



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of **New York**

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

*Proposal to establish:
Canarsie Ascend Charter School*

September 8, 2011

Executive Summary

Lead applicant Steven Wilson submitted the proposal to establish the Canarsie Ascend Charter School (“Canarsie Ascend”) to the SUNY Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) on February 28, 2011 in response to the Institute’s January 3, 2011 Request for Proposals (“RFP”) that was released on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “SUNY Trustees”).

The proposed mission of Canarsie Ascend is to equip every student with the knowledge, confidence, and character to succeed in college and beyond. Students will, from the earliest grades, steadily build a strong foundation of learning habits, critical thinking skills, and knowledge; excel academically as they progress through the program, mastering high-level math and science; and graduate as confident young adults, prepared to succeed as college students, citizens, and leaders in their chosen fields. The founding school board intends to contract with the New York based non-profit charter management organization Ascend Learning, Inc. (“Ascend Learning”) for overall school management services.

Canarsie Ascend would open in the fall of 2012 in New York City (NYC) Community School District (CSD) 18 (Brooklyn) with 208 students in Kindergarten and 1st grade and grow to serve 660 students in K - 5th grade in the final year of the proposed charter term. The school plans to enroll new students at all grade levels as space permits within the proposed charter term. The founders of the school ultimately envision a full K - 12th grade program and plan to seek an expansion of the school’s initial K - 5th grade structure at the time of Initial Charter Renewal. Ascend Learning has helped the proposed school board identify private facility space at 9719 Flatlands Avenue in Brooklyn and a lease currently is being negotiated (which is subject to Institute review and approval).

Ascend Learning currently contracts with three New York charter schools: Brooklyn Ascend Charter School; Brownsville Ascend Charter School; and Bushwick Ascend Charter School, all authorized by the NYC Schools Chancellor. Canarsie Ascend would replicate the educational program implemented at those schools (described below), a central feature of which is the use of a SABIS proprietary curriculum and assessment program through an established licensing agreement between SABIS and Ascend. State testing data for the one school that has such data is provided below.

Consistent with the May 2010 amendments to the Charter Schools Act, the Institute finds: 1) that the proposal for Canarsie Ascend rigorously demonstrates the criteria detailed in the Institute’s RFP including the mandatory criteria set forth in Education Law subdivision 2852(9)(b)(i); 2) that the proposed school has conducted thorough and meaningful public review processes to solicit community input regarding the proposal in accordance with the requirements in the RFP, which conform with Education Law subdivision 2852(9)(b)(ii); 3) the proposal is one that best satisfies the objectives contained within the RFP based on the content of the proposal and its supporting documentation, and is therefore qualified within the meaning of Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(d); and 4) the Institute has scored the proposal pursuant to Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(c), and there are enough charters to be issued by the SUNY Trustees pursuant to the January 2011 RFP or otherwise to accommodate the proposal and all other RFP applicants the Institute is recommending for approval.

Based on the foregoing:

The Institute recommends that the SUNY Trustees approve the proposal to establish the Canarsie Ascend Charter School.

Background and Description

While SUNY may still award a small number of charters pursuant to its traditional application process, amendments to the Act made additional charters to create new education corporations available only through an RFP process. The Institute received 25 total proposals to create new charter schools in response to the January 3, 2011 RFP. This review cycle could legally result in a maximum of 63 new charters approved by the SUNY Trustees, per Education Law subdivision 2852(9), 30 of which reflect charters that were available but not awarded in response to SUNY's August 2010 RFP. Two of the current 25 proposals were submitted in response to the expedited timeline provided for in the January 2011 RFP and subsequently approved by the SUNY Trustees in January 2011, while an additional 12 charters were awarded by the SUNY Trustees in June 2011, leaving 49 available charters.

The Institute conducted a rigorous evaluation of the Canarsie Ascend proposal including academic, fiscal and legal soundness reviews, and review by an external panel of experts. Pursuant to its protocols, the Institute has met with the applicant, the proposed board of trustees which will oversee the school, other members of the founding team and representative of Ascend Learning. An Institute staff member also conducted a visit to two of the schools currently managed by Ascend Learning as part of its due diligence review. In addition, members of SUNY Trustees' Education, College Readiness and Success Committee will have the opportunity to interview the lead applicant and members of the founding board prior to the Committee's meeting currently scheduled for September 20, 2011.

The mission of Canarsie Ascend would be in part "to equip every student with the knowledge, confidence, and character to succeed in college and beyond." The founders would implement the following key design elements in pursuit of the school's mission:

- use of the SABIS educational system including a college-preparatory curriculum that is tightly linked to an electronic assessment system, innovative pedagogical protocols, tools for building a transformative school culture, and state-of-the-art school management software;
- the implementation of the *No Excuses* school culture, which endeavors to assertively shape students' habits, values, and aspirations; and
- a college preparatory environment of high expectations for all students.

The board of trustees of Canarsie Ascend would contract with Ascend Learning for charter management services including provision of the school's educational program; selecting and acquiring instructional materials; recruiting, recommending to the board for hire, and developing the school director; and day-to-day operations including business administration, contracted services, human resources, and maintenance of the school's facilities. Ascend Learning would provide these services in exchange for a fee, as outlined in a draft agreement with the proposed board of trustees, which the Institute reviewed. The school board will evaluate the quality of the services provided by Ascend Learning and have the opportunity to extend or cancel the agreement at the end of each contract period. The Institute will review and must approve all final management contracts.

Given the restrictions on for-profit management or operation of charters initially issued through the RFP process, the Institute examined the relationship between the school and SABIS, a for-profit entity. The Institute found the contractual arrangements between SABIS, Ascend Learning and the

proposed school legal because SABIS is not providing managerial or operational services to the school. Rather, Ascend Learning is paying a per pupil fee to SABIS for use of propriety curricula and assessment materials and systems, which is passed on to the school through the not-for-profit management contract with Ascend in the same manner as textbooks are purchased from for-profit book vendors.

Currently Ascend Learning contracts with three charter schools in Brooklyn authorized by the NYC Schools’ Chancellor: Brooklyn Ascend Charter School; Brownsville Ascend Charter School; and Bushwick Ascend Charter School, which collectively serve 1,225 students. Of the three, only one, Brooklyn Ascend Charter School, has state testing data available. The following tables show the performance of the school on the state English Language Arts (“ELA”) and mathematics exams over the last three years.

Brooklyn Ascend Charter School 2010-11					
Subject	Testing Grades	School Percent Proficient	District Percent Proficient	Percent Free Lunch	Effect Size¹
ELA	3-4	53.4	46.1	65.4	0.43
Math	3-4	58.3	51.5	65.4	0.26

In 2010-11, the most recent year for which data is available, with 53.4 percent of its students performing at or above proficiency on the ELA exam and 58.3 percent of its students performing at or above proficiency on the math exam, the school outperformed the district of location by 7.3 and 6.8 percentage points in ELA and math, respectively. With 65.4 percent of its students eligible for the federal free lunch program, Brooklyn Ascend Charter School performed higher than expected to a small degree when compared to similar schools statewide in ELA, demonstrating an Effect Size of 0.43. On the math exam, the school performed slightly higher than expected compared to similar schools statewide, demonstrating an Effect Size of 0.26.

Brooklyn Ascend Charter School 2009-10					
Subject	Testing Grades	School Percent Proficient	District Percent Proficient	Percent Free Lunch	Effect Size
ELA	3	49.1	43.6	68.3	0.37
Math	3	43.3	48.8	68.3	-0.34

In 2009-10, with only 3rd grade students taking the state exams, 49.1 percent of the school’s students performed at or above proficiency on the ELA exam and 43.3 percent of its students performed at or above proficiency on the math exam. The school outperformed the district of location by 5.5 percentage points and underperformed the district in mathematics by 5.5 percentage points. With

¹ Effect Size is a statistical measure calculated by dividing the difference between the actual and predicted outcome by the standard deviation. It reflects the difference between a school’s attained and expected performance in each tested grade, relative to other schools with similar free-lunch statistics and tested grades. (The Effect Size for all grades is weighted by the number of students tested in each grade.) The school’s overall performance rating is based on the following Effect Size ranges: Above 0.79 - Higher than expected to a large degree; 0.50 to 0.79 - Higher than expected to a medium degree; 0.30 to 0.49 - Higher than expected to a small degree; 0.01 to 0.29 - Slightly higher than expected; -0.29 to -0.01 - Slightly lower than expected; -0.30 to -0.49 - Lower than expected to a small degree; -0.50 to -0.79 - Lower than expected to a medium degree; Below -0.79 - Lower than expected to a large degree.

68.3 percent of its students eligible for the federal free lunch program, the school performed higher than expected to a medium degree when compared to similar schools statewide in ELA, demonstrating an Effect Size of 0.37. On the math exam, the school performed lower than expected to a medium degree, demonstrating an Effect Size of -0.34.

As the tables above illustrate, the performance of the Brooklyn Ascend Charter School on the state ELA and math exams improved from 2009-10 to 2010-11. The Institute's review and due diligence of Ascend Learning within the context of the overall evaluation of the proposal revealed a number of action steps that Ascend Learning had taken in response to the performance of its first 3rd grade cohort on the state exams. Through the terms of its licensing agreement, Ascend Learning worked with SABIS to revise and enhance the mathematics instructional materials used by all of the schools it manages following a careful review and analysis of student achievement results in 2009-10. In addition, a new interim assessment system for ELA and math, as well as analytical tools for reviewing assessment data to use it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning was implemented during the 2010-11 school year. Internal results provided to the Institute by Ascend Learning during the review process suggested that students were likely to perform at higher levels on the state exams in 2010-11, which was the case. Significantly, the Institute reserved decision on this application until the 2010-11 state testing data was available, (the application having been submitted only with the then available 2009-10 data), and so informed the applicant.

The features of the school's proposed educational program include relatively large class sizes with explicit, whole-class instruction; frequent electronic assessments that provide teachers with immediate feedback on student mastery of concepts taught over the past week; the use of student prefects to assist their peers and the teacher; an Intensive Program to fill learning gaps quickly including those resulting from language barriers; specific, concrete, and actionable techniques to raise academic and behavioral expectations that make the most efficient use of classroom time, create a strong and vibrant culture, and build character and trust; and powerful academic management software that relieves teachers of many time-consuming tasks, with the goal of allowing them to focus on delivering clear, vibrant, and engaging lessons.

The SABIS educational system includes a detailed, college-preparatory curriculum linked to an electronic assessment system, innovative pedagogical protocols, tools for building a transformative school culture, and state-of-the-art school management software. Over the course of 180 days of instruction, students will receive relatively more time on task, with the school day running from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. four days a week, Monday through Thursday, and 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Friday. Students will have eight periods of instruction each day including ELA 15 times a week and math eight times a week, as well as time for independent reading. In addition to ELA and math, the curriculum will include science, social studies, Spanish (four days a week), fine arts (dance, music, theater, and visual arts), health education, and physical education.

Through implementation of the SABIS Intensive Program, students substantially behind in English, math, or both, receive instruction in small groups, focusing only on the essential concepts necessary to succeed in the general education classroom with their peers. A program of Structured English Immersion will be used to prepare English language learners (ELLs) to join their peers successfully and as quickly as possible. The school will use SABIS programs specifically designed for ELLs that focus on phonics, reading, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and other English language fundamentals.

Reporting jointly to Ascend Learning and the school board, the school director will be ultimately responsible for the quality of instruction in the school and the academic progress of the student body;

the proposal states that he or she will be, above all, the school’s instructional leader. The school’s leadership team, composed of a dean of instruction, a dean of students, and a director of operations, will report directly to the school director. The dean of instruction and dean of students will oversee instructional staff, with the former concentrated on academic program implementation and the latter on the implementation of the No Excuses culture; and the director of operations will oversee non-instructional staff. Teachers would be accountable for student results as they track their students’ progress in mastering required skills and concepts.

The school’s faculty would receive intensive and ongoing professional development through three weeks of pre-service training; professional development days; after-school sessions throughout the school year; weekly grade-team meetings; and ongoing modeling.

The Canarsie Ascend by-laws indicate that school board would consist of not less than 5 voting members. The proposed initial members of the board of trustees are set forth below.

1. **Butch Trusty** – Manager of The Bridgespan Group, a strategy consulting firm; A.B., Brown University; M.P.A., Duke University
2. **Anne Greenberger** – Managing Director of Real Estate for Teach for America; B.A., University of Pennsylvania; M.B.A, Columbia University Business School
3. **C. Allison Jack** – Senior Program Director, New Leaders for New Schools; M.A., University of Chicago
4. **Lorna Alleyne** – Longtime Canarsie resident and former Vice President of the Bank of New York Mellon; B.S., Pace University
5. **Neena A. Reedy** – Vice President and Assistant General Counsel, Asset Management Group of Goldman Sachs & Co.; B.A., Georgetown University; J.D., New York University Law School
6. **Parent Member** – Seat reserved for a parent
7. **Community Members** – Two seats reserved for community members

The founding team for Canarsie Ascend envisions locating the school in CSD 18 where its management partner has a strong relationship with the community and where there is a strong need for high performing schools. The management organization has demonstrated the ability to implement viable private facility plans for the three existing schools with which it contracts and has presented an effective plan for doing so with the proposed school.

The fiscal impact of Canarsie Ascend on the district of residence, the New York City School District, is summarized below.

Number of Students	Per Pupil Aid Rate Assumed	Per Pupil Aid Revenue Only	Total Budget for New York City (in billions)	(%) of Total NYC Ed. Budget
208 (2012-13 school year – year 1)	\$13,527	\$2,813,616	\$19.007	0.015%
660 (2016-17 school year – year 5)	\$15,224	\$10,047,840	\$20.704	0.049%

The calculations above assume there will be no annual increase in per-pupil aid in years 1 (2012-13) and a three percent increase each year thereafter for the remainder of the charter period (2013-14 thru 2016-17). The New York City Department of Education (“NYCDOE”) yearly budget figures were accessed from the latest, December 2010, Financial Status Report (FSR) published on the NYCDOE website. No information was available for 2015-16 and 2016-17 so no increase in spending was assumed for those years. Using the moderately aggressive assumptions for per-pupil aid and revenue and the district’s four-year operational budgeting assumptions, along with the fundamentally conservative assumptions for years four and five of the proposed charter period, illustrates a maximum fiscal impact of the proposed school on the district.

It should be noted that the NYCDOE estimate used by the Institute in conducting its analysis is subject to unpredictable increases and decreases in any given year given the nature of per-pupil funding for the district. While the school has included in its proposal estimated calculations accounting for special education revenue, federal Title I funds, other federal grants and/or funds provided by the district and to be received by the school, the Institute’s calculations and analysis do not account for these sources of potential revenue.

The Institute finds that the fiscal impact of the proposed school on the New York City School District, public charter and nonpublic schools in the same geographic area would be minimal.

In addition, through a due diligence process, the Institute found that the proposed management organization, Ascend Learning, is fiscally sound.

The Institute has notified the school district as well as public and private schools in the same geographic area of the proposed school and as of the date of this report has received no comments in response.

The applicant has conducted public outreach, in conformity with a thorough and meaningful public review process prescribed in the RFP, to solicit community input regarding the proposed school (Ed. Law §2852(9-a)(b)(ii)).

The RFP also contained minimum eligibility and preference criteria to reflect the requirements of Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a). The proposal met the eligibility requirements, as evidenced by the following:

- The proposal was complete and met the following basic criteria:
 - submitted by the appropriate deadline;
 - was complete, i.e., include a Transmittal Sheet, Proposal Summary and responses to all RFP requests;
 - individual responses adequately addressed each specific request; and
 - the proposal was coherent.
- The proposal met the standard for describing a quality educational program and provided sufficient evidence that the proposed school is likely to operate in an educationally and fiscally sound manner, to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes set out in Education Law subdivision 2850(2) as well as demonstrated a rigorous commitment to student achievement.

- The proposal included a viable plan to meet the enrollment and retention targets established by the SUNY Trustees for students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, and students who are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program (as detailed in Request No. 24).
- The proposal provided evidence of public outreach that conforms to the process prescribed by the SUNY Trustees for the purpose of soliciting and incorporating community input regarding the proposed charter school.

As the Canarsie Ascend proposal met the eligibility criteria, the Institute's evaluation continued with a full review of the proposal, including a review by an external panel of experts, an interview of the founding team and proposed board of trustees, and requests for clarification and or amendments to the proposal. The review process then continued with an evaluation of the proposal in relation to the eleven Preference Criteria contained in the RFP for which proposals can earn credit as described in the RFP's Scoring Rubric. The purpose of the Scoring Rubric was to prioritize proposals in the event that the number of proposals meeting the SUNY Trustees' requirements exceeded the maximum number of charters to be issued in 2011. In the event of a tie for the last charter both proposals would be rejected unless one applicant agreed to withdraw his or her proposal for consideration in a subsequent RFP. The preference criteria, which in addition to eligibility criteria and the overall high standards established by the SUNY Trustees, included the demonstration of the following in compliance with Education Law subdivisions 2852(9-a)(c)(i)-(viii):

- increasing student achievement and decreasing student achievement gaps in reading/language arts and mathematics;
- increasing high school graduation rates and focusing on serving specific high school student populations including, but not limited to, students at risk of not obtaining a high school diploma, re-enrolled high school drop-outs, and students with academic skills below grade level;
- focusing on the academic achievement of middle school students and preparing them for a successful transition to high school;
- utilizing high-quality assessments designed to measure a student's knowledge, understanding of, and ability to apply, critical concepts through the use of a variety of item types and formats;
- increasing the acquisition, adoption, and use of local instructional improvement systems that provide teachers, principals, and administrators with the information and resources they need to inform and improve their instructional practices, decision-making, and overall effectiveness;
- partnering with low performing public schools in the area to share best educational practices and innovations;
- demonstrating the management and leadership techniques necessary to overcome initial start-up problems to establish a thriving, financially viable charter school; and
- demonstrating the support of the school district in which the proposed charter school will be located and the intent to establish an ongoing relationship with such school district.

While the Institute received a total of 25 proposals in response to its January 2011 RFP, only 15 have been recommended for approval, including two in March 2011 which were approved by the SUNY Trustees. All of the 15 proposals recommended for approval met the eligibility criteria and were therefore assessed a score using the rubric contained in the RFP. The proposal for Canarsie Ascend earned a score of 30 preference points out of a possible total of 64. Based on this score and the other information and findings set forth herein, the Institute is recommending that the SUNY Trustees approve the proposal to establish the Canarsie Ascend Charter School, which would not exceed the statutory limit in Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(a).

Findings

Based on the comprehensive review of the proposals and interviews of the applicant and the proposed board of trustees, the Institute makes the following findings.

1. The charter school described in the proposal meets the requirements of Article 56 of the Education Law (as amended) and 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 and health services;
 - an admissions policy that complies with the Act, federal law and the U.S. Constitution;
 - 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 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 educational 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;
 - the inclusion of descriptions of programmatic and independent fiscal audits, with fiscal audits occurring at least, annually;
 - the inclusion of a school calendar and school day schedule that provide at least as much instruction time during a school year as required of other public schools; and
 - the inclusion of methods and strategies for serving students with disabilities in compliance with all federal laws and regulations.
3. Granting the proposal is likely to: 1) improve student learning and achievement; and 2) materially further the purposes of the Act. This finding is reflected by (among other things):
- the inclusion of a curriculum framework document that specifies how the proposed curriculum will ensure that students will meet or exceed the performance standards of the Board of Regents reflecting the adoption of the Common Core State Standards;
 - a comprehensive plan to assess student achievement through the use of State tests, externally-verifiable standardized tests and other diagnostic assessments;
 - the implementation of the SABIS educational system;
 - robust programs to meet the needs of students at risk of academic failure;
 - the inclusion of significant opportunities for professional development of the school’s instructional staff prior the start of each school year and throughout the year;
 - a commitment to providing an educational program focused on outcomes, not inputs; and
 - an organizational structure with an explicit focus on instructional leadership to improve teaching and student learning.
4. The proposed charter school would meet or exceed enrollment and retention targets, as prescribed by the SUNY Trustees, of students with disabilities, English language learners, and students who are eligible applicants for the federal free and reduced price lunch program as required by Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(b)(i).

The data upon which to base the enrollment and retention targets mandated by the amendments to the Act was not available at the time the statute mandated the RFP be issued. As a result, the Institute developed internal evaluation criteria regarding the enrollment and retention of each class of student referenced in the amendments to the Act such that the Institute could make the determination that the applicant would meet or exceed the enrollment and retention targets when developed. During the first year of the charter term, SUNY, working in conjunction with the State Education Department, will develop such targets, and shall ensure: “(1) that such enrollment targets are comparable to the enrollment figures of such categories of students attending the public schools within the school district, or in a city school district in a city having a population of one

million or more inhabitants, the community school district, in which the proposed charter school would be located; and (2) that such retention targets are comparable to the rate of retention of such categories of students attending the public schools within the school district, or in a city school district in a city having a population of one million or more inhabitants, the community school district, in which the proposed charter school would be located.” The Institute will conduct separate analyses for setting enrollment and retention targets, respectively. The former analysis will be based on the demographic and classification characteristics of cohorts of students first entering the school; the latter analysis will be based on the characteristics of cohorts of students leaving the school. During each year in the charter period, the same methodology will be applied to each charter school to determine if it has met or made progress toward meeting its district-based target. Based on the foregoing, the Institute finds that the proposal has rigorously demonstrated that the proposed charter school would meet or exceed enrollment and retention targets, to be prescribed by SUNY during the first year of the charter in accordance with the amendments to the Act.

5. The applicant has conducted public outreach for the school, in conformity with a thorough and meaningful public review process prescribed by the SUNY Trustees, to solicit community input regarding the proposed charter school and to address comments received from the impacted community concerning the educational and programmatic needs of students in conformity with Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(b)(ii).
6. The Institute has determined that the proposal rigorously demonstrates the criteria and best satisfies the objectives contained within the RFP, and, therefore, is a “qualified application” within the meaning of Education Law subdivision 2852(9-a)(d) that should be submitted to the Board of Regents for approval.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on its review and findings, the Institute recommends that the SUNY Trustees approve the proposal to establish the Canarsie Ascend Charter School to open in Brooklyn in September of 2012.

Canarsie Ascend Charter School

Basic Identification Information

Lead Applicant(s):	Steven Wilson
Management Co.:	Ascend Learning, Inc.
Other Partners:	None
Location (Districts):	New York City Community School District 18
Student Pop./Grades:	Opening with 202 students in K – 1 st grade; growing to 660 students in K - 5 th grades.
Opening Date:	September 2012

New York City School District 18			
Enrollment (2009-10):		18,297	
Percent (2009-10):			
African-American:		91	
Hispanic:		7	
Asian, White, Other:		2	
Percent Qualifying for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch (2009-10):		78	
Percent Limited English Proficient		5	
English Language Arts (2009-10)		Mathematics (2009-10)	
Grade	Percent Proficient	Grade	Percent Proficient
3	44	3	49
4	39	4	52
5	45	5	55
6	31	6	45
7	30	7	40
8	27	8	36

Source: Demographic data are from the New York State Accountability and Overview Report 2009-10; test data are from the 2009-10 results released on the New York City Department of Education’s website.