



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

New Roots Charter School

School Evaluation Report 2009-2010

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INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “SUNY 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 the current visit to the school, summarizing areas of strength and areas for growth. The second section, titled School Overview, provides descriptive information about the school, including enrollment and demographic data, as well as summary historical information regarding the life of the school. The third section entitled School Evaluation Visit, presents analysis of evidence collected during the current evaluation visit. A summary of conclusions from previous school evaluations is also provided as background and context for the current evaluation.

Because of the inherent complexity of an organization such as a school, this School Evaluation Report does not contain a single rating or 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 New Roots Charter School, the school appears to be making adequate progress toward achieving its mission and meeting the SUNY Charter Renewal Benchmarks considered during this evaluation. 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

Areas of Strength:

- The school regularly administers formative and summative assessments.
- Teachers implement purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to state standards and the school's curriculum. Students are consistently engaged.
- School leaders instill high expectations for teacher performance and student achievement. Instructional leaders are starting to provide teachers with generally effective support. They are conducting regular evaluations that accurately identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses.
- The school is safe and orderly.
- The school has a comprehensive professional development program.

Areas for Growth:

- While the school is making limited use of diagnostic assessments, it has not developed a systematic approach to using assessment data to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.
- Many teachers are developing units and lessons on an ad hoc basis.
- The rigor of instruction varied and learning time was not always maximized.
- The school has limited data available to monitor the progress of at-risk students.
- The school's discipline system is inconsistent.

Organizational Capacity

Areas of Strengths:

- In its first year of operation, the school has faithfully followed its mission and has implemented many of its key design elements.
- The school has hired and retained quality staff.
- The board has adequate skills, structures and procedures with which to govern the school.

Areas for Growth:

- The school has been challenged to maintain sufficient enrollment.

SCHOOL OVERVIEW

Opening Information

Date Initial Charter Approved by SUNY Trustees	September 9, 2008
Date Initial Charter Approved by: Operation of Law	February 23, 2009
School Opening Date	September, 2009

Location

School Year(s)	Location(s)	Grades	District
2009-10 through present	116-120 North Cayuga Street, Ithaca, NY	All	Ithaca City School District

Current Mission Statement

New Roots Charter School will prepare our diverse student body to meet the challenges of citizenship, work, and life-long learning in the 21st century. Our interdisciplinary academic program will feature hands-on, community-based learning that supports students in solving real-world problems. New Roots Charter School students will earn a Regents diploma and demonstrate readiness for higher education by earning college credit and creating a graduation portfolio that demonstrates that they have met or exceeded all 28 New York State Learning Standards. Our school community will create a model of secondary education that integrates best practices in sustainability education with those proven to support educational equity.

Current Key Design Elements

• An integrated curriculum;
• Service learning requirements;
• Mentoring communities;
• Concurrent enrollment for college credit;
• Use of the Environment as Integrating Context model for curriculum development;
• Following the Expeditionary Learning model; and
• Demonstrating achievement through exhibitions and digital portfolios.

School Characteristics

School Year	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Charter Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ¹	Original Chartered Grades	Actual Grades
2009-10	125		97	9-10	9-10

¹ 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.)

Student Demographics

	2009-10 ²	
	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of Ithaca School District Enrollment
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	1%
Black or African American	12%	11%
Hispanic	3%	5%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0%	12%
White	83%	70%
Multiracial	3%	1%
Special Populations		
Students with Disabilities	25%	12%
Limited English Proficient	0%	5%
Free/Reduced Lunch		
Eligible for Free Lunch	37%	26%
Eligible for Reduced-Price Lunch	3%	6%

Current Board of Trustees³

Board Member Name	Term Expires	Position/Committees
Jason Hamilton	June, 2010	Chair
Peter Bardaglio	June, 2010	Vice-Chair
Kathryn Caldwell	June, 2010	Secretary
Granger Macy	June, 2010	Treasurer
Jennifer Bokaer-Smith	June, 2010	Trustee
Christine Coveney	June, 2010	Trustee
Synnove Heggoy	June, 2010	Trustee
Karl Madeo	June, 2010	Trustee
Conrad Metcalfe	June, 2010	Trustee
Roger Richardson	June, 2010	Trustee
Linnet Short	June, 2010	Trustee
Tim Turecek	June, 2010	Trustee
Tina Nilsen-Hodges	June, 2010	Founding Principal

² Source: This information is not yet publicly available and all statistics given are provided by the school.

³ Source: Institute Board Records.

School Leader(s)

School Year	School Leader(s) Name and Title
2009-10	Tina Nilsen-Hodges, Principal

SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT ANALYSIS AND EVIDENCE

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, and assessment), and the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization, including such items as governance and management. Entitled 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 and organizational capacity, issues regarding compliance with applicable state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed); 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 detailed analysis of the observations and conclusions from this year's evaluation, along with supporting evidence. This is followed by information regarding the conduct of the evaluation, including the date of the visit and information about the evaluation team, is provided.

Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence

Use of Assessment Data (Benchmark 1.B)

Teachers are using assessments within their classrooms, but the school has not developed a systematic approach to using assessment data to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.

The school regularly administers formative and summative assessments but only administers a limited number of diagnostic assessments. Teachers reported creating and administering pre-unit tests to measure prior knowledge and formative assessments such as assignments, homework and quizzes to gauge learning during the delivery of curriculum units. Curriculum documents indicated that summative assessments, used at the end of units, include written tests as well as projects or performance tasks. Assessment documents indicated that the Terra Nova Online Assessment was administered to measure student progress at the beginning of the year and teachers reported that it would be given again at the end of the year. A detailed writing rubric is in use. The school intends to use portfolios for promotion, but at the time of the visit was in the process of formulating procedures for their development.

The school leadership does not systematically analyze the assessment results; rather, the data are primarily collected and maintained by individual teachers with the assessment methodology and interpretation varying by teacher who each engages in his/her own informal process for analyzing the results. In turn, the teachers use the assessment results in different ways to modify instruction and identify students for remediation or enrichment. Some teachers reported that they use assessment

data to group students for targeted instruction, though behavior was also a factor. Teachers described an informal set of procedures for using assessment results to identify topics for re-teaching.

The school is in the process of developing policies and procedures for using student performance data. Its report cards provide detailed information regarding students' attainment of learning targets as well as habits of mind, heart and work. Teachers have developed rubrics to grade student work and reported using the School Tool online grading system, which is also used by the Ithaca School District. School leaders planned a curriculum night to discuss with parents grading and plans for supporting students to ensure they finish the year successfully.

Curriculum (Benchmark 1.C)

The school has begun to develop a curriculum and use it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.

Staff spent a week at the Cloud Institute during the summer learning backwards design and becoming knowledgeable about both sustainability and the state standards. The school has begun to develop basic curriculum maps based on the framework submitted in its charter application. Nevertheless, a number of teachers indicated that they determine what to teach based on Regents exams and state standards rather than the school's curriculum framework. Further, although teachers and staff did much planning during the summer, a number of teachers reported developing units and lessons as they go, some the night before a lesson. Teachers have significant discretion in selecting and developing instructional materials. For example, teachers indicated that they are allowed to select books and texts and create their own materials, which they view positively.

The school, which is developing its service learning model, has implemented ongoing projects with learning components. The school has a process for selecting, developing and reviewing the curriculum framework and resources at the end of the year. Teachers were already reflecting on changes. The Cloud Institute will continue to support staff in the use of backwards design.

Pedagogy (Benchmark 1.D)

High quality instruction is evident in some classes.

Teachers implement purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to state standards and the school's curriculum. Reviewed lesson plans indicated clear learning objectives with activities designed to meet them. Teachers were observed discussing with students the day's learning targets as well as offering guiding questions.

Students are continually engaged. They actively answered questions during discussions and were focused during independent learning time. In a science class students were attentive while the teacher modeled the lab activities. Students were well-prepared for expedition assignments and engaged by the learning activities. The rigor of instruction, however, varied and learning time was not always maximized. Questioning and activities did not always challenge students to develop higher order thinking or problem solving skills, and reviewed student work was not always complete or at grade level. Some classes started late because students had not returned on time from activities outside the building.

Instruction addresses a variety of learning modes and the school is beginning to develop strategies for meeting individual students' needs. The school uses a wide variety of instructional activities, including those conducive to visual, aural and kinesthetic learning, and provides electives that rotate every trimester. Within classes differentiated instruction and materials were not evident. An observed academic development class appeared more of a study hall than a structured class to meet individual student's needs. Course schedules have been differentiated to meet the needs of advanced students. For example, one student was engaged in a self-study in preparation for the trigonometry Regents exam and another student was taking both 9th and 10th grade mathematics.

Instructional Leadership (Benchmark 1.E)

Effective instructional leadership is beginning to emerge.

School leaders instill high expectations for teacher performance and student achievement. School leaders expect teachers to participate actively in developing an integrated curriculum and to assess student mastery regularly. When asked about expectations for student achievement, teachers provided a variety of answers, ranging from developing the whole child to preparing students for college.

Instructional leaders are starting to provide teachers with generally effective support. The school is using an observation protocol based on the Kim Marshall's teacher evaluation system. Teachers noted the regular presence of the principal and special education coordinator in their classrooms and at team meetings. Teachers reported receiving feedback based mostly on classroom observations with less attention to curriculum and lesson plans; some teachers found the feedback helpful to the extent that it was focused on instructional strategies while others desired more concrete suggestions. Teachers also noted their own reliance on peers for support and ideas.

Instructional leaders conduct regular evaluations that accurately identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses. The school leader worked with teachers to set goals at the beginning of the year and there is a process for follow up and check-ins to monitor progress. At the time of the visit the school leaders had conducted formal teacher evaluations which were being used at the time of the evaluation visit to develop student-learning and professional-performance goals for each teacher.

At-Risk Students (Benchmark 1.F)

The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically.

The school uses informal procedures for identifying at-risk students and is planning to implement a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. The school's grading system, based on mastery learning is used to identify struggling students. The school provides sufficient resources, though targeted support to meet the needs of struggling students is limited. About one-quarter of the students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) with special education staff providing both push-in and pull-out services. The district provides services such as counseling and occupational therapy. In some classes up to three adults were observed, allowing teachers to target instruction to small groups or one-on-one. The academic development period is designed to provide targeted support, though observed classes were not very structured. Teachers have office hours and time during academic development blocks to provide additional assistance; they also make themselves available before and after school.

The school has limited data available to monitor the progress of at-risk students. Given its small size in its first year of operation, much of the communication is informal. While teachers reported discussing students of concern during team meetings, the school does not have a systematic approach to track struggling students.

Teachers are provided with sufficient support to help them meet the needs of at-risk students. Some training was provided during the summer and teachers have access to IEPs. The special education staff coordinates its activity with that of the general classroom teachers working, for example, with students to preview, practice and review material that is covered in their classes.

Student Order and Discipline (Benchmark 1.G)

The school is beginning to develop a culture of learning.

The school is safe and orderly. Students are respectful and the transitions between classes are smooth. Interviewed teachers said they felt safe in the school and noted the importance of good relationships between students and staff.

The effectiveness of classroom management varied. The “New Roots Commitment” is posted throughout the school: “respect yourself, respect others, respect the environment.” The school leader described a balance between teacher discretion and common agreements, with working agreements posted in classrooms, including “participate fully, listen for understanding, ask questions, take risks, support risk-takers, start and end on time, honor confidentiality.” Teachers used a variety of strategies to promote a constructive learning environment, including proximity, structured and engaging lessons, and various modalities. When one group of students left the building for an expedition, the teacher reviewed explicit behavior expectations and to which students generally responded. In some classes after a quick introduction students transitioned efficiently into independent activities with minimal teacher direction. In other classes students were disruptive, engaged in horseplay, and ate snacks while the teacher struggled to keep students engaged in the learning activity.

The school’s discipline system is inconsistent. While its approach is based on Restorative Justice principles, teachers had differing perceptions of discipline procedures and protocols. For example, though cell phones and iPods were a distraction in several classes, teachers were inconsistent in their expectations about, and consequences for, their use. Some teachers reported that the school did not have a uniform approach for dealing with misbehavior and meting out consequences. They were unclear about the suspension policy, though review of documents indicated procedures are in place for informing parents and providing alternative instruction. The dean of students was working with teachers on issues of consistency and criteria for sending students outside of the classroom versus handling discipline in class.

Professional Development (Benchmark 1.H)

The school has a comprehensive professional development program. Teachers described it as a priority and a reason they chose to work at the school. The school’s leadership team attended trainings in Expeditionary Learning and staff attended retreats at EcoVillage addressing sustainability and environmental themes as well as science education and diversity training. At the Cloud Institute, staff learned backwards design of curriculum and expectations for integrating sustainability. Half the

time at Monday staff meetings is devoted to s on Mondays with half of the time devoted to administrative topics and the remainder to planning and instruction.

The professional development program is addressing school-wide needs and is beginning to address individual teacher needs. Much work has been done in the first year to develop the school's faculty and their understanding of the unique vision in the charter. Some targeted professional development has occurred for individuals. For instance, teachers reported receiving specific training and support in special education and classroom management.

Mission & Key Design Elements (Benchmark 2.A)

In its first year of operation, the school has faithfully followed its mission, implementing many of its key design elements. Sustainability is a clear theme throughout the school, evidenced in posters, curriculum, lessons and discussions. Expeditionary learning and service learning have been implemented, and the school is working to implement restorative justice, student-led conferences and passage portfolios. The farm-to-school lunch program is in place, involving students in the preparation and cooking as well as service learning projects.

Organizational Capacity (Benchmark 2.C)

The school has established a well-functioning organizational structure with staff, systems, and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program.

The school's organizational structure supports distinct lines of accountability with generally defined roles and responsibilities. The leadership team includes the principal, business manager, dean of students, farm-to-school coordinator and outreach coordinator. Teachers understood the roles of school leaders and knew who to go to for what. The grade level teams also appear to be a valuable structure that provides support.

The school is competently managed. The school has a part-time business manager who will become full-time next year and has outsourced some systems, such as IT and accounting. The school has had to revise its budget as it determined real costs and adjusted to lower than anticipated enrollment, but has continued to implement its key design elements. Teachers reported adequate resources and funds for purchasing materials as they develop curriculum.

The historic facility presents significant challenges. One teacher's classroom is a hallway and many classrooms have open walls. Some rooms can only be reached by going through other rooms; as a result transitions are often disruptive. The science labs have limited plumbing and electrical outlets. Nevertheless, the staff was making the best of the space and did not consider it a major detriment.

The school has hired and retained quality staff. Teachers have come from across the country to work at the school and most have classroom experience. Interviewed teachers were generally enthusiastic about the school; one teacher said he chose to work at the school because of the opportunity to participate in the design of new processes and procedures. Two teachers had left since the beginning of the year; one on long-term leave due to illness, the other due to poor fit.

The school has struggled to maintain sufficient enrollment. It has experienced significant student turnover and the 10th grade enrollment is low. At the time of the visit there were 52 students enrolled in 9th grade and 42 in 10th grade. Since the beginning of the school year 33 students have left, many

of whom were replaced by backfilling. Reasons given for student departures included culture fit, moving out of town, desire for larger school with sports program and special education needs.

Governance (Benchmark 2.D-E)

The board has adequate skills, structures and procedures with which to govern the school. Board members have expertise in education, non-profit management, and business. The board is actively seeking additional members and hopes to add legal and finance expertise. The board operates with a committee structure including executive, nomination, finance, personnel, facilities, development, and accountability committees. The board's priorities have included setting the policies of a new school and securing a suitable facility.

The board regularly receives data reports -- including enrollment, finance and student performance -- from school leaders. The accountability committee reviews assessment results and is developing a dashboard of indicators and benchmarks to track and measure progress. Though students have not yet taken any Regents exams, the board is monitoring student preparation.

The board is developing an evaluation plan for the school leader and itself; it is in the process of collecting rubrics that will inform the development of protocols. The board is also aware of conflict of interest issues; board members have reportedly recused themselves from issues such as those related to the school facility.

Conduct of the Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the school evaluation visit at New Roots Charter School on March 25, 2010. 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.

Jason Sarsfield is a Senior Analyst for the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York, responsible for reviewing school applications, analyzing data to identify critical issues for renewal visit teams, monitoring the development of all renewal recommendation reports and supporting the development, refinement, and revision of internal policies and practices of the Institute's renewal process. Mr. Sarsfield returns to the Institute from the Bronx Charter School for Better Learning in the Bronx, NY, where he supervised the administration of standardized assessments, conducted analysis of student achievement data for purposes of program evaluation, and oversaw the development and submission of reports to state, federal and local agencies. Prior to his service at the Bronx Charter School for Better Learning, he served as a Senior Analyst at the SUNY Charter Schools Institute, where he provided leadership for annual and informal school evaluation visits. Before moving to New York to work for the Institute, Mr. Sarsfield was a contract analyst for the Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University, where he evaluated the academic performance of authorized charter schools and provided technical assistance for school improvement initiatives and the analysis of student achievement data. Mr. Sarsfield also served as a teacher and coach for Bad Axe Public Schools in Michigan and was a teacher at a residential high school in rural Alaska. Mr. Sarsfield received his Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education from Northern Michigan University and is a candidate for a Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership from Central Michigan University.

External Consultants

Elena Day is the Director of School Operations for the New York City Charter School Center. Prior to working at the Charter Center, she did extensive work for charter schools and other not-for-profits under her own management consulting company. Additionally she has worked for Credit Suisse First Boston where she was Vice President in equity trading, sales and capital markets e-commerce and head of financial product development and web development for Private Advisor, a high net-worth retail initiative. At Morgan Stanley, Elena Day was in the business-to-business ecommerce group and Vice President in strategy for Morgan Stanley online. Elena Day received her BA from Wesleyan University, with a degree in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, and her MBA from Columbia University.

Greg Speranza is the President of MindStream Consulting, Inc., a company specializing in school quality, leadership coaching and strategic planning for charter schools. Mr. Speranza's work takes him to Massachusetts, Ohio, New York and Michigan. Prior to becoming a consultant, Mr. Speranza was a successful charter school principal, leading two NYS charter schools to five year renewals with SUNY and NYSED, respectively. His previous school, Southside Academy, in Syracuse, NY, increased both its NYS ELA and Math scores by 48 points during the three years Mr. Speranza was principal. His school in Buffalo, NY also won awards from the NYS Business Council and the Buffalo News for the work done with students coming from poverty. Prior to Mr. Speranza's charter school leadership, he was the principal of a residential treatment center school in Lockport, NY; coordinator of an alternative high school in Barker, NY; and a middle school English teacher in Medina, NY. He holds a BA in English Literature, and MS degrees in Education and School Leadership, as well as a certification in School Leadership Coaching from the National Association

of Elementary School Principals. Mr. Speranza resides and operates his business in Buffalo.

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.

Renewal Question 1 Is the School an Academic Success?	
<u>Evidence Category</u>	<u>State University Renewal Benchmarks</u>
State University Renewal Benchmark 1B Use of Assessment Data	<p>The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the school regularly uses standardized and other assessments that are aligned to the school’s curriculum framework and state performance standards; • 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; • the school uses protocols, procedures and rubrics that ensure that the scoring of assessments and evaluation of student work is reliable and trustworthy; • the school uses assessment data to predict whether the school’s Accountability Plan goals are being achieved; • 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; • the school’s teachers use assessment data to adjust and improve instruction to meet the identified needs of students; • 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; • the school regularly communicates each student’s progress and growth to his or her parents/guardians; and • 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.
State University Renewal Benchmark 1C Curriculum	<p>The school has a clearly defined curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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; • the school has carefully analyzed all curriculum resources (including commercial materials) currently in use in relation to the school’s curriculum framework,

	<p>identified areas of deficiency and/or misalignment, and addressed them in the instructional program;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the curriculum <i>as implemented</i> is organized, cohesive, and aligned from grade to grade; 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; teachers develop and use lesson plans with objectives that are in alignment with the school’s curriculum; the school has defined a procedure, allocated time and resources, and included teachers in ongoing review and revision of the curriculum; and the curriculum supports the school’s stated mission.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1D</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>	<p>High quality instruction is evident in all classes throughout the school.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> teachers demonstrate subject-matter and grade-level competency in the subjects and grades they teach; 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; lesson plans and instruction are aligned to the school’s curriculum framework and New York State standards and performance indicators; 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; all students are cognitively engaged in focused, purposeful learning activities during instructional time; 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 teachers challenge students with questions and assignments that promote academic rigor, depth of understanding, and development of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1E</p> <p>Instructional Leadership</p>	<p>The school has strong instructional leadership.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school’s leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for student achievement; the school’s leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for teacher performance (in content knowledge, pedagogical skills and student achievement); the school’s instructional leaders have in place a comprehensive and on-going system for evaluating teacher quality and effectiveness; 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; 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; the school’s instructional leaders organize a coherent and sustained professional development program that meets the needs of both the school and individual

<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1F</p> <p>At-Risk Students</p>	<p>teachers;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 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. <p>The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school deploys sufficient resources to provide academic interventions that address the range of students’ needs; all regular education teachers, as well as specialists, utilize effective strategies to support students within the regular education program; the school provides sufficient training, resources, and support to all teachers and specialists with regard to meeting the needs of at-risk students; 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; all regular education teachers demonstrate a working knowledge of students’ Individualized Education Program goals and instructional strategies for meeting those goals; 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 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.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1G</p> <p>Student Order & Discipline</p>	<p>The school promotes a culture of learning and scholarship.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school has a documented discipline policy that is consistently applied; classroom management techniques and daily routines have established a culture in which learning is valued and clearly evident; 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 throughout the school, a safe and orderly environment has been established.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1H</p> <p>Professional Development</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school provides sufficient time, personnel, materials and funding to support a comprehensive and sustained professional development program; the content of the professional development program dovetails with the school’s

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

	<p>its mission and Accountability Plan goals, and a process for their regular review and revision;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the school has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals; • the roles and responsibilities of the school’s leadership and staff members are clearly defined; • the school has an organizational structure that provides clear lines for accountability; • the school’s management has successfully recruited, hired and retained key personnel, and made appropriate decisions about removing ineffective staff members when warranted; • the school maintains an adequate student enrollment and has effective procedures for recruiting new students to the school; and • the school’s management and board have demonstrated effective communication practices with the school community including school staff, parents/guardians and students.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 2D</p> <p>Board Oversight</p>	<p>The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school’s mission and provide oversight to the total educational program.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the school board has adequate skills and expertise, as well as adequate meeting time to provide rigorous oversight of the school; • 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; • 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; • the school board has received regular written reports from the school leadership on academic performance and progress, financial stability and organizational capacity; • 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; • 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; • the school board has not made financial or organizational decisions that have materially impeded the school in fulfilling its mission; and • 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.
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 2E</p> <p>Governance</p>	<p>The board has implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes, and has abided by them.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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;

- 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.

APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Charter Schools and the State University of New York

The New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 (“the Act”) called for the creation of tuition-free public schools that would operate independently and autonomously of local school districts, schools that by design are committed to improving student achievement for all students, particularly those at-risk of academic failure.

The Act specifies that civic leaders, community groups, educators and/or parents interested in bringing public school choice to their communities may apply to one of three chartering entities in the state to open a new charter school: the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”), the New York State Board of Regents (the Regents), or local boards of education (in New York City, authorizing power is vested in the Chancellor). Additionally, existing traditional district-operated schools can seek to convert to charter status through their governing boards of education.

The Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) was established by the State University Trustees to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities under the Act, including reviewing applications to establish charter schools as well as the review of renewal applications for those schools (as detailed more fully below, an initial charter is granted for a period of five years only). In each case, the Institute makes recommendations to the State University Trustees. In addition, the Institute is charged with providing ongoing oversight of SUNY authorized charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools in every respect. They are open to all children, non-sectarian in their programs and funded with public tax dollars. Unlike district operated schools, which are run by a board of education, each public charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees, which is directly responsible for school performance. Although independent, public charter schools and their boards, like traditional public schools and school boards, are subject to oversight and monitoring. Additionally, all public charter schools in New York State are jointly subject to inspection and oversight by the State Education Department (SED) on behalf of the Board of Regents. As such, charter schools, though free from many mandates, are more accountable to the public than district-run schools.

Charter schools are also accountable for performance. In exchange for the freedom from many state rules and regulations that the Act provides, a public charter school receives a charter, or contract, of up to five years and must meet stated student performance goals that are set forth in its Accountability Plan as well as standards regarding its fiscal, legal and organizational effectiveness within the charter period, or risk losing its charter or not having its charter renewed. This tradeoff—freedom from rules and regulations in exchange for unprecedented accountability for student performance and real consequences for failure—is one of the most significant differences between public charter schools and other public schools administered by traditional school districts.

The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits

Because some schools take planning years before opening (during which time their five-year charter continues to run as if they had opened) and/or receive renewal charter terms of less than five years, the number of years that a school has been in operation is not always co-terminus with the number of

years that a school has provided instruction. Thus for example, a school that is in its seventh year of operation may be in its fifth year of instruction and facing initial renewal, having previously received a short-term planning year renewal for a period of time equivalent to the number of planning years the school took. It will therefore receive a renewal visit, whereas another school that did not take any planning years and was renewed for five years would be in the second year of its second five-year charter. This school would therefore not receive a renewal visit but rather an evaluation visit and report, which all schools in that position receive. As such, each of the Institute's evaluation reports contains a chart indicating the years the school has been in operation, the year of its present charter period, when it has been renewed and for how long, and the feedback that has been previously issued to the school.

In evaluating schools at renewal and on a regular and ongoing basis, the Institute uses a series of benchmarks that cover not only the strength of the academic program but the strength and effectiveness of the organizational and fiscal policies, structures and procedures that the school has instituted at the time of the visit ("the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks"). How these benchmarks are used (and which are used) varies, depending on the specific year of the visit as well as whether the school is in its initial renewal cycle (the first five years) or, having been renewed one or more times, in subsequent renewal cycles.

In particular, the Institute uses a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks (Benchmarks 1.B—1.H) to review the effectiveness of a charter school's academic programs, e.g., the strength of a school's internal assessment system, the rigor of its pedagogical approach, and the breadth and focus of the school's curriculum. In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), the focus on these academic benchmarks is important precisely because the quantitative indicators of academic achievement, i.e., students' performance on standardized tests (especially the state's 3rd - 8th grade testing program and Regents assessments), are generally few in number and difficult to interpret. The qualitative indicators serve as proxy indicators, therefore, for student assessment data sets that are necessarily incomplete and incipient. Moreover, only by using these qualitative indicators can the Institute provide feedback not only on *how* the school is doing but also *why* it is succeeding or failing.⁴

Over time, and particularly at the time of the school's initial renewal (and subsequent renewals thereafter), the quantitative indicators (as defined by Renewal Benchmark 1A, the school's progress in meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals) take on paramount importance and the qualitative indicators concordantly diminish in importance. This is consonant with the fact that charter schools must demonstrate results or face non-renewal. However, while subsequent renewal decisions are based almost solely by the school's progress toward meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals during the charter period, the Institute continues to use the academic benchmarks in its evaluation of charter schools. The reason for this is that it can give the school, parents, and other stakeholders information not only on how the school is doing but perhaps the reasons for its lack of performance (if such is the case).

Keeping This Report in Context

In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face a variety of challenges

⁴ More often, of course, schools do not succeed or fail so much as parts of the highly complex organization are working well and parts are not.

as they mature, and not all charter schools address each challenge at the same pace. The State University Trustees and the Institute recognize the difference between the challenges of starting-up a school and those involved in sustaining its viability and effectiveness over the long-term, as well as the differences in the richness of student assessment data available for a school which has recently opened compared to a school which has been in operation for an extended time. In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face major challenges in the first few years of their charter. These challenges include:

- establishing a positive, academically focused school culture that provides high expectations, support and encouragement for students and teaching staff, and any necessary remediation for students;
- establishing operational and communication patterns with the governing school board of trustees, as well as communication patterns with staff, parents and the community;
- setting up sound fiscal processes and procedures;
- establishing the school in often less-than-ideal facilities, without ready access to facilities funding mechanisms available to district administered public schools;
- creating an environment with strong instructional leadership where teachers receive timely professional development to address changing student needs;
- ensuring that all staff are familiar with and consistently use an effective system for behavior management; and
- retaining qualified staff and minimizing the frequency and rate of any staff turnover by understanding the reason for it, and providing replacement staff with an orientation to the school and its program, as well as the necessary professional development.

Readers should also keep in mind the inherent limitations of a one- or two-day visit, which provides only a snap-shot of the school on the visit days. While the Institute is confident that the majority of its observations are valid, in that they reflect an underlying reality about the school's academic and organizational structures, they are not perfect or error-free.

While there is no one rating that the Institute gives as a result of a school evaluation visit, it is important to note that where the evaluation team identifies area after area with not just room for improvement but significant and severe deficiencies, and few, if any, countervailing strengths, the difficulty that the school may have in presenting a compelling case for renewal is likely to be substantially increased and this fact may well be noted. Conversely, where the evaluation team finds that strengths outnumber weaknesses in both quantity and quality, the school is likely to be better positioned to build a strong case for renewal. So, too, this fact may be noted.

In sum, then, we urge all readers to review the entire report and not to take a particular comment in the report about the school out of context.

Finally, we note that this report cannot serve its three functions (providing data to the school to use for its potential improvement; disseminating information to stakeholders; and gathering data so that the Institute may come to renewal with a richer set of evidence) unless the report is not only unsparingly candid regarding the observations that the Institute has made, but also focused on those areas that are potentially in need of improvement rather than those accomplishments that the school

has accumulated to date.

While this level of what can reasonably be termed *brutal honesty* is necessary, as is the focus on areas for improvement, readers should remember that almost no other entity in education is held to such a high standard of review. This is especially true of public schools that traditional districts and Boards of Education oversee. In so saying, the Institute does not ask the reader to make excuses for schools that are not succeeding—and the Institute’s accountability system does not and will not—but we do note that providing this level of accountability, which almost every charter school welcomes and even advocates for, represents in and of itself a revolution in how public education is governed.