

Instructional Visit Summary
Excel Academy South

Provider: The Camelot Schools of Pennsylvania, L.L.C.
Contract Term: FY 2018 - 2022

Site Visit Date: Tuesday, April 3, 2018 - 9:00 a.m.
Program Capacity: 400

Site Visit Review Team:

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Overview of Instructional Site Visits:

Instructional site visits consist 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** includes standardized questions that focus on: data and academic outcomes; academic outcomes versus goals; and preparation for classroom observations. **Academic Success Questions with Teachers** includes standardized questions that focus on: the use of academic assessments; academic outcomes versus goals; and the school's overall academic performance. **Academic Success Questions with Students** includes standardized questions that focus 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

Academic Outcomes. Excel Academy South presented and discussed the program's key academic data, including literacy and numeracy growth, retention rate, graduation rate, percentage of students attending at least 85% of school days, and Special Education data. Excel Academy South aggregated and analyzed its own data as a demonstration of the program's ability to make data-informed decisions for positive student outcomes. After analyzing test results from the past two years, Excel Academy South implemented a newer version of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) this year, which encompasses 50 numeracy and 50 literacy questions instead of 25, to better access students' academic needs. So far this year, there has been .75 % of growth; program leadership attributes the lower growth rate to the fact that the TABE is a newer test, which takes longer to complete and is not a repetition of the questions from the older version of the test. Additionally, program leadership anticipates that test scores may drop while a new baseline is established. Program leadership noted that students love taking the test because it is new and more challenging. Excel Academy South's primary focus this year is increasing literacy growth, thus they itemize TABE data and look at the questions to see what percentage of students answered correctly. Moreover, program leadership shifted attention of data analysis from aggregate to individual, in order to access specific and across the board skill-gaps and to distinctly identify students who are struggling academically. Excel Academy South articulated that special education students are performing the same as general education students. Special education students receive additional supports in the classroom. Excel Academy South has two (2) new English Language Learner (ELL) students who truly need additional language support; program staff have made differentiation and accommodations for students who need extra help. Excel Academy South attributes their retention and graduation rates to the culture of the program – noting that students feel known and cared for, there is a family atmosphere, and a small group advisory. Each instructional staff is charged with advising 12 students to ensure they keep students' needs as a focal point. A phone call home is made every time a student is absent. Norms and rules are written out and clearly expressed for students to be successful. The program community undertakes a new social cause every month. Students and staff participate to support various social causes and efforts to help communities monetarily or via volunteering time. Group efforts builds Excel Academy South's community to a high level and helps to increase student retention and engagement. Program leadership articulated the various ways they support students with postsecondary planning and access. The Director of Student Services meets with students to create a roadmap to college. Every student has a postsecondary checklist that they share with a staff member in order to maintain accountability for their postsecondary options. In the senior seminar course, students learn resume writing and how to write research papers and correctly cite sources. Excel Academy South offers vocational options for students including a culinary class and a new music class (many students want careers in the music industry). Additionally, the program will host an upcoming Women's Career Day, in which women from various professions are invited to speak with students about their careers and a Male Symposium for topics such as health and career awareness.

Academic Outcomes versus Goals. Excel Academy South publishes an annual Campus Improvement Plan that tracks the program's literacy and numeracy growth, credit attainment, attendance, and extra-curricular participation, among other metrics. The program is on pace to reach 2 years of growth in numeracy and 1.5 years of growth in literacy this year, compared to the goal of 2 years growth in each subject area. The leadership team stated that the majority of students are on pace to gain at least 8 credits during the school year, most students are attending at least 85% of school days, and 40% of students are involved in an extracurricular program. The program sees attendance as an area for improvement and expects to continue to reinforce it going forward. Academic outcomes are shared with staff in weekly professional development meetings. The

leadership team also shares with the faculty a Google Doc that includes up to date program-level academic outcomes. The program shares academic outcomes with parents via phone calls, in-person meetings, and through the online parent portal. Students receive grades on a weekly basis (both academic and behavioral marks) and their progress is published on “data walls” in each classroom. Teachers are required to submit drafts of interim and summative assessments before they can administer them to students. Interim and summative assessments are reviewed by the Principal and Academic Coordinator, who provide personalized feedback to each teacher. Program staff then meets again to review assessment results and teachers make adjustments to their curriculums based on students’ strengths and weaknesses. Teachers also use data gathered from these assessments to group students together based on their literacy and numeracy levels. **Classroom Observation Preparation.** When asked what we should see in classrooms, the program’s Principal noted that we should see students and teachers engaged in teaching and learning. There are some new teachers who have been at Excel Academy South, partially through this school year; there are some teachers who have been at the program for 8-9 years. We will see an increase in classroom size and student population. There are 19 teachers with one special education teacher who flows to multiple classrooms throughout the day. Moreover, we will see more technology in the classroom, which is a reflection of the DonorsChoose.org initiative. The program added a new music class this year and noted that classrooms with technology are excelling. The program’s new SAT preparatory teacher is struggling and has been receiving support to develop more rigorous and content related lesson plans.

Classroom Observations

Review team members observed a Geometry class for 15 minutes that was already in progress, and nine students were present in class during the observation. All students were on-task and engaged with the lesson. Recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources were on display in the classroom. The class agenda, including the lesson objective and warm-up activity were posted on the whiteboard. The class was working in groups of two or three to describe the lives of different mathematicians and explain each mathematician’s contributions to society. The teacher was teaching the class by providing individualized feedback to each group, while providing general feedback to the class as a whole. The students’ work mostly detailed the background of mathematicians and their work, however, the students were not yet putting the math principles to use. The teacher’s planned exit ticket was to have students answer what they thought was the greatest discovery and which mathematician made the discovery.

Review team members observed a SAT Preparatory class for 10 minutes that was already in progress, and seven students were present in class during the observation. All students were on-task and researching their respective topics on desktop computers. The classroom being used was a computer lab and therefore there was no evidence of classroom procedures or instructional resources pertaining to this subject. The teacher provided each student with a basic outline to follow along as they took notes. The teacher also had a lesson plan prepared, however, the student objectives in the lesson plan were very rudimentary (program leadership indicated to us that they have been trying to provide this teacher additional support). Student voice in the classroom was very minimal as each student was focused on doing research individually. The students were expected to present their findings through a 5-minute oral presentation, and later in the course they are expected to do a 10-minute oral presentation. The teacher conveyed that the research and presentations will help students build their vocabularies for the SAT. The teacher did not give an indication of any math being reviewed in this class, which should be a crucial component of the course. The students were not challenged to answer any questions during our observation.

Review team members observed an Environmental Science class for 10 minutes that was at the start of the lesson, and 10 students were present in class during the observation. The teacher had a lesson plan prepared and posted outside of the classroom, and classroom walls displayed class rules and instructional resources. The teacher had a very elementary warm-up for the students (the warm-up required students to simply list 2-3 things that the Earth was made up of). All of the students were on-task and engaged. The class goal was to learn about the “Dynamic Earth” by taking notes on a worksheet that the teacher passed out. The worksheet had a lot of information about the Earth’s physical and compositional layers for the students to review. The class went over the answers as a group, while each student completed the worksheet individually. Students were able to sporadically answer some of the questions on their own, but the teacher generally gave students the answers on difficult questions. The students were required to complete an exit ticket before leaving, and the teacher grades the exit tickets on a weekly basis.

Review team members observed an English 2 class for 15 minutes that was already in progress, and 15 students were present in class during the observation. Recent student work, classroom procedures, and instructional resources were on display in the classroom. The class agenda, including the lesson objective and warm-up activity were posted on the whiteboard. The mode of instruction was small group work. The lesson objective was for students to read a sample about Greek theatre and then to apply what they learned to determine if a series of statements were true or false; however, the learning objective was written in a slightly vague way that could lead to confusion. The teacher moved around the room checking in with all of the small groups, provided targeted support, and prompted students to help each other. The teacher maintained a very consistent approach to all students as he was encouraging everyone to reach maximum participation and dialogue in their small groups. He moved around often in order to spread this consistent message. The teacher was extremely clear on what constituted the highest level of participation, using a scale of 1-4. During his rounds to the different small groups, the teacher explained what level of participation students showcased and gave them advice on how to reach level 4. This clearly motivated students to follow his lead. Though most of the students demonstrated awareness of classroom rules/procedures, during our entire observation, about ¼ of the students were off task. For off-task behavior, the teacher spoke loudly to redirect students, which was partially successful in getting them to continue their group work. Questioning, observing, and peer review of work was the assessment method used. The teacher checked in with each group and encouraged those who understood to share with others. Additionally, the teacher provided opportunities to go ahead or catch up if needed. Rigor was slightly above basic level as students read for comprehension and were charged to fill in blanks on a sheet of paper. Pairing of students allowed for differentiation. Students worked collaboratively together; however, it was difficult to determine if they went beyond basic recall.

Academic Success Questions with Teachers

Ms. Kemmerer (5th year Special Education co-teacher), Mr. Wilson (3rd year History teacher), and Ms. Hardgrove (1st year English teacher) participated in the Academic Success Questions with Teachers. The teachers reported using the following interim assessments: TABE (3 times per year), Keystone Assessments, and the WRAT4 for special education students. Teachers also told the review team that they like to use as many formative assessments as possible in order to build students’ knowledge in each subject, and they give students formative assessments through midterms and finals. All three teachers were aware of program level academic and climate goals, which are stated in Excel Academy South’s Campus Improvement Plan. Teachers noted that, on top of their regular classes, they are in charge of an advisory class of 10-12 students for whom they monitor attendance and behavioral goals. Phone calls home are mandatory for any student who is absent, but teachers also make sure to call home for any student who is doing exceptionally well or has shown significant improvement. Teachers analyze interim assessments in professional development meetings and used them to group students together

based on their performance. The Excel Academy South leadership also uses professional development sessions to continue to build on a common framework for instruction in their classrooms. The teachers we spoke with told us that they prefer using strategies such as collaborative group work, literacy groups (required in all subject areas this year), and scaffolding in order to differentiate learning.

Academic Success Questions with Students

Four students, who were selected by Excel Academy South, participated in the Academic Success Questions with Students. Students were all "Execs," which is the highest position of responsibility that a student can reach under Excel's student leadership model. As Execs, the students represent student governance, act as mediators with other students, and showcase leadership abilities. All four students had experiences in neighborhood high schools and special admission high schools prior to attending Excel Academy South. Students gave various reasons for leaving their previous high school but by far the most prevalent is the overwhelming size of the previous school in addition to a feeling of neglect from teachers. Three out of four students heard about Excel Academy South via word of mouth through a friend and one was referred by a therapist. Two of the students attended a form of cyber school in between their high school and enrolling into Excel Academy South. When asked about Excel Academy South's academic expectations, students feel that the curriculum applies to their lives and expressed that teachers go out of their way to engage them in the classroom. Students are very appreciative that teachers help them even if they do not ask for help. Students feel that teachers willingly come in early and leave late in order to provide academic support. Students do not receive homework but are kept busy completing various projects given to them in their classes. Students understand the TABE testing timelines and their purpose and stated that teachers give very complex and individualized assessments, with an emphasis on writing. Students showcased a very nuanced understanding of the various levels of intervention and mediation that they may experience in the program community. Students who show leadership qualities are trained by their own peers on strategies to de-escalate other students. All students expressed feeling responsible for each other, modeling faculty behavior, and assisting others in the academic and social process. For example, one student stated that program staff are very patient with their peers, which helps them showcase these same qualities. The expectations around discipline and behavior are outlined very early when students enter school; there was an overall agreement amongst the students regarding discipline policies. Discipline ranges from non-verbal cues all the way to emergency meetings with students, depending on the severity of the transgression. Student leaders intervene often within this spectrum. Additionally, students expressed excitement about school events such as the haunted house held at the program and the Thanksgiving meal cooked by staff. This particular group of students are extremely proud to be part of this program community. They all seemed to get along very well with one another and are happy to continue helping their fellow peers succeed at Excel Academy South.

Recommendations

The review team recommends that Excel Academy South continues to focus on ways to increase academic rigor. The program should continue to support struggling teachers and ensure that lesson plans and lesson objectives are written clearly and align with instructional methods. Finally, Excel Academy South should continue on its current path of providing a safe and respectful learning environment for students, families, and staff.