



Charter Schools Institute  
*The State University of New York*

## **Buffalo United Charter School**

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# **School Evaluation Report 2008-2009**

Visit Date: March 19, 2009

Report Issued: March 23, 2011

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## INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”), jointly with the New York State Board of Regents, are required by law to provide oversight sufficient to ensure that each charter school that the State University Trustees have authorized is in compliance with applicable law and the terms of its charter. The State University Trustees, however, consistent with the goals of the New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998, view their oversight responsibility more broadly and positively than purely monitoring compliance. Accordingly, they have adopted policies that require the Charter Schools Institute (“the Institute”) to provide ongoing evaluation of charter schools authorized by them. By providing this oversight and feedback, the State University Trustees and the Institute seek to accomplish three goals:

- **Facilitate Improvement.** By providing substantive information about the school’s academic, fiscal and organizational strengths and weaknesses to the school’s board of trustees, administration, faculty and other staff, the Institute can play a role in helping the school identify areas for improvement.
- **Disseminate Information.** The Institute disseminates information about the school’s performance not only to its board of trustees, administration and faculty, but to all stakeholders, including parents and the larger community in which the school is located.
- **Document Performance.** The Institute collects information to build a database of a school’s performance over time. By evaluating the school periodically, the Institute can more clearly ascertain trends, determine areas of strength and weakness, and assess the school’s likelihood for continued success or failure. Having information based on past patterns, the Institute is in a better position to make recommendations regarding the renewal of each school’s charter, and the State University Trustees are better informed in making a decision on whether a school’s charter should be renewed. In addition, a school will have a far better sense of where they stand in the eyes of its authorizer.

The Institute regularly collects a range of data about each school’s performance over the course of its charter period, which ultimately contributes to that school’s renewal decision. These data include student performance results, financial audits, any legal records of issues addressed, board meeting minutes, and reports from regular evaluation visits conducted by the Institute (or external experts contracted by the Institute) and other agencies with oversight responsibilities.

This annual School Evaluation Report includes three primary components. The first section, titled Executive Summary of School Evaluation Visit, provides an overview of the primary conclusions of the evaluation team regarding this year’s visit to the school. The second section, titled School Description, provides descriptive information about the school, including enrollment and demographic data, as well as summary historical information regarding the life of the school. Finally, this report presents the evidence and conclusions from an evaluation visit conducted in the current school year in a third section, titled School Evaluation Visit. Within this section is a summary of conclusions from previous school evaluations.

Because of the inherent complexity of an organization such as a school, this School Evaluation Report does not contain a rating or a single comprehensive indicator that would indicate at a glance the school’s prospects for renewal. It does, however, summarize the various strengths of the school and note areas in need of improvement with respect to the school’s performance as compared to the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks. To the extent appropriate and useful, we encourage school boards to use this evaluation report in ongoing planning and school improvement efforts.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT**

Based on the analysis of evidence from the evaluation visit to the Buffalo United Charter School (BUCS), the school is making adequate progress towards achieving its mission. Although this conclusion is drawn from a variety of indicators which are discussed more fully later in this report, some of the more salient indicators include the following:

### *Academic Success*

BUCS regularly administers diagnostic, formative and summative assessments and has an established system for collecting and analyzing results. Teachers use assessment data to identify skill deficits and group students for instruction and remediation; school leaders use data to evaluate and improve the academic program. The school regularly shares student performance results with parents.

BUCS has developed a comprehensive curriculum framework that is generally aligned to New York State standards; the school recognizes that some gaps exist in its curriculum and has plans to improve the curriculum maps. Teachers use a variety of resources and have freedom to supplement the school's commercial curriculum programs. The school has a process for reviewing and revising the English language arts and mathematics curriculum.

Teachers plan purposeful lessons that are generally aligned to the curriculum. With some exceptions, instruction was rigorous, though student engagement and use of learning time varied widely across classrooms. The use of differentiated instruction is in its nascent stage.

School leaders have established high expectations for student achievement and teacher performance. Instructional leaders provide teachers with ongoing and systematic support. Teachers are regularly evaluated and instructional leaders adequately monitor and evaluate the academic program.

The school has generally effective interventions for at-risk students, both within and outside the classroom. Teachers receive adequate training to support the needs of struggling students, and the school has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs.

BUCS has established a safe environment. Students are for the most part orderly in public spaces. Teachers' effectiveness with classroom management varied across classrooms with some misbehavior being tolerated without consequences. The school has developed documented discipline policies and procedures for different grade ranges, but enforcement is inconsistent.

The school has a sustained and cohesive professional development program. Professional development appears to be meeting the needs of staff members and addressing a range of experience levels and subject areas.

### *Organizational Capacity*

BUCS has adhered to its mission and key design elements. The school is competently managed. The organizational structure supports distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The school has hired and retained quality personnel. While the kindergarten was under-enrolled, the school has maintained adequate enrollment.

In terms of governance, the board has adequate skill sets, structures and procedures to govern the school and is seeking additional members to increase diversity and community representation. The board is clearly focused on student achievement and the school's academic Accountability Plan goals. Board members receive sufficient information from school leaders and the school's management company to provide effective oversight. The board appears to be regularly evaluating school leaders and the management company.

## SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

### Opening Information

Date Initial Charter Approved by SUNY Trustees	June 2002
Date Initial Charter Approved by Board of Regents	September 2002
School Opening Date	September 2003

### Location

School Year(s)	Location(s)	Grades	District
2003-Present	325 Manhattan Avenue, Buffalo 14214	K-8	Buffalo City School District

### Partner Organizations

	Partner Name	Partner Type	Dates of Service
Current	National Heritage Academies, Inc.	EMO	2003-Present

### Current Mission Statement

Buffalo United Charter School will offer families and students a public charter school, which focuses on high achievement and instills a sense of family, community, and leadership within all of our students.

### Current Key Design Elements

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing a complete wrap around program for students through the school's partnership with the Boys &amp; Girls Clubs of Buffalo.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging strong relationships between families and teachers through monthly newsletters to keep parents updated on their child's academic progress, assignments and school events; formal parent satisfaction surveys; and providing a room designated exclusively for parents.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering parental involvement through three parent-teacher committees – School Improvement Committee, Parent Involvement Committee and a Curriculum Committee.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring student performance and identifying learning gaps through daily learning exercises, classroom assessments, group and individual projects, nationally referenced standardized test (NWEA-MAP) and required New York State assessments.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing a code of conduct designed to provide students with a safe and orderly school environment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on leadership development of all students by emphasizing a different character quality each month.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing each student with an academic program based on a strong curriculum that is aligned with New York State's learning standards.</li> </ul>

## School Characteristics

School Year	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Charter Enrollment	Actual Enrollment <sup>1</sup>	Original Chartered Grades	Actual Grades	Days of Instruction
2003-04	240	240	240	K-4	K-4	176
2004-05	400	405	396	K-5	K-5	182
2005-06	480	480	430	K-6	K-6	182
2006-07	555	555	484	K-7	K-7	200
2007-08	650	N/A	573	K-8	K-8	190
2008-09	630	N/A	600	K-8	K-8	186
2009-10	655	N/A	635	K-8	K-8	183
2010-11	680	N/A	616	K-8	K-8	183

## Student Demographics

	2008-09 <sup>2</sup>		2009-10	
	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of Buffalo CSD Enrollment	Percent of School Enrollment <sup>3</sup>	Percent of Buffalo CSD Enrollment <sup>4</sup>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%	0%	1%
Black or African American	97%	57%	97%	56%
Hispanic	2%	15%	2%	15%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0%	3%	0%	4%
White	1%	24%	1%	23%
Multiracial	0%	0%	0%	1%
<b>Special Populations</b>				
Students with Disabilities <sup>5</sup>	12%	N/A	10%	N/A
Limited English Proficient	0%	8%	0%	9%
<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>				
Eligible for Free Lunch	77%	74%	81%	70%
Eligible for Reduced-Price Lunch	16%	8%	11%	7%

<sup>1</sup> Source: SUNY Charter School Institute's Official Enrollment Binder. (Figures may differ slightly from New York State Report Cards, depending on date of data collection.)

<sup>2</sup> Source: 2008-09 School Report Cards, New York State Education Department.

<sup>3</sup> Source: 2009-10 Demographics and Limited English Proficient Percentages calculated from BEDS reports submitted at the beginning of the school year. This information is unverified by the schools. It also does not include Free/Reduced Lunch status, but rather categorizes students as "economically disadvantaged." Free/reduced lunch figures were provided by the school.

<sup>4</sup> Aggregated district data not yet available for 2009-10.

<sup>5</sup> New York State Education Department does not report special education data. School data is school-reported from charter renewal applications. District data from NYSED Special Education School District Data Profile.

### Current Board of Trustees<sup>6</sup>

Board Member Name	Position/Committees
Diane Rowe	President
Dottie Bellanti	Vice President
Paul Joyce	Secretary
Lester Hoeflich	Co-Treasurer
Art Traver	Co-Treasurer
Antwan Barlow	Member
Madonna Buscaglia	Member

### School Leader(s)

School Year	School Leader(s) Name and Title
2003-04 to 2005-06	David Bouie, Principal
2005-06	Gary Bell, Interim Principal
2006-07 to 2007-08	Jon Metz, Principal
2008-09 to Present	Tammy Messmer, Principal

### School Visit History

School Year	Visit Type	Evaluator (Institute/External)	Date
2003-04	First Year	Institute	May 14, 2004
2004-05	Second Year	Institute	April 5, 2005
2005-06	Third Year	External	April 25-26, 2006
2006-07	Fourth Year	Institute	March 27-28, 2007
2007-08	Initial Renewal	Institute	October 16-18, 2007
2008-09	Sixth Year	Institute	March 19, 2009
2009-10	Sixth Year	External	October 13-14, 2009
2009-10	Comprehensive Monitoring Site Visit	State Education Department	March 24, 2010
2010-11	Subsequent Renewal	Institute	September 27-28, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Source: School renewal application and Institute board information.

## **SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT**

### **Background**

Regardless of the type of visit, Institute evaluations of SUNY authorized charter schools are organized around a set of benchmarks that address the academic success of the school including teaching and learning, e.g. curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization, including such items as board operations and student order and discipline. Called the State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks, these established criteria are used on a regular and ongoing basis to provide schools with a consistent set of expectations leading up to renewal.

While the primary focus of the visit is an evaluation of the school's academic program, issues regarding compliance with applicable state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed), and where the Institute finds serious deficiencies in particular relating to student health and safety it may take additional and immediate action; however, monitoring for compliance is not the principal purpose of the visit.

This section of the School Evaluation Report begins with a summary of the observations and conclusions from previous visits to the school. This information is used by evaluation teams in preparation for the visit and assists the observers in understanding the accomplishments and challenges the school has faced. Similarly, this information provides the reader with insight into the Institute's monitoring of the school's academic program and conclusions from prior visits, including those conducted by external experts on behalf of the Institute. Following this summary is a detailed analysis of the observations and conclusions from this year's evaluation, along with supporting evidence. Finally, information regarding the conduct of the evaluation, including the date of the visit and information about the evaluation team is provided.

### **Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit**

The Charter Schools Institute conducted an initial renewal evaluation visit of Buffalo United Charter School in the fall of 2007. The evaluation team observed classrooms; interviewed administrators, board members and teachers; and reviewed student work and other documents. As a result of the evaluation visit a letter was provided to the school's board of trustees outlining the major conclusions from the visit, which are briefly summarized below.

BUCS had a mixed record of achievement as measured by its progress toward meeting key Accountability Plan goals. The school had a system to gather assessment data and used results to make school-wide changes to its academic program; the school was beginning to train teachers to use these results to improve instruction. The school was also transitioning from a curriculum based on textbooks and materials selected by its education service provider to a standards-based curriculum supported by pre-packaged curricular materials. The quality of instruction varied throughout the school with the most effective instruction observed in the elementary grades. BUCS had implemented various supports for at-risk students and had hired paraprofessionals to assist classroom teachers in providing support for struggling students. The school had a documented discipline system and defined approach to classroom management, though at the time of the renewal visit it was implemented with

mixed success throughout the school, particularly in the upper grades. BUCS had invested significant resources in professional development, which were aligned with school-wide priorities.

Organizationally, the school had recommitted to its key design elements, including its focus on parent involvement and its moral focus program. The school's board of trustees had worked effectively and taken action to correct deficiencies in the school's academic performance.

## **Current Evaluation Visit: Benchmark Analysis and Evidence**

### *Use of Assessment Data (Benchmark 1.B)*

The school regularly administers diagnostic, formative and summative assessments, and has an established system for collecting and analyzing results. Assessments in use include monthly fluency tests, previous state exams and "Buckle Down" tests similar to state exams, DIBELS and the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measure of Academic Progress (NWEA) exam. Teachers could readily describe the school's testing regimen, including the collection of data, item analysis and communication of results to teachers. Teachers described regular formative assessments, including quizzes, unit tests and rubrics, though both school leaders and teacher interviews indicated that some teachers were less familiar with the effective use of formative assessments, which is a focus for ongoing professional development. National Heritage Academies (NHA), the Michigan-based for-profit educational management organization with which the school contracts, was in the process of developing rubrics and scoring scales and will be working with teachers to norm their use.

The school's testing and data coordinator collects and organizes assessment data and provides deans with reports to share with teachers. There are plans to strengthen the utility of these reports in the coming year. Professional development training and team meetings also support the administration and use of assessments. Teacher teams work with their dean to develop action plans based on assessment results.

Teachers use assessment data to identify skill deficits and group students for instruction and remediation. For example, teachers noted using results to identify students for additional tutoring after school. School leaders use data to evaluate and improve the academic program. Teachers noted that data gathered and analyzed by school leaders provides the impetus for defining remediation, including grouping of students, action plans for corrective reading and after-school tutoring. Some teachers also noted the use of assessment results to inform the alignment of curriculum and instruction.

The school regularly shares student performance results with parents and the community. In addition to providing parents with information about their own child through regular progress reports and report cards, the school hosts open houses and honor roll breakfasts to share information about student and school performance. School performance has also been covered by articles in local newspapers.

### *Curriculum (Benchmark 1.C)*

The school has developed a comprehensive curriculum framework that is generally aligned to state standards. Teachers reported the use of National Heritage Academy curriculum resources, which though originally not New York specific, are becoming more aligned to state standards and assessments. Teachers and staff continue to develop curriculum maps and pacing guides that inform their daily lesson

planning, though some teachers follow textbooks as their scope and sequence. Teachers develop lesson plans aligned to their curriculum framework that employ student-centered objectives. The use of state standards was also evident in lesson planning. Teachers use a variety of instructional resources and have freedom to supplement the school's commercial curriculum programs. The school recognizes that some gaps exist in their curriculum and has plans to improve its curriculum maps. For instance, BUCS added a writing block to its schedule. A process is in place for reviewing and revising the English language arts and mathematics curriculum. Teachers are asked to track curriculum issues during the year for use in the summer curriculum review process.

#### *Pedagogy (Benchmark 1.D)*

Teachers plan purposeful lessons that are generally aligned to the curriculum. They reported planning with input from the principal, deans and instructional coaches and using a common lesson plan format for plans they submit weekly. They indicated that instructional leaders provide regular, useful feedback. Lesson plans that were reviewed during the visit demonstrated clear objectives aligned to the lesson activities. Differentiation was not consistently reflected in lesson plans; the lesson plans for single gender classes did not indicate any differences.

With some exceptions, instruction was rigorous. Teachers employed a variety of pedagogical techniques that appeared appropriate for the lesson objectives. Inspectors noted both teacher-centered instruction as well as the use of small groups and independent practice. Examples of rigorous instruction included open-ended questions requiring students to justify their opinions and clearly articulate their point of view. In some classes, however, questions primarily required students to recall information without employing higher level thinking such as synthesis or evaluation.

Student engagement and use of learning time varied widely across classrooms. For example, in some classes students were focused on listening to the teacher and responding to her directions with a palpable sense of urgency. Timers were employed effectively in some classes to keep students on task and ensure all of the day's agenda items were covered. In other classes students rested their heads on their desks while the teacher lectured or talked during the lesson, despite repeated attempts by the teacher to get their attention.

The use of differentiated instruction is in its nascent stage, described by school leaders as a work in progress with more training planned to help teachers better adapt instruction to meet their students' needs. Action plans are being developed that target instruction for students, including groups that cut across grades. There was some evidence of grouping and centers in lesson plans and classroom observation, as well as some differentiated curriculum and pedagogy. However, in practice the approach to grouping varied across teachers with some, for example, using the same task for all groups while others had different assignments based on student needs. Students were assigned to groups based on a variety of criteria, including assessment results and teacher evaluation. During interviews teachers reported their intent to use differentiation, but also indicated the need for more training to do so effectively. The ongoing development of the school's assessment system and curriculum provide a foundation for more effective implementation of differentiated instruction.

#### *Instructional Leadership (Benchmark 1.E)*

School leaders have established high expectations for student achievement and teacher performance. The current principal began her career at the school as an instructional coach/assistant principal, was elevated

to interim principal in July and appointed principal in December. The school's leadership communicates clear priorities and expectations during regular staff meetings as well as with individual teachers. Deans described their primary function as focusing on academic rigor and student achievement. Teachers reported an emphasis on the use of assessment data to inform instructional practices and improve student achievement. In addition, school leaders provide regular feedback through review of lesson plans and classroom observations. A number of teachers noted the increased consistency and structure from previous years; one teacher cited the calendar for the year as an example of the improved level of organization and planning.

Instructional leaders provide teachers with ongoing and systematic support. The school has a number of positions dedicated to helping teachers, including the principal, deans and instructional coaches. Deans and coaches are assigned to particular grade levels to offer targeted support and feedback. Instructional leaders meet regularly with grade level teams to plan instruction, analyze data, develop action plans, and discuss student needs. Novice teachers with up to three years of experience are provided with targeted support and mentoring. Instructional coaches focus on observation, feedback and support, and do not evaluate teachers.

Teachers are regularly evaluated and instructional leaders adequately monitor and evaluate the academic program. Teachers reported setting short- and long-term goals as part of the observation and evaluation process. Formal teacher evaluations are conducted twice a year and teachers reported informal observations and feedback are a regular occurrence. Staff indicated the evaluation provides them with useful feedback. School leaders focus on the assessment results of individual teachers, grade level teams and the school overall to identify trends and develop action plans. The school conducts self-assessments two times per year as well.

#### *At-Risk Students (Benchmark 1.F)*

The school generally has effective interventions for at-risk students, both within and outside the classroom. Teachers reported receiving support from the special education coordinator with respect to the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) within their general education classes. Teachers meet regularly with the special education teacher to discuss struggling students and a special education teacher is also present during team meetings. The school has implemented a corrective reading program and uses staff, including paraprofessionals, to support small group and one-on-one remediation. According to school leaders evidence suggests the program is working, as fewer students are being identified as in need of assistance. Tutoring is provided by education students from a local college. Some teachers also noted the value of the after-school Boys and Girls Club program and indicated there is a waitlist to enroll. The school offers a summer program. Some services, such as speech, occupational and physical therapy, and mandated counseling are provided by the district. Special education teachers provide both push-in services as well as resource room based on IEP goals and classroom assignments.

Teachers receive adequate training to support the needs of struggling students. Summer sessions for teachers included Response to Intervention. The professional development calendar indicated a number of sessions designed to address the issues of at-risk students, including interpretation of data, lesson plan design, and grouping techniques. Teachers noted professional development activities both on and off site, such as those related to corrective reading. At-risk students were a focus during the summer as well; for example, one teacher reported discussing a book on "black boys learning difficulties."

The school has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs. Assessment results drive the process, with action plans designed to identify students and target services. Teachers refer students to the Intervention Assistance Team, which includes special education staff, grade span representatives and deans. This team observes students, develops strategies and interventions and monitors progress. The school reported a productive relationship with the district's Committee on Special Education. The school monitors the effectiveness of its program by evaluating IEP goals and examining changes in required services, testing modifications and assessment results.

#### *Student Order and Discipline (Benchmark 1.G)*

The school has established a safe environment. Students are for the most part orderly in public spaces, though students were observed running around in the cafeteria and gymnasium. They were generally calm and respectful in hallways, especially in the lower grades. Adults were consistently present during transitions. Teachers' effectiveness with classroom management varied across classrooms: in some classes, students were continually engaged in learning activities with little misbehavior exhibited or tolerated and teachers used positive reinforcement to encourage cooperation and teamwork; in others, misbehavior was tolerated without consequence with students consistently misbehaving and teachers either ineffective in re-directing the behavior or not noticing it. In a number of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms students were not engaged in learning and students disrupted instruction. Teachers in these classes were often ineffective in their attempts to regain student attention and focus them on the lesson activities.

The school has developed documented discipline policies and procedures for different grade ranges, but enforcement is inconsistent. Teachers described the school-wide discipline system as a "ladder of referral" with an escalating set of consequences for misbehavior. Procedures have been revised and differentiated by grade. For example, a school leader noted that teachers now "own" detention and use it more effectively. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers reported that they recently updated their discipline policies with their new dean, but they had not yet been fully implemented. Teachers did not adhere to a common system of rewards/consequences between classes and each teacher had his or her own system posted in their classrooms.

#### *Professional Development (Benchmark 1.H)*

The school has a sustained and cohesive professional development program. Teachers meet regularly for training sessions that include watching video and mini-lessons on relevant topics. In addition to formal training, instructional leaders meet regularly with teachers to discuss practice and share suggestions and strategies for improving instruction. Professional development topics have included assessment and the use of data, instructional rigor, vocabulary development and curriculum mapping. The school has begun to implement peer-led seminars. NHA also provides professional development resources, including its summer institute. Professional development appears to be meeting the needs of staff members and addressing a range of experience levels and subject areas. The school is implementing the professional learning community concept and teachers were very positive about the professional development opportunities afforded them, including training sessions and staff meetings on site as well as off site conferences and reimbursed graduate courses. A new teacher coach provides targeted assistance to those new to the profession. Notably, professional development has also been provided for instructional leaders: they attended leadership development and coach training sessions.

### *Mission & Key Design Elements (Benchmark 2.A)*

BUCS is clearly focused on achieving its mission. The school board and leaders are working closely with NHA to increase student achievement. In addition, the school has provided wraparound services, including summer and after-school programs.

### *Organizational Capacity (Benchmark 2.C)*

The school appears to be competently managed. Teachers did not indicate a lack of resources or support. A number of staff committees are active in areas such as attendance, school calendar and scheduling, behavior management, and curriculum planning. The organizational structure supports clear lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The school continues to fine tune the roles of deans and coaches, who provide support to teachers. NHA provides ongoing support, including leadership training and mentoring as well as a service center that fields calls on a range of topics. The school has hired and retained quality personnel. The principal reported low teacher turnover with the most change in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The board did receive a letter from staff regarding interest in collective bargaining, primarily out of interest in the teachers' retirement system. Board members reported that NHA is addressing the issue as it considers the school's staff employees of NHA rather than public employees. Except for kindergarten, the school has maintained adequate enrollment. The school reported the current attendance rate at 94 percent and leaders said they were analyzing student absence and tardiness data and contacting parents to increase the attendance rate.

### *Governance (Benchmark 2.D-E)*

Members of the school's board have an adequate skill set and have put in place structures and procedures with which to govern the school. Board members have a range of skills and expertise in relevant areas, including legal, education, finance and community leadership. Priorities have included hiring a strong principal, providing professional development and support for teachers, maintaining a good relationship with NHA, addressing the needs of at-risk students, and enhancing school culture. Board meetings have been restructured to focus on reports of student performance and efforts to raise achievement levels. The board is seeking additional members, hoping to increase diversity and seeking a parent of a graduate.

The board is focused on student achievement. In addition to being cognizant of the goals and targets in the school's Accountability Plan, board members noted their concern for high school matriculation and success. The board receives sufficient information from school leaders to provide effective oversight. Board members indicated they have become more informed and request more information than they had in the previous charter period. Presentations at board meetings have included department reports, including special education.

The board has capably evaluated the school leader. A personnel committee is responsible for annual performance evaluations and has established criteria against which the school leader is assessed. The board also receives input from NHA regarding the performance of the school leader. After receiving a short-term renewal, the board has worked with NHA to focus on raising student achievement and obtaining a subsequent five year renewal. Board members noted a marked improvement in NHA's

responsiveness. For instance, in response to the low enrollment in kindergarten, the board has been working with NHA to hire a student recruiter. Finally, the board has devoted some resources to board development, including seminars in New York and Michigan.

### **Conduct of the Visit**

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Subsequent Evaluation Visit at Buffalo United Charter School on March 19, 2009. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

**Simeon Stolzberg (Team Leader)** is Director of School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. He is responsible for the coordination of school evaluation visits by Institute staff and external consultants, the development of reporting tools/protocols and the production of reports, and he also coordinates internal staff training with regard to school evaluation visits and reporting tools. Prior to joining the Institute, Mr. Stolzberg managed his own consulting practice, advising charter schools across the country in their application and planning phases. He also served as Middle School Director for the Beginning with Children Charter School in Brooklyn, New York. In 2002, as a Building Excellent Schools Fellow, Mr. Stolzberg wrote the prospectus and application for the Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter School (BArT) in Massachusetts; the school was one of only five schools approved by the state that year. Mr. Stolzberg served as the school's founding principal. Mr. Stolzberg received his Master's Degree in Public Policy from Georgetown University and his Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy, with independent studies in education and political economy, from Williams College.

**Kevin Flynn** is an Accountability Analyst for the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. He is responsible for providing technical support related to school accountability plans, as well as the reporting and analysis of individual school performance. Prior to joining the Institute in November 2008, Mr. Flynn served as the Chair of the Science Department at KIPP 3D Academy Charter School in Houston, TX, where he authored curriculum, instructed 7th and 8th grade students, coached peers, and managed the Saturday School program. Prior to his service at KIPP 3D Academy, Mr. Flynn served as a science teacher via Teach For America at the John Marshall Middle School, also in Houston. A recipient of the school's Excellence in Teaching Award, his responsibilities included curriculum development and instruction for at-risk students as well as English Language Learners. Mr. Flynn received his Master's degree in Education, with a concentration in Policy, Organization and Leadership Studies, from Stanford University and his Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences from Cornell University.

**Sue Seymour** is a Senior Analyst at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. In the past Mrs. Seymour taught pre-kindergarten through 10th grade. From 1996 to 1999 she worked in the Governor's Office of Regulatory Reform as an analyst. There she assisted various state agencies, among others the banking department and the Office of Children and Family Services, in cutting "red tape" from their New York State regulations. Interested in education reform, she joined the Charter Schools Institute in 1999. She received her B.S. from The University of Rochester and her M.A. from Manhattanville College concentrating in Special Education and Reading.

**Joe Nicolella (External Consultant)** retired after more than thirty years in the field of education. At the time of his retirement, Mr. Nicolella was the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, and as such his responsibilities included developing and maintaining all staff rosters and procedures for a district of over 1700 employees; providing leadership and supervision of the district professional

development program; recruiting, selecting and hiring staff; coordinating the development of the district teacher assessment and evaluation approach; and conducting disciplinary and other hearings, as well as contract negotiations. Prior to becoming Assistant Superintendent, Mr. Nicolella served as a principal at the junior high and middle school level for six years, as director of student services for three years, as an assistant principal for ten years, and as a science teacher at the middle and high school levels for over ten years. Since retirement from public education, Mr. Nicolella has served in the capacity of a supervisor of administrative interns and student teachers at the College of St. Rose, as an interim coordinator of special education, and as acting lead principal for three middle schools. For nearly three years, he also has been a consultant for the Charter Schools Institute, with a primary responsibility to review and critique curriculum documents submitted to the Institute as a part of the initial charter school application process, charter renewal, or change in program. Mr. Nicolella has earned a Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Education. He also holds a Master of Science in Advanced Classroom Teaching and a Specialist in Curriculum and Instruction. Mr. Nicolella has also completed all coursework for the doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction. All of his professional training was completed at the University at Albany.

**Constance Moss (External Consultant)** served as the Associate Superintendent for Shared Accountability/Chief Information Officer with the Buffalo Public Schools. Prior to that she served in the positions of Assistant Superintendent of Standards, Research and Assessment, School District Administrator for Assessment, as well as a principal in both Buffalo and Niagara Falls school systems. Dr. Moss was appointed by Commissioner Mills to serve on the New York State Assessment and Safety Net Panels. Prior to retirement she was a member of the New York State Grades 3 – 8 Assessment Implementation Committee. She is a credentialed curriculum auditor and has participated in national curriculum/accreditation visitations. She is currently providing support to charter schools in the area of instructional models.

**APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT**

*An excerpt of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks follows.*

Visit the Institute’s website at: <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/documents/renewalBenchmarks.doc> to see the complete listing of Benchmarks.

Benchmarks 1B – 1H, and Benchmarks 2A – 2E were using in conducting this evaluation visit.

<b>Renewal Question 1 Is the School an Academic Success?</b>	
<b><u>Evidence Category</u></b>	<b><u>State University Renewal Benchmarks</u></b>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1B</b></p> <p><b>Use of Assessment Data</b></p>	<p><b>The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school regularly uses standardized and other assessments that are aligned to the school’s curriculum framework and state performance standards;</li> <li>• the school systematically collects and analyzes data from diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, and makes it accessible to teachers, school leaders and the school board;</li> <li>• the school uses protocols, procedures and rubrics that ensure that the scoring of assessments and evaluation of student work is reliable and trustworthy;</li> <li>• the school uses assessment data to predict whether the school’s Accountability Plan goals are being achieved;</li> <li>• the school’s leaders use assessment data to monitor, change and improve the school’s academic program, including curriculum and instruction, professional development, staffing and intervention services;</li> <li>• the school’s teachers use assessment data to adjust and improve instruction to meet the identified needs of students;</li> <li>• a common understanding exists between and among teachers and administrators of the meaning and consequences of assessment results, e.g., changes to the instructional program, access to remediation, promotion to the next grade;</li> <li>• the school regularly communicates each student’s progress and growth to his or her parents/guardians; and</li> <li>• the school regularly communicates to the school community overall academic performance as well as the school’s progress toward meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1C</b></p> <p><b>Curriculum</b></p>	<p><b>The school has a clearly defined curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has a well-defined curriculum framework for each grade and core academic subject, which includes the knowledge and skills that all students are expected to achieve as specified by New York State standards and performance indicators;</li> <li>• the school has carefully analyzed all curriculum resources (including commercial materials) currently in use in relation to the school’s curriculum framework,</li> </ul>

	<p>identified areas of deficiency and/or misalignment, and addressed them in the instructional program;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the curriculum <i>as implemented</i> is organized, cohesive, and aligned from grade to grade;</li> <li>teachers are fully aware of the curricula that they are responsible to teach and have access to curricular documents such as scope and sequence documents, pacing charts, and/or curriculum maps that guide the development of their lesson plans;</li> <li>teachers develop and use lesson plans with objectives that are in alignment with the school’s curriculum;</li> <li>the school has defined a procedure, allocated time and resources, and included teachers in ongoing review and revision of the curriculum; and</li> <li>the curriculum supports the school’s stated mission.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1D</b></p> <p><b>Pedagogy</b></p>	<p><b>High quality instruction is evident in all classes throughout the school.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teachers demonstrate subject-matter and grade-level competency in the subjects and grades they teach;</li> <li>instruction is rigorous and focused on learning objectives that specify clear expectations for what students must know and be able to do in each lesson;</li> <li>lesson plans and instruction are aligned to the school’s curriculum framework and New York State standards and performance indicators;</li> <li>instruction is differentiated to meet the range of learning needs represented in the school’s student population, e.g. flexible student grouping, differentiated materials, pedagogical techniques, and/or assessments;</li> <li>all students are cognitively engaged in focused, purposeful learning activities during instructional time;</li> <li>learning time is maximized (e.g., appropriate pacing, high on-task student behavior, clear lesson focus and clear directions to students), transitions are efficient, and there is day-to-day instructional continuity; and</li> <li>teachers challenge students with questions and assignments that promote academic rigor, depth of understanding, and development of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1E</b></p> <p><b>Instructional Leadership</b></p>	<p><b>The school has strong instructional leadership.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school’s leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for student achievement;</li> <li>the school’s leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for teacher performance (in content knowledge, pedagogical skills and student achievement);</li> <li>the school’s instructional leaders have in place a comprehensive and on-going system for evaluating teacher quality and effectiveness;</li> <li>the school’s instructional leaders, based on classroom visits and other available data, provide direct ongoing support, such as critical feedback, coaching and/or modeling, to teachers in their classrooms;</li> <li>the school’s leadership provides structured opportunities, resources and guidance for teachers to plan the delivery of the instructional program within and across grade levels as well as within disciplines or content areas;</li> <li>the school’s instructional leaders organize a coherent and sustained professional development program that meets the needs of both the school and individual</li> </ul>

<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1F</b></p> <p><b>At-Risk Students</b></p>	<p>teachers;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school’s leadership ensures that the school is responding to the needs of at-risk students and maximizing their achievement to the greatest extent possible in the regular education program using in-class resources and/or pull-out services and programs where necessary ; and</li> <li>the school’s leadership conducts regular reviews and evaluations of the school’s academic program and makes necessary changes to ensure that the school is effectively working to achieve academic standards defined by the State University Renewal Benchmarks in the areas of assessment, curriculum, pedagogy, student order and discipline, and professional development.</li> </ul> <p><b>The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school deploys sufficient resources to provide academic interventions that address the range of students’ needs;</li> <li>all regular education teachers, as well as specialists, utilize effective strategies to support students within the regular education program;</li> <li>the school provides sufficient training, resources, and support to all teachers and specialists with regard to meeting the needs of at-risk students;</li> <li>the school has clearly defined screening procedures for identifying at-risk students and providing them with the appropriate interventions, and a common understanding among all teachers of these procedures;</li> <li>all regular education teachers demonstrate a working knowledge of students’ Individualized Education Program goals and instructional strategies for meeting those goals;</li> <li>the school provides sufficient time and support for on-going coordination between regular and special education teachers, as well as other program specialists and service providers; and</li> <li>the school monitors the performance of student participation in support services using well-defined school-wide criteria, and regularly evaluates the effectiveness of its intervention programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1G</b></p> <p><b>Student Order &amp; Discipline</b></p>	<p><b>The school promotes a culture of learning and scholarship.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school has a documented discipline policy that is consistently applied;</li> <li>classroom management techniques and daily routines have established a culture in which learning is valued and clearly evident;</li> <li>low-level misbehavior is not being tolerated, e.g., students are not being allowed to disrupt or opt-out of learning during class time; and</li> <li>throughout the school, a safe and orderly environment has been established.</li> </ul>
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1H</p> <p><b>Professional Development</b></p>	<p><b>The school’s professional development program assists teachers in meeting student academic needs and school goals by addressing identified shortcomings in teachers’ pedagogical skills and content knowledge.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school provides sufficient time, personnel, materials and funding to support a comprehensive and sustained professional development program;</li> <li>the content of the professional development program dovetails with the school’s</li> </ul>

	<p>mission, curriculum, and instructional programs;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• annual professional development plans derive from a data-driven needs-assessment and staff interests;</li> <li>• professional development places a high priority on achieving the State University Renewal Benchmarks and the school’s Accountability Plan goals;</li> <li>• teachers are involved in setting short-term and long-term goals for their own professional development activities;</li> <li>• the school provides effective, ongoing support and training tailored to teachers’ varying levels of expertise and instructional responsibilities;</li> <li>• the school provides training to assist all teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities, English language learners and other students at-risk of academic failure; and</li> <li>• the professional development program is systematically evaluated to determine its effectiveness at meeting stated goals.</li> </ul>
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<b>Renewal Question 2</b> <b>Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?</b>	
<u>Evidence Category</u>	<u>State University Renewal Benchmarks</u>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2A</b></p> <p><b>Mission &amp; Key Design Elements</b></p>	<p><b>The school is faithful to its mission and has implemented the key design elements included in its charter.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stakeholders are aware of the mission;</li> <li>• the school has implemented its key design elements in pursuit of its mission; and</li> <li>• the school meets or comes close to meeting any non-academic goals contained in its Accountability Plan.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2B</b></p> <p><b>Parents &amp; Students</b></p>	<p><b>Parents/guardians and students are satisfied with the school.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has a process and procedures for evaluation of parent satisfaction with the school;</li> <li>• the great majority of parents with students enrolled at the school have strong positive attitudes about it;</li> <li>• few parents pursue grievances at the school board level or outside the school;</li> <li>• a large number of parents seek entrance to the school;</li> <li>• parents with students enrolled keep their children enrolled year-to-year; and</li> <li>• the school maintains a high rate of daily student attendance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2C</b></p> <p><b>Organizational Capacity</b></p>	<p><b>The school has established a well-functioning organizational structure with staff, systems, and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school demonstrates effective management of day-to-day operations;</li> <li>• staff scheduling is internally consistent and supportive of the school’s mission;</li> <li>• the school has established clear priorities, objectives and benchmarks for achieving</li> </ul>

	<p>its mission and Accountability Plan goals, and a process for their regular review and revision;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals;</li> <li>• the roles and responsibilities of the school’s leadership and staff members are clearly defined;</li> <li>• the school has an organizational structure that provides clear lines for accountability;</li> <li>• the school’s management has successfully recruited, hired and retained key personnel, and made appropriate decisions about removing ineffective staff members when warranted;</li> <li>• the school maintains an adequate student enrollment and has effective procedures for recruiting new students to the school; and</li> <li>• the school’s management and board have demonstrated effective communication practices with the school community including school staff, parents/guardians and students.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2D</b></p> <p><b>Board Oversight</b></p>	<p><b>The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school’s mission and provide oversight to the total educational program.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school board has adequate skills and expertise, as well as adequate meeting time to provide rigorous oversight of the school;</li> <li>• the school board (or a committee thereof) understands the core business of the school—student achievement—in sufficient depth to permit the board to provide effective oversight;</li> <li>• the school board has set clear long-term and short-term goals and expectations for meeting those goals, and communicates them to the school’s management and leaders;</li> <li>• the school board has received regular written reports from the school leadership on academic performance and progress, financial stability and organizational capacity;</li> <li>• the school board has conducted regular evaluations of the school’s management (including school leaders who report to the board, supervisors from management organization(s), and/or partner organizations that provide services to the school), and has acted on the results where such evaluations demonstrated shortcomings in performance;</li> <li>• where there have been demonstrable deficiencies in the school’s academic, organizational or fiscal performance, the school board has taken effective action to correct those deficiencies and put in place benchmarks for determining if the deficiencies are being corrected in a timely fashion;</li> <li>• the school board has not made financial or organizational decisions that have materially impeded the school in fulfilling its mission; and</li> <li>• the school board conducts on-going assessment and evaluation of its own effectiveness in providing adequate school oversight, and pursues opportunities for further governance training and development.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2E</b></p> <p><b>Governance</b></p>	<p><b>The board has implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes, and has abided by them.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school board has established a set of priorities that are in line with the school’s goals and mission and has effectively worked to design and implement a system to achieve those priorities;</li> </ul>

- the school board has in place a process for recruiting and selecting new members in order to maintain adequate skill sets and expertise for effective governance and structural continuity;
- the school board has implemented a comprehensive and strict conflict of interest policy (and/or code of ethics)—consistent with those set forth in the charter—and consistently abided by them through the term of the charter;
- the school board has generally avoided creating conflicts of interest where possible; where not possible, the school has managed those conflicts of interest in a clear and transparent manner;
- the school board has instituted a process for dealing with complaints (and such policy is consistent with that set forth in the charter), has made that policy clear to all stakeholders, and has followed that policy including acting in a timely fashion on any such complaints;
- the school board has abided by its by-laws including, but not limited to, provisions regarding trustee elections, removals and filling of vacancies;
- the school board and its committees hold meetings in accordance with the Open Meetings Law, and minutes are recorded for all meetings including executive sessions and, as appropriate, committee meetings; and
- the school board has in place a set of board and school policies that are reviewed regularly and updated as needed.