



**Nevada State Public
Charter School
Authority**

To: Lee Iglody, Board President, American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas
Rachelle Hulet, District Administrative Director, American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas
From: Mark Modrcin, Director of Authorizing, State Public Charter School Authority
CC: Jason Guinasso, Chair, State Public Charter School Authority
Rebecca Feiden, Executive Director, State Public Charter School Authority
Date: May 15, 2019
Re: Site Evaluation Report for American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas

**SITE EVALUATION REPORT
American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas**

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 criteria considered for renewal; student achievement, financial prudence, and fulfilment 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 American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas, which was conducted by Mark Modrcin and Mike Dang on March 26, 2019. The school is currently in its 5th year of its 1st charter term, which expires on June 30, 2020.

Please contact the Team Lead for this Site Evaluation, Mark Modrcin, with any questions.

SITE EVALUATION REPORT: AMERICAN PREPARATORY ACADEMY – LAS VEGAS

Campus Name: Patrick Campus

Grade Levels: K – 12

School Leader: Rachelle Hulet

Purpose of Site Evaluation: Year 5, first charter term

Date of Authorization: July 2014

Evaluation Date: Tuesday, March 26, 2019

Conducted By: Mark Modrcin & Mike Dang

SUMMARY OF SITE EVALUATION

The mission of American Preparatory Academy – Las Vegas is to provide an orderly, safe and nurturing learning environment wherein content-rich, efficient curriculum and research-based instructional methodologies are utilized to ensure that every student achieves academic success and develops good character based on concrete measurements.

During our Site Evaluation, the team observed this mission being lived out on campus through the following:

- Students are exposed to rigorous curriculum that is challenging and engaging. Observed classrooms featured students that were attentive to the lessons and actively participating, especially in elementary classrooms as evidenced by chorale responses. This reinforces the school's mission of providing a content-rich environment.
- The school had clear, established systems in place to incorporate checks for understanding within lessons and to prevent the loss of learning time. Classrooms were orderly and efficient, with teachers operating with a noticeable sense of urgency.
- Teachers are invested in the success of their students and feel supported in their mission to ensure that all achieve academic success. Specifically, teachers spoke to the frequent coaching that occurs on-site and the many professional development opportunities as key factors that make them feel supported as they work with students to drive to improvement.

Site Evaluation team members observed instruction in the core subject areas of math, science, history/government, English/Language Arts and character development. Staff observed students in elementary, middle and high school grades. On average, each classroom evaluation was approximately 22 minutes. Evaluators were able to observe lessons at the beginning, middle and end of periods.

Observers noted consistency of school wide expectations, procedures and practices throughout the school day. Specifically, elementary students recited choral responses in almost every classroom as checks for understanding. Students also appeared actively engaged and familiar with expectations in each classroom as there were no behavior issues in observed classrooms and the vast majority of students appeared on task during classroom lessons. Daily objectives were sometimes posted in classrooms, but it was difficult for observers to understand how some classrooms were assessing or planned to assess student progress against that specific objective during their lessons.

I. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Classroom Environment	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport	The majority of teachers have established a positive learning environment through clear systems and respectful interactions. The climate in classrooms was respectful of students, and the tone of teachers was positive both in the delivery of content and in response to students.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Establishing a Culture of Learning	Elementary classrooms were rated highly within this indicator as there was a strong culture for learning that seemed genuine. Students and teachers demonstrated a commitment to the subject matters as evidenced by the choral responses and high levels of student engagement in most classrooms. The unique staffing structure at APA also contributes to a strong culture of learning as multiple adults are supporting learning in most elementary classrooms.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Managing Classroom Procedures	Classroom procedures were seamless at the elementary level, with students assuming some responsibility for their functioning. This was evidenced by students consistently following posted classroom expectations. This was less true at the secondary level as there were more instances of students off-task. In rare cases, this was not addressed by teachers.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Managing Student Behavior	In all but a few cases, teachers were aware of any student behavior issues and they were addressed in a respectful manner. Teachers and students are aware the school's behavior expectations and follow them the vast majority of the time.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed

II. INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION

Instructional Observation	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Communicating with Students	Teacher communication with students, both verbal and written, was very clear and attempted to address any pitfalls students may have about the content of the lesson. Many lessons, however, did not have a posted objective. When it was posted, it was often unclear as was the path forward to achieve the objective, which prevented this rating from being distinguished. Teacher explanations of content were clear and direct. Two examples of this occurred when teachers provided age-appropriate, detailed descriptions of igneous rocks and World War II to first graders and high school students, respectively.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques	Some, but not all, teachers consistently used higher-level questions to facilitate discussions within classrooms. For example, one high school classroom started with basic historical questions about when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed

	and who it involved, but then asked students to differentiate this event from the European theater and justify America's decision to enter the war. Student participation was high in almost every classroom, helping buoy this rating. School leadership and teachers should prioritize implementing higher-level questions in all lessons across grade levels.	
Engaging Students in Learning	Students were engaged throughout the majority of lessons and the activities, materials and content within classrooms was age and grade-level appropriate. Observers noted that at least 75% of all students were engaged in each classroom. It was unclear if the materials were scaffolded to support the diverse needs of some students.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Using Assessment in Instruction	Teachers excelled at monitoring student performance in addition to providing feedback on student work and their mastery of content throughout lessons. However, the specific objective in some classrooms was unclear making it difficult to provide a rating in this section above proficient.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed

III. OPERATIONS

Instructional Observation	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Mission-driven Operations	Routines are designed with the mission of the school and students in mind. Systems were established and had clearly been practiced and ingrained in teacher and student behavior for many months as their execution was seamless. The school also has a large operations staff to ensure that teachers and students are well-supported and focus on teaching and learning.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Managing Schoolwide Procedures	Routines and procedures are implemented with little confusion or disruption to the classroom or school. This is a particular strength of the elementary school compared to the secondary school where routines were implemented with less consistency. For example, almost all elementary classrooms include CFUs intermittently throughout lessons. Correct responses elicit applause or positive support from classmates. Elementary students also consistently abide by SLANT ¹ , where they are sitting in their chairs, attentive, and tracking the teachers throughout instruction.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Maintaining a Safe Environment	The school has strong safety systems as evidenced by cameras, implementing safety drills on a routine basis and safety posters easily visible. Students commented that they feel very safe on campus.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed

¹ SLANT is classroom strategy and an acronym standing for: Sit up, Lean forward, Ask and answer questions, Note important points and Track the speaker.

IV. FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Group	Number of Participants	Duration
Governing Board Members	2 of 5	45 minutes
School Leadership Team	5	45 minutes
Parents / Families	6	45 minutes
Students	12	45 minutes
School Staff (w/teachers)	12	45 minutes

Site Evaluation team members conducted five Focus Groups, one each with the following groups: Governing Board, school leadership team, parents/families, students, and school Staff. Participants were asked a series of questions, including common questions across all Focus Groups, with a range of 5 to 15 questions, depending on the group. The staff focus group included a mix of instructional and non-instructional staff. Instructional staff consisted of both elementary and secondary.

In general, the following themes developed from each of the following Focus Groups:

Governing Board

- The Governing Board understands the mission of the school and noted during the focus group that they are actively engaged in the progress and success of the school. Members participating in this focus group indicated that they receive academic updates at each board meeting, and when results or data are trending in the wrong direction, there is extensive conversation around the plan moving forward. Governing Board members identified specific assessments (DIBELS) and the dashboard systems as key methods in which they are kept apprised of the school's academic trajectory.
- Governing Board members applauded the training and systems installed by the contracted educational management organization (APA), noting that the feedback from teachers regarding professional development, classroom cameras and observations by the Utah-based employees are informative and critical in their development.
- Parallel to the comments offered during the student focus group, Governing Board members believe that the small group setting for classrooms and extracurricular activities are critical ingredients to the success of APA. One member said that "these activities are important in preparing students to be active participants in their community", which ties to the mission of the school.

School Leadership Team

- The leadership team at APA spoke to a unique staffing model at APA to address the challenges related to teacher recruitment and retention in Nevada. School leaders have found that their best source of high-quality instructors is those that are familiar with the school's model and mission. To capitalize on this, the school brings in paraprofessionals and aspiring teachers to work as instructors in hourly positions, assisting licensed classroom teachers on a daily basis. These individuals often times accept full-time roles in future years once they are licensed and familiar with the APA model.
- The school leadership team believes in consistent, high-quality professional development, and works to make sure that it is effective and responsive to the needs of teachers. APA teachers receive pre-service training from their contracted EMO prior to the start of the school year to reinforce school system expectations. Ongoing training occurs throughout the school year on timely topics to reinforce instructional practices and student supports. At the end of the year, the staff spends approximately one week reviewing the year and making plans for the following year using data and anecdotes about what was successful.

- Consistent school-wide expectations are a priority the administration, and this is evident to observers in classrooms. School Leaders emphasized that classrooms should include agendas for the class period, teacher-led instruction, choral responses, students following the SLANT strategy and daily homework.

Parents / Families

- Parents and family members praised the school for its positive culture and the responsiveness of staff to student and family needs. In particular, parents noted that there are seemingly minor actions, such as shaking hands with students as they enter the classroom or receiving a greeting from teachers they do not know. More than one parent said that these actions set APA teachers apart. All focus group participants confirmed that they feel very welcome at the school.
- When asked how their students felt connected to their teachers and classes, members of this focus group shared that teachers are very responsive to classroom needs and students' interests outside of APA. One parent shared that a teacher has taken time out of their day to see their student participate in after-school activities, and most teachers know how children spend their time outside of class.

Students

- Students value the small school environment, positive school culture and extracurricular activities available to them at this school. Multiple students within the focus group noted that they appreciate that teachers are very responsive to their needs and that they care about their success. Said one student: *“Teachers don’t just say they care about us, they mean it. I can tell this is true because they do not let us fail and are willing to work with us individually if necessary.”* Another student offered this: *“When I don’t have the best day, my teachers know when I may need help or when I’m sad. I have been here for five years and some of the teachers are still here from when I started. These teachers know me and that makes me comfortable.”*
- All students commented that there are high expectations related to student performance, and this includes completing homework on a regular basis. Younger students shared that they receive homework regularly, and older students confirmed that the homework load grows as students progress to higher grades.
- Students feel very safe at APA, noting that there are cameras in almost every room and that safety procedures and drills are taken seriously. One student noted that they appreciate how serious the APA staff takes student safety issues.

School Staff

- School staff indicated that the administrative team maintains an ‘open door’ policy and is always willing to address concerns and hear feedback. There was a general appreciation of the grade level team meetings that occur weekly followed by the elementary and secondary grade meetings later in the week. The secondary team specifically noted that having an assistant director to assist with discipline and parent issues has been a welcome change.
- The coaching systems implemented at APA keep teacher development front and center. Teachers are formally observed regularly—approximately once every other month—and coaching is always available. Teachers expressed their gratitude for the clarity within the rating system and how feedback is constructive instead of punitive.
- Overall, staff was content with the resources they are allocated and the opportunities made available to them for professional development. There is a clear desire among staff to engage and work with the network of schools based in Utah, including observing their instruction and school days to glean best practices.

V. OVERALL STRENGTHS OF PROGRAM

a. Positive culture that reflects the mission and vision of the school

Casual interactions with staff members as well as the multiple focus groups for staff, students and parents revealed a very positive school culture. There is a strong sense of family prevalent at the school, morale appears high and both students and staff seem very happy with the school and their choices to be here. SPCSA staff attributes this as a critical element to the success of the school. Additionally, teachers are open and appeared eager to identify their weaknesses and problem-solve collaboratively for the betterment of students and the school.

b. Strong systems and protocols the reinforce skills and classroom content

As referenced in the classroom observation section, the elementary school has strong systems and uniform expectations that students and staff leverage extensively to check for understanding and mastery of content. SPCSA staff was impressed with the songs, rhymes and student ownership of these systems. They appear to be effective in their purpose and execution. SPCSA staff believes that the school should continue to leverage these systems and look to implement similar systems at the secondary level.

c. Teachers are supported both in and out of the classroom and through a robust professional development program

APA employs a unique staffing structure that appears to successfully increase the level of support teachers receive. Instructors are assigned to most classrooms, especially at the elementary level. These individuals function as aides or paraprofessionals to the lead teacher, providing extra support for students during lessons throughout the day. The school also has scheduled meetings throughout each week to enhance collaboration between teachers as well as to share best practices. Finally, APA implements extensive professional development before, throughout and after the end of the school year to build capacity and reflect on future growth opportunities. SPCSA staff is confident that each of these mechanisms has contributed to the positive culture and strong systems throughout the school.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION ITEMS

a. Leverage higher-level questioning techniques within classrooms

The evaluation team was impressed by the level of rigor within almost every classroom as evidenced by the topics and content covered during observations. Despite the rigorous content, the school should continue to push teachers to use higher level questions during instruction so as to examine and monitor student progress against the intended objectives. SPCSA staff observed few teachers using higher order questions that ask students to analyze, evaluate and/or synthesize material. Many questions were asked of entire classes and were met with chorale responses. This is an excellent foundation and builds student recall but does not require students to think at higher levels. SPCSA staff also saw few classroom objectives posted, making it difficult to understand expectations at the end of lessons.

Recommendation

During end-of-year professional development or beginning of the year training for the 2019 – 20 school year, school leadership should work with teachers to review Bloom’s Taxonomy

and Depth of Knowledge questions so that they can be intentionally included in lesson plans for the upcoming school year. Higher level questions are most effective when they are planned for, and SPCSA staff encourages APA teachers to intentionally include higher-level questions in their lesson plans so that they can be included more frequently. This will increase the rigor for all students as they will be asked to compare, analyze and synthesize on topics and content.

b. Push teachers to post and follow actionable objectives for daily lessons

In most observed classrooms, the posted objective lacked specificity and was not clearly actionable. SPCSA staff found the content delivered during all lessons to be aligned to the posted objective, but the target objective for individual lessons was unclear and rarely included actions to determine whether or not students were on track to master the stated objective. In most observations, there was not a mechanism used by teachers to formally assess student progress against this objective.

Recommendation

During end-of-year professional development or summer training for the 2019 – 2020 school year, school leadership should work with teachers to build capacity to write actionable daily objectives. SPCSA staff suspects the vast majority of teachers can pick up on this very quickly, and that once teachers develop and refine their ability to craft daily objectives that are actionable, individuals and grade level teams will be able to further enhance their lesson delivery. Actionable objectives should also lead to more timely data for teachers.

c. Serve more at-risk students in future years, especially under an expanded charter

As reported on the Site Evaluation Data Collection Form, APA currently serves 79 students with an IEP, has declassified 7 students from Special Education over the last year, and serves 28 students who are English language learners. These numbers are far below the averages for the state of Nevada, Clark County School District, and the SPCSA portfolio averages.

Action Item

Develop a plan prior to September 1, 2019 to increase the diversity of APA prior to the 2020 – 21 school year. This plan may include pursuing an aggressive school marketing and recruitment plan across the Las Vegas metropolitan area to different student demographics, phasing in the National School Lunch Program and/or implementing a weighted lottery at the Patrick campus for admissions in the 2020 – 21 school year. The SPCSA recognizes the value of having diverse schools that are representative of the community in which they are located and appreciates APA proposing weighted lottery for the second campus to open in the fall of 2020. SPCSA staff is requesting that similar actions be taken at the Patrick campus in the coming months so that demographics more closely mirror those of the community.

d. Provide SPCSA staff with copies of secondary curriculum

APA was unable to provide copies of the curriculum used for grades 6 – 12 during the Site Evaluation document review. While staff trusts that the curriculum at the school is high-quality and rigorous based on the classroom observations throughout the day, staff would like to review this information.

Action Item

Provide SPCSA Authorizing staff with copies of the secondary curriculum within 1 week of when this report is issued. SPCSA staff can be available to pick up this material should it be more cost-effective to place on a flash drive.

Note

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

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