



Nevada State Public Charter School Authority

To: Jeff Geihs, Founders Board Chair
Jason Guinasso, SPCSA Board Chair
Ron Fick, Founders Academy principal

From: Sandra Kinne, SPCSA

Date: Tuesday, April 16, 2019

Re: Site Evaluation Report for Founders Academy

SITE EVALUATION REPORT: Founders Academy

Site Evaluations are a critical accountability component to the oversight of schools by the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) and are fundamental to charter schools' autonomy. As approved by the Legislature [NRS-388A.150] the Authority is to *"provide oversight to the charter schools that it sponsors to ensure that those charter schools maintain high educational and operational standards, preserve autonomy and safeguard the interests of pupils and the community."*

Site Evaluations allow the SPCSA to assess schools' student achievement, progress to goals, and fulfillment of their mission, vision, and educational program outlined in their charter. Improving the learning of pupils, and, by extension, the public education system; increased opportunities for learning and access to quality education; and a more thorough and efficient system of accountability for student achievement in Nevada are all foundational elements of the SPCSA's mission, the legislative intent of charter schools and are central elements of the Authority's on-going evaluation of charter schools.

The SPCSA conducts multiple visits and evaluations throughout schools' charter terms. The cumulative evidence through multi-year oversight measures become part of the record that help inform recommendations put forth by SPCSA staff, specifically renewal recommendations to the Authority Board. The Board of the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority makes all final charter renewal decisions. Site Evaluations are just one criterion considered for renewal; student achievement, financial prudence, and fulfillment of the program outlined in the approved charter are also evaluated by the Authority when making renewal decisions.

Attached is the Site Evaluation Report for Founders Academy, which was conducted by SPCSA staff members, Sandra Kinne and Mark Modrcin on Wednesday, April 6 at Founders Academy, 5730 West Alexander, Las Vegas, NV 89130. The school is currently in its 5th year of its first charter authorization term, which expires June 30, 2020. The school leader is Ron Fick, and the board chair is Jeff Geihs.

Please contact the Team Lead for this Site Evaluation, Sandra Kinne, with any questions.

SITE EVALUATION REPORT: FOUNDERS ACADEMY

Campus Name: Founders Academy
Grade Levels: K-12
School Leader: Ron Fick, principal
Purpose of Site Evaluation: Year 5 evaluation
Date of Authorization: June 2014
Conducted Date: Wednesday, March 6
Conducted By: Sandra Kinne, Mark Modrcin

SUMMARY OF SITE EVALUATION

The mission of Founders Academy is to train the minds and improve the hearts of young people through a rigorous, classical education in the liberal arts and sciences, with instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue.

Founders' mission was observed through the following:

- Students stand to provide answers
- Students greet visitors and introduce themselves
- Teacher-centered instruction
- British Literature is a unique elective aligned with liberal arts and sciences
- Logic is a unique elective and aligns with a liberal arts and sciences education

The team conducted 14 classroom observations across all grade levels at Founders, with time spent in range of content areas in the upper grades, including British Literature, Logic, Composition, and Math. On average, the observation time in each classroom was 21 minutes. Observations ranged through the full cycle of observations, with some conducted in the beginning, middle, and end of each instructional lesson.

Observers noted that each classroom, across all grade levels, had a student greeter, who shared with visitors what the class is working on at the moment; in some classrooms, connections were made to students' real-life, such as a biology lesson related to the environment and local water levels; and there was strong compliance by students to rules and directions. Observers also noted significant questioning by teachers of students, in discussions, but, as noted below in the recommendations, almost all of the questions were low-level, DOK 1 (Depths of Knowledge) and asked by the teacher rather than student-based discussion.

Common trends from stakeholders noted in focus groups were: the high level of expectations and standards for students, the rigor of a classical education, and the issue of car lines, which was named by both parents and students as an opportunity for improvement and efficiency.

While the team identified some opportunities for continued development, overall, the school's culture, students' sense of safety at the school, and the commitment to the mission

were strong and present. Our identification of strengths of Founders’ program, as well as recommendations for continued growth, are below.

I. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

| Classroom Environment | Evidence Observed | School-wide Rating |
|--|--|--|
| Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport | In general, there is evidence that shows proficiency in this characteristic. I. The observed learning environment is physically and emotionally safe, and this was echoed by students in focus groups. In some cases, there is room for improvement; one upper grade teacher’s use of rhetorical questions to correct behavior - “Is there a reason why I’m hearing conversations right now?”- as well as a lack of positive reinforcement demonstrate a basic level for this area. Overall, though, classroom interactions in relationships, behavior, and discourse are positive and respectful. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Establishing a Culture for Learning | The classrooms consistently represent a culture for learning, with commitment to the subject by teacher and students, and there is clear evidence in observations and focus groups of high expectations in the school. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Managing Classroom Procedures | Overall, there are clear, established routines and procedures that are regularly followed. In one classroom, there was a ‘revolving door’ of bathroom trips (at least 7 students going over the course of a 20-minute observation), and the teacher resorted to verbal communication rather than the established silent signal. However, teachers generally followed school instituted practices. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Managing Student Behavior | Observers noted no behavior issues and few – if any – incidents in which student behavior had to be actively managed. Teachers were aware of student behavior, and there were clear, established standards of conduct. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed |

II. INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION

| Instructional Observation | Evidence Observed | School-wide Rating |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Communicating with Students | Some of the teachers’ questioning requires further explanation. There are also times when it is difficult to understand how the teacher’s questions are appropriately scaffolded and may be confusing. In | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | another class, the teacher does not provide a clear objective nor reference what students are supposed to learn, in the context of the lesson. However, all questions are appropriate and respectful. | |
| Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques | In several classes, there was no discussion of what students read, either lead by teacher or students. In several observed instances, the teachers explain most of the concepts, rather than soliciting students' responses, and ask most of the time "Is this right?" when asking Ss questions, or teachers generally provide multiple examples instead of soliciting responses from Ss. Questions asked were low-level "Do you remember what 'x' is?" and check box for yes/no on warm up activity. There are several missed opportunities to ask students to give examples or respond to high-level questions. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Engaging Students in Learning | There was a wide range of observations related to this criterion, but, in general, there was limited engagement by students in multiple classrooms and lessons. In some cases, students did not have book/did not follow along with reading; some students appeared off-topic (i.e., using pencil to write/draw rather than follow along in book), and in another class, students are not following directions and/or working on a different task. Overall, there is uneven, inconsistent demonstration of student engagement in learning. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Using Assessment in Instruction | In general, this criterion was not observed or was observed to be at the basic level. For example, in one classroom, there was no assessment in learning completed during the lesson. It is not clear from the objective how student learning is to be assessed. While students appear to be gathering information from their questions, there is no tie to specific performance standards or binary and measurable objective. More CFUs (checks for understanding) would help, especially when aligned to a specific objective. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed |

III. OPERATIONS

| Observations | Evidence Observed | School-wide Rating |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Mission driven operations | Operations, procedures, and practices appear to be consistently designed and implemented with the school's mission in mind. | Distinguished Proficient Basic |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | | Unsatisfactory |
| Managing Schoolwide Procedures | There is general consistency of implementation of procedures, including students greeting visitors, and students standing up to respond to questions. While board configuration is inconsistent across the school, this is not a significant element to justify less than proficient for this criterion. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |
| Maintaining a Safe Environment | There are clear, consistently implemented check-in, arrival, and safety procedures. Students report feeling safe in focus groups, and there was a clear emphasis on ensuring student’s safety in conversations with school leadership and as observed throughout the day. | Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory |

IV. FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

| Group | No. of Participants | Duration of Focus Group |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Governing Board ¹ | 3 | 60 min |
| Parents/Families | 6 | 45 min |
| Students | 12 | 45 min |
| Staff | 12 | 45 min |

Governing Board

- Board members spoke positively of the orientation and governance training they’ve received, particularly from Brian Carpenter, a widely-recognized expert in charter school board governance. Said one board member, *“Orientation was the best part of being on this Board.”*
- Board members said they’ve discussed the Notice of Breach and the elementary school’s two-start status. They noted an alignment issue with their math program’s curriculum and sequence, and they’ve brought in consultants and external partners to help the school realign its curriculum and introduce Singapore Math to best support students and improve the school’s star status. Said one board member, *“(The principal) is accountable and has done exactly what has been asked – identified the problem, implemented the plan, and sought solutions. We’re confident this will change.”*
- Board members cited the school’s level of expectations and college-readiness as key elements of the mission. Board members said the school has high expectations, which can be an adjustment for some. *“The intensity level is higher here versus other (schools),”* said one board member. Said another, parents and students knowing about the high level of expectations provides real life lessons as they are enforced, and students are held accountable. These high expectations help the school provide rigorous college prep curriculum. *“I’m not concerned that my child will come out of*

¹ Three members of the seven-member board participated. Quorum was not met, and Open Meeting Law was not violated.

here with a 3.7 GPA and won't be ready for college. This is a problem at other schools. I have no concerns about my two students being ready for college."

Parents/Families

- Parents echoed the board members' points about expectations of the school. Said one about Founders, *"They are held to a higher standard."* Another said s/he chose the school because of the "regimented discipline" and the consistency of high expectations.
- Parents also spoke of the school's communication with them, stating it's consistent. They often receive text messages or phone calls, and there is a weekly newsletter that helps parents stay informed.
- Parents overwhelmingly said if there was more money for the school, they'd like to see it go towards books and/or a school library. Car lines were also a repeatedly cited concern and common area where parents agreed there needed to be more efficiency.
- Parents consistently referred to the school as a non-public school and spoke of it as though it was a private school, including using that term in reference to Founders Academy.

Students

- Students feel safe, that there is a sense of strong culture, and bullying isn't an issue like it is at other schools. They said they feel supported by teachers. Said one student, *"Staff is a lot more interactive with the student body. ... Staff isn't just here to do their job. Students are greeted as peers not just someone below you. Staff is just nice here."*
- Technology was the common theme for students' suggestions for improvement; one suggestion was to integrate more into the school; allow students to use their phones afterschool to communicate with parents; and teach and teaching online safety. Said one student, *"With technology now and as the world is evolving, this school hasn't been as good at teaching us about online safety. ... Kids could be harmed by people online."* Though, one student disagreed with the majority of comments, citing, *"I think books are more valuable than learning on a tablet."*
- Students had strong opinions on the school and appreciate the high standards and expectations the school sets. Several cited the pillars and honor code, and one said, *"We try to live up to those standards we set"* including being professional and developing as "a better person." Echoed another student, *"A lot of other schools don't even teach that. ... What it means to be a good person and how to be a good person."* Said another student, *"This school is not for everyone. Especially in today's world and the olden days. ... For a lot of us that go here, we want to learn the old ways. We don't want to learn the new ways. ... If you don't want to have to think and reason or and follow dress code, this place isn't for you."*

Staff

- Teachers and staff cited the school's mission as a commitment to getting students to think for themselves, "get them thinking outside the box", said one. Teachers and staff said the classical education means shaping students' character, developing moral compasses and *"enlightening students' minds through moral knowledge ... so they can be contributors to society."* Said one focus group participant, it's *"learning not what to think but how to think."*
- Teachers and staff said admin has an open-door policy and is responsive to their needs. *"They pay attention to what we need and what we say we need,"* said one staff member, specifically citing the changed math curriculum.
- The support from the affiliated partner, Hillsdale College, was widely cited by teachers and staff as a positive resource. *"We have access to our representative head at Hillsdale College, and we can call them when we have questions,"* said one teacher, adding that it's free access to college professors and a step above their own administration. Another teacher added that they attend a training at Hillsdale every summer, and there are opportunities to go there during the year.

V. OVERALL STRENGTHS OF PROGRAM

1. Students feel challenged and safe

Multiple students in the focus group spoke of feeling challenged academically by their coursework and instruction. They spoke of appreciating being challenged and pushed to be better, with one stating it wasn't like other schools where you "just have to show up to get a good grade." They value the rigor and the school's push to prepare them for college, think for themselves, and do better work. They also spoke of feeling safe, and several named the school's small size as a factor in their safety. They spoke of adults being "everywhere" because it's a small campus, and that allows them to feel safe, as do the locked doors and consistently-implemented safety protocols, which were observed and noted by the SPCSA staff.

2. Stakeholders understand and demonstrate passion for the 'classical' model of the school

Staff, parents, students, and board members alike all praised the model and noted the emphasis on character building, citizenship, rigorous instruction, and the "holistic side of being a human being," as one board member put it. Parents talked about their children being prepared for standardized test because of the content and curriculum, not because of test prep. The refrain "students are being taught to think" was heard repeatedly from multiple stakeholders, demonstrating a shared principle of the importance of learning and an appreciation for the school's philosophy and model.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS/ACTION ITEMS

1. Stronger support for students in Special Education

In multiple classroom observations, inconsistency between the level of support provided by Teacher Aides/Instructional Aides was noted. In several classes, the Aides were not engaged with students, on their phone in an isolated spot of the room, and/or supporting multiple

students throughout the room, giving the impression they were not providing targeted support for any identified Special Education students.

Additionally, though teachers spoke of the Special Education support and resources available from the Hillsdale team, given the discussions by teachers and staff around the misalignment of Hillsdale-endorsed curriculum and state standards - particularly as related to math – there is a concern around the supports in place for Nevada students.

Also, while school leadership and parents spoke of students in Special Education being held to same expectations as students in general education, there was little, if any, discussion about how the school differentiates to ensure students' IEPs are supported. Said one member of the leadership team during the SPCSA Roundtable with them, *"Our IEPs have been redirected to making students successful to the curriculum we have here."* This gave the Authority team pause, as students' IEPs are specific to individual students' needs and should be designed to best support with modifications of the curriculum to support their IEPs goals – not the other way around.

ACTION ITEM

We suggest retraining and aligning all staff, particularly the instructional aides on best practices for supporting lead teachers, as well as providing full staff development around Special Education. If students with IEPs have 1:1 Aides, and we make the assumption that this may be the case, ensure those aides are devoted solely to the individual students rather than supporting the whole class. For aides that *are* class aides, ensure they have strategies and skills to best support the teacher's instructional practices and student learning, including students identified for Special Education.

Also, per the school's Data Collection Form, submitted prior to the Site Evaluation as part of the Site Evaluation process, 27 students have IEPs. Given the student enrollment of 703 on Validation Day, this accounts for a 3.8% student population qualifying for Special Education. The state average is 10.4%. We encourage the school to evaluate their recruitment strategies to ensure they are catering their classical education to *all* students and are able to meet the needs of *all* students, regardless of students' special education identification.

2. Increase rigor

While multiple stakeholders praised the rigorous instruction at the school, the Authority team found it to be lacking during most of the observations conducted. Like many of the schools in the SPCSA portfolio, and as observed through multiple Site Evaluations at a number of schools, Founders Academy also struggles with low-level questions and discussions. Many of the discussions are led by teachers, who typically ask DOK 1 (Depth of Knowledge) level questions that result in 'yes/no' responses. As noted above, in several instances, teachers provide information through instruction and simply ask students "Is this correct?" with little discussion or even indication that it would not be correct given how it was presented as factual and grounded in evidence.

ACTION ITEM

Whether with Hillside, the school's affiliated partner, or through school-based professional development, we suggest revisiting DOK levels and/or Blooms' Taxonomy to push for higher-level, more rigorous questioning throughout all grade levels, especially at the elementary levels. As suggested to other schools, we encourage teachers to craft questions, related to the instructional delivery and mastery of objective, as part of the lesson planning process so that teachers may be intentional in their questioning of students to informally assess understanding. (We also recognize lesson plans are not required to be submitted by all staff. This may be an area for isolation of a lesson planning component – submission of HLQs or Essential questions.) Given the emphasis on classical education and teaching students to think, the quality of discussion and an increased level of dialogue would benefit students.

VII. Note

SPCSA School Support Team members will follow up on each of these recommendations during their next site visit, unless otherwise noted.

###