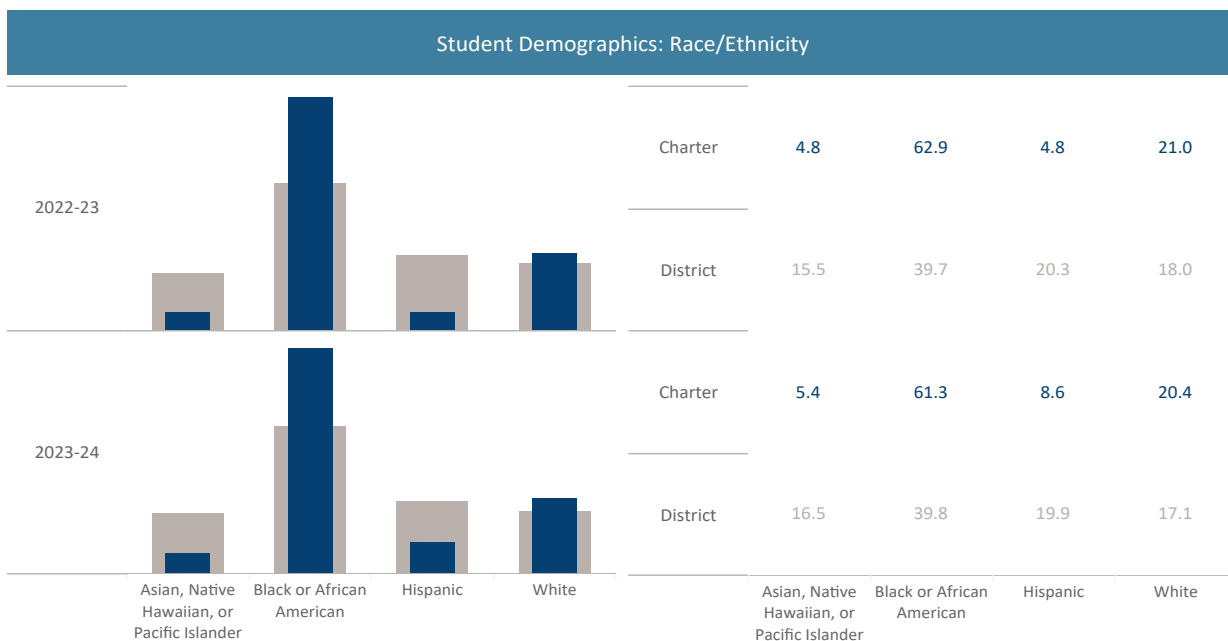
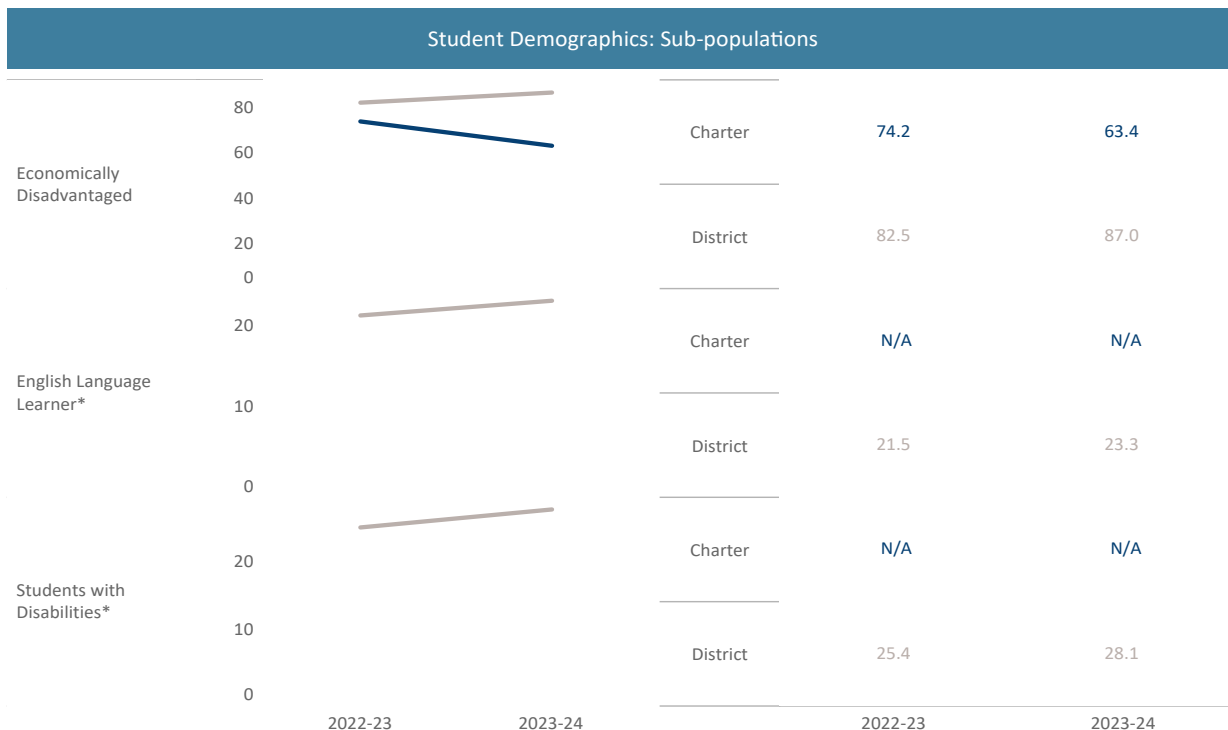
CHARTER CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL YEAR	CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT ²	ACTUAL AS A PERCENTAGE OF CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	GRADES SERVED
2022-23	100	58	58%	K-1
2023-24	150	86	57%	K-2
2024-25	200	95	48%	K-3

1. Source: The Institute’s board records at the time of the visit.
2. Source: Institute’s Official Enrollment Binder. (Figures may differ slightly from New York State Report Cards, depending on date of data collection.)

Buffalo Commons Charter School

Buffalo City School District



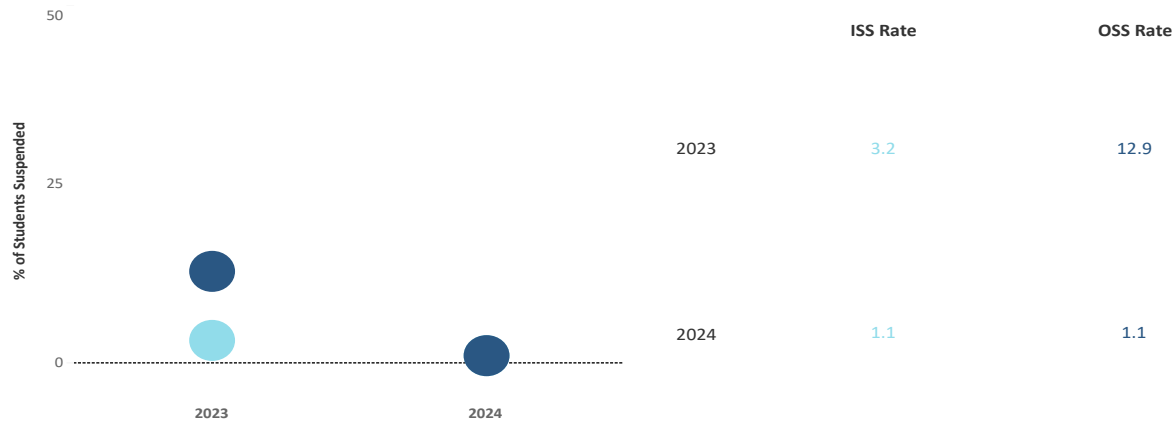
*Due to an error in data reporting, enrollment rates for English language learners and students with disabilities are unavailable for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years.

Data reported in these charts reflect BEDS day enrollment counts as reported by the NYSED.

APPENDIX A: SCHOOL OVERVIEW



Buffalo Commons Charter School



Data suitable for comparison are not available. The percentage rate shown here is calculated using the method employed by NYCDOE: the total number of students receiving an in school or out of school suspension at any time during the school year is divided by the total enrollment, then multiplied by 100.

Persistence in Enrollment: The percentage of students eligible to return from previous year who did return

Expulsions: The number of students expelled from the charter each year

	2023	2024
2023-24	100.0	0

Buffalo Commons Charter School's Enrollment and Retention Status: 2023-24			Target	Charter
enrollment	economically disadvantaged		81.2	64.1
	English language learners*		18.7	N/A
	students with disabilities*		18.4	N/A
retention	economically disadvantaged		93.6	100.0
	English language learners*		95.3	N/A
	students with disabilities*		94.1	N/A

*Due to an error in data reporting, enrollment rates for English language learners and students with disabilities are unavailable for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years.

Discipline data above reflect information reported by the education corporation and validated by the Institute. Enrollment and retention data reflect available BEDS day information as reported by the NYSED.

CHARTER SCHOOL VISIT HISTORY

SCHOOL YEAR	VISIT TYPE	DATE
2022-23	First Year	May 12, 2023
2024-24	Evaluation Visit	May 14, 2025

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

DATE(S) OF REVIEW	EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS	TITLE
May 14, 2025	Andrew Kile	Director of School Evaluation
	Katy Clayton	School Evaluator

CHARTER CYCLE CONTEXT

CHARTER TERM	TERM YEAR	ANTICIPATED RENEWAL VISIT
Initial	Third Year of its Five Year Charter Term	Fall 2026

