



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

*Application to Establish the
Achievement First Aspire Charter School*

May 3, 2010

Executive Summary

The application to establish the Achievement First Aspire Charter School (“AF Aspire”), to be located CSD 19 (Brooklyn) in New York City, was submitted to the Charter Schools Institute by lead applicant Leslie Esthers Redwine on January 11, 2010. AF Aspire would open in August of 2011 serving 166 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade, growing to serve 501 students in Kindergarten through 5th grade during the initial charter term. The mission of the proposed charter school is to provide students with the academic and character skills they need to excel in top colleges, to succeed in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders in their communities. Ultimately (after renewal of the proposed charter), the founders envision a Kindergarten through 12th grade school serving 966 students. The school board would contract with Achievement First, Inc. (“Achievement First”), a not-for-profit charter management organization.

The Charter Schools Institute recommends that the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approve the charter application of the Achievement First Aspire Charter School.

Background and Description

An application to establish the Achievement First Aspire Charter School in Brooklyn was submitted to the Institute on January 11, 2010. The Institute conducted a rigorous review, including an extensive staff review as well as review by a panel of nationally renowned experts in the charter school arena. Pursuant to its review protocols, the Institute has met with the lead applicants and founding board members and has required the applicant to revise, clarify and otherwise amend the application in numerous respects. In addition, the Chair of the SUNY Trustees’ Charter Schools Committee had an opportunity to interview the lead applicant and founding board members.

The school would open with 166 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade and grow to include 501 students in Kindergarten through 5th grade in the initial charter term. The founding team envisions a school focused on strengthening the academic and character skills needed for all students to ultimately excel in top tier colleges, to achieve success in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders in their communities. Eventually the school’s founders hope to grow the school through the 12th grade and enroll 966 students.

To achieve its mission, the design of the educational program of the school is based on the Achievement First school model, a model first developed and tested at the Amistad Academy in Connecticut, which has shown success in significantly increasing the achievement of students at-risk of academic failure. This model has been successfully replicated at Elm City College Preparatory Elementary and Middle Schools in New Haven, Connecticut, as well as in New York at the Achievement First Crown Heights Charter School, Achievement First East New York Charter School and Achievement First Endeavor Charter School (all in Brooklyn and authorized by the New York City Schools Chancellor). The SUNY Trustees have also authorized three charter schools in Brooklyn as well that engage the services of Achievement First: Achievement First-Bushwick (approved in January 2006 and opened in the fall of 2006), Achievement First Brownsville (approved in October of 2007 and opened in the fall of 2009), and Achievement First North Crown Heights (approved in January of 2008 and will open in the fall of 2010). Primary design elements include: 1) unwavering focus on student achievement; 2) consistent, proven, standards-based curriculum; 3) Interim assessments and strategic use of performance data; 4) more time on task; 5) principals with the power to lead; 6) increased supervision of the quality of instruction; 7) aggressive recruitment of

talent; 8) disciplined, achievement-oriented school culture; 9) rigorous, high-quality focused training for principals and leaders; and 10) parents and community as partners. The model also provides two teachers per classroom for students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade and divides schools into “Academies” of, eventually, Kindergarten through 4th grade, 5th through 8th grade, and 9th through 12th grade.

The original school on which the Achievement First model is based, the Amistad Academy, has consistently shown great success in closing the achievement gap in New Haven. On Connecticut’s Mastery Test in 2002 through 2009, Amistad students (who are 98% students of color and 80% eligible for free/reduced lunch) outperformed the state averages in reading and mathematics. In the 2008-09 school year, Achievement First-Bushwick Charter School, serving grades 3-7, outperformed its community school district of location in both English language arts and mathematics: 72% of students were proficient or higher on the State English language arts assessment; and 92% were proficient or higher on the State mathematics assessment. Achievement First Brownsville Charter School opened in the fall of 2009 with students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade, and does not yet have State assessment data.

The School has developed its curriculum based on New York State standards, using Achievement First’s proprietary Math, Writing and REACH (character) programs, SRA reading, FOSS Science, and Scott Foresman and History Alive for social studies. In the middle school, the curriculum will be based on that used at Amistad Academy and currently in use at Achievement First-Bushwick Charter School.

Achievement First Aspire would be the seventh school in Brooklyn managed by the Achievement First network. The proposed management agreement with Achievement First would become effective upon the approval of the school’s charter and approval by the Institute. Achievement First is the non-profit entity formed by the leaders of Amistad Academy to provide schools with access to the fundamental characteristics of the Amistad Academy model and its elementary school counterpart, first modeled in New Haven at the Elm City schools. Achievement First’s primary goal is to fully close the academic achievement gap between urban students and suburban students. Achievement First will provide, on a fee-for-service basis, a menu of support services such as start-up support, principal training and evaluation, staff recruitment, curriculum, staff development, budget, fundraising, information technology, school evaluation and marketing/advocacy. The school would compensate Achievement First with 10% of its basic per pupil revenues for the first five years of operation. (As with all management agreements, the Institute will review the final proposed contract pursuant to the Charter Agreement and on behalf of the SUNY Trustees).

The applicant and proposed trustees have chosen a managerial structure whereby the school’s principal will serve as the school leader and be dually accountable to both the school’s board of trustees and Achievement First. (The elementary school program and the middle school program will have separate principals.) The school’s principal for each program will implement the mission and policies set by the school’s board of trustees, hire and supervise all school-based staff, and observe, evaluate, and provide professional development to teachers as the instructional leader of the school. Achievement First, for its part, will supervise the school principals, providing both coaching as well as evaluation. It will provide its evaluations to the school’s board of trustees, together with the raw data supporting its evaluation to allow the school’s board to make its own independent evaluation. The board of trustees of the school will have final hiring and firing decisions of the principals; if Achievement First disagrees with the school board’s decision in this respect, it can choose to terminate its contract with the school. The school can terminate its contract with

Achievement First for cause, as well as choose not to renew the contract upon its expiration at the end of the charter term.

Achievement First would also be the sole corporate member of the proposed education corporation that will be formed when the school is chartered. As a type B New York not-for-profit corporation, a charter school may have members although most charter schools do not have corporate members. In the SUNY Trustees' portfolio only the Achievement First schools and the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School have a sole corporate member and they are the only schools with any members. Pursuant to the New York Not-For-Profit Corporation Law, members, or in this case a sole corporate member, may elect or appoint all future school trustees, and would be able to amend the school's by-laws; however, material changes to the by-laws are subject to the approval of the Institute, and, if required by the Charter Schools Act, approval by the SUNY Trustees and the Board of Regents. (For more detailed information regarding this type of structure please see the *Summary of Findings and Recommendations – Proposed Revision of the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School* dated June 16, 2005 (available from the Albany office of the Institute.) The other Achievement First schools authorized by the SUNY Trustees have utilized this governance structure without incident. Therefore, the Institute sees no reason why it should not be permitted again. In addition, only two Achievement First affiliated trustees may serve on the school board and they must recuse themselves from all votes involving Achievement First.

The applicant has found individuals to serve on the proposed board of trustees whose backgrounds and expertise reflect a variety of talents and skills. Based on conversations with the proposed school trustees, they appear to clearly understand the roles and responsibilities of a board of trustees and have the ability to ensure the appropriate and effective operation of the proposed charter school, including providing appropriate oversight not only over the school's principal and leadership team, but of Achievement First as well. The school's by-laws and code of ethics make it clear that the maximum of two trustees associated with Achievement First will recuse themselves from voting on all issues involving Achievement First. In addition, the non-affiliated trustees have made clear their ability to oversee Achievement First, including negotiating the services contract with Achievement First and overseeing its implementation. The proposed initial members of the board of trustees are set forth below.

1. **Anthony Davis** (Proposed Chairperson) – Co-founder and President, Anchorage Capital Group, L.L.C.; former Portfolio Manager in the Bank Debt Group and Associate in Investment Banking at Goldman Sachs; M.B.A., The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Trustee of Achievement First East New York Charter School.
2. **Jon Atkeson** (Proposed Treasurer) – Managing Director of Private Equity at Fortress Investment Group, LLC; formerly Vice President of Private Equity at Whitney & Co. and Equity Analyst at J. Bush & Co.; former Treasurer of the Amistad Academy Board of Directors; J.D., Yale Law School.
3. **Diahann Billings** – Deputy Director of External Affairs, City Year New York; formerly Director of External Affairs for Achievement First, director positions at Prep for Prep, and history teacher, curriculum developer and corporate attorney; J.D., Columbia Law School.
4. **Melanie Mullan** – Coro Fellow; formerly CEO at Achievement First (Leadership New York).

5. **Cathy Mitchel Toren** – Most recently Campaign Director for City Comptroller; formerly Director of Development for The Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law; Executive Committee Board Member of the American Jewish Committee, past board member of the National Child Research Center and the Cleveland Historical Society.
6. **Matt Taraglia** – Director of Strategic Relationship Management, Financial Services at Deloitte; formerly Business Development Manager at EMC.
7. **Noel Anderson**, Ph.D. – Associate Professor, Political Science Department and School of Education, CUNY – Brooklyn; Co-founder and Co-director of the Empowerment, Recruiting, Investing, and Supporting (ERIS) Program of the Black Male Initiative at CUNY; formerly a teacher and Director of Education at Sponsors for Educational Opportunity.
8. **Aaron Kauffman** – Senior Project Manager, The Hudson Companies (real estate development and finance); Master of Science degree in City Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
9. **Sara Keenan** – Director of Leadership Development, Achievement First; Former teacher and 2007 Education Pioneer, New York City Department of Education, Office of Accountability.
10. **Vacant** – reserved for a parent of a student enrolled at the school.

The founding team of the school is currently working with the New York City Department of Education’s Office of New Schools to identify under-utilized public school space in Community School District 19. Currently, all of the charter schools that engage the management services of Achievement First are located in shared NYCDOE facilities in Brooklyn. With the exception of two schools, the long-term plan is to occupy public school space. In the event that space is not available through the NYCDOE, the founding team will pursue all avenues to locate and identify a facility, including the many relationships they have established with New York’s philanthropic community, as well as by working with public officials and community agencies.

The fiscal impact of the proposed Achievement First Aspire Charter School on the New York City School District is summarized below:

Number of Students	Per Pupil Aid Rate Assumed	Per Pupil Aid Revenue Only	Total Dollars to Charter School from NYC (includes SPED)	Total Budget for New York City (in billions)	(%) of Total NYC Ed. Budget
166 (2011-12 school year – year 1)	\$12,816	\$2,127,456	\$2,165,419	\$18.821	0.012%
501 (2015-16 school year – year 5)	\$14,425	\$7,226,925	\$7,345,675	\$20.308	0.036%

The school's calculations assume that there will be an annual increase in per pupil aid of 3% over the span of the charter period. In measuring the fiscal impact on the district, the Institute utilized budgetary information made available by the New York City School District in their latest Financial Status Report (FSR), February 2010, published on the NYCDOE website. There was no information available for 2015-16 so a 3% increase in spending was assumed for that year, which was the average increase for the last two fiscal years provided in the report. It should be noted that the school district estimate is subject to unpredictable increases and decreases in any given year. The Institute's calculations of the total dollars provided to the charter school from the district does include SPED funding. It does not account for federal Title I funds, other federal grants and/or funds provided and to be received by the school since the school's main funding stream comes from per pupil aid. However, the school has included in the application calculations accounting for federal Title I funds, other federal grants and/or funds provided by the district and to be received by the school.

The applicant made an assessment, and the Institute concurs, that the fiscal impact of the proposed school on both the New York City School District and nonpublic schools in the same geographic area would be negligible.

The Institute has notified the NYCDOE as well as public and private schools in the same geographic area of the proposed school and has received no comment from these entities. (Copies of the notification letters are on file in the Albany office of the Institute.)

The application included a multi-faceted approach to demonstrate that the proposed charter school is likely to have sufficient enrollment to meet its student enrollment target. The application included letters of support from Congressman Ed Towns, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and District Manager of Community Board #5, Walter Campbell. In addition, the application included a letter of support from the Executive Director of the Blue Ridge Foundation/Board Chairperson of Groundwork, Inc. Secondly, the applicant provided information regarding the waiting lists of five currently open Achievement First charter schools in Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick with a combined waiting list of 7,147 students waiting to enter Kindergarten through 5th grade (of that 7,147 students, 3,492 are waiting for seats in Kindergarten or first grade). Finally, the applicant also provided petitions that included the signatures of over 50 parents of students who support the creation of the charter school.

Findings

Based on the comprehensive review of the application, discussion with national experts and interviews of the applicant and the proposed board of trustees, the Institute makes the following findings.

1. The charter school described in the application meets the requirements of Article 56 of the Education Law (as amended) and all other applicable laws, rules, and regulations as reflected in (among other things):
 - the inclusion of appropriate policies and procedures for the provision of services and programs for students with disabilities and English language learners;

- the required policies for addressing the issues related to student discipline, complaints, personnel matters, health services, Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), and the Open Meetings Law;
 - the inclusion of the proposed by-laws for the operation of the school's board of trustees; and
 - the inclusion of an analysis of the projected fiscal and programmatic impact on surrounding public and private schools.
2. The applicant has demonstrated the ability to operate the school in an educationally and fiscally sound matter as reflected in (among other things):
- the provision of an educational program that meets or exceeds the State performance standards;
 - the replication of a model that has had outstanding and demonstrable success in raising student achievement, including closing the achievement gap;
 - the articulation of a culture of self-evaluation and accountability at both the administrative and board level;
 - the student achievement goals articulated by the applicant;
 - an appropriate roster of educational personnel;
 - a sound mission statement;
 - a comprehensive assessment plan;
 - the provision of sound start-up, first-year, and five-year budget plans;
 - a plan to acquire comprehensive general liability insurance to include any vehicles, employees, and property;
 - evidence of adequate community support for, and interest in, the charter school sufficient to allow the school to reach its anticipated enrollment; and
 - the inclusion of descriptions for programmatic and independent fiscal audits, with fiscal audits occurring at least, annually.
3. Granting the application is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes of the Charter Schools Act (as amended). This finding is reflected by (among other things):
- the inclusion of a curriculum document that specifies how the proposed curriculum will ensure that students will meet or exceed the performance standards of the Board of Regents;
 - a comprehensive plan to assess student achievement through the use of State tests, externally-verifiable standardized tests and other diagnostic assessments;

- the articulation of strategies to amend and differentiate instruction where assessment data indicates such need;
- the staffing of classes with high-quality teachers to allow for more concentrated, focused and differentiated instruction;
- the inclusion of significant opportunities for professional development of the school’s instructional staff throughout the year;
- “sacred” three hours blocks of time dedicated to literacy;
- the inclusion of tutoring during and after school, as well as on Saturdays, for students at-risk of academic failure;
- an organizational structure that supports the principal in functioning as a true instructional leader;
- coaching provided to classroom teachers by the school principal and academic dean; and
- a commitment to providing an educational program focused on outcomes, not inputs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on its review and findings, the Charter Schools Institute recommends that the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approve the application to establish the Achievement First Aspire Charter School to be located in Community School District 19 of Brooklyn to open in August of 2011.

Achievement First Aspire Charter School

Brooklyn, New York

Basic Identification Information

Lead Applicant:	Lesley Redwine
Management Co.:	Achievement First, Inc.
Other Partners:	None
Location (District):	New York City, CSD 19
Student Pop./Grades:	Opening with 166 students in K and 1 st grade and growing to include 501 students in K-5 th grade at the end of the first charter term.
Opening Date:	August 2011

School District of Proposed Location Profile

New York City School District 19			
Enrollment (2008-09):		26,106	
Percent (2008-09):			
White:		1	
African-American:		53	
Hispanic:		39	
Asian, Other:		7	
Percent Participating in Federal Lunch Program (2008-09):			
Free Lunch:		81	
Reduced Price Lunch:		6	
Percent Proficient on State Exams (2008-09)			
English Language Arts		Mathematics	
Grade	Percent Proficient	Grade	Percent Proficient
3	63	3	90
4	59	4	79
5	65	5	79
6	66	6	70
7	57	7	70
8	43	8	59

Source: Demographic data is from the New York State Accountability and Overview Report 2008-09; test data are from the 2008-09 results released on the State Education Department website.