

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

Opportunity Network

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Excel Academy North Instructional Site Visit Summary May 31, 2017

Provider: The Camelot Schools of Pennsylvania, L.L.C
Contract Term: FY 2013-2017
Program capacity: 200

Site Visit Date: Thursday, March 30, 2017- 9:00 a.m.
IEP Compliance: 100%
Average Daily Attendance: 68.7%

Review Team:

Majeedah Scott, Director, Multiple Pathways
Dr. Wanda Jenkins, Director, Operations
Darryl Johnson, Transition Liaison
Meredith Mehra, Deputy, Teaching and Learning
Lucas Westmaas, Senior Associate, District Performance Office

Program Staff:

Scott Cruttenden, Regional Director, Camelot Schools
Ryan Muller, Principal
Stephen Glammer, Director of Operations
Kelly King, Director of Student Services

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 North leadership presented and discussed the program's growth data in reading and mathematics from the previous school year. In reading, 77% of students made two or more years worth of growth. In mathematics, 88% of students made two or more years worth of growth. Program leadership attributed high outcomes in reading and mathematics growth to their daily use of TABE results to drive instruction. TABE results are used by administrators and Teachers to identify specific strengths and weaknesses that students have in various skill areas. Lesson plans target skill deficiencies and the program implements the six common instructional strategies across all of their classes. The instructional strategies support high student engagement through the differentiation of learning activities. The program uses TABE data to modify the curriculum to ensure that students have the opportunity to master skills that they struggle with. The program focuses on writing across the curriculum. Program leadership recognized that students do not like to write and often enter the program with very low writing skills. Leadership also recognized that important role that writing plays in postsecondary success (college and employment). As a result, the Excel Academy North ensures that students have ample opportunities to practice writing in a low stakes environment.

Excel Academy North 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.

Excel North'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.

The program's Principal and other administrators go into classrooms on a daily basis to conduct informal walkthroughs. Teachers are formally evaluated four times each school year. Excel North leadership then debriefs with Teachers one-on-one to discuss the results of performance evaluations. The overall goal for the formal evaluations is to continuously improve instruction.

Program leadership discussed the strategies it uses to support students with postsecondary planning. On students' first day of enrollment program staff begin to engage them in one-on-one meetings in order gauge the aspirations of each student. From that moment, the program takes every opportunity to expose students to the different postsecondary options. Excel Academy North hosts a large college fair at the beginning in the year. The program has established a strong partnership with Community College of Philadelphia so that students have a safe option for college matriculation. However, program leadership has learned that one of the biggest barriers to Community College of Philadelphia enrollment is taking the placement test. As a result, the program escorts students to the College campus to take their placement exams. Excel Academy South also provides a Senior Capstone class to graduating seniors. In Senior Capstone, students develop postsecondary plans, apply to colleges, create resumes, complete financial aid applications, and participate in mock job interviews. Senior Capstone class is graduation requirement for seniors, in addition to the multidisciplinary/senior project.

Excel Academy North utilizes the results from midterm and unit assessments to modify the curriculum as needed to ensure that students are taught lessons that address their areas of weaknesses. The curriculum is set from the beginning of every school year, but the program modifies it along the way to directly align to meeting students' needs.

Excel Academy North leadership identified attendance as the program's biggest area for improvement. As is typically the case, program leadership have noticed that students with consistent attendance are those who are doing well in class. To combat poor attendance, the program is going above and beyond this year to get the students engaged more.

Excel Academy North 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 an English 4 class for approximately ten minutes and 18 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 objective of the lesson focused on students expressing their comprehension of major themes from Shakespeare's *Othello* through the creation of a mind map. All students were engaged in classroom talk during the observation. The Teacher engaged the class in answering questions about themes from the play as a whole group. The class then transitioned to a group activity in which students worked together to create a mind map related to themes from *Othello*. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to illustrate and create original ideas related to the reading.

Review team members observed an African American History class for approximately 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 objective of the lesson required students to compare and contrast two court decisions and two newspaper editorials in order to better contextualize and analyze *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Students worked in groups to read the court cases and editorials. They then documented their opinions and main ideas from the readings. Later in the lesson, groups would share out their responses. The Teacher circulated around the room to check for understanding and progress. The depth of engagement observed challenged students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate main ideas and opinions related to the readings.

Academic Success Questions with Teachers

Teachers Mr. Weir (History) and Ms. Duffy (English 3-4) participated in the Academic Success Questions with Teachers. Mr. Weir and Ms. Duffy reported using Keystone exam results, TABE results and classroom assessment results to monitor student learning. The Teachers discussed Excel North's school-wide process for reviewing data. Assessment results are reviewed during morning and afternoon meetings as a whole staff with facilitation by program administration. During these meetings, Teachers share best instructional practices for improving student achievement. Excel North keeps a running log of assessment results throughout the year in order to track student progress and to determine trends that may need to be addressed at the program level. Teachers talked about their use of Engrade Pro to communicate with students and to post class grades. They are able to see how all students are doing in every class, not just their own. This allows them to recognize any patterns for students; negative patterns are addressed by Teachers using a team approach. Teachers also reported using Engrade Pro to message students about their progress.

Teachers discussed the academic data that is shared with parents/guardians. Parents have access to Engrade Pro and can log in to how their children are doing at any time. In addition, Excel Academy North hosts back-to-school nights and report card conferences for parents to visit the school and talk with directly Teachers about academic progress. The program also mails home progress reports (interim and marking period). Teachers reported emailing and texting parents as well in order to keep them abreast of their children's progress.

Mr. Weir and Ms. Duffy talked about the support they receive with analyzing student academic data and making appropriate instructional shifts. They reported receiving a significant amount of help from the program's Principal. In addition, weekly common planning and team meetings support collaboration among Teachers. During these meetings, Teachers have the chance to also receive support from one another. Teachers share best practices, pedagogical theories, lesson plans, and cross-curricular ideas. Mr. Weir and Ms. Duffy noted that collaboration among teachers helps them to learn more about their students, which puts them in a better position to support students academically.

The Teachers reported that the program's Principal conducts frequent classroom observations. Most observations are informal, but Teachers receive feedback from the Principal nonetheless. Operational leaders also observe their classrooms and give feedback. Excel Academy North Teachers also participate in rounds, during which they observe their peers' classrooms. Mr. Weir and Ms. Duffy considered the observations and rounds to be very

helpful in that they benefit from receiving different perspectives that challenge them to constantly improve and think critically about their practice.

Overall, both Teachers considered Excel Academy North to be doing well academically. Teachers noted the growth that the program has experienced over time. They have found the program to be much more focused on teaching and learning, and less focused on behavioral issues. Both Teachers reported a desire to remain with Excel Academy North for the long run.

Academic Success Questions with Students

Excel Academy North leadership selected five students to participate in the Academic Success Questions with Students. Students ranged from 17 to 18 years of age. Four of the five students had previous high school experiences in traditional, public school settings; one student was home schooled for high school. Students resided in West Philadelphia and the lower Northeast.

Students unanimously agreed that their Teachers at Excel Academy North expect a lot from them academically. They stated that Teachers will let them know when an assignment does not meet expectations. Teachers highlight errors on the assignment and offer ways to fix them. Similarly, students reported knowing what is expected of them as Excel Academy North students. They referred to the program's norms as the main source of expectations and described how the norms help them to avoid certain negative behaviors. Students reported having the opportunity to reflect on any misbehavior with the program's behavior staff. In their opinion, students felt that the program's norms were "perfect" for the program. In their opinion, "regular high school kids" are able to do whatever they want, which is why traditional schools have so many problems. Four of the five students attributed their previous disengagement from school to the lack of norms at their previous schools.

Excel Academy North students talked about the types of tests that they take throughout the school year. Students reported taking midterms, finals, SMI/SRI, Keystones, regular class tests and the SAT or ACT. Students regarded the SAT or ACT as a graduation requirement and they noted that most students chose Temple University as their testing center because Excel Academy North staff show up on test days with breakfast for them.

The students talked about their attendance and the attendance of their peers. Review team members asked students why they thought it was difficult for some students to come to school regularly. Students attributed poor attendance to where students live. They noted that some students live far from the school and have very long commutes to and from school daily. Students talked about helping each other get to school on-time. They encourage each other and hold each other accountable. In addition, students stated that they can receive wake-up calls from Teachers whenever they are having difficulties arriving at school on-time.

Excel Academy North students were very clear about their postsecondary pathways. Students were able to identify the colleges that they plan to attend (Community College of Philadelphia and Indiana University of Pennsylvania). They were also able to identify their desired majors, which included psychology and welding. Students expressed their gratitude for Senior Capstone classes and that they have learned a great deal about options for college, trade schools, and careers after high school. All students felt that Excel Academy North was preparing them to be successful after graduation.

Recommendations

The review team recommends that Excel Academy North continues to develop strategies to improve overall student attendance. Considering that the program was formerly located in the Northeast and many students still currently reside in that area, it may be helpful for the program to begin accepting more students who live closer to the school. The Opportunity Network can assist Excel Academy North with developing enrollment partnerships

with neighborhood high schools in their area, such as Benjamin Franklin High School and Strawberry Mansion High School.