



Genesee Community Charter School
at the Rochester Museum & Science Center

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April 10, 2020
Susan Gibbons
Charter School Liaison, Charter School Office
New York State Education Department
EB 5N Mezzanine
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Ms. Gibbons:

On behalf of the Genesee Community Charter School, we would like to respond to the Final Renewal Site Visit Report provided April 3, 2020 holistically based on the Site Visit from November 6 – 7, 2019 as well as our application for charter renewal on August 15, 2019. This was a timely renewal for Genesee Community Charter School because in 2018, GCCS endured their first School Leadership transition with the retirement of the founding School Leader after 17 years. Additionally, within this same year, the Board President position shifted to a well-known Community Representative and parent of a GCCS graduate. Even though transitions in leadership can cause uncertainty and skepticism, this transition allowed for fresh eyes and new perspectives. Genesee Community Charter School prides itself in harnessing feedback and revision. This leadership transition allowed the community to safeguard the importance of institutional knowledge while making some essential adjustments to policies, procedures, and practices to prepare for the next 20 years as a model educational institution.

We appreciated the Renewal Site Visit Report's accurate reflection of some of the recent changes that were made to better meet the needs of our School community and be in compliance with feedback from the New York State Education Department. Since 2001, we have continued to maintain our enrollment capacity and adjust our curriculum and instruction to meet new academic standards. As reflected in the Summary of Findings, we believe we hold many strengths by maintaining our key design elements such as utilizing EL Education as our continued model for project-based learning and progressive and innovative instructional practices.

We also appreciated the "Noteworthy" section and a similar statement in the Summary of Findings section identifying our strength in dissemination efforts to ensure that other schools both within our Rochester City School District and around the country are collaborating with us to determine the best instructional practices for students. For three years during this charter term, GCCS partnered with Roberto Clemente School #8 to implement foundational literacy skills curriculum to students in Kindergarten through second grades. The results for both schools were extremely noteworthy in both student literacy achievement and was noted as one of the strongest collegial collaboration efforts between a district and charter school.

We noticed that our Benchmark 1: Student Performance rating in the Final Renewal Site Visit Report is listed as "Meets." In 2018, the Midterm Site Visit Report identified Benchmark 1 as "Exceeds." Since The Performance Framework Rating Rubric lists "Exceeds" as a potential rating, Genesee Community Charter School disagrees with the "Meets" rating when New York State ELA and Mathematics scores

are overall higher than at the time of the Mid-term Site Visit Report and our school was noted to have some of the highest achievement scores in the Rochester City School District throughout the charter term.

Within the Teaching and Learning Performance Benchmark analysis, we acknowledge the dedication GCCS gives to developing a strongly aligned cross-curricular framework highlighting our arts integration all in service of developing the whole child. Additionally, GCCS has worked diligently to develop intervention systems and differentiated practices for ensuring our diverse student body is receiving an educational program that meets their needs.

Throughout this charter term, Genesee Community Charter School has continued to tighten intervention systems and has developed an Intervention Team to meet regularly with grade level teachers to discuss intervention goals, analyze data, and discuss next steps. The Final Renewal Site Visit Report notes the Students With Disabilities (SWD) population demonstrating inconsistent performance throughout the charter term based on New York State ELA and Mathematics assessment data. The report states, "In the 2014-2015 school year, 71% of SWD were proficient in math, whereas in 2018-2019 school year 33% of SWDs were proficient in math." Although the numbers are true within small subgroup percentages, it is also noteworthy to identify the change in testing during the charter term. Schools were advised and it is noted on data.nysed.gov not to compare the 2016-2017 results to 2017-2018 results due to a change from Pearson to Questar and a two-session design. Therefore, comparing 2018-2019 data to 2014-2015 data is not an accurate analysis. The School would also like to add that there was a large (23%) increase in SWD math proficiency between the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years and the SWD subgroup has also improved in trending towards proficiency in math (according to Table 1 in Attachment 1 of the Renewal Site Visit). Additionally, the report does not identify the 16% improvement in SWD ELA proficiency from the 2014-2015 school year to the 2018-2019 school year. There was also a large and noteworthy (19%) increase in SWD ELA proficiency between the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school year which was not identified in the report.

Genesee Community Charter School strongly values community culture and family engagement as it is part of its key design elements. The School appreciates the acknowledgement of this highlight as it has worked to fine tune discipline practices to be more restorative while continuing to be proactive. Additionally, family engagement and involvement are acknowledged within the Final Renewal Site Visit Report to reflect the variety of methods the School uses to communicate with families. The report states that the School's Complaint policy does not parallel the expectations for families to relay their concerns. Although a 10-day response to a parent or family concern is listed in this policy, this is not the general practice of the School Leader as responses are often given within 24-48 hours and therefore this policy will be revised for accuracy.

The Final Renewal Site Visit Report clearly identifies Genesee Community Charter School's strong and consistent financial conditions as a School as noted in our composite scores. Within the report, the Charter School Fiscal Accountability Summary attached to the report was not a complete and accurate reflection of this financial health and management since there were inconsistencies in how our audited financials were interpreted. The Board Treasurer and Finance Committee called attention to this discrepancy prior to the submitted charter renewal application noting that investments were not considered as cash equivalents and were not listed consistently within the summary table making it appear that the School's Days of Cash does not meet standard. However, when investments are properly aligned, the School's Days of Cash met the standard every year. Also, although the School was operating at a loss in two out of the five years, it is clear that the School has operated with a collective surplus over the charter term.

Genesee Community Charter School acknowledges the Approaches rating within Benchmark 6: Board Oversight and Governance. The School has worked diligently to create a more diverse body of Board Members to reflect the diversity of the student population and school community and knows that the Board is in the process of developing a strong strategic plan to launch the school beyond its first 20 years as an entity.

During the course of the charter term, there have been many discussions with the Charter School Office to rectify the procedures and by-laws to reflect the Education Governance Council's role alongside the Board of Trustees. Since the School's inception in 2001, it has been important to include the voices of the GCCS staff to play a role in the decision-making process for the School. Since then, the School has acknowledged the changes in regulations to prevent staff members from being seated on the Board. The School respectfully disagrees with the statement, "Despite numerous discussions with CSO to the contrary, the school continues to violate guidance for board decision making with the requirement that the Educational Governance Council approve any board action." Within the charter term, the Board of Trustees and the School's Legal Council have worked diligently to revise the by-laws and methods for the separation between the Education Governance Council and the Board of Trustees. The current by-laws enable the Board of Trustees to disregard the Educational Governance Council by a super majority vote. This preserves the essential influence of the educators while maintaining Trustee control. The report also states, "Board membership, as identified on the school's website and on the board roster that was submitted with the renewal application, although not in meeting minutes, includes the school leader and two staff members." As provided in Attachment G of the charter renewal application, there is no mention of the Education Governance Council Members on the Board of Trustees Table. Feedback regarding the website was not provided until the Final Charter Renewal Report was provided and the School will make these revisions as soon as the charter renewal is finalized.

In Performance Benchmark 9: Enrollment, Recruitment and Retention section of the Final Renewal Site Visit Report, the School acknowledges that its population does not match the percentages of subgroups within the Rochester City School District. However, the description of this performance benchmark also identifies the importance of making good faith efforts to attract, recruit, and retain such students. Within the last two years of this charter term, there has been significant growth in the number of enrolled students who qualify for free/reduced priced lunch (ED) as well as English Language Learners/Multi-lingual Learners (ELL/MLL). Since GCCS has maintained an average overall 96% retention rate (89% for SWD, 100% ELL/MLL, and 95% ED) for this charter term, enrollment mostly occurs in Kindergarten. The Final Renewal Site Visit Report does not acknowledge the specific subgroup percentages for Kindergarten within the last portion of the charter term. Since the Corrective Action Plan went into effect in the 2018-2019 school year to increase efforts to enroll ELL/MLL and ED students, the School has seen a significant increase in these subgroups in Kindergarten. During the 2018-2019 school year, 43% of the Kindergarten students qualified for free/reduced lunch with no ELL/MLL students enrolled that year. However, during the 2019-2020 school year, 47% of the Kindergarten students qualified for free/reduced lunch and 13% of the Kindergarteners are identified as ELL/MLL students. To compare these results to Kindergarten cohort percentages, the 2019-2020 school-wide enrollment percentages are 34% ED students and 3% ELL/MLL students. These cohort percentages far exceed the school-wide percentages. With an overall 96% retention rate, it is likely school-wide percentages will increase as students continue at GCCS.

Although the Benchmark 9 section of the report includes all practices that occurred during the charter term, it is also noteworthy to mention the most recent developments by partnering with E3 Rochester and participating on GoodSchoolsRoc.org common application. As of April 1, 2020, Genesee Community Charter School has 534 applications for 30 available open spots in Kindergarten. This is a drastic increase (from 172 applications in 2018-2019) and a major demand for a very small number of open seats each year. The lottery will take place on April 15, 2020.

Genesee Community Charter School would finally like to respond to Benchmark 10: Legal Compliance as this was the most surprising rating within the Final Renewal Site Visit Report. This performance benchmark is rated "Approaches" yet there is little evidence for this rating citing no revisions in bylaws, no marked improvement based on the Corrective Action Plan, and all non-material revisions were approved. In regard to the bylaws, the School has worked with its Legal Counsel and the Charter School Office to revise all policies and bylaws in accordance with the law and regulations. New feedback on the bylaws was not received until the Final Renewal Site Visit Report and we will immediately take action to rectify those identified areas.

Additionally, it was noted that, “the Corrective Action Plan put into place to address the schools’ longstanding enrollment concerns yielded no marked improvement at the time of the submission of the renewal application.” As stated previously and on the contrary, there has been significant marked improvement in the Kindergarten cohorts for both the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school year in the identified subgroups and therefore GCCS believes the Corrective Action Plan’s goals were met and will continue to be a strong focus moving forward.

We will continue to respond to any and all feedback from the Charter School Office and will maintain constant communication with our Legal Counsel to ensure we are meeting all laws and regulations including our faithfulness to our charter.

Genesee Community Charter School recognizes the importance of maintaining a strong and stable charter, yet also values the engagement of community stakeholders to develop a common vision for the future. GCCS is proud of the accomplishments we have made to continue to be progressive in our mission to use the EL Education design to nurture children’s natural abilities to be reflective questioners, articulate communicators, critical thinkers, and skilled problem-solvers in order to reach exemplary standards and become 21st century leaders in the Rochester community and beyond.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shannon Hillman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being larger and more prominent.

Shannon Hillman, School Leader

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michele Hannagan". The signature is cursive and written in a lighter blue color.

Michele Hannagan, Board of Trustees President