

Dear Ms. Gibbons,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Remote Renewal Site Visit Report for Discovery Charter School. Below, we briefly summarize the impact of the shutdown caused by the COVID pandemic and the subsequent cancellation of the NYS Test on both the availability of data related to academic performance (Benchmark 1) and the status of the DCS budget as of the end of the 2019-20 school year (Benchmark 4). We also provide updates on our progress toward meeting benchmarks 1, 4, 9, and 10-- information that was not available at the time of the Remote Site Visit.

**Benchmark 1:** We note that our level of compliance with Benchmark 1 is based on NYS test data gathered in spring 2019, prior to implementing our 2019-22 school turnaround process. (This process has resulted in the strong teaching and school culture referenced in the Remote Renewal Site Visit Report for Benchmarks 2 and 3.) A comparison of our internal quarterly assessment data from the 2019-20 school year to the recent 2020-21 Quarter 2 benchmark demonstrates that DCS students are showing steady progress in both Math and ELA. The overall average proficiency in grades 3-6, as of 2021 Quarter 2, is 20 percentage points higher, when compared to 2019-20.

**Benchmark 4:** In the June 30, 2020 audited financial statements, DCS recognized a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan of approximately \$643K. The PPP loan program is part of the larger Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided by the Federal government. Currently, DCS is progressing through the loan forgiveness portion of the PPP loan. DCS anticipates that the entire value of the loan will be forgiven and ultimately recognized as revenue in the 2021 school year. The forgiveness of the PPP loan will provide financial resources to the current fiscal year and beyond. Over the past few fiscal years, the DCS Board has systematically approved using previously amassed net assets to improve our academic outcomes. In addition, as we have used these resources, we have identified as part of our Strategic Plan the development of a long-term strategic plan to maintain the improved academic outcomes while meeting a long-term budget projection of financial sustainability. The DCS Board and Staff are committed to both of these critical initiatives as we move forward.

**Benchmark 9:** Discovery continues to prioritize the recruitment and retention of a more diverse student population. We have steadily increased the number of students with disabilities and students for whom English is a new language. Over a two-year period, we have increased our ENL population from 5% to, currently, 15%. Discovery aspires to further increase our ENL numbers from 15% to 20% for the 2021-22 school year. In addition to the ongoing work of our Benchmark 9 committee, we have recently developed strategies for PR/ advertising by utilizing [www.goodschoolsroc.com](http://www.goodschoolsroc.com) and other social media outlets. Since last year, our SWD population has increased from 15% to 16%. To date, our priorities in this area have been to strengthen our programming (e.g., blended classes and additional accessibility measures for SWD), and to develop and strengthen our relationships with cooperating school committees on special education. For the 2021-22 school year and beyond, strategies for recruiting students with disabilities will be an additional priority. As noted in the Remote Renewal Site Visit Report, we will in the 2021-22 lottery provide four "tickets" for students with disabilities and students for whom English is a new language.

**Benchmark 10:** The Remote Renewal Site Visit Report notes a number of deficiencies in legal compliance. As a result of a comprehensive review of bylaws and policies, the Charter School Office requested a number of changes, all of which now have been approved by the Board of Trustees and submitted to CSO. We have also taken immediate corrective action to comply fully with requirements

for background checks via fingerprinting for new employees, and the school calendar. We will review with the Charter School Office any additional compliance issues, and promptly address them.

DCS is known in the Rochester community for its safe, supportive, and joyful learning environment. After DCS completed the lottery for the 20-21 school year, it had a list of more than 600 students waiting for a vacancy in one of its 280 seats. This evidence of demand in the community is corroborated by annual surveys of DCS families, which give the school consistently high marks on all dimensions. Even though the pandemic has forced DCS to support teaching and learning remotely, the school maintains at least a 95% daily attendance and it has engaged 100% of parents in parent-teacher conferences.

On behalf of the children, families, staff and trustees of Discovery Charter School, we are grateful for the constructive feedback relative to all of the Benchmarks in the Remote Renewal Site Visit Report. As we complete the 2021-22 Action Plan, we will incorporate the corrections and changes noted above, as well as plans to continue to strengthen our work across all of the benchmarks. We recognize that our “school turnaround” process will be an ongoing process of improvement.

Yours,

Sara Varhus, Chair, Board of Trustees

Sara Castner, School Director