



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem

School Evaluation Report 2008-2009

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

Based on the analysis of evidence gathered during an evaluation visit to the Sisulu Walker Charter School of Harlem (“Sisulu”) on May 5, 2009, the school appears to be making adequate progress towards achieving its mission. Although this conclusion is drawn from a variety of indicators which are discussed more fully later in this report, some of the more salient indicators include the following:

Academic Success

Sisulu regularly administers a variety of useful assessments by following and supplementing the assessment calendar provided by Victory Schools, Inc., the education management organization with which it contracts. The school has a system for collecting and analyzing assessment results but does not yet have a consistent process in place to ensure the validity and reliability of the evaluation of student work. With the guidance of the principal and a Reading First coach, teachers use the results from the DIBELS and interim assessments to adjust instruction. The Terra Nova and PIAT assessment results are also used to identify students for Title I supplemental instruction. Student and school performance results are regularly shared with parents.

The school has adopted curricular programs that are reported to be aligned to standards. There is limited evidence of curriculum documents to guide and pace teachers’ lesson planning and teachers vary in their understanding of standards-based instruction. The school leader has identified curriculum development as a priority area for improvement.

In general, teachers planned and implemented purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to standards. While overall students appeared cognitively engaged in learning activities, the level of rigor and use of instructional time varied. Instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of students.

School leaders have set high expectations for student achievement; they regularly observe teachers and provide ongoing support, resources and guidance. However, an effective and systematic teacher evaluation system is not yet in place. Through student assessment data, school leaders monitor and evaluate the academic program. There is no evidence that the effectiveness of the professional development program is assessed.

The school provides effective interventions for at-risk students. There is evidence that the Title I program has made substantial progress towards its goal to “close the achievement gap with students who score a year below grade level.” The special education coordinator provides push-in and pull-out services. The school has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs, and teachers are provided with adequate training to help them meet the needs of at-risk students.

Sisulu has established a safe and orderly environment. Overall, the school has created and fostered a culture where learning is valued. The school has a documented discipline policy; at the time of the visit, however, the policy was not consistently applied.

The school has a sustained and comprehensive professional development program, including summer sessions, monthly trainings, grade level team meetings and in-class coaching. Although the Reading First grant has expired, the curricular and professional development expectations have been sustained. Though some differentiation of professional development is provided in the form of

coaching and access to outside resources, teachers report that the school's professional development resources are not utilized effectively to meet individual teachers' needs. Teachers and school leaders expressed a desire for more ongoing and differentiated professional development.

Organizational Capacity

Although the inspection team did not specifically collect evidence regarding the school's mission and key design elements, it was apparent that the staff is focused on "high expectations for all of [their] students" and has maintained a "small and supportive learning environment," as specified by the school's mission statement.

Day-to-day operations are competently managed. Overall, the school's organizational structures support distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The school has experienced high staff turnover, however, which has inhibited progress in building a stable and independent teaching staff.

The board of trustees has instituted structures and procedures to provide rigorous oversight of the school. The board is stable to the extent that a core group has been involved since the school's inception and, despite some turnover of the other members, has maintained skill sets that include education, finance, development and management.

The board is structured with task-oriented committees that draw on the expertise of Victory Schools, Inc. and a number of consultants. Through its academic committee, the board has established an effective system for evaluating the school leader. The board receives sufficient information from school leaders to provide effective oversight. The board has communicated its goals and priorities to school management.

One seat on the board is reserved for the head of the school's parent teacher organization (PTO), who acts as a liaison to the parents. Recently, the board has given parents the opportunity to express their concerns about school policies and procedures at board meetings, leading to the introduction of ad hoc committees to review parental concerns and improve school policies.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application to establish the Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem (“Sisulu”) in July of 1999; the Board of Regents approved the school in August of that same year. Sisulu was the first charter school to open in New York State in September 1999 with an enrollment of 247 students in kindergarten through 2nd grade. The school’s original enrollment plans included adding one grade per year to eventually serve approximately 650 children in kindergarten through 6th grade. However, facility constraints made this planned growth challenging. During most of its original charter term, the school operated out of two facilities.

The State University Trustees awarded a Short-Term Renewal of two-years to Sisulu on January 27, 2004. At that time, the school served 300 children in kindergarten, 3rd, 4th and 5th grades. Kindergarten, 3rd and 4th grades were located at 115th Street, and 5th grade classes convened at the Police Athletic League on Manhattan Avenue, a few blocks away.

On March 13, 2006, the State University Trustees granted Sisulu a Full-Term, Five-Year Renewal. Currently, the school serves 260 students in 2nd through 5th grade, all housed at 125 West 115th Street, with plans to reintroduce a kindergarten class in the 2009-10 school year.

Sisulu’s mission statement is as follows:

The mission of the school is to prepare K-5 students living in and around Central Harlem for matriculation to outstanding public, private and parochial middle and high schools by nurturing their intellectual, emotional, artistic and social development.

Sisulu partners with Victory Schools, Inc., a for-profit education management company which seeks to improve public education by assisting in the start-up and management of public charter schools of outstanding quality, particularly those created to serve at-risk students. For an annual fee, Victory Schools provides the following services to the school: design and implementation of the educational program; selection and acquisition of instructional and curricular materials; design, implementation and monitoring of professional development activities; business, personnel and payroll services and facility management; budgeting and financial reporting services; and insurance procurement.

Sisulu’s academic program is focused on the core skills of reading, language arts and mathematics. The school utilizes standards-based balanced literacy/balanced math curricula that emphasize the mastery of essential reading and math skills, as well as the development of higher order thinking and processing ability. Established as part of the school’s two-year renewal agreement, the key design elements include:

- extended daily instruction in core subjects;
- research proven, standards-based core programs;
- comprehensive and on-going staff development regarding specific curriculum implementation and strategies;
- enhanced English language arts support, including ongoing assessment and a phonics and phonemic awareness component to develop and support basic reading skills; and

- enhanced mathematics support, including: introduction to all the major mathematical content domains, including number sense, algebra, measurement, geometry, data analysis and probability, beginning in Kindergarten; an emphasis on developing higher-order and critical thinking skills; individual and group work projects, explorations, investigations and math games to ensure fact power.

As of the date of the current school inspection, the school's board of trustees was comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. William Allen, Chair;
- Ms. Cie-Jai Brown;
- Mr. Michael Barbosa;
- Mr. James d'Auguste, Esq.;
- Ms. Trisia Carter;
- Ms. Minnie Goka;
- Mr. Kenneth McRay;
- Mr. Martez Moore;
- Ms. Yolanda Payne;
- Ms. Hillary Strong; and
- Ms. Danni Tyson

School Year (2007-08)

184 Instructional Days

School Day (2007-08)

8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.¹

Enrollment

¹ After school instruction/activities are scheduled from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m.

School Year	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ²	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
1999-00	247		245	K-2		K-2	Yes
2000-01	347		340	K-3		K-3	Yes
2001-02	447	322	299	K-4	1-4	1-4	Yes
2002-03	547	327	290	K-5	K-2, 5	K, 2-5	Yes
2003-04	647	300	300	K-6	K, 3-5	K, 3-5	Yes
2004-05	225		225	1, 4-5	1, 4-5	1, 4-5	Yes
2005-06	225		230	K-2, 5	K-2, 5	K-2, 5	Yes
2006-07	262		241	K-3		K-3	Yes
2007-08	262		267	1-4		1-4	Yes
2008-09	262		260	2-5		2-5	Yes
2009-10	262			K, 2-5			
2010-11	262			K-5			

Demographic Data³

	2005-06		2006-07		2007-08	
	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #5 Enrollment	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #5 Enrollment	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #5 Enrollment
Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0	1	0	0	0
Black or African American	92	63	88	61	92	59
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0	1	1	1	2	2
Hispanic	8	34	9	36	5	37
White	0	1	0	1	0	2
Multiracial ⁴	N/A	N/A	1	0	1	0
Special Populations						
Students with Disabilities	7.5	N/A	5.7	15.0	N/A	N/A
Limited English Proficient	0.0	11.2	0.0	11.4	0	11
Free/Reduced Lunch						
Eligible for Free Lunch	72	76	69	66	68	71
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	17	6	18	5	14	7

² Actual enrollment per the Institute's Official Enrollment Table. Note that the New York State Education Department School Report Card and Database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated, may represent slightly different enrollment levels depending on the date in which this data was collected.

³ Source: 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08 School Report Cards (New York State Education Department). Note that the State Education Department does not report special education data.

⁴ Multiracial enrollment data were not collected statewide in the 2005-06 school year.

SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

Background

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

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

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

Summary of Previous Evaluation Visits

The Charter Schools Institute conducted a subsequent renewal evaluation of Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem on November 30, 2005. The evaluation team observed classrooms; interviewed administrators, board members and teachers; and reviewed student work and other documents. A report was provided to the school's board of trustees outlining the major conclusions from the visit, which are briefly summarized below.

At the time of the subsequent renewal visit, the school had met eight of the nine academic goals in its Accountability Plan. The school administered and used a variety of assessments as diagnostic tools and indicators of student academic progress, including Victory School's interim assessment program. Inspectors found that over time, the school had better defined its curricular choices. A Reading First grant provided a foundation for its reading program, curricular materials, professional development and key staff. The grant also funded the school's remedial instruction through its "Academic Academy," an after-school program.

Sisulu had a strong professional development program in place, focused on the school's reading program and classroom management, and provided primarily by the school's Reading First coach and Victory Schools. The school had established a safe and orderly environment for students and staff and distributed its discipline policy through the student/parent handbook.

As an institution, the school had improved its organizational strength and focus while undergoing numerous challenges, including changes in principal and facility as well as adjustments to its relationship with Victory Schools. Victory Schools modified the curriculum design for Sisulu and provided two years of *pro bono* services to the school. Inspectors found that in the three years prior to the renewal visit, Victory Schools and Sisulu's board of trustees had worked together to find solutions to the school's academic and organizational problems, although the future business relationship for the upcoming charter term was not clear.

At the time of the last visit, Sisulu maintained full enrollment and a waitlist of 159 children.

Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence

Use of Assessment Data (Benchmark 1.B)

Sisulu regularly administers a variety of useful assessments and follows an assessment calendar provided by Victory Schools. Students are assessed using the Terra Nova, Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT), and Princeton Review interim assessments, as well as assessments from the school's commercial curricular series. To the extent that the commercial curriculum material is purported to be aligned to state assessments and the Princeton Review, which enjoys widespread use in New York, the school assumes that the assessments are aligned. Although the Reading First grant expired the previous year, the school has continued the recommended assessments, administering DIBELS on a schedule based on the student's status as intensive, strategic or benchmark.

The school has a system for collecting and analyzing assessment results but does not yet have a consistent process in place to ensure the validity and reliability of the evaluation of student work. In addition to collecting grades and writing samples (three high and three low from the same assignment) from teachers, the assessment coordinator analyzes the results from the Princeton Review interim assessments. She conducts an item analysis and reports the results by strand and standards as well by individual students. The Reading First coach analyzes the DIBELS results, looking for trends and patterns. Prior to the monthly data summary meetings with the principal and Reading First coach, the assessment coordinator produces a data report that summarizes the formal and informal assessment results and a binder with the more detailed evidence. Student writing is assessed using the rubrics contained within *Strategies for Writing*. Using the same rubric, the school has aligned expectations within the grade level. While the school has provided some limited opportunity for teachers to compare work samples across grade-levels, it has not yet systemically aligned the evaluation across grades.

With the guidance of the principal and Reading First coach, teachers use the results from the DIBELS and interim assessments to adjust instruction. The assessment coordinator informally gives teachers regular ongoing evaluations of individual student performance on interim assessments and teacher-generated assessments. Teachers reported that the reading coach meets with them once a month to review the Princeton Review and DIBELS assessments. She reviews patterns of results to assist teachers in modifying lesson plans and regrouping students as needed. The Terra Nova and PIAT assessment results are also used to identify students for Title 1 supplemental instruction.

Student and school performance results are regularly shared with parents. Four times a year, the school sends home a report card created by the principal to be "standards driven" and "something that parents could understand." In addition, teachers send home progress reports to share students'

performance during the week. Teachers contact parents via telephone regularly when a student is performing below or above level. DIBELS results by grade level are posted in the lobby.

Curriculum (Benchmark 1.C)

The school has adopted the following curricular programs, which are reported to be aligned to standards. The Core Knowledge social studies curriculum is taught using Core Knowledge and McGraw Hill. The Scott Foresman /Addison Wesley mathematics series is supplemented by the games and literature from Everyday Math. According to the principal, the Reading First grant helped to shape the curriculum; the school continues to use *Open Court* for its English language arts instruction in kindergarten through 3rd grade, supplemented by *Strategies for Writers* for writing. In the 4th and 5th grades, literature groups are now used instead of the series, which was determined to be at too low a level. Although writing has been one of the principal's "initiatives," the Reading First coach acknowledges that students "spend a lot more time on reading" and that writing continues to be an area for improvement. When needed, some teachers supplement these programs in some subjects to ensure that they teach to standards.

There is limited evidence of curriculum documents to guide and pace teachers' lesson planning. Teachers vary in their understanding of standards-based instruction; some track their students' mastery of standards-based skills and include standards in their lesson plans, while others concede that they do not know if their curriculum meets NYS standards. Interviews with teachers suggest that curricular mapping is an individual or grade-level activity rather than a school-wide endeavor, with its success depending on the skill and initiative of the individual teacher. Lesson plans are submitted weekly to the principal, who makes comments and returns them.

The school leader has identified curriculum development as a priority area for improvement. The ability to establish an effective process has been exacerbated by teacher turnover as well as by Sisulu's looping approach, such that the school last had a 5th grade in 2005-06. Teachers new to the school were implementing a curriculum in a grade that had not been offered in three years. Next year will be the first year that all grades, kindergarten through 5th, will be offered at the same time. The school leader and teachers report that the school has come to a consensus about the need for summer professional development in backwards planning and curriculum mapping.

Pedagogy (Benchmark 1.D)

In general, teachers planned and implemented purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to standards. Lesson plans are required and are reviewed by the principal every Monday. Although there is not a common format among reviewed lesson plans, it appears that most teachers include objectives and standards in their plans. In observing classes, inspectors found that most teachers taught purposeful lessons. In some cases, however, the teacher did not focus on the objective and instead, commented primarily on foundational skills (such as conciseness and complete sentences) rather than focusing the group discussion on the achievement of the lesson's objective.

While overall students appeared cognitively engaged in learning activities, the level of rigor and use of instructional time varied. During classroom observations, inspectors reported numerous examples of instructional strategies that encouraged student engagement, including small group work, pair share, probing questions and requiring evidence for student responses. Students also completed writing assignments that required them to apply previously taught concepts, such as personification in poetry and historical events in imaginary newspaper articles. Yet in other classrooms, teachers did

not maximize instructional time and the level of rigor was lower. For example, poor management during an observed math lesson meant that the teacher was only able to teach the more basic portion of the lesson and unable to engage the students in applying the skill, an opportunity for higher order thinking.

Instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of students. English language arts lessons are differentiated throughout the school. One 5th grade teacher reported that she differentiates both the level of books and lesson objectives: the highest group focuses on vocabulary in context while the lowest group concentrates on fluency, decoding and sight words. Observations and interviews by evaluation team members indicate that the use of differentiated instruction varies in the other subject areas. A 2nd grade teacher reported that differentiation is becoming “more pervasive each year” and asserts that it is “spreading across the curriculum to social studies and science.” A 5th grade teacher said that “in math, heterogeneous grouping works better [because] they can help each other,” while other classes do adjust their mathematics instruction based on the needs of students.

Instructional Leadership (Benchmark 1.E)

School leaders have set high expectations for student achievement. As indicated in its 2007-08 School Performance Evaluation, Sisulu is meeting its English language arts and mathematics Accountability Plan goals. Teachers reported that they are held accountable for their students’ performance through regular meetings with the school leader, during which achievement is reviewed and issues regarding low performance are addressed.

Instructional leaders regularly observe teachers and provide ongoing support, resources and guidance. As one teacher describes it, the principal “walks through a lot” and talks to teachers “informally.” Teachers report that the Reading First coach is a “valuable” source of support because she can “make connections between data and her own ongoing observations” and that she is available for individual and group conferences to discuss student achievement, classroom management and curriculum as well as to provide in-class coaching. In addition, consultants from Victory Schools provide support in the other subject areas.

An effective and systematic teacher evaluation system is not yet in place. While the principal has tried several forms, including the format recommended by Victory Schools, she has not yet found one that is satisfactory. She acknowledges that she needs to establish a consistent procedure because “people do not do what you do not evaluate.”

Through student assessment data, school leaders monitor and evaluate the academic program. There is a system in place for the assessment coordinator to collect and analyze class-level data for the principal to evaluate. According to the principal, the Princeton Review interim assessments help her to “understand the effectiveness of instruction on a national standard.” As an example, the results of the 5th grade assessment indicated that students had more difficulty comprehending expository text, causing the Reading First coach to work with teachers to expand their instruction so that students “read more widely in their genres” and to teach appropriate comprehension skills. However, there is no evidence that the effectiveness of the professional development program is assessed.

At-Risk Students (Benchmark 1.F)

The school provides interventions for at-risk students. While the results suggest that the programs are effective, there appear to be issues around coordination and communication among classroom

and intervention teachers. The school's full-time Title 1 teacher provides supplemental instruction in reading and/or math to students who score one grade level below on the Terra Nova in either reading or mathematics. The principal says that the Title 1 teacher's job is to "close the achievement gap with students who score a year below grade level." When the 60 students he served last year were tested again at the end of last year, only six students scored below grade level in reading and two students scored below grade level in mathematics.

The special education coordinator provides push-in and pull-out services to the 22 students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Although classroom teachers send their lesson plans to both the Title 1 teacher and special education coordinator, who report that they coordinate their lessons with the classroom instruction, teachers report varying levels of communication and coordination. Some believe that there is continuity without "formal sit-downs;" others find the current method disruptive and are unclear about the Title 1 selection process.

Teachers are provided with adequate training to help them meet the needs of at-risk students. The Reading First coach, trained through the now expired Reading First grant, taught the teachers how to place and teach students in appropriate literacy groups. In addition, the principal hired an expert in small group instruction as a consultant and purchased her professional book for teachers. Inspectors observed a great deal of small group instruction during the one-day visit. One teacher stated, "I can form small group instruction based on [a] student's strength and weaknesses. I can challenge their level of understanding."

The school has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs, including those with disabilities. The Child Study Team, comprised of the guidance counselor, Reading First coach, Title I teacher, assessment coordinator, principal and special education coordinator, meets once a month. The team assesses current performance, suggests additional strategies and makes recommendations for available services prior to referring a student for special education evaluation. At the time of the visit, the school did not have any students who were identified as English language learners.

Student Order and Discipline (Benchmark 1.G)

The school has established a safe and orderly environment. Hallway transitions are smooth and orderly. Students' behavior suggests that they feel comfortable and secure, speaking freely in front of the class and participating in small group discussions with fellow students.

Overall, the school has created and fostered a culture where learning is valued. Inspectors noted that many teachers have established routines and students are engaged in learning. An experienced teacher who is new to Sisulu this year said that "students know what is expected" and asserted that "procedures and expectations are in place." However, in the classrooms of some newly hired teachers, management is inconsistent. Students often talk out of turn, share answers and engage in conversations during teacher lectures, and need repetitive reminders for self control. This significantly impedes learning and limits rigor, as valuable time is lost and students' attention must repeatedly be directed.

The school has a documented discipline policy; however, the policy is not consistently applied at present. As the policy is contained within the parent-student handbook, all stakeholders have access to it and, according to the principal, teachers "have the capacity to implement consistently" but do not do so. She outlined the "continuum of consequences," stressing that "kids feel better when it is

followed consistently and fairly” and acknowledged the need for more consistency in feedback to teachers who do not adhere to the discipline policy.

Professional Development (Benchmark 1.H)

The school has a sustained and comprehensive professional development program, including summer sessions, monthly trainings, grade level team meetings and in-class coaching. Prior to the beginning of the academic year, two weeks of professional development establish expectations for school culture, core subject instruction and student management. Once a month, the entire staff participates in a three-hour training. In addition to consultants for Everyday Math, Open Court and Houghton Mifflin and from Victory and Reading First, teachers are supported by the Reading First coach, who was trained through the Reading First grant. Although the grant has expired, the curricular and professional development expectations have been sustained. For example, all teachers have completed or are currently participating in the Reading Academy, a 5-module course (Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension) taught by the Reading First coach.

Though some differentiation of professional development is provided in the form of coaching and access to outside resources, teachers report that the school’s professional development resources are not utilized effectively to meet individual teachers’ needs. The principal has sought teachers’ input on professional development and conducted a workshop in which the staff collaboratively identified the school’s areas for improvement to focus future professional development, including curriculum development and pedagogical capacity. At the time of the visit, teachers and school leaders expressed a desire for more ongoing differentiated professional development, particularly for novice and veteran teachers. The Reading First coach provided substantial in-class coaching to novice teachers, spending up to two full weeks in the teachers’ classrooms. School staff in specialized positions, such as the assessment coordinator and special education coordinator, attend professional development sessions at the New York Charter School Center.

Mission & Key Design Elements (Benchmark 2.A)

Although the inspection team did not specifically collect evidence regarding the school’s mission and key design elements, it was apparent that the staff is focused on “high expectations for all of [their] students,” as specified by the school’s mission statement. Interviewed teachers were familiar with the mission of the school being the preparation of the students for a higher-level institution of learning. One teacher described the school’s mission as “preparation for Ivy League schools.”

The school has maintained a “small and supportive learning environment,” as dictated by its mission statement. The arts program, a key design element, is led by experienced art and music teachers, and the principal has budgeted to expand the program to include violin instruction. Some classes have participated in community services projects, such as Pennies for Leukemia.

Organizational Capacity (Benchmark 2.C)

Day-to-day operations are competently managed. Interviews with teachers suggest that they are able to focus on their own classrooms and are confident in the management of the school. The school’s facility is well kept and classrooms appear to be well supplied.

Overall, the school’s organizational structures support distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Teachers appear to know who to go to for what purpose. The

principal is supported in leading the school by the business manager, Reading First coach, assessment coordinator, special education coordinator and Title 1 teacher. Although the Title 1 teacher has been very successful in remediating students' academic deficits, some teachers express a desire for a better understanding of the role and improved coordination with classroom teachers. The principal has determined that some teaching assistants "have not contributed to the development of the students" and has made plans to use those resources in a different way in the subsequent year.

The school has experienced high staff turnover, which has inhibited progress in building a stable and independent teaching staff. At the time of the visit, five of the school's ten classroom teachers were in their first year at Sisulu and only two had been at the school longer than two years. Four of those teachers were in their first year of teaching.

Governance (Benchmark 2.D-E)

The board of trustees has instituted structures and procedures to provide rigorous oversight of the school. The board members' skill sets include education, finance, development and management, and the board has a range of expertise that supports an effective mode of operation using a task-oriented committee structure. Recently, the board revised its by-laws and tightened its practices by making explicit a variety of procedures that had been vaguely defined. The board is stable to the extent that a core group has been involved since the school's early days. Apart from this core group, there has been quite a bit of turnover on the board. Because of the changes in membership and because it often operates as a committee of the whole, emphasizing collective decision-making, its new by-laws include the requirement that board members attend regularly or give up their membership. As such, the board now sets specific standards for its members while continuing to seek additional members who are committed to providing ongoing support to the school.

The board is structured with task-oriented committees that draw on the expertise of Victory Schools and a number of consultants. The finance committee works effectively to oversee the development of annual budgets and to keep track of expenditures while working with Victory Schools to provide support for a financial review process. Of particular note, the academic committee consists of a founding board member, the Victory Schools liaison, a consultant who is a former board member, and the principal. Headed by the board member, the group plays an intermediate role between the school leadership, the management company and the board. Their multiple perspectives on the school program provide an effective dynamic, striking a balance between detailed monitoring and reflective oversight.

The board receives sufficient information from school leaders to provide effective oversight. It has received regular written reports from the school leadership on academic performance and progress, financial stability and organizational capacity. The board is focused on student achievement and the school's academic Accountability Plan goals. It requested that Victory Schools develop a dashboard of school outcomes, including student achievement results, and present bottom-line data at board meetings. Further, each meeting contains an academic committee report that provides updated information on the implementation of the school program, as well as new academic initiatives undertaken by the school leadership or Victory Schools. At the time of the school visit, the board members were clearly aware of the school's student achievement record and the performance of the school in terms of its Accountability Plan goals.

The board has communicated its goals and priorities to school management. In addition to requesting the development of the dashboards, the board has asked Victory Schools to develop

specific financial statements that are useful to both the financial and non-financial members of the board to help them carry out their oversight. In general, such requests indicate that the board has become much more demanding of the management company than it was during the first charter period, when it was less experienced in carrying out its responsibilities as the holders of the charter. Board members reported that they now hold Victory Schools accountable for delivering on requests that are part of the service agreement and that they informally review Victory School's performance. They expressed appreciation for Victory School's enhancement of the school's financial capabilities, its general support for school operations, and its support in identifying real estate brokers to assist in finding a new school facility.

Through the academic committee, the board has established an effective system for evaluating the school leader. The Victory Schools liaison provides a set of benchmarks, which the board member and consultant then use to evaluate the principal. The results are reported to the entire board, which in turn sets specific goals for her. The board chair reports that her goal attainment is reviewed every few months.

The board is clearly attempting to keep parents informed and acting on the belief that informed parents are an integral part of the school community. One seat on the board is reserved for the head of the school's parent teacher organization (PTO). By acting as a liaison to the parents, the PTO president keeps them informed about board initiatives and in turn gives voice to parental concerns amongst her fellow board members. The board has lately given parents the opportunity to express their concerns about school policies and procedures at board meetings. The airing of these issues has led the board to introduce *ad hoc* committees to review parental concerns and improve school policies. In other instances, the board has been responsive to criticism about current school practices and has directed the leadership and Victory Schools to review them. This responsiveness to these pockets of parental dissatisfaction suggests that the board has become extremely proactive in enhancing communication with parents.

Conduct of the Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Subsequent Evaluation Visit at Sisulu Walker Charter School on May 5, 2009. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

Hillary Johnson (Team Leader and External Consultant): Dr. Johnson is an independent educational consultant with 18 years experience as a teacher, staff developer and researcher. She has conducted over 25 school inspections with the Charter Schools Institute, primarily as a consulting writer. Past projects include providing professional development in reading and writing instruction, analyzing the alignment between standards and curriculum, and designing video-based professional development to support principals in developing instructional monitoring skills. She began her career as a Spanish bilingual teacher and a Reading Recovery teacher in Oakland CA. Subsequently, she served as a Literacy Content Coach and Whole School Change Coach to several Boston Public Schools. Dr. Johnson earned her B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, her M.Ed. from Harvard University and her Doctorate of Education from Harvard University with a concentration through its Urban Superintendents Program.

Ron Miller, Ph.D. is the Vice President for Accountability at the Charter Schools Institute. After teaching for seven years in New York City public schools, Dr. Miller joined the central offices of the New York City Department of Education, where he conducted evaluative research and organizational studies. As Director of the Office of School Planning and Accountability, he served as the educational accountability officer for the Department. In that capacity, he developed school accountability reports for the city schools and coordinated staff development on their use for district administrators in all the high school and community school districts. In addition, he worked with school leaders to develop their competence to use data for school improvement. In this role he developed PASS, a school performance review system which was adopted in 600 city schools. Dr. Miller has regularly presented papers at annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association and has served as Adjunct Assistant Professor at Teachers College Columbia University and Pace University. He holds an AB degree from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology from Columbia University.

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

Corrine Cristofaro (External Consultant) is the Executive Director of the Western New York Charter School Coalition. Corrinne joined the Coalition after 15 years as a Buffalo-area high-school Business and Marketing Teacher, recognized in *Who's Who in America's High School Teachers*. She boasts an in-depth knowledge of the NYS education system: academic standards, classroom teaching and preparation, union policies and procedures, and curriculum development. Ms. Cristofaro is also an experienced and certified NYS Coach and Women's Basketball Official. Additionally, Ms. Cristofaro is an Adjunct Instructor for the Business Department at Buffalo State College, where she teaches a variety of courses. .

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	<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.
Use of Assessment Data	
State University Renewal Benchmark 1C	<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
Curriculum	

	<p>materials) currently in use in relation to the school’s curriculum framework, 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

	<p>development program that meets the needs of both the school and individual 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>State University Renewal Benchmark 1F</p> <p>At-Risk Students</p>	<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;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the content of the professional development program dovetails with the school’s mission, curriculum, and instructional programs; 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>
State University Renewal Benchmark 2A Mission & Key Design Elements	<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.
State University Renewal Benchmark 2B Parents & Students	<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.
State University Renewal Benchmark 2C Organizational Capacity	<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;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school has established clear priorities, objectives and benchmarks for achieving its mission and Accountability Plan goals, and a process for their regular review and revision; 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 by design 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. While 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.⁵

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 as they mature, and not all charter schools address each challenge at the same pace. The State

⁵ 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.

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-day visit, which provides only a snap-shot of the school on visit day. 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 single-day 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.