



Charter School Annual Site Visit Report
Charter School Office
2009-2010

EXPLORE EMPOWER
CHARTER SCHOOL
ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

APRIL, 2010

Part 1: Executive Summary

School Overview and History:

Explore Empower Charter School is an elementary and middle school serving approximately 160 students from kindergarten through grade 2 in the 2009-2010 school year.¹ The school opened in 2009 with kindergarten through grade 2 and plans to grow to serve students kindergarten through grade 8.² It is currently housed in a DOE facility in District 17.³

The school population comprises 91% Black, 3% Hispanic, 1% White, and 1% Asian students. 77% of students are designated at Title I.⁴ The student body includes 1% English language learners and 8% special education students. Boys account for 60% of the students enrolled and girls account for 40%.⁵

The school is in its first year of operation and has not yet received a DOE Progress Report or an accountability determination.⁶

Annual Review Process Overview:

The NYC DOE Charter School Office conducts an annual site visit of New York City Department of Education authorized charter schools in order to assess three primary questions: is the school an academic success; is the school a viable organization; and is the school in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. The visits are conducted by representatives of the New York City Department of Education Charter School Office Accountability Team and last the duration of one school day. The annual site visit begins with a meeting with the principal and school leadership team. Subsequently, the reviewers visit classrooms and hold brief meetings with available administrators, teachers, and students. Areas of evaluation include, but are not limited to: academic goals and mission; curriculum and instruction; school culture and learning environment; assessment utilization; parent engagement; government structures and organizational design; community support; special populations; and safety and security.

The following experts participated in the review of this school:

- Robert Galli, Education Consultant
- Michael Pomeranz, New York City Urban Fellow
- Aamir Raza, Charter School Office

¹ NYC DOE ATS system

² NYC DOE ATS system and charter agreement

³ NYC DOE Location Code Generating System database

⁴ Demographic Data drawn from NYC DOE ATS System; Title I percentage from 2008 NY State Report Cards

⁵ Student Demographic data is inputted by school staff into the ATS enrollment database and summarized by NYC DOE staff.

⁶ New York State Education Department - www.nysed.gov

Part 2: Findings

What the school does well

- Curriculum and instruction are focused on high academic achievement and rigor
 - Curriculum is aligned to the NYS Standards
 - Balanced approach to literacy instruction occurs for 180 minutes each day:
 - Rigorous curricula are used to support high academic performance: *Math Expressions*, *Stern Structural Arithmetic* programs and *Story Town*
- Student assessment information is used by the teachers to drive instruction
 - Students are assessed on a regular basis using a series of benchmark tools that reflect the NYS Standards
- A strong school culture supports mission, vision and school wide expectations
 - A comprehensive structure is in place to support positive student behavioral expectations. These expectations include listening and following directions, being prepared to learn, self and peer respect, respect for the learning environment and support for optimum performance
 - Students wear uniforms to avoid unnecessary distractions which may limit academic performance
 - A series of interventions and consequences has been established to meet the behavioral expectations
 - Student safety and health are a priority in order to maintain the best teaching and learning environment for the entire school community
 - Student arrival, dismissal and daily attendance are carefully monitored
 - Each classroom is named after a college/university
- A structured parent communication system exists to ensure ongoing and regular communication between school and home
 - Cell phone connections, Parent/Teacher Association, Weekly Memo, Classroom Newsletter, Parent/Teacher Conferences, Report Cards, Progress Reports, Home-School Folder, Classroom visits by parents, Parent/Guardian Volunteer Opportunities
 - A ladder of referral has been implemented to support, promote and encourage resolution regarding social and academic parental concerns
 - Parents are encouraged to allow students to participate in a wide variety of school trips. A *Universal Field Trip Permission Slip* is completed by parents and kept on file as well as constant reminders about upcoming trips.
 - A comprehensive *Empower Charter School Parent-Student Handbook* is available and distributed to parents.
- Exemplary teaching practices are in effect
 - Classrooms are print rich and celebrate student projects and success: Historical Leaders of our Land, Solids and Liquids, Survey-Graph- Coordinate, Our Biographies
 - Tools for student success and optimum teaching are evident in all classrooms
 - Common planning and professional development for teachers and staff is built into the school calendar and schedule
 - Extended conversations were observed between teachers and students to ensure learning (K-2)
 - Clarifying questions and multiple strategies to encourage inquiry were observed (K-2)
- The school is in good financial condition and maintains appropriate internal controls

- The school possesses \$1,955,122 in current assets and \$861,598 in current liabilities
- The school exercises appropriate internal controls on its financial systems
- The school board is providing adequate and balanced oversight
 - The school board and management have found appropriate balance to support each other
 - Board gets adequate reporting and data to have meaningful dialogue at board meetings
 - Board conducts school leadership evaluation relative to several goals outlined in the charter

What the school needs to improve

- A common language and belief should be developed to assist students with identifying errors and mistakes
 - Staff needs to address the following question: At what point do we correct a student's error without discouraging creativity and inquiry?
- Plans for the school's sustainability should be addressed before the next grade evolves
 - As we grow and expand, how do we ensure and maintain our mission and vision?
- Classroom libraries should be expanded to include a variety of multi-leveled books
 - Current libraries contain a variety of on-level books

Part 3: Framing Questions

FRAMING QUESTIONS:

Throughout the Renewal Process and the life of each school's charter, the NYCDOE Charter School Office uses the following framing questions to monitor Charter School success:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
2. Has the School Been a Viable Organization?
3. Has the School Been in Compliance with All Applicable Laws and Regulations?

Annual Site Visit Rubric:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
 - Academic Goals and Mission
 - School components and curriculum align together and holistically support the mission
 - School has high academic expectations and employs strategies for the full range of students served by the school, including those at risk and those with special needs
 - Curriculum and Instruction
 - The educational plan is flexible and is adjusted to meet the performance levels and learning needs of all enrolled students
 - School implements programming to address the needs of students with disabilities and ELLs
 - Teachers demonstrate the use of differentiated instructional techniques to support the varying ways by which students learn
 - School has implemented programming for students who need remediation or acceleration
 - School Culture
 - The culture is strong, intentional, supportive and sustainable and promotes student learning
 - The school motivates all students and respects the diversity of learners and cultures in the community
 - School offers programs, activities or support services beyond academics to address students' social and emotional needs
 - School calendar and day are set to provide extra supports to ensure that students are able to meet and exceed academic goals
 - Schedule for communication to parents/students is timely and allows for due process, includes strategies to prepare students for transitions and strategies for those students who are not on schedule, presents a clear and fair system that complies with students' due process rights
 - Structures that foster the development of authentic, sustained, caring, respectful relationships among all stakeholders within school
 - Behavioral expectations and social supports that reflect the school's mission and comply with all applicable laws and regulations
 - Assessment
 - Establishes a culture of continuous improvement and accountability for student learning

- Develops assessments that shape and inform instruction on an ongoing basis and develop data that's used to gauge student, teacher and school progress through formative and summative assessment
 - Student learning measured with multiple forms of assessments/metrics
 - Develops educational goals and performance metrics that are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reflect the Mission and Time-Specific
 - Develops assessments that are appropriately aligned with curriculum, instruction, and adopted standards
 - Provides evidence of how data will influence instruction, professional development and curricular adjustments
 - Parent Engagement
 - Parent engagement strategies that integrate and mobilize parents within the school community as conduits for student success
 - Capacity to communicate effectively with parents and families
 - Parent engagement strategies that integrate and mobilize parents within the school community as conduits for student success
2. Is the School a Viable Organization
- Governance Structures and Organizational Design
 - School has articulated appropriate roles, responsibilities, and decision-making structure for school community members (including Board of Trustees and school leadership)
 - An accountability structure that provides effective oversight of the educational program and fiscal components of the school is in place and utilized
 - Board regularly reviews a data dashboard of student achievement and fiscal management that forms the basis for Board discussions and decisions
 - Board has diverse skill set that lends itself to strong educational / operational oversight
 - Board has an articulated process for ongoing policy development, Board member development and self-evaluation
 - Organizational charts are aligned with mission; roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
 - Board has developed essential strategic partnerships with organizations that support the mission of the school
 - Community Support
 - School Leadership demonstrated responsiveness to the unique needs and interests of the community to be served
 - School has established a presence in the community and has buy in from community members
3. Is the School in Compliance with Applicable Laws and Regulations
- Special Populations
 - Well-defined plan and sufficient capacity to service the learning needs of Special Education students, English Language Learners
 - School adequately addresses the academic and non academic needs of students in need of remediation, students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and gifted students
 - There is a coherent plan for meeting the non-academic needs of students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and other populations
 - School employs a process to identify students at risk of not meeting expectations and creates intervention plans and follow up
 - School demonstrates a comprehensive recruitment, enrollment and retention approach that is sensitive to the diverse needs of students
 - School admission policy and lottery preferences serve to create a student body that reflects community demographics and give a preference to community school district residents
 - Safety and Security
 - School is well maintained

- Transitions and student gatherings are orderly and well supervised
- Expectations for student behavior are well known and are enforced fairly
- School is current with all safety recruitments and drills.
- AED machines are in operation and school staff is trained in CPR