



*Dennis M. Walcott, Chancellor*

Charter School Annual Site Visit Report  
Charter Schools Office  
2010-2011

**ACHIEVEMENT FIRST CROWN HEIGHTS CHARTER SCHOOL**  
ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

JUNE 2011

# Part 1: Executive Summary

## **School Overview and History:**

Achievement First Crown Heights Charter School is an elementary/middle/high school serving approximately 754 students from kindergarten through grade ten in the 2010-2011 school year.<sup>1</sup> The school opened in 2005 with grades kindergarten, one and five. It has plans to grow to serve students in grades kindergarten through twelve.<sup>2</sup> It is currently housed in two buildings, with the elementary and middle schools in DOE space and the high school in private space, both in District 17.<sup>3</sup>

The school population comprises 98.0% Black, 1.3% Hispanic, 0.1% White and 0% Asian students. 72.8% of students are designated as Title I, compared to 81.6% in the district.<sup>4</sup> The student body includes 0.7% English language learners (ELL) and 11.0% special education students (SPED), compared to district averages of 10.1% designated as ELL and 13.4% receiving SPED services.<sup>5</sup> Please note that the demographics and student population are taken from ATS and that all Achievement First students eventually enroll in a single high school.

The school earned a C on its progress report in 2009-2010, an A in 2008-2009 and an A in 2007-2008.<sup>6</sup> The average attendance rate for the 2009-2010 school year was 97.2% for its elementary/middle school and 96.9% for its high school.<sup>7</sup> The school is in good standing with state and federal accountability.<sup>8</sup>

## **Annual Review Process Overview:**

The NYC DOE Charter Schools Office conducts an annual site visit of New York City Department of Education authorized charter schools in order to assess three primary questions: is the school an academic success; is the school a viable organization; and is the school in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. The visits are conducted by representatives of the New York City Department of Education Charter Schools Office and last the duration of one school day. The annual site visit begins with a meeting with the principal and school leadership team. Subsequently, the reviewers visit classrooms and hold brief meetings with available administrators, teachers, and students. Areas of evaluation include, but are not limited to: academic goals and mission; curriculum and instruction; school culture and learning environment; assessment utilization; parent engagement; government structures and organizational design; community support; special populations; and safety and security.

The following experts participated in the review of this school on June 8, 2011, and June 9, 2011:

- Sonya Hooks, Senior Director, NYC DOE Charter Schools Office
- Simeon Stolzberg, Consultant

---

<sup>1</sup> NYC DOE ATS system

<sup>2</sup> NYC DOE ATS system and charter agreement

<sup>3</sup> NYC DOE Location Code Generating System database

<sup>4</sup> Demographic Data drawn from NYC DOE ATS System on June 30, 2011

<sup>5</sup> NYC DOE ATS system; data pulled on June 30, 2011

<sup>6</sup> These Progress Report grades represent only Achievement First Crown Heights Elementary and Middle schools, not its High School

<sup>7</sup> NYC DOE School Progress Report

<sup>8</sup> New York State Education Department - [www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov)

## Part 2: Findings

**Note:** The Achievement First Crown Heights Charter School comprises an elementary, middle and high school program, each with its own staff, program and network support. The following conclusions address the overall school with evidence derived from each of the three programs.

### Areas of Strength

- School leadership is clearly focused on school improvement.
  - Priorities at the elementary school include improving collaborative planning and coaching.
  - The middle school is focused this year on re-setting the culture, concretizing the curriculum, revising its literacy program and enhancing supports for at-risk students.
  - The high school, which is still adding grades, is enhancing its use of data, developing its writing program and increasing student independence and accountability for learning through a seminar program.
  
- Efforts to implement a more structured school culture appear to have taken hold.
  - Posters listing school expectations, procedures and routines were observed throughout the school.
  - Students were generally well-behaved in classrooms and public spaces. In most observed classrooms, students had internalized routines and procedures. For example, students snapped to indicate agreement, consistently raised their hands, and quickly followed instructions. Transitions between classes and activities were efficient.
  - The middle school has introduced a merit/demerit system that was observed in use during the day of the evaluation visit. Demerits result in detentions and credits are used as an incentive through opportunities to purchase items in a student store and participate in field trips.
  - The middle school changed mid-year to having students remain in classrooms while teachers transition between classes to save instructional time and diminish the need for hallway oversight.
  - The high school uses a staffed community restoration room to address behavior and discipline issues outside the classroom.
  
- The school has enhanced instructional leadership to provide teachers with ongoing support and evaluation.
  - The elementary, middle and high school each have a principal as well as academic and student deans who conduct frequent observations and provide regular feedback to teachers. Teachers reported helpful and critical feedback with follow-up.
  - Teachers have designated coaches and regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings. The elementary school hired additional coaches who support specific grade levels. Coaches assist with curriculum development, instructional planning, use of data and pedagogy.
  - Grade level teams and departments meet regularly to discuss curriculum, instruction and individual students.
  - Professional development is reportedly focused on the schools' priorities. Teachers described professional growth plans that are used to frame their oversight and evaluation.
  - Interviewed teachers were uniformly positive about instructional leadership. They noted the open-door policy, responsiveness to requests for assistance, regular observation and critical but not threatening feedback.
  
- The school is developing a systematic approach to the use of data.
  - The school is using a variety of diagnostic, formative and summative assessments, including Fountas and Pinnell, Brigance, Degrees of Reading Power, GRADES

- assessments as well as writing prompts and rubrics, performance based assessments and summative interim assessments.
- Teachers use six-week data cycles for instructional planning. Summative interim assessments are administered at the end of each cycle followed by dedicated data days for staff to analyze assessment results and develop action plans. The high school has a notably rigorous data analysis protocol including detailed presentations to peers.
  - Achievement First has developed Athena, a data warehouse and analysis tool, which teachers described as useful in developing action plans based on assessment results.
  - Teachers at all levels are collaboratively evaluating student work to norm expectations. Anchor papers are being developed and archived for future use.
- The school provides a range of supports to meet the needs of at-risk students.
    - The elementary school implemented a response to intervention (RTI) model this year and is developing criteria for tiered interventions. Professional development has been provided to develop teachers' skills in identification, differentiated instruction and tracking student progress.
    - The middle school uses leveled classes with reduced student-teacher ratio in the lowest level classes. Eight interns were hired as "floaters" who follow the lowest classes throughout the day to provide additional in-class support.
    - Small group interventions are provided throughout the day, including reading groups during book club in the middle school, guided reading at the high school during the college readiness class and small group math instruction during study hall. Saturday Academy also provides additional support to students.
    - Special education is provided through push-in and pull-out services. Speech, occupational therapy and physical therapy are done by contracted service providers. The school also has social workers who provide counseling.
    - A range of supplemental programs are used to support struggling students, including computerized instruction that provides teachers with immediate data on student performance.
    - Teachers noted opportunities for tutoring and additional support before and after school and through office hours at the high school.
    - The school reported the effective inclusion of students with autism through a range of supports, including paraprofessionals and social skills classes.
  - The school reports adequate parent engagement.
    - Teachers send regular progress reports and report cards to parents and hold parent-teacher conferences to discuss student performance.
    - Interim assessment and other data are shared with parents.
    - The school holds events such as reading nights that are informative to parents.
    - Parent volunteers are active at events and trips.
    - The high school has a parent leadership council that meets monthly; its meetings are attended by school leaders and its executive committee has a weekly call with the school. The middle school has lined up volunteers for a parent leadership committee next year.

## Areas of Growth

- The school should continue to focus on bringing stability to the culture and curriculum.
  - Despite being a school in its second charter term, at the time of the visit much was new or evolving, including leadership and staff, school culture systems, curriculum, assessment, and professional development.
  - There have been significant changes in leadership. This year the elementary school principal is new to her role, the middle school principal is new to the school and the high school is in only its second year of operation. Leaders expect more collaboration across schools as staffing stabilizes.
  - The middle school has increased behavioral expectations this year and implemented a “No Excuses” model. At the time of the visit, the school had administered 334 out-of-school suspensions. During the school year, 30 students have left, many reportedly during the first semester because they did not like the new school culture. Focus groups have been held with parents to get feedback and inform modifications to the culture. In addition, a meeting was held with the current 4<sup>th</sup> grade students’ parents to explain the middle school’s culture.
  - The curriculum is a work in progress and its coherence varies by both grade level and subject. Curriculum had not been systematically archived, which presented a challenge with so many new teachers. Elementary school teachers are developing shared lesson plans through a deliberate collaborative process. At the middle school, the principal introduced a backwards planning model to develop curriculum alignment templates (CATs) based on standards. School leaders acknowledged the need for enhanced coordination across grades and between the three schools.
  - Achievement First uses common interim assessments (IAs) across its schools. However, at the time of the evaluation visit, the IAs were described as “in flux.” In some cases, they were reportedly not aligned to the curriculum and results were not always timely. Some teachers felt the IAs were not useful for students well below grade level. School leaders indicated that they do provide feedback to the network that is used to revise the IAs. In addition, student performance data is not disaggregated by school for the Board of Trustees’ high school committee.
  - The school is developing its teacher evaluation systems and is beginning to establish systems for goal setting and follow-up.
  - The school continues to develop supports for struggling students. The elementary school focused on literacy intervention this year and intends to add mathematics supports next year. Additional special education staff will also be hired next year. New supplemental programs will also be added next year.
  - Given that so much at the school is a work in progress and so many of the teachers are new to the school or the profession, sustainability is an issue identified by both school teachers and leaders. Some teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands at the school, which was corroborated by teacher survey results.
- The school should focus on the retention of instructional staff.
  - The school has experienced high teacher turnover, which is a challenge for implementing so many new programs.
  - Eight teachers left the elementary school from the previous year, and the school lost two during this school year.
  - The middle school lost 13 teachers from the previous year and had to hire a large number of novice teachers for this year.
  - At the high school, two out of five of the founding 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers did not return this year.
- The school should continue to increase urgency around improving academic rigor and increase the consistency of rigor across classrooms.
  - In some classes, all students were actively participating in learning activities. The use of chants, call and response, quick pacing and manipulatives were used to engage students.

- In some classes, tasks and questioning were grade appropriate and challenged students to develop higher order thinking skills. Students were asked to explain their answers or expand on other students' answers. Teachers required the use of subject-specific vocabulary and emphasis was placed on citing evidence from text.
  - In some classes, some students finished tasks quickly and were left with nothing to do while other students completed the activity. Some lessons were not paced appropriately leaving little time for students to practice or explore. Some tasks were very low-level, such as filling in blanks with phrases dictated by the teacher. Teacher instructions and explanations were not always clear.
  - High expectations at the high school were notable. Detailed rubrics for writing and protocols for solving word-problems were in evidence.
- The school should continue documented outreach to English language learners in order to match district averages.
    - The school's population includes 0.7% ELL students, which is lower than the district average of 10.1%.
- The relationship between the three school levels and the Achievement First (AF) network is not clearly coordinated.
    - AF connects to the school through a number of channels. Three different regional superintendents, one each for the elementary, middle and high school, provide leadership support. AF has subject-specific directors who also work with school principals and departments on curriculum, instruction and assessment; their roles are reportedly still being defined. The network also assists with staff recruitment and professional development and provides significant support to the school's operations staff in areas such as finance and IT.
    - School leaders described significant curriculum development at the school level with plans for increased sharing across the network. On the other hand, network staff described shifting to centralized scope and sequences and unit plans. It was not clear who was driving or coordinating this process, though the need for an organized curriculum was evident.
    - The school described developing internal teacher evaluation systems, which it is going to have to align to the network's developing teacher pathways process.
    - Teachers noted that students were not always adequately prepared for the transition from one school level to the next. There is communication between the three levels but it is not coordinated.

## Part 3: Framing Questions

### FRAMING QUESTIONS:

Throughout the Renewal Process and the life of each school's charter, the NYCDOE Charter Schools Office uses the following framing questions to monitor Charter School success:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
2. Has the School Been a Viable Organization?
3. Has the School Been in Compliance with All Applicable Laws and Regulations?

### Annual Site Visit Rubric:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
  - Academic Goals and Mission
    - School components and curriculum align together and holistically support the mission
    - School has high academic expectations and employs strategies for the full range of students served by the school, including those at risk and those with special needs
  - Curriculum and Instruction
    - The educational plan is flexible and is adjusted to meet the performance levels and learning needs of all enrolled students
    - School implements programming to address the needs of students with disabilities and ELLs
    - Teachers demonstrate the use of differentiated instructional techniques to support the varying ways by which students learn
    - School has implemented programming for students who need remediation or acceleration
  - School Culture
    - The culture is strong, intentional, supportive and sustainable and promotes student learning
    - The school motivates all students and respects the diversity of learners and cultures in the community
    - School offers programs, activities or support services beyond academics to address students' social and emotional needs
    - School calendar and day are set to provide extra supports to ensure that students are able to meet and exceed academic goals
    - Schedule for communication to parents/students is timely and allows for due process, includes strategies to prepare students for transitions and strategies for those students who are not on schedule, presents a clear and fair system that complies with students' due process rights
    - Structures that foster the development of authentic, sustained, caring, respectful relationships among all stakeholders within school
    - Behavioral expectations and social supports that reflect the school's mission and comply with all applicable laws and regulations
  - Assessment
    - Establishes a culture of continuous improvement and accountability for student learning
    - Develops assessments that shape and inform instruction on an ongoing basis and develop data that's used to gauge student, teacher and school progress through formative and summative assessment
    - Student learning measured with multiple forms of assessments/metrics
    - Develops educational goals and performance metrics that are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reflect the Mission and Time-Specific
    - Develops assessments that are appropriately aligned with curriculum, instruction, and adopted standards

- Provides evidence of how data will influence instruction, professional development and curricular adjustments
- Parent Engagement
  - Parent engagement strategies that integrate and mobilize parents within the school community as conduits for student success
  - Capacity to communicate effectively with parents and families
- 2. Is the School a Viable Organization
  - Governance Structures and Organizational Design
    - School has articulated appropriate roles, responsibilities, and decision-making structure for school community members (including Board of Trustees and school leadership)
    - An accountability structure that provides effective oversight of the educational program and fiscal components of the school is in place and utilized
    - Board regularly reviews a data dashboard of student achievement and fiscal management that forms the basis for Board discussions and decisions
    - Board has diverse skill set that lends itself to strong educational / operational oversight
    - Board has an articulated process for ongoing policy development, Board member development and self-evaluation
    - Organizational charts are aligned with mission; roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
    - Board has developed essential strategic partnerships with organizations that support the mission of the school
  - Community Support
    - School Leadership demonstrated responsiveness to the unique needs and interests of the community to be served
    - School has established a presence in the community and has buy in from community members
- 3. Is the School in Compliance with Applicable Laws and Regulations
  - Special Populations
    - Well-defined plan and sufficient capacity to service the learning needs of Special Education students, English Language Learners
    - School adequately addresses the academic and non academic needs of students in need of remediation, students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and gifted students
    - There is a coherent plan for meeting the non-academic needs of students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and other populations
    - School employs a process to identify students at risk of not meeting expectations and creates intervention plans and follow up
    - School demonstrates a comprehensive recruitment, enrollment and retention approach that is sensitive to the diverse needs of students
    - School admission policy and lottery preferences serve to create a student body that reflects community demographics and give a preference to community school district residents
  - Safety and Security
    - School is well maintained
    - Transitions and student gatherings are orderly and well supervised
    - Expectations for student behavior are well known and are enforced fairly
    - School is current with all safety recruitments and drills.
    - AED machines are in operation and school staff is trained in CPR