



January 27, 2022

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 this opportunity to respond to the final Exploration Elementary Charter School for Science and Technology (Exploration) Remote Renewal Site Report provided to us on January 12, 2022. According to the remote renewal site visit protocol, the primary purpose of the renewal site visit is to supplement and validate the information collected over the charter term by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Charter School Office (CSO). The information collected is used to inform the action taken by the Board of Regents to approve, modify, or disapprove the charter school's request for renewal. In alignment with the renewal process being one that offers the school community the opportunity to reflect on its experiences during the charter term and to make a compelling case for renewal, we are compelled to present our reflections.

Two representatives from the NYSED CSO team conducted a two-day remote renewal site visit at Exploration on October 19-20, 2021. While we understand safety and health is a top priority, we missed the opportunity for NYSED representatives to visit Exploration in person. Every day, our halls, classrooms, lunchroom, gymnasium, and playground are filled with learning, collaboration, and love. Staff members work diligently to prepare our students for success in school, college, and life in the 21st century. Driven by our mission, Exploration engages learners, their families, and the community in the processes of scientific inquiry and the use of innovative technology to develop the social, emotional, and academic tools necessary to thrive in school and in today's global world.

While we are pleased that the report recognizes that significant efforts have been taken to support students' social-emotional and mental health, we know that many of the practices (systems and routines), are best observed in person. Our dedicated, hard-working staff members, including our school leaders that have provided stable leadership over the past 2.5 years, consistently do the important work of meeting our students' needs while strengthening their well-being and delivering standards-aligned instruction. We take great pride in the learning environment that has been created and would love for you to feel the energy that many say embraces them as they walk through the door and down the halls. The energy just doesn't transfer so well over Webex and the opportunities for in-person visits to our school were limited (1 pre-opening visit (7/31/17) and 1 check in visit (4/29/19) over the charter term). Our school doors and classrooms are always open for a visit.

A five-year renewal term is important to our community in Rochester's long-term success. More specifically, Rochester crime rates are at an all-time high, with 81 homicides in 2021 (up from 51 in 2020). The crime in Rochester has had a direct impact on Exploration's student and parent community, and our school has provided impacted families with a safe and supportive environment as they manage

through challenging times. The Rochester City School District is actively managing through another transition and plans to close elementary schools as a part of their restructuring. Now more than ever, Rochester needs stable, dedicated, and innovative schools like Exploration.

The Board and School leadership are committed to our families and have confidence that the renewal term will yield an upward trend in student performance and student enrollment, as well as lead to significantly higher rates of growth. Given our commitment to the school and the community, this response takes the time to address a few points we deem germane to our request for renewal. The response is organized in alignment with the 2015 Performance Framework benchmarks and indicators in three key areas.

Key Area 1: Educational Success

Benchmark 2

Summative Evidence: At Exploration, instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of students who are performing above or below expectations.

- Exploration implements practices to align the curriculum across grades and differentiates the curriculum to provide opportunities for all students to master grade-level skills and concepts. The curriculum is designed to seamlessly incorporate differentiation so that learning content is accessible to all students. The lesson plan template is also designed to prioritize differentiation. Teachers' planning time supports differentiation; teacher's schedules include 210 planning minutes per week. Teachers use the same curriculum materials for all learners, but adjust the depth, process, or product based on students' readiness, interest, and/or learning needs. Because the school changed its ELA and math curricula in the middle of its charter term and right before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have not yet implemented the new curricula with fidelity for a complete school year. We are confident that once we have the opportunity to implement the curricula over a sustained period of time, student performance will accelerate.

Element 2a: Exploration teachers continue to increase the rigor of instruction.

- While school leaders described high-quality instruction prior to the observations, they agree with the report that lessons observed were not satisfactorily rigorous and high quality. We'd like to point out that we have made strategic changes to our curriculum that, in alignment to New York State standards, supports the school's efforts to strategically build students' foundational literacy skills, raise students' math levels, increase the level of instructional rigor, and remain true to our commitment to science. Exploration prioritizes academics and works with urgency to secure partnerships with organizations dedicated to building robust instructional practices. For example, the school recently contracted with SchoolWorks to implement its MORE (Master, Observe, Rate, and Elevate) System that provides capacity building and intentional support to elevate the overall quality of instruction.
- Shared goals and clarity of expectations (including clear definitions of commonly used terms such as rigor, relevance, and quality) support collaboration so that we all work toward the same outcomes.
- Exploration conducts ongoing observation, both scheduled and unscheduled (once per month by the principal and every two weeks by the coordinator). Observation, structured by the Danielson Rubric, is an essential element that drives instructional rigor at Exploration.

Element 3a: *Exploration will return to the normal two-session test format for Spring 2022.*

- State assessments were cancelled for the 2019-2020 school year and administered under the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic for the 2020-2021 school year. According to the October 28, 2021 memo from the NYSED, 2021 grades 3-8 assessment results are not representative of the state's student population and should not be compared to that of previous school years, statewide, or among subgroups of students.

Elements 4a and 4b: *Exploration uses an MTSS to build a system of prevention, early intervention, and supports for all students.*

- Leaders acknowledged a negative impact on academic performance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, to rapidly address students' unfinished administration of school year 2021-22, interventions began on 9/27/21 (based on previous year's i-Ready data as well as current year's scores on the Bridges Intervention Placement test for Math and the Decoding Placement Test for Corrective Reading). Interventions were further informed by current school year's data, two school days after the close of the fall diagnostic window. More specifically, the i-Ready testing window closed on October 20, 2021; results informed interventions delivered to students beginning on 10/25/21 (a few days after the virtual site visit; thus, site visitors were unable to see and/or learn about the interventions being implemented).
- Exploration's MTSS framework is characterized by a continuum of evidence-based, systemwide practices that support a rapid response to academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Our continuum of services includes Tier I – whole class and small group instruction; Tier II – small-group remediation; and Tier III – tutoring and intervention. General education teachers collaborate with special educators, intervention teachers, and the Student Support Services Coordinator who provide the tiered support services. Prioritizing intervention, we employ four interventionists (two reading and two math). In addition, our curriculum programs that are used for intervention services offer evidence-based programming appropriate for tiered instruction.

Benchmark 3

Summative Evidence: *Exploration students, living in the 5th most violent city in New York, benefit from attending Exploration, a school where they feel safe and supported.*

- During the current school leader's tenure SY 2019-20 to current, Exploration has implemented steps and a staffing plan to provide its students with a safe, positive learning environment. The school has not been designated as a Potentially Dangerous School since SY2017-18.

Key Area 2: Organizational Soundness

Benchmark 4

Financial Condition: *Exploration is in good financial health and meets the criteria for Benchmark 4.*

- Prior to the pandemic, Exploration worked diligently to put itself into a solid financial position. This was achieved through improved discretionary spend practices, increased enrollment, long term fiscal planning, and strong financial oversight by the Board of Trustees.
- Without the \$450K from the Paychex Protection Program (PPP) loan, Exploration still has a net positive balance operating at a surplus of \$1.1M, despite a global pandemic. With that said, using

the 6/30/2021 audited financial statements reducing current cash on hand by \$450,000 results in a balance of \$1,428,295. Using the formula for days of cash on hand (cash/(operating expenses – depreciation expense)/365 days), Exploration's operating expenses are \$4,245,878 and depreciation is \$78,213, resulting in Exploration's days of cash on hand of 125.09 days. Also, re-running the composite score calculation (taking out the impact of the \$450,000 gain on the PPP loan forgiveness), the change was minimal with a reduction of the composite score to 2.8.

- Exploration currently maintains no long-term debt or any other significant obligations which offers up even more flexibility for the future. This is further supported by the liquidity footnote in our 6/30/2021 audited financial statements noting that we have nearly \$2M in financial assets available for general expenditures. As a result of the forgiveness of the PPP loan, we do not have any obligation to use financial assets to pay back those monies. We also do not have significant net assets that are restricted meaning our net assets can be used as needed. Should we have any unanticipated financial issues arise, we do maintain a line of credit of \$300K to help alleviate those potential issues.

Benchmark 6

Element 1a: *Parent/Family engagement is essential to our school's success.*

- The parent to be added to our Board this school year, pending document review and CSO approval, is the third parent to serve on the board. Exploration has had 2 previous parent reps: 2-15-2018 (T. Wagstaff) and 5-10-2019 (B. Banks).

Element 1b: *The Board's work is shaped by the mission and a well-defined strategic plan.*

- While the Board most recently started implementing the newly adopted 5-year strategic plan, it has had strategic plans for each year prior. (These plans are available upon request.) On an annual basis, after discussion with school leaders, the Board updates their strategic plan.

Element 1b: *Our strategic plan provides direction to meet our long-term vision.*

- Goals, to be met "by June 2026," represent our vision and articulate our priorities for the renewal term. These goals define success and, in turn, are used to drive operations. The board meets annually to engage in strategic and continuous improvement planning. With an understanding of the school's current strengths and areas of growth, the board members assess progress toward these strategic goals and plan accordingly. According to research in the Harvard Business Review, a good strategic plan evolves and shifts as opportunities and threats arise.

Element 1b: *Board members update school policies, with urgency as necessary.*

- The board regularly updates school policies. Policies, as needed, are updated with urgency. For example, the board quickly approved the Law 2D policy in December of 2020.

Element 1e: *The Board evaluates the School Leader based on performance related to certain indicators as outlined in the school leader evaluation.*

- The principal's evaluation process is followed each year. The Board is currently finalizing the mid-year review for the current school year.
- The principal's evaluation considers Leadership Development, School Strategy and Roadmap Execution, Academic Achievement through continuous improvement, Partnerships, Security, and Fiscal Management.

- The Board is currently partnering with Board on Track to mature its current evaluation processes.

Element 1f: *Board members regularly attend meetings.*

- Documentation (2020-2021 Annual Report and an October 26, 2021, email from CSO to Exploration) states board member attendance has improved in the past 2 years.

Benchmark 7

Elements 1d and 2a: *Every classroom at Exploration is led by a certified teacher.*

- While 60 of 69 positions are filled, due to vacancies, the school is unable to provide two adults (a teacher and a teacher aide) in every K-Grade 3 classroom as described in its renewal application. Exploration is impacted by New York's teacher shortage. On January 5, 2022, Governor Hochul recognized New York's ongoing and chronic teacher shortage that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Exploration is currently implementing actions to recruit and retain teachers. For example, Exploration offers a monetary incentive of a \$2,000 sign on bonus to attract more high-quality teachers. We look forward to positive outcomes of the Governor's new investment in NY's students and teachers.¹

Key Area 3: Faithfulness to Charter and Law

Benchmark 8:

Element 1b: *Exploration offers cross cutting curricular opportunities.*

- Exploration offers students a makerspace program.
- A Science Coordinator provides schoolwide support to integrate STEM throughout the curriculum. This integration complements students' STEM instruction in the science lab and makerspace. In SY 2021-22, Exploration's Science Department added hands-on interactive science kits. The kits are used by classroom teachers during their ELA Units; they specifically cover science concepts. For example, third graders used a grade level hands-on, interactive science kit to explore Light and Sound (Unit 5). The kit aligns with their Core Knowledge Language Arts 2.0 lessons and Exploration is looking forward to seeing the student work that will come from the addition of these kits.

Benchmark 9:

Element 2: *Enrollment targets met or exceeded 85% of its maximized authorized enrollment in SY2019-20 and SY2020-21.*

- In the 2020-2021 school year, Exploration was at 85% of its maximized authorized enrollment, which increased by the time of the site visit check-in to 88% on May 12, 2021.
- Since the visit, positions have been filled; another 3rd grade section has been filled with students from our waitlist.

¹<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-new-investment-new-yorks-students-teachers-and-schools>

Benchmark 10:

Element 1a: *Board members disclose possible conflicts in financial disclosure forms.*

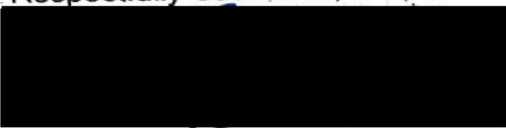
- The board chair and another member of the board are currently employed by Paychex. These members disclosed possible conflicts with their most recent submission of their financial disclosure forms in the 2020-2021 Annual Report and recused themselves from any and all discussion or votes regarding this company.

Element 1c: *Exploration will seek approval from the CSO or Board of Regents for all changes to its charter.*

- Over the current charter term Exploration requested and was approved for the following revisions:
 - Non-material: Exploration was approved to amend its school calendar were approved to better align with the RCSD calendar.
- Exploration did not request approval for all changes. For example, a summer school program was offered in summer 2021 to address students' performance that was adversely impacted by COVID disruptions to learning. While the school does not anticipate offering another summer program, they stated that changes such as this (as well as others) will be implemented once written approval has been attained from CSO or BOR.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration of this response to the renewal site visit. We look forward to working with you through the first renewal term.

Respectfully Submitted,


Carlos Cong, Board Chair


Rachelle Simmons, Principal