



Charter Schools Institute  
*The State University of New York*

# Summary of Findings and Recommendations

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*Application to establish the  
Achievement First Brownsville Charter School*

October 1, 2007

## **Executive Summary**

The Achievement First Brownsville Charter School (the “School”) proposes to open in Brooklyn in September of 2008 with 84 fifth grade students, growing to serve 645 students in Kindergarten through third, and fifth through eighth grades during the term of its charter. The mission of the proposed charter school is to provide students with the academic and character skills they need to gain admission to 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 twelfth grade school that would serve 930 students. The School would be operated by Achievement First, Inc., a not-for-profit charter management organization.

The Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) recommends that the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”) approve the charter application for the School.

## **Background and Description**

An application to establish the School in Brooklyn was submitted to the Institute on June 29, 2007. 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 applicants to revise, clarify and otherwise amend the application in numerous respects. In addition, Co-Chair Cox of the State University Trustees’ Committee on Charter Schools had an opportunity to question the lead applicant and founding board members.

The School would open with 84 students in fifth grade and grow to include 645 students in Kindergarten through third and fifth through eighth grades. 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 twelfth grade.

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, which has shown success in significantly increasing the achievement of students at-risk of academic failure in Connecticut. This model has been successfully replicated at Elm City College Preparatory Elementary and Middle Schools in New Haven, Connecticut, and is now being implemented at 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), as well as Achievement First-Bushwick (in Brooklyn and authorized by the State University Trustees in January 2006 and opened in the fall of 2006). 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 breaks the School up into “Academies” of, eventually, Kindergarten through fourth grades, fifth through eighth grades, and ninth through twelfth grades.

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 2006, Amistad students (who are 98% students of color and 80% eligible for free/reduced lunch) outperformed the state averages in reading and mathematics, and also outperformed suburban school districts. Two Achievement First charter schools have administered assessments under the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP). Achievement First Crown Heights Charter School, which was in its second year in 2006-07, outperformed its local school district. The percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on NYSTP’s English language arts and mathematics assessments was notably greater than that of the district. Because Achievement First Endeavor administered the state assessments for the first time in 2006-07, shortly after students were first enrolled in the school, a comparison to its local district is not valid.

The School has developed its curriculum based on New York State standards, using Saxon Math, Direct Instruction for reading, Core Knowledge for history, FOSS Science, SRA Decoding, Waterford computer-based Early Literacy, and Achievement First’s REACH program. In the middle school, the curriculum will be based on that used at Amistad Academy.

The School intends to enter into a management agreement with Achievement First, Inc. that would become effective upon the approval of the School’s charter. Achievement First, Inc. 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, Inc. will provide, on a fee-for-service basis, a menu of support services such as start-up, 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 contracts, the Institute will review the final proposed contract pursuant to the charter and on behalf of the State University Trustees). As set forth above, Achievement First, Inc. currently manages four schools in New York.

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, Inc. (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 the 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, Inc., for its part, will supervise the School principals, providing both coaching as well as supervision and 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, Inc. 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, Inc. for cause, as well as choose not to renew the contract upon its expiration at the end of the charter term.

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 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, Inc. as well. The School's by-laws and code of ethics make clear that trustees associated with Achievement First, Inc. will recuse themselves from voting on all issues involving Achievement First, Inc. In addition, the non-affiliated trustees have made clear their ability to oversee Achievement First, Inc., including negotiating the services contract with Achievement First, Inc. and overseeing its implementation. The proposed initial members of the board of trustees are set forth below.

1. Kelly Wachowicz (Lead Applicant/Proposed Chair) – Vice President of New Business Initiatives at IStar Financial, Inc. Previously served as Vice President at both the NYC Economic Development Corporation and Madstone Films.
2. Max Polaner – Chief Financial Officer for Achievement First.
3. Sean Andrews – Vice President of Operations at the Prospect Park YMCA. Formerly Executive Director of the New York City Audubon Society; Deputy Executive Director for Programs at the Parks Council; and Director of the Community Leadership Program.
4. Ernest Hart, Esq. – Assistant Vice President for Employee and Labor Relations at Columbia University. Formerly Chief of Staff to the New York City Deputy Mayor for Policy/Special Counsel; Commissioner of Human Resources/Administration for the City of Yonkers; and has served as Adjunct Professor of Law at New York Law School.
5. Nicole Campbell – Senior Program Officer for the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation. Prior experience includes developing strategies for community engagement with the New York City Department of Education and working with the government of the Dominican Republic to evaluate the nation's adult education programs.
7. Chrystal Stokes – Director Assistant to the Senior Vice President of Business Development and Mergers & Acquisitions at the American Express Company. Formerly a manager of Planning and Forecasting at American Express; an associate in the private equity group at J.P. Morgan Partners; the Assistant Treasurer of Granite Broadcasting Corporation; and a financial analyst in the Mergers and Acquisitions Department of Goldman, Sachs & Co.
8. One seat reserved for a parent of a student enrolled in the school.

The founding team of the School is currently working with the New York City Department of Education's (the "NYCDOE's") Office of New Schools to secure space in Region 5. The Office

of New Schools has provided a letter acknowledging its awareness and intent to locate space for the School. However the NYCDOE will not complete its facility and accountability analysis of district schools until mid-October. The NYCDOE will communicate with the Institute regarding facilities' decisions. 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 through working with public officials and community agencies. In the long term, the school intends to occupy its own permanent space, and has developed its financial plan that reflects this intention.

The fiscal impact of the School on its district of residence, the New York City School District, will be negligible and is summarized below.

<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Per Pupil Aid</b>	<b>Total Dollars to Charter School from NYCDOE</b>
84 (Year 1 – 2008-09)	\$11,023	\$925,932
645 (Year 5 – 2012-13)	\$11,023	\$7,109,835

Using the figures above for total funds to be transferred from the New York City School District to the proposed charter school, the year one figure of \$1,471,608 represents 0.006% of an estimated budget of \$16.5 billion for the New York City Schools. In year five, the figure above represents 0.04% of the estimated budget. The cumulative fiscal impact of all charter schools on the New York City School District was estimated to be 0.51% in 2005-06 according to the State Education Department. The calculations conservatively assume that there will be no increase in the per pupil aid or the overall budget of the New York City School District over the life of the proposed charter. The Institute's calculations do not account for special education, federal Title I funds or other grants or funds provided by the district and to be received by the School. The applicant made an assessment that the fiscal impact of the proposed school on 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 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 used a multi-faceted approach to demonstrate that the proposed charter school is likely to have sufficient enrollment to meet its student enrollment target. First the application included letters of support from legislators (Congressman Ed Towns and Senator John Sampson), community based organizations (Community Board #16, Brooklyn Children's Museum, Brooklyn Arts Council, and the Brownsville Heritage House) and "partner" organizations (Brooklyn College School of Education, Dr. John Flateau-a professor at Medgar Evers College, Robin Hood Foundation, and the Independence Community Foundation). Secondly, the applicant provided information regarding the waiting lists of three currently open Achievement First charter schools that will enroll fifth grade in the 2008 year. The schools are located in Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, and their waiting lists reflect 268

students. Finally, the applicant also provided petitions that included the signatures of 59 parents of students who will enroll in fifth grade in the fall of 2008.

### **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 applicants have 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 for the Achievement First Brownsville Charter School to open in the Brownsville community of Brooklyn in September of 2008.

# Achievement First Brownsville Charter School

Brooklyn, New York

## Basic Identification Information

Lead Applicant(s): Kelly Wachowicz  
 Management Co: Achievement First, Inc.  
 Other Partners: None  
 Location (District): Brooklyn (Brownsville community)/NYC  
 DOE Region 5, Administrative District 23  
 Student Pop./Grades: 84 5th grade students; expanding to 645  
 students grades K – 3 and 5 - 8  
 Opening Date: September 2008

## School District of Proposed Location Profile

Public School Enrollment (2005-2006):	12584	
Percentages (2005-2006)	White: 1% Black: 81% Hispanic: 17% Asian, Other: 1%	
Percentage of Public School Student Participating in Federal Lunch Program (2005-2006):	88%	
Test Scores (ELA/2007 and Math/2007) -- Percentages of Public School Students Failing to Meet the Regents Performance Standards:	<u>ELA</u>	<u>Mathematics</u>
	3 <sup>rd</sup> – 57.2	27.4
	4 <sup>th</sup> – 59.6	36.8
	5 <sup>th</sup> – 58.4	47.4
	6 <sup>th</sup> – 58.5	39.5
	7 <sup>th</sup> – 61.7	45.8
	8 <sup>th</sup> – 59.9	59.2
	Avg. 59.3	43.5

Source: demographic data is from the New York State Accountability and Overview Report 2005 – 06; test data are from the 2006-07 results released on the State Education Department website.