

April 12, 2024

Susan Gibbons  
Charter School Liaison, Charter School Office  
New York State Education Department  
EB 5N Mezzanine  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12334

Dear Ms. Gibbons:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit evaluative comments to the final Exploration Elementary Charter School for Science & Technology (Exploration) Renewal Site Visit Report dated April 5, 2024.

In 2022, Exploration received a two-year renewal term (July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2024). The table below shows Exploration improved academic, operational, and fiscal practices during our first renewal term.

Benchmark Ratings Beginning and End of First Renewal Term			Number of Benchmark Ratings														
Benchmark	2022 Rating	2024 Rating															
1	Approaches	FFB	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>2022</th> <th>2024</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Meets</td> <td>2</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Approaches</td> <td>7</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Falls Far Below</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				2022	2024	Meets	2	8	Approaches	7	1	Falls Far Below	1	1
	2022	2024															
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8	Approaches	Meets															
9	Falls Far Below (FFB)	Approaches															
10	Approaches	Meets															

Each performance benchmark is important and necessary to support student success and earn charter renewal. That said, we recognize the critical importance of Benchmark 1: Student Performance and discuss this benchmark below.

**Benchmark 1:**

As stated in the final renewal site visit report, Exploration is currently +3 percentage points above the district of location (DoL) in ELA and +5 percentage points above the DoL in math. This tells us Exploration continues to outperform the DoL and provide families in the heart of Rochester with expanded choices.

However, outperforming the DoL is insufficient. Unsatisfied with student performance outcomes, we continue to use data to inform actions to meet our and the Regents' expectations for high performance. As stated in our renewal application, our data-driven program pivots in direct response to students' and teachers' needs. For example, new curricular materials (math and ELA); longer instructional periods, supplemented by daily (M-Th) intervention periods; comprehensive professional development; and more

intense and diverse supports (e.g., counseling, student support, and behavior intervention plans, etc.) have been implemented over the renewal term. While each of these have contributed to growth in student performance, current data indicates the urgent need for a pivot in our focus on teaching and learning. More specifically, data (performance, observation data, etc.) indicates our teachers need greater and more consistent support in implementing the curriculum with fidelity, consistently differentiating lessons to maximize individual student performance, and actively receiving coaching support designed to address specific needs. Therefore, funds have been allocated to hire four instructional coaches beginning in SY2024-25. Qualitative evaluations show coaches can help instructors apply standards-based policy to their daily teaching strategy. There is also evidence<sup>1</sup> that instructional [coaching can help close the equity gap](#).

In our school leaders' conversation (held on April 11) with the School Director of ██████████ Charter School (per the suggestion from NYSED Charter School Office member ██████████), we learned that the schools share many practices. Both schools implement similar standards-aligned curricula, maintain low staff-to-student ratios, utilize data to make decisions, etc. We also affirmed that rigorous and systematic teacher coaching has contributed to Discovery Charter School's successful turnaround efforts.

In 2021, ██████████ Charter School's Benchmark 1 was rated Falls Far Below. Following a three-year renewal term, data shows the school has significantly accelerated student performance. Documentation shows the school may receive a full five-year renewal term in the summer of 2024.<sup>2</sup> Evidence strongly suggests that a well-designed instructional coaching program improves teacher practice and student outcomes. This is particularly important given the pool of teachers available for hire in Rochester, a city experiencing population<sup>3</sup> and enrollment declines.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Exploration, ██████████ explained they have found it difficult to hire experienced teachers. [Survey data](#) found that novice teachers reported the highest impact of instructional coaching on their efficacy.

The conversation also provided us with input regarding coach assignments. Research shows that content-specific coaching in reading and math has greater effects on teaching and learning than coaching focused on general teaching practices. Therefore, we anticipate coaches will be assigned by content level rather than grade level.

Coaches will supplement our provision of classroom resources and materials. They will observe instruction and provide feedback with greater frequency. Teachers will learn and practice new skills under the supervision of their coach, who will provide immediate feedback. Coaches will model high-impact instructional practices to increase rigor and teachers' ability to differentiate instruction. Coaches and teachers will engage in consistent student-focused conversations that explicitly target students' needs. They will plan together to effectively use proven strategies while ensuring instruction transfers to desired academic performance outcomes.

Finally, we learned ██████████ CS entered a three-year contract with an organization to provide coaching strategies. Therefore, over the next three years, we expect efforts taken will supplement Exploration's

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.k12dive.com/news/how-a-team-of-instructional-coaches-helps-turn-around-low-performing-school/587257/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/charter-schools/discovery-nl-9-14-23.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.timesunion.com/projects/2023/new-york-migration/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.whec.com/top-news/where-have-all-the-school-children-gone/>

ability to 1. support students in gaining grade-level proficiency and 2. meet or exceed Benchmark 1 during our second renewal term.

Overall, Exploration has made significant improvements this renewal term. We look forward to continuing our work with the CSO through our second renewal term and making continued improvements to serve our Rochester students and families. At Exploration Elementary Charter School for Science & Technology (Exploration), we remain committed to **every child, every family, every day**.

Sincerely,

Maya Crane, Board Chair

Rachelle Simmons, Principal