

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

Opportunity Network

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Excel Academy South Instructional Site Visit Summary May 31, 2017

Provider: The Camelot Schools of Pennsylvania, L.L.C
Contract Term: FY 2013-2017
Program capacity: 400

Site Visit Date: Wednesday, March 22, 2017- 9:00 a.m.
IEP Compliance: 100%
Average Daily Attendance: 71.6%

Review Team:

Christina Grant, Assistant Superintendent
Majeedah Scott, Director, Multiple Pathways
Darryl Johnson, Transition Liaison
Elvis Mucaj, Strategy Analyst
Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend, President & CEO,
Philadelphia Youth Network

Program Staff:

Scott Cruttenden, Regional Director, Camelot Schools
Jarrad Muller, Executive Director
Cassie Miller, Principal
Jamie Pomianek, Academic Coordinator

Overview of Instructional Site Visits:

Instructional site visits consisted of four main parts: **Academic Success Questions with Leadership**; **Academic Success Questions with Teachers**; **Academic Success Questions with Students**; and **Classroom Observations**. **Academic Success Questions with Leadership** was driven by standardized questions that focused on: data and academic outcomes; academic outcomes versus goals; and preparation for classroom observations. **Academic Success Questions with Teachers** was driven by standardized questions that focused on: the use of academic assessments; academic outcomes versus goals; and the school's overall academic performance. **Academic Success Questions with Students** was driven by standardized questions that focused on: student backgrounds and previous educational experiences; academic expectations set by Teachers; tests, grading procedures, and supports from Teachers; overall level of satisfaction with the program and recommendations for improvement; the program's mission; the program's Special Education services; and food and health services. **Classroom Observations** was guided by a standardized Classroom Observation Form that assessed elements of: the classroom environment; instruction; and assessments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Academic Success Questions with Leadership

Excel Academy South leadership presented and discussed the program's reading and mathematics growth data from last school year. In reading, 49% of students made two or more years worth of growth. In mathematics, 53% of students made two or more years worth of growth. Program leadership attributed some of the growth to the instructional strategies that they have in place in all classes, as well the program's focus on teaching students specific skills in areas of deficiency. The program ensures that reading across all content areas is a priority and they are making the shift from simply reading to reading for understanding, making inferences, and using context clues to determine vocabulary. Excel Academy South uses a nationally recognized common instructional framework from Jobs for the Future (JFF), and is a national demonstration school for JFF. The framework's six instructional strategies are used in all of Excel Academy South's classrooms. The strategies support engaging instruction, rich questioning, and literacy/numeracy skill building. The program administers the TABE to all students three times per year to get baseline and growth data. Teachers use test results to develop lesson plans and learning support strategies for students.

Average daily attendance for Excel Academy South is slightly higher this school year compared to the previous year (72% versus 70%). The program developed advisories for all students so that every Teacher now provides guidance to 10-12 students in an advisory class setting. Program leadership believed that this has positively affected attendance outcomes for this year. Advisory Teachers are responsible for making attendance calls home and contacting parents when students are failing. As a result, parents now receive additional communication from the program from both Teach Leaders and Advisory Teachers. Advisory classes provide a consistent venue for talking with students about school attendance, which has led to students taking more ownership over their own attendance records. Program leadership has found that students are subsequently becoming more responsible by calling out if they cannot attend school and by confronting their peers with poor attendance. Incentives are rewarded to advisory classes with the highest attendance.

Excel Academy South has common planning time every Wednesday to talk about instruction. The meetings are Teacher-led and focus on examining data trends and featuring instructional strategies that have been successful. Program leadership provided an example from a recent professional development in which Teachers presented artifacts to their peers that were rooted in various instructional strategies. The program's Principal discussed seeing Teachers grow the most from peer interactions, particularly the rounds model, in which Teachers observe their colleague's classrooms.

The program is focusing this year on providing more opportunities for students to engage in collaborative group work and literacy circles. A great deal of focus has been placed on developing Teachers to use questioning and scaffolding techniques, and knowing when they should be used in the classroom. Teachers are also encouraged to use classroom talk to get students discussing content with Teachers guiding the conversations.

Excel South's leadership visits classrooms daily to conduct informal observations. Each administrator observes classes from a different perspective, which allows Teachers to receive comprehensive feedback and supports. For example, one administrator focuses on the implementation of the six instructional strategies, while another administrator focuses on differentiation. As a national demonstration school for Jobs for the Future, Excel Academy South holds residencies three times per year and retains model instructors on campus who are experts and provide mentorship and guidance to less experienced Teachers.

Excel Academy South leadership described what review team members should see during classroom observations. Aspects of the six instructional strategies should be evident in all classes. Strong relationships between students and staff should be evident. Collaboration and interaction among students should be evident. All classes should follow the same class structure, which includes a warm-up, lesson, activity, and closing exercise. All classes follow the same agenda format so that students are familiar with the format and know what to expect.

Classroom Observations

Review team members observed a Geometry class for ten minutes and 12 students were present in class during the observation. Classroom walls displayed recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources. All students were on-task during the observation. Lesson objectives and the class agenda were posted. Students worked together in small groups using textbooks and worksheets. The Teacher used questioning and observation as a means to assess students' mastery of the content. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to analyze and apply geometric concepts.

Review team members observed a Physical Science class for ten minutes and 13 students were present in class during the observation. Classroom walls displayed recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources. All students were on-task during the observation. Lesson objectives and the class agenda were posted. Students were working on personalized brochures that integrated Physical Science concepts. The Teacher used questioning and observation as a means to assess students' mastery of the content. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to analyze and apply geometric concepts.

Review team members observed a Senior Seminar class for ten minutes and 14 students were present in class during the observation. Classroom walls displayed recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources. All students were on-task during the observation. Lesson objectives and the class agenda were posted. The focus of the lesson was for students to learn how to develop a thesis statement. Steps for writing a thesis statement were posted on the board. The Teacher used questioning and observation to assess student's mastery of the content. The transition from direct instruction to independent practice was orderly and efficient, and students were aware of classroom procedures. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to create a thesis statement using a bubble organizer as the foundation for their work.

Review team members observed an Algebra 2 class for ten minutes and 12 students were present in class during the observation. Classroom walls displayed recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources. All students were on-task during the observation. Lesson objectives and the class agenda were posted. The class worked on solving multi-step equations, and students used tablets as they worked in pairs. Students referenced a website provided by the Teacher, which dove deep into quadratic formalisms. The Teacher circulated around the classroom observing students and providing help where needed. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to analyze and apply information, as well as synthesize and evaluate concepts.

Review team member observed a Chemistry class for ten minutes and 20 students were present in class during the observation. Classroom walls displayed recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources. All students were on-task during the observation. Lesson objectives and the class agenda were posted. Students were engaged in an ice cream experiment aimed at demonstrating the movement of particles in a chemical change state. Each student worked on his/her own experiment, however, interaction among peers was evident. Students used a worksheet to record their observations and experiment results. The Teachers circulated around the room and periodically announced tips to students for completing the experiment. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to analyze and apply information, as well as synthesize and evaluate concepts.

Academic Success Questions with Teachers

Four Teachers participated in the Academic Success Questions with Teachers (English, Social Science, History, and Biology). Most of the Teachers have worked at Excel Academy South for more than two years. They attributed their passion about student success as one of the reasons that keeps them at the program. Teachers also talked about the opportunities that they have for growth at Excel Academy South. They get intensive training in the Jobs for the Future instructional framework, which they credited as having increased their teaching skills tremendously. Teachers also talked about the Wednesday professional development meetings that they have and how they learn a great deal from their colleagues and administrators about promising strategies to improve their teaching.

Teachers noted that they work hard to provide instruction that is relevant and engaging for students. They want their students to really learn the concepts that are being taught and they see the value that learning has on the lives of their students. Teachers noted that their lesson plans are rooted in Pennsylvania Common Core Standards to ensure that students are learning the appropriate content for the subject matter. Overall, they considered their approach to teaching to be student-centered.

Teachers talked about TABE results and how the data is shared out by administrators during Wednesday professional development. Teachers use TABE results to target specific skills that students are struggling with. They talked about incorporating a great deal of scaffolding into their lessons in order to re-teach basic skills and still get to higher level concepts within the subject. Common planning time was discussed, and Teachers found the collaboration among peers to be very helpful in planning and executing lessons. They talked about entering grades into the Engrade system on a weekly basis so that students are always aware of how well they are performing.

Academic Success Questions with Students

Excel Academy South leadership selected four students to participate in Academic Success Questions with Students. Students' ages ranged from 17 to 18 years old, and students previously attended traditional and virtual high schools. Students discussed their journeys to Excel South, with unanimously entailed unsuccessful experiences at their previous high schools. They noted that they have found success at Excel Academy South and that the program is preparing them for real life and the Teachers really care about them.

Students talked about checking the program's Engrade system often to determine how well they are doing in school. They also check in daily with Teachers to ensure that they are on track to pass their classes. Students acknowledged that the overall focus of the program is to earn a high school diploma and move on to college or work after high school. Students talked about taking their SATs and how program staff supports them on test day by meeting them at the testing center and bringing them food and encouraging them. Students reported really liking all of their Teachers. They can easily get help from Teachers when they need it, and they have formed strong relationships with Teachers and other program staff. Students talked about having one-on-one conversations with their Teachers when they are not performing so well in class. Teachers encourage them to do better and extend themselves to provide extra support.

When asked what they would change about the program, if anything, students talked about the physical plant. Students stated that they would like for Excel South to be located in a regular school building because the program deserves everything that a public school has. Students do like the food that is served for lunch and they remarked about getting stale desserts at lunch.