



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
OF THE CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE
AS TO THE APPLICATION FOR CHARTER
RENEWAL OF THE ROCHESTER LEADERSHIP
ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL**

FEBRUARY 18, 2005

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INTRODUCTION

The Charter Schools Act of 1998 (the “Act”) authorizes the State University of New York Board of Trustees (the “Board of Trustees”) to grant charters for the purpose of organizing and operating independent and autonomous public charter schools. Charter schools provide opportunities for teachers, parents, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools and school districts in order to accomplish the following objectives:

- improve student learning and achievement;
- increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are at-risk of academic failure;
- provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system;
- create new professional opportunities for teachers, school administrators and other school personnel;
- encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods; and
- provide schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance based accountability systems by holding the schools accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results.¹

In order to assist the Board of Trustees in their responsibilities under the Act, the Board of Trustees authorized the establishment of the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York (the “Institute”). Among its duties, the Institute is charged with evaluating charter schools’ applications for renewal and providing its resulting findings and recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

This report is the primary vehicle by which the Institute transmits to the Board of Trustees its findings and recommendations regarding a school’s renewal application, and more broadly, the merits of a school’s case for renewal. It has been created and issued pursuant to the “Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewals of Charters for State University Authorized Charter Schools” (the “State University Renewal Practices”).² More information regarding this report is contained in the “Reader’s Guide” that follows.

¹ See § 2850 of the Charter Schools Act of 1998.

²The State University Renewal Practices, Policies and Procedures (revised January 25, 2005) are available at www.newyorkcharters.org.

Statutory and Regulatory Considerations

Charters may be renewed, upon application, for a term of up to five years. The Act prescribes the following requirements for a charter school renewal application:

- a report of the progress of the charter school in achieving the educational objectives set forth in its charter;
- a detailed financial statement that discloses the cost of administration, instruction and other spending categories for the charter school that will allow a comparison of such costs to other schools, both public and private;
- copies of each of the annual reports of the charter school including the charter school report cards and certified financial statements; and
- indications of parent and student satisfaction.³

The Institute's processes and procedures mirror these requirements and meet the objectives of the Act.⁴

As a charter authorizing entity, the Board of Trustees can renew a charter so long as the Trustees can make each of the following findings:

- the charter school described in the application meets the requirements of the Act and all other applicable laws, rules and regulations;
- the applicant can demonstrate the ability to operate the school in an educationally and fiscally sound manner; and
- granting the application is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes of the Act.⁵

Where the Board of Trustees approve a renewal application, they are required under the Act to submit the application and a proposed charter to the Board of Regents for its review.⁶ The Regents may approve or return the proposed charter to the Board of Trustees with the Regents' comments and recommendation. In the former case, the charter will then issue and become operational on the day the initial charter expires. In the latter case (return to the Board of Trustees), the Board of Trustees must review the returned proposed charter in light of the Regents' comments and respond by resubmitting the charter (with or without modification) to the Regents, or by abandoning the proposed charter. Should the Board of Trustees resubmit the charter, the Regents have thirty days to act to approve it. If they do not approve the proposed charter, it will be deemed approved and will issue by operation of law.⁷

³ § 2851(4) of the Act.

⁴ Further explication of these policies and procedures is available on the Charter Schools Institute's website. See <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/howto/renewal.html>.

⁵ See § 2852(2) of the Act.

⁶ See § 2852(5) of the Act.

⁷ See §§ 2852(5-a) and (5-b) of the Act.

Process for Renewal

While that renewal process formally commences with submission of a renewal application, a school must work to make the case for renewal from the time it is chartered. From its inception, the school must build its case for renewal by setting educational goals and thereafter implementing a program that will allow them to meet those goals.

Under the State University's accountability cycle, a school that is chartered enters into a plan (the "Accountability Plan")⁸ setting forth the goals for the school's educational program (and other measures if the school desires) usually in the first year of the charter. Progress toward each goal is determined by specific measures. Both goals and measures, while tailored in part to each school's program, must be consistent with the Institute's written guidelines. When the Accountability Plan is in final form, it receives approval from the Institute.

Thereafter, the charter school is required to provide an annual update on its progress in meeting its Accountability Plan goals and measures (the "Accountability Plan Progress Report").⁹ This permits the school not only the ability to provide all stakeholders with a clear sense of the school's progress, but forces the school to focus on specific academic outcomes. In the same vein, both the Institute and the State Education Department conduct visits to the school on a periodic basis. The main purpose of the Institute's visits is to determine the progress the school is making in implementing successfully a rigorous academic program that will permit the school to meet its Accountability Plan goals and measures. Reports and de-briefings for the school's Board or leadership team are designed to indicate the school's progress, its strengths and its weaknesses. Where possible, and where it is consistent with its oversight role, the Institute provides general advice as to potential avenues for improvement. To further assist the school in this regard, the Institute may contract with third-party, school inspection experts to conduct a comprehensive third-year visit to the school and to look specifically at the strength of the school's case for renewal at that point.

By the start of the fifth year of a school's charter (as set forth above), it must submit an application for charter renewal, setting forth the evidence required by law and the State University. Applicant charter schools are asked to formulate and report evidence of success in answer to four renewal questions:

- Is the school an academic success?
- Is the school a viable and effective organization?
- Is the school fiscally sound?
- If the school's charter is renewed, what are its future plans?

The application is reviewed by Institute staff. The staff also conducts a desk audit to both gather additional evidence as well as verify the evidence the school has submitted. This audit includes

⁸ See <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/resource/reports.html> for detailed information on Accountability Plan guidelines.

⁹ See <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/resource/Model%20Progress%20Report1.pdf> for a model Accountability Plan Progress Report.

examination of the school's charter, including amendments, Accountability Plan, Accountability Plan Progress Reports, Annual Reports and internal documents (such as school handbooks, policies, memos, newsletters, and Board meeting minutes). Institute staff also examines audit reports, budget materials, and reports generated over the term of the school's charter both by the Institute and the State Education Department.

Thereafter, the Institute conducts a multi-day site visit to the school. Based on a review of each school's application for charter renewal, a lead member of the Institute's renewal visit team works with the school's leadership to design a visit schedule and request any additional documentation the team may require to ensure that analysis of the school's progress is complete (professional development plans, special education plans, school newsletters, *etc.*). Renewal visit team members visit classes, observe lessons, examine student work, sit in on school meetings, interview staff members and speak informally with students. In addition, the team conducts extensive interviews with the school's Board of Trustees and administrators.

The evidence that the Institute gathers is structured by a set of benchmarks that are grouped under the four renewal application questions listed above. These benchmarks are linked to the Accountability Plan structure and the charter renewal requirements in the Act; many are also based on the correlates of effective schools.¹⁰

Following the visit, the Institute's renewal team finalizes the analysis of all evidence generated regarding the school's performance. The Institute's renewal benchmarks are discussed and the lead writer uses the team's evidence and analysis to generate comments under each renewal benchmark. The completed benchmarks present a focus for discussion and a summary of the findings. The benchmarks are not used as a scorecard, do not have equal weight, and support but do not individually or in limited combination provide the aggregate analysis required for the final renewal recommendation.

The Institute then prepares a draft report and provides a copy to the school for its review and comment. The draft contains the findings, discussion and the evidence base for those findings, but does not contain a recommendation. Upon receiving a school's comments, the Institute reviews its draft, makes any changes it determines are necessary and appropriate and determines its findings in their final form. The report is then finalized, recommendations are included, and copies are provided to the members of the Committee on Charter Schools, the other members of the Board of Trustees and the schools themselves. This report is the product of that process.

¹⁰ See <http://www.effectiveschools.com>.

READER'S GUIDE

This renewal report contains the following sections: Introduction, Reader's Guide, School Description, Recommendations and Executive Summary, Findings and Discussion and completed Renewal Benchmarks. As this guide, the Introduction, and School Description speak for themselves, no guidance is provided for these sections. Guidance as to the remaining sections is set forth below.

1. Recommendations and Executive Summary

The Institute's Recommendations are the end result of its review process. In this section, the Institute provides not only its recommendation as to whether the charter should be renewed, but the recommended terms of any renewal, *i.e.*, short or long-term, grades and number of students it is recommended the school be authorized to serve, conditions under which the charter is renewed, *etc.* Following the recommendations themselves is a short executive summary that lays out in abbreviated form reasons for the recommendation as well as the findings that support the recommendation.

Pursuant to the State University Renewal Practices, the recommendations made by the Institute can take the following forms.

- *Early renewal*: available to schools in the fourth year of the charter that can at that point make a compelling and unambiguous case for renewal. Schools that gain early renewal will then have five full years of instruction before facing renewal again, thus allowing them to concentrate on instruction and providing them with more ready access to capital markets.
- *Short-term planning year renewal*: available to schools that have taken one or more planning years. These schools will be able with limited review to obtain renewal in order to allow them to gather at least four full years of data before facing a full-blown renewal review.
- *Renewal*: available to schools in their fifth year. Schools that have a compelling and unambiguous case for renewal will be eligible for renewal term of five years.
- *Renewal with conditions*: available to schools that 1) have a compelling and unambiguous educational record of success but that have material legal, fiscal or organizational deficiencies that practically cannot be completely corrected by the time of renewal — so long as such deficiencies are not fatal to a determination that the school is fiscally, legally and organizationally sound, or 2) have demonstrated sufficient academic performance for renewal, but require conditions to improve the academic program. Such conditions may

include but are not limited to restrictions on the number of students and grades served.

- *Short-term renewal*: available to schools in their fifth year that present an ambiguous or mixed record of educational achievement, but that have effectively implemented measures to correct those deficiencies and such measures are likely to lead to educational success and students' academic improvement with additional time. Typically, but not always, short-term renewal will be for two years. A short-term renewal may also be coupled with conditions relating to organizational, fiscal or legal deficiencies.
- *Restructuring renewal*: available to schools that have not presented a case for renewal of any kind, but that are voluntarily willing to enter into a restructuring plan whereby the current school would cease instruction at the end of the school's final year of instruction under the current charter and its Board of Trustees would wind up operations of the school. Thereafter, the school's Board would legally commit itself to implementing a wholesale restructuring of the education corporation, including a new Board of Trustees, administrative team, academic program, enrollment and organizational structure, and potentially a new location, which school then could meet and exceed state standards and all the requirements of the Act. Once restructured the education corporation would have authority to recommence instruction.
- *Non-renewal*: where a school does not present a case for renewal (short term, conditional, or otherwise), the charter will not be renewed and the charter will be terminated upon its expiration.

In addition to discussing the recommendations themselves (and any conditions made part of those recommendations), the executive summary also contains the findings required by subdivision 2852(2) of the Education Law, including whether the school, if renewed, is likely to improve student learning and achievement.

2. Finding and Discussion

The findings are grouped and separated into four sections corresponding to the four questions that a charter school seeking renewal must answer and must provide evidence supporting its answer. They are:

- Is the school an academic success?
- Is the school a viable and effective organization?
- Is the school fiscally sound?
- If the school's charter is renewed, what are its future plans?

Below each group of findings is a summary of the evidence supporting the finding. This evidence is a synthesis of information gathered over the life of the school's charter and is analyzed through the lens of the Institute's Renewal Benchmarks (available on the Institute's website).

The ordering of the findings—with those regarding a school's academic performance and outcomes placed first—reflect the fact that renewal of a State University authorized charter is primarily based on a school's progress towards performance-based goals that the charter school and the Institute agreed to in the school's Accountability Plan. However, while success in meeting these goals is the primary determining factor, the school's ability to demonstrate that its educational program as implemented is effective and that the organization is viable, fiscally stable and in compliance with applicable law are also important factors. So, too, the school must be able to show that its plans for the charter renewal term are feasible, reasonable and most of all achievable.

3. Renewal Benchmarks

The Renewal Benchmarks section contains each renewal benchmark together with a review of the pertinent evidence gathered during the renewal cycle. As noted earlier, the benchmarks, similar to the findings, are grouped under the four renewal questions.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School (RLA or the Academy) was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. The school opened in the fall of 2000, enrolling 276 students in Kindergarten through eighth grades, and has expanded to 648 students in 2004-05. It originally occupied the first three floors of an office building in downtown Rochester, sharing the building with professional tenants, located at 82 Saint Paul Street in Rochester, New York. In April of 2003, the school broke ground on its new 48,000-square-foot facility in the former Mapledale Party House at 1020 Maple Street. The school moved into its new facility that includes 32 classrooms, a parent room, a large gymnasium and administrative offices in the fall of 2003.

The mission of the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School is as follows:

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School will provide a Kindergarten through eighth grade educational program that emphasizes high academic standards with added student accountability that will lead to increased student achievement. We will create responsible citizens through education in moral character development. We recognize that parents are the primary educators of their children and will involve parents throughout the learning process.

Based on a belief that a child's self-esteem is developed through diligence and achievement, the school's founders sought to create a school that provides an orderly environment with high academic and social expectations, and in which parents play a key role in helping the school to achieve its mission.

The school has contracted with National Heritage Academies to oversee its management. National Heritage Academies, which has a network of 51 charter academies in five states, including New York, educating approximately 26,000 students, uses a well-known and highly regarded curriculum, including Core Knowledge, Open Court, and Saxon Math, as well as a character development component. Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School's governance structure includes a School Leadership Team consisting of parent chairs of six school committees who report to the school's Board of Trustees.

RECOMMENDATION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recommendation: The Charter Schools Institute recommends that the State University Board of Trustees not approve the application for charter renewal submitted by the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School and that the educational program of the Rochester Leadership Academy *i.e.*, the school, not be renewed and close at the end of the present school year. As the Rochester Leadership Academy charter expires during the course of the current school year, the Institute further recommends that the charter be renewed through and including December 31, 2005, which will allow the school's Board of Trustees to provide instruction under the terms and conditions of the original charter through the end of the current school year, terminate the education program at the end of the 2004-05 school year and wind up the affairs of the school in an orderly fashion. Pursuant to the foregoing recommendation, the school's Board of Trustees will have no authority to provide instruction, including, but not limited to, summer school, beyond the end of the current school year.¹¹

Summary Discussion

Rochester Leadership Academy is located in Rochester, New York and is partnered, under a management contract, with National Heritage Academies (NHA), an educational service provider, *i.e.*, management company. RLA has a current total enrollment of 648 students in grades Kindergarten through eight. The school has applied for a full-term, five-year renewal charter, or, in the alternative, a short-term renewal of two years or longer.

In order for the Charter Schools Institute to recommend that a charter school authorized by the State University Board of Trustees be awarded a five-year renewal of its charter, a school must show that it has met its Accountability Plan measures and goals or at least made consistent and meaningful progress towards meeting those outcome measures and goals. It must also demonstrate that it is, at the time of renewal, a fiscally and organizationally sound entity and meets the requirements of the Charter Schools Act and applicable law.

In order for a charter school to qualify for short-term renewal, the school must be able to present student assessment data that, at the very least, presents a mixed record of academic success. In addition, the school, at the time of renewal, must have in place the personnel, programs and structures, such that, if the school were allowed more time to operate, the school would be likely

¹¹ Pursuant to the *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* (revised January 25, 2005 and available on the Institute's website www.newyorkcharters.org), the school's Board of Trustees may seek a restructuring of the charter before December 31, 2005, to allow the continued corporate existence of the education corporation and possible re-use of the charter by future applicants.

in that time to produce improvements in student achievement and meet its Accountability Plan measures and goals, or at the very least make significant and consistent progress towards them.

Based on all the evidence gathered during the charter period, and as supported by the evidence and findings contained in this report, the Institute has not made and can not make the findings that it would need to support a positive recommendation for a full-term or short-term renewal for RLA.

RLA has, for the most part, not met the key academic outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics it set for itself in its Accountability Plan, and its progress towards meeting them is limited. In the fourth year of the charter, the school's performance on the state assessments was significantly worse than in the previous year, with only 9.1 percent of eighth graders testing as proficient in ELA and 20 percent in math. On a comparative basis, the Rochester City School District, which itself posted low scores as compared to state averages and even other large cities, generally outperformed RLA. During the first three years of the school's charter, both student performance on the state assessments and on the school's value-added assessment, the MAT-8, indicated that students were not learning at the level needed to achieve school goals contained in the school's Accountability Plan or to meet state standards. Student performance results indicate that most RLA students are *not* being prepared for high school by virtue of the small proportion that is scoring proficient on the fourth and eighth grade state examinations. However, not all trends in the data throughout the charter period were negative, and as such, though barely so, the assessment outcomes, taken collectively, are mixed, *e.g.*, a steady increase in the percentage of students in the fourth grade in math at proficient, with 43.5 percent at proficient in the school's fourth year (2003-04).

Unfortunately, however, while RLA meets the first part of the standard that the Institute has established to determine eligibility for short-term renewal, it has not met the second part. The qualitative indicators used by the Institute to determine if the personnel, program and structures are in place to make it likely that the school, if granted more time, would make significant and consistent progress towards its Accountability Plan measures are only partly in place. Significant steps have yet to be taken that would be essential to the school's being able to meet the standard for short-term renewal and make meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the goals and measures in the school's accountability plan.

As detailed in the report, beginning in the late spring of the school's fourth year, RLA has attempted to remake itself by hiring a new principal, two instructional administrators, 14 new teachers and creating a professional development plan that emphasizes the use of student performance data to guide instruction. RLA has also instituted changes in its academic program and student behavioral expectations. However, while the changes to the academic program have been significant, and the administrative team and faculty are to be commended, significant problems and shortcomings remain. The renewal team still found that the quality of instruction overall was not high and not of the caliber needed to make significant and consistent progress towards the school's accountability goals. Even more important, the personnel that would need to be in place to oversee instruction and improve upon it were not yet in place; as such, there is an insufficient basis to find (other than plans and assurances put forth by the school) that instruction would improve at the pace and scale necessary. In sum, RLA neither has the

personnel and systems in place that would make likely that the necessary improvements in instruction will take place as planned.

At the organizational level, RLA has improved over time. Most significantly, the Board of Trustees in its early years did not provide adequate and effective oversight in regards to the performance of NHA, the school's management partner. Moreover, the Board failed to ensure that key design elements of the school were implemented effectively and, in some instances, implemented at all. Of particular note, not until the fifth year did the school began to implement in any meaningful way the various parent/teacher/administrative committees. These committees, if implemented as envisioned in the application for a charter, would have significantly strengthened the oversight of the educational program and its responsiveness to parent concerns. From the standpoint of parent satisfaction, indicators are mixed; notably, the school has experienced a high rate of student turnover year-to-year.

To the Board's credit, and after a review of student assessment data, the Board's oversight has materially improved in the latter part of the charter, and indeed NHA and the Board are engaged in an ongoing and constructive dialogue with both parties focused on raising student achievement. The parties have created a turn-around plan. As noted above, however, its effectiveness at this time is mixed, and the Board has significant work to do in order to fully carry out its oversight duties over the educational program. In a similar vein, the school leadership committees are now being implemented, though they are in their infancy. So, too, the Board's fiscal oversight has improved, though work remains to be done in terms of the Board's agreements with and oversight of NHA.

Overall, then, the Institute finds that the personnel, programs and structures in place, in quantity or quality, while having improved from the level they were at in the first four years of the charter, are not sufficient in terms of quantity or quality to make it likely that the school would meet its Accountability Plan goals—or make significant and consistent progress towards them—if the school were given more time.

Accordingly, for these reasons, and based on the other findings and evidence set forth in more detail in this renewal report, the Institute recommends that the school not be granted a short- or full-term renewal. Rather, the Institute recommends that the school program that RLA is currently operating be terminated at the end of the 2004-05 school year and that renewal be granted for the purpose of completing current instruction and allowing the corporation to orderly wind up its affairs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Is the School an Academic Success?

- Finding 1: Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has for the most part not met the key academic outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics it set for itself. While the school met a number of its goals in 2002-03, these positive results were not sustained. Indeed, over the four years of the charter, the school's progress toward its goals has been limited. Rochester Leadership is far from achieving its absolute outcomes on the state's fourth and eighth grade examinations and its performance on these examinations remains well below that of the Rochester City School District.*
- Finding 2: In its fifth year, the school has established a comprehensive assessment system used to guide instructional practices. Owing to the preliminary nature of its implementation, its impact on student achievement has yet to be determined.*
- Finding 3: Under new leadership, the school has reconstituted its administrative team and provided more direct instructional support to classroom teachers. However, two key positions have yet to be filled, including an academic leader in the upper grades. Evidence obtained during the renewal visit did not indicate that teachers were receiving the type of clear and in-depth critical feedback necessary to result in changes and improvement in their instructional practices that would lead to high student achievement.*
- Finding 4: Classroom instruction did not always reflect high expectations for student learning. The implementation of many teachers' lessons was rarely engaging and challenging enough to enable students to meet high standards.*
- Finding 5: The school has created and implemented discipline policies and procedures that have resulted in a generally orderly environment. In some instances, minor infractions are tolerated that negatively impact instruction.*
- Finding 6: The mission and goals of the school are enthusiastically supported and consistently espoused by all stakeholders of the school. Collectively teachers acknowledge a cultural shift in the school and its staff with regard to curriculum implementation/instruction, assessment and use of data, professional development, evaluation, discipline and leadership.*

Based on the test data it has amassed, as well as the Institute's inspection visits, including its renewal visit, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has yet to establish a Kindergarten through eighth grade educational program "that emphasizes high academic standards with added student accountability that will lead to increased student achievement" as envisioned by its mission.

In terms of assessment data, the school's record is, at best, mixed. In 2002-03 the school met a number of its key academic goals in English Language Arts and mathematics and increased its performance on the state assessments from 2001-02. However, these positive results were not sustained in the school's fourth year (2003-04). The percentages of students who were proficient dropped substantially in both the fourth and eighth grade in English Language Arts and in the eighth grade in math; in the fourth grade in math the percentage increased modestly. Moreover, on the fourth grade ELA assessment, the percentage of students who had been at the school for three years or longer who were at proficient was lower than the percentage overall. The same was true in the eighth grade, though the percentage of students there for three years (or longer) was higher on the eighth grade math assessment.

At the end of the fourth year, the school is far from achieving its absolute outcomes on the state's fourth and eighth grade examinations. Only 9.1 percent of the eighth grade students who have been at the school for three years or longer were proficient as measured by the eighth grade ELA assessment; the figure for fourth grade is 27.9 percent. From a comparative perspective, the school has generally trailed behind the Rochester City School District which was used as the school's comparative yardstick. Taking all fourth and eighth grade ELA and math scores for the years 2002, 2003 and 2004, the district performed better than the school on nine of 12 of those assessments.

So, too, the school's results have been mixed on the value-added to student learning according to year-to-year cohort gains on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT-8). It met its goal of an annual gain once each in reading and math. Over the course of the four years of the charter, the value-added to student achievement has been slightly better than expected in comparison to the national sample of students used to develop the test. From a broader perspective, given that the cohorts only showed the requisite gain set in their Accountability Plan in one year, the cohorts were, at the end of the fourth year of the charter, on average below the 40th percentile in both subjects, which is far from grade level.

Overall, the results indicate that most Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School students are *not* being prepared for high school by virtue of the small proportion who are scoring proficient on the fourth and eighth

grade state examinations. The value-added data confirm the instructional program has only enabled students to make limited progress toward achieving a desired level of performance.

As the student academic performance data are mixed, so, too, are the qualitative indicators that the Institute uses to assess the strength of a school at the time of its renewal visit.

Beginning in its second year, but increasing in pace in the current school year, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has made changes in its educational program and organizational structure to address poor student academic performance. In its second year, the school added a behavior specialist to its staff to assist teachers in addressing student behaviors that interfered with instruction. In its third year, working through its management company, the school hired a reading specialist and instituted remediation through the use of Corrective Reading and Reading Mastery. Other changes included: the hiring of paraprofessionals to provide support in reading, language arts and mathematics; providing professional development in the Collins Writing program; and the hiring of science and social studies specialists. In its fourth year, the school made a major change by hiring a new Principal and restructuring administratively to provide additional instructional support for classroom teachers. The additional administrators began in the school's fifth year.

As reflected above, the school's program at the time of the renewal visit had been energized and improved in significant respects. In addition, while the school had struggled in the early years of the charter to establish a level of student order and discipline that would support student learning, especially in the middle school grades (seventh and eighth), at the time of the renewal visit, significant improvement was noted in this area, especially in the middle school grades.

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School also sought to improve its teaching so that student learning would improve. In its fifth year, the school has tried to remake itself with a new Principal and two instructional administrators. The school has 14 new teachers and a professional development plan that emphasizes the use of student performance data to guide instruction. Based on interviews with parents, teachers and administrators, RLA has instituted a new culture of high expectations in terms of academic performance and behavior and all stakeholders are participants.

However, while the changes to the academic program have been significant, significant problems and shortcomings remain. While, as noted above, discipline has improved, inspectors at the renewal visit found that minor infractions were tolerated in some classrooms and that those

infractions sometimes affected the quality of instruction. More importantly however, the renewal team still found that the quality of instruction overall was not high and, even more significantly, that the personnel in the fifth year were not yet in place that would quickly improve the quality of instruction, a fact the school has acknowledged and is now trying to correct. Thus, while the school has in place a good assessment system that identifies with precision the strengths and weaknesses of individual students, it does not have the personnel and systems in place that result in changes in instruction—and the requisite level of high-quality instruction—that are necessary for sustained growth in academic achievement. Put another way, all teachers were not receiving the day-to-day, high-quality direction and coaching instrumental to improving student learning and achievement. Following directly from that, observations of classrooms indicated that students were often not engaged and challenged at the levels necessary for them to meet high standards. Many students often “opted out” of instruction in quiet ways, showing the connection between high-quality instruction and student interest in that instruction.

2. Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

- Finding 1: Having determined to rely on its management company, the Board in the early years of the charter did not identify and appreciate the weaknesses and serious deficiencies in the school’s academic program. The Board did not provide sufficient oversight and evaluation of the management company’s performance though improvements in the fifth year are evident.*
- Finding 2: Late in the fourth year of the charter the Board took more systemic action to improve the school’s academic program. In the fifth year the Board has significantly improved its oversight of the academic program though not all systems are fully in place*
- Finding 3: Over the course of the school’s charter, the Board has generally provided effective operational and fiscal oversight.*
- Finding 4: Several key design elements of the school’s charter were either not implemented or not implemented effectively during the first four years of the charter; significant improvements in implementation is evident in the fifth year.*
- Finding 5: Based on evidence to date and a review of relevant policies and procedures, other internal controls, Board minutes and interviews, the school is deficient with respect to certain elements of charter compliance including notification regarding changes in enrollment, Board members, Principals and by-laws, Freedom of Information Law compliance, and obtaining proper background checks on prospective employees prior to*

hiring. Otherwise, the school appears to have been, and presently appears to be, generally in compliance with the Charter Schools Act, applicable provisions of the New York Education Law and other New York law, applicable federal law (e.g., I.D.E.A., F.E.R.P.A.), and its by-laws.

In the early years of the charter, the Board, having contracted with its management company, National Heritage Academies (NHA) for comprehensive management, oversight and evaluation of the educational program, generally deferred to NHA in that regard. During those years, the Board concentrated its attention on facility development and other operational issues affecting a start-up school. Moreover, as NHA has subsequently appreciated, the data and systems it was using to evaluate the school's performance (as well as the performance of the administrative team) were seriously deficient and did not provide an accurate picture to it or to the Board of Trustees. As such, neither the management company nor the Board of Trustees sufficiently appreciated the difficulties that the school was having in instituting a high performing academic program.

To its credit, the Board of Trustees, though only in the latter years of the charter, began to push for additional data and systems by which to evaluate the school; and the Board, itself, was largely responsible for ensuring that such data was provided to it, though its failure to act more quickly and to allow the issue to languish must be noted.

As a result of its efforts, the Board, during the fourth year, began to understand that the school was in fact not succeeding in creating a high-quality and effective educational program for its students. Indeed, as noted elsewhere, during that fourth year, the school's performance on state assessments declined from its performance in the previous year.

At the end of the fourth year and into the fifth year, the Board's oversight of the educational program has much improved. The Board has taken important initiatives, including working with NHA and the administrative team to craft a turn-around plan. However, as noted elsewhere, that plan is not fully in place. In particular, permanent key personnel have yet to be hired and the school has yet to build the administrative team that can provide the day-to-day professional development of the teaching staff, many who are new to the school.

Consistent with the above, the school also failed to implement key design elements of its original charter application during the first four years of the charter. Of particular note, the NHA model for school governance called for the creation of six committees staffed variously by parents, teachers and administrators. The work of those committees was to be coordinated by the "School Leadership Team" which would be a conduit for reporting to the Board. Those committees were not established in any meaningful

way during the first four years of the charter. In the fifth year of the charter, the school administrative team and the Board (as well as NHA) have worked to make those committees a reality and stakeholders report that implementation is proceeding.

In terms of more mundane but important operation issues affecting the school, including facility, the Board has been effective and provided appropriate oversight over the management company. So, too, the Board and the administrative team (as well as NHA), with certain exceptions, has generally put in place and followed appropriate procedures regarding Board governance and the school has been in substantial compliance with its charter and legal obligations.

3. Is the School Fiscally Sound?

Finding 1: The Board's oversight of the financial operations of the school was moderately effective.

Finding 2: Throughout the life of its charter, the school generally met its financial reporting requirements and maintained appropriate internal controls.

Finding 3: The school's financial condition is to a large extent dependent on the financial viability of its management partner and a continuance of the relationship.

Financial oversight by the Board has been moderately effective. The Board's oversight procedures have included a review of financial reports, approval of budgets and revisions, approval of the audit contract and authorization of the use of Board funds. The Board's oversight of its agreement with its management partner has not always been forceful and has resulted missed opportunities regarding furthering the school's goals.

The school has complied with financial reporting requirements and submitted annual financial statement audit reports with unqualified opinions indicating that the school's financial statements fairly represent its financial position. Reports have been prepared and the school has followed generally accepted accounting principles. The school has established and maintained appropriate internal controls.

From a purely financial perspective, the school is a marginally viable entity. The nature of the school's contract with its management company makes it difficult for the school to accumulate assets. Except for an allowance for Board funds, NHA retains all revenue received as compensation for the variety of educational and management services provided. As a result, the school has no capital assets and unrestricted net assets of only \$39,480. Under a continuation of the management company

operational model, the school would not need a significant accumulation of cash reserves. However, should it move to a different model, such as operating without a management company, it is unlikely the school could make that transition without a substantial influx of capital.

4. What Are the School’s Plans for the Renewal Period and Are They Reasonable, Feasible and Achievable?

Finding 1: If the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School’s charter is renewed, the school plans to increase enrollment by 32 students and remain as a Kindergarten through eighth grade program. Whether the plan is reasonable, feasible and achievable is questionable.

Finding 2: RLA’s Board of Trustees anticipates that the Board will continue using its current structure. The plans in this area are reasonable, feasible and achievable.

Finding 3: The school has provided a reasonable and appropriate five-year fiscal plan for the term of a future charter.

If the charter for RLA is renewed, the school intends to continue as a Kindergarten through eighth grade school with a curriculum based on the New York State Standards and core curriculum. Student enrollment would reach its maximum of 680 students in the first year of the renewed charter. The school’s administrative structure would include a Principal, an instructional leader and three deans to provide supervision and guidance in the area of curriculum, instruction and assessment. The school would also have a Director of Student Excellence to primarily oversee student behavior and other programs.

At the time of the renewal visit, the school had hired two instructional leaders, in addition to the Principal. However, in order for the school’s teaching staff to receive the type of support needed to improve instruction, classroom teachers require detailed, classroom-based instructional guidance. It was not evident that both instructional leaders possessed the capacity to provide sufficient in-depth support to teachers in their daily instruction, or their review of student written materials.

As indicated above in the discussion regarding the academic success of the school, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has struggled to establish an environment that supports learning, especially in the middle school grades (seventh and eighth). The school’s inability to establish and maintain a strong academic environment in the middle school grades has contributed to the poor performance of those students on the state assessments at both the fourth and eighth grades. Although student performance has not been stellar on the state fourth grade assessments, student performance on the eighth grade assessments during the initial

charter period has generally been worse. In addition, based on observations and interviews during the school's renewal visit, a strong case cannot be made that, even with the systemic changes instituted at the school, the middle school program is positioned to be sufficiently effective to change the pattern.

At the time of the renewal visit, RLA's Board of Trustees had developed a more direct link to its management company's base office in Michigan, no longer needing to go through a regional Director. The management company had expressed its commitment to providing the fiscal and corporate resources necessary to ensure that student performance significantly improves. The Board is committed to ensuring that the school has the necessary leadership, curriculum, fiscal and other resources necessary for students to attain the school's and state's goals. To address the challenge, the Board of Trustees has already instituted specific practices, such as closely monitoring the performance of students and staff, including classroom visits.

The school's fiscal plan is reasonable and appropriate given the management company model under which it intends to continue to operate. There are no new facility issues, as the school intends to remain at its current location. Fiscally, the school plans to continue to contract with NHA to provide all aspects of the education program. The major challenge faced by the school would be achieving its planned enrollment goals.

RENEWAL BENCHMARKS

Evidence Category	Benchmarks	
Renewal Question 1 Is the School an Academic Success?		
Benchmark 1A Academic Attainment & Improvement	1A.1.1	Absolute Measures (New York State Assessments): The school meets or has made meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the outcome measures contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of the school’s charter.
	1A.1.2	Comparative Measures: The school meets or has made meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the outcome measures contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of the school’s charter.
	1A.1.3	Value Added Measures: The school meets or has made meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the outcome measures contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of the school’s charter.
	1A.1.4	NCLB Measure: The school has made adequate yearly progress as required by NCLB.
	1A.1.5	Unique Academic Measures: The school meets or has made meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the outcome measures contained in its Accountability Plan.

Academic Attainment & Improvement

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has for the most part not met the key academic outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics it set for itself. While the school met a number of its goals in 2002-03, these positive results were not sustained. Indeed, over the four years of the charter, the school’s progress toward its goals has been limited. Rochester Leadership Academy is far from achieving its absolute outcomes on the state’s fourth and eighth grade examinations and its performance on these examinations remains well below that of the Rochester City School District, which is itself quite low.

In its absolute level of performance on the fourth grade state examinations, RLA's results have shown modest change over the course of the four years. ELA results in the fourth year are slightly better than those in the first year. In math, gains were greater, but in both subjects, RLA remains far from the achievement goals it had established. On the eighth grade state examinations, the overall pattern is similar. The school showed slight gains, but remained far below its Accountability Plan performance standard. Discounting the first year of the charter in which only eight students took the exams, the school's level of performance during the subsequent three years improved, but the change occurred from an exceedingly low starting point. The school's Accountability Plan calls for examining the performance of students who have been in the school for three or more years. The results show that students generally did *not* perform better if they were in the school longer.

In its comparative level of performance on the fourth- and eighth-grade state examinations, RLA has mostly under-performed the Rochester City School District. With the exception of the eighth grade ELA examinations in 2002-03 and 2003-04 and the eighth grade math examination in 2003-04, the school has scored below the district, which again has itself performed at a low level.

Results have been mixed on the value-added to student learning according to year-to-year cohort gains on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT-8). The school met its goal of an annual gain once each in reading and math. Over the course of the four years of the charter, the value added to student achievement has been slightly better than expected in comparison to the national sample of students used to develop the test. Comparing results from fall 2000 to spring 2004 for the same students, performance was somewhat better in math and virtually the same in reading. Nevertheless, these relatively varied results still leave the school at a low level of performance when put in a larger context. From a broader perspective, given that the cohorts only showed the requisite gain set in their Accountability Plan in one year, the cohorts were at the end of the fourth year of the charter on average below the 40th percentile in both subjects, which is far from grade level.

The State Education Department has deemed RLA to be a *Charter School in Good Standing*, which indicates that the school has not failed to make adequate yearly progress for two successive years under the NCLB requirements. RLA had unique outcome measures in its Accountability Plan, but did not report the results in the renewal application.

Overall, the results indicate that most RLA students are *not* being prepared for high school by virtue of the small proportion who is scoring proficient on the fourth and eighth grade state examinations. The value-added data confirm the instructional program has only enabled students to make limited progress toward achieving a desired level of performance.

Accountability Plan Outcome Measures

In its Accountability Plan, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School set outcome measures to demonstrate its academic success in the key subjects of English Language Arts and mathematics, as well as science and social studies.¹² The outcome measures include the following three required types: 1) the absolute level of student performance on state examinations; 2) the comparative level of student performance on state

¹² In its renewal application, the school changed outcome measures from how they were stated in the Accountability Plan. These changes included the length of time students would be enrolled before being held accountable for their performance, and the criterion of success for the value-added outcome measures.

examinations; and 3) the value-added to student learning according to year-to-year comparisons of student cohort performance on a school-selected standardized test. The following tables indicate the specific outcomes RLA set for itself accompanied by its annual results.¹³

In addition to being held to these accountability measures, RLA is expected, under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to make adequate yearly progress toward enabling all students to score at the proficient level on the state ELA and math examinations. In holding charter schools to the same standards as other public schools, the state issues a school accountability report. RLA's accountability status in the most recent report is indicated below.

Besides the three required outcome measures and the NCLB outcome measure, the school may also have included additional self-selected academic outcome measures as part of its Accountability Plan. These various outcome measures constitute the renewal benchmarks for academic attainment and improvement.

Absolute Level of Performance on State Examinations

Accountability Plan		Results				
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grade	School Year			
			2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
ELA	75 percent of students who have been enrolled at RLA for three or more years will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State English Language Arts Assessment (ELA) administered to 4 th and 8 th grade students each year.	4	19.6% ²	27.3% ²	31.0%	24.1%
		8	12.5% ^{1,2}	4.2% ²	31.3%	9.1%
Math	75 percent of students who have been enrolled at RLA for three or more years will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State Math Assessment administered to 4 th and 8 th grade students each year.	4	27.3% ²	35.0% ²	32.1%	43.5%
		8	33.3% ^{1,2}	4.3% ²	25.0%	20.0%
Science	75 percent of students who have been enrolled at RLA for three or more years will perform at or above the proficiency level as described by New York State on the New York State Science Assessments administered to 4 th and 8 th grade students each year. ³	4	22% ²	44% ²	29% ²	58.3% ²
		8	N/A	36% ²	33% ²	52.9% ²
Social Studies	75 percent of students who have been enrolled at RLA for three or more years will perform at or above the proficiency level as described by New York State on the New York State Social Studies Assessments administered to 5 th and 8 th grade students each year	5	N/A	63.9% ²	40% ²	52.3% ²
		8	N/A	27.2% ²	28% ²	0.0%

Note: The absolute measure in the renewal application only holds accountable students who have been enrolled for *five* years; RLA's Accountability Plan in fact includes students who have been enrolled for *three or more years*.

¹ Eight students tested

² Results are for all tested students irrespective of time enrolled.

³ Results on the science exam in 2000-01 to 2002-03 represent the proportion of students answering a pre-determined number of questions correctly (i.e., the state designated level).

¹³ Please note: as 2000-01 was the school's first year of operation, there are no value-added cohort results for that year. RLA does not provide comparative performance data in science and social studies, as called for in its Accountability Plan. It also does not report on the unique measures included in the Accountability Plan.

Comparative Level of Performance on State Examinations

Accountability Plan		Results					
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grade	Comparison	School Year			
				2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
ELA	A greater percent of students in grades 4 and 8 will score at or above the levels of proficiency in Language Arts than will students in the Rochester City School District. ¹	4	RLA Rochester SD	95 127	107 136	130 131	115 131
		8	RLA Rochester SD	88 ² 102	88 105	104 95	110 101
Math	A greater percent of students in grades 4 and 8 will score at or above the levels of proficiency in Math than will students in the Rochester City School District ¹	4	RLA Rochester SD	102 133	120 132	121 148	134 158
		8	RLA Rochester SD	89 ² 53	39 59	85 61	72 80
Science	A greater percent of students in grades 4 and 8 will score at or above the levels of proficiency in Science than will students in the Rochester City School District	4	RLA Rochester SD	22% 50%	44% 54%	29% 51%	58.3% 66.7%
		8	RLA Rochester SD	N/A 39%	36% 46%	33% 46%	52.9% 32.7%
Social Studies	A greater percent of students in grades 4 and 8 will score at or above the levels of proficiency in Social Studies than will students in the Rochester City School District	5	RLA Rochester SD	N/A 84%	63.9% 51%	40% 61%	52.3% 61%
		8	RLA Rochester SD	N/A 35%	27.2% 19%	28% 19%	0.0% 16%

Note: The renewal application does not report comparative data in science and social studies.
¹ Results for RLA and the Rochester City School District reported as the School Performance Index.
² Eight students tested.

Value-Added to Student Learning According to Spring-to-Spring Cohort Gains

Accountability Plan		Results				
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grades	School Year			
			2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Reading	Cohort students will demonstrate improvement in Total Reading Achievement as determined by an average increase of 3.0 NCEs on the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8.	All	N/A	3.1	(-0.5)	2.1
Math	Cohort students will demonstrate improvement in Total Math Achievement as determined by an average increase of 3.0 NCE on the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8.	All	N/A	(-15.2)	19.6	1.6

Adequate Yearly Progress as Required by NCLB

The State Education Department's School Accountability Report states RLA's 2003-04 School Accountability Status: *Charter School in Good Standing*, which indicates that the school has not failed to make adequate yearly progress for two successive years.

Student Achievement According to Unique Academic Measures

Subject	Accountability Plan Outcome Measure	Grades	Results			
			2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Writing	75 percent of the students in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7 will exhibit proficiency in Language Arts by writing an essay that will be scored, using a rubric developed by the classroom teachers and administration of RLA, to evaluate proficiency in writing.	3, 5, 6, and 7	The school did indeed have students write essays in the first three years of operation, and those essays were scored. However, the scoring indicated that a significant percentage of students were attaining a 2 or 3 on the school's internal writing assessment. However, the instrument was not aligned with New York State standards and was discontinued as an evaluative tool.			
Science	Cohort students will demonstrate improvement in Science Achievement as determined by an average increase of 3.0 NCE on the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8.	1 - 8	The renewal application does not report results of the MAT-8 science test.			
Social Studies	Cohort students will demonstrate improvement in Social Studies Achievement as determined by an average increase of 3.0 NCE on the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8.	1 - 8	The renewal application does not report results of the MAT-8 social studies test.			

<p>Benchmark 1B</p> <p>Use of Assessment Data</p>	<p>1B</p> <p>The school effectively and systematically uses assessment and evaluation data to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</p> <p>A school that fully meets this benchmark will have put in place during the life of the charter a system for the effective use of assessment data. Such a system would include at least the following elements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the collection and analysis of student performance data, including data gathered from an analysis of student work pursuant to a set of well-defined and well-aligned standards; ● the use of assessment instruments and data to determine accurately whether State performance standards and other academic goals are being achieved; ● the use of assessment data to make changes and improvements, where the data indicates a need, to curriculum and instruction; ● the regular communication between teachers and administrators of assessment results and a common understanding between and among teachers and administrators of the meaning and consequences of those results; and ● the regular communication to parents of assessment data to assist them in their efforts to improve student learning and achievement. <p>More generally, a school should be able to demonstrate a system where performance standards, instruction, required student work and assessments are integrated and have led to increased student knowledge and skills.</p>
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Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has collected student performance data over the course of its initial charter period, but has not demonstrated the ability to analyze and use that data to inform instruction in a way that has resulted in increased student achievement. In the first three years of the school’s charter, both student performance on the state assessments and on the school’s value-added assessment, the MAT-8, indicated that students were not learning at the level needed to achieve school goals contained in the school’s Accountability Plan or to meet state standards. In response to poor student performance and student behavior issues, the school began to make changes in its educational program and organizational structure during the school’s second year.

Other than the New York State assessments, the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has used the Metropolitan Achievement Test 8 (MAT-8) as its value-added assessment since the school opened in 2000. The MAT-8 was administered annually, with results often taking weeks to obtain. In the school’s fifth year, it has a clearly defined and systemic assessment system. The school, through its management company, has instituted the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) with its Rausch Unit Scale or RIT scores as the primary means of assessing student progress. The MAP replaces the MAT-8, and is computerized to require less scoring and reporting time. In addition, the MAP is considered more diagnostic by both administrators and teachers.

As of the 2004-05 school year, the MAP assessments will be administered quarterly; the school conducted the second administration in late December after the renewal visit. Printouts are produced for use by teachers of individual student scores and total class scores in reading, mathematics and language arts. The scores are used to determine the appropriate levels of instruction; in ELA, the school created three levels of instruction (novice, basic and proficient) to meet student needs as determined by test results. Teachers may consult AcademyLink on National Heritage Academies' (NHA's) website to use the learning continuum and to see sample lesson plans with suggestions for lesson enhancement for students falling within discrete performance levels.

At the primary level, Kindergarten and first grades, teachers administer the STAR Early Literacy assessment in reading, which is also computerized. Student performance on the STAR assessment is used to determine the appropriate reading level for each student: emergent, probable or transitional. The literature provided to teachers helps guide them in determining appropriate student groups for purposes of instruction. The assessment is administered three times per year, and students can score out or above its scale. Once a student scores out, s/he is then ready to be assessed using the MAP. Typically, this occurs during a student's second grade school year.

Based on classroom observations and teacher interviews during the renewal visit, the use of classroom assessment by teachers is mixed. For those teachers who do use it strategically in their classrooms to determine student understanding of new information, some of the methods used include: problem solving with a quick teacher check in mathematics; periodic quizzes or mini-quizzes in science; homework; Collins writing; class participation and/or student role-playing with the teacher to demonstrate understanding. However, evidence indicated that many teachers did not possess the necessary expertise to incorporate such assessments in their daily instructional practices.

In addition, the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence was adopted school-wide during the 2003-04 school year, as part of NHA's Operation Breakthrough, to involve students in setting non-academic goals, in areas such as personal development and attendance, and gauging their growth. At the time of the renewal visit, the Baldrige system was not fully implemented by all teachers in all classrooms. Although all classrooms had the Baldrige chart on the wall and binders for each student, upon inspection, many binders included sections that were either completely empty, or contained incomplete graphs or other student work.

The renewal application made reference to a writing rubric being used by the school. However, little evidence was found that a single writing rubric was in use by classroom teachers. At the middle school level, student folders included writing rubrics. It was unclear, however, how or when those rubrics were used by students or teachers. During classroom observations or in document reviews, neither teachers nor students made any references to the rubric. Teacher feedback on certain essays had numbers assigned to them (one through three), but specific details about how or why the teacher awarded the number was not referenced or explicitly stated.

Since the 2004-05 school year is the initial year for instituting the full assessment system, evidence of its effective implementation was not yet available at the time of the renewal visit. However, based on teacher and administrative interviews and observations, teachers were aware of the system and spoke with knowledge about the documents and other materials provided to assist in interpreting the data provided by the MAP and understanding how to use that data to change instruction. Limited evidence of teacher effectiveness in interpretation of student performance data and ability to change instruction as a result of student performance was available.

Although in previous years the school had a mixed record of communicating with staff and parents about student performance data, RLA began the current school year by using a portion of its August professional development to share and discuss its student performance data. The administrators and staff have begun to use student performance data as a constant item for grade level meetings, faculty meetings and weekly meetings with the Principal, Director of Student Excellence (DSE) and/or teacher development coordinator (TDC). In previous years, based on interviews with parents, parents were not completely informed about the level of student performance. At the beginning of this school year, parents received reports that explained the STAR literacy and the MAP/RIT assessments. The documents also provided ideas for helping children improve their academic performance. Student performance and assessment information was also shared with parents during the parent conferences held in October.

<p>Benchmark 1C</p> <p>Curriculum</p>	<p>1C</p> <p>The school has a clearly defined quality curriculum that prepares students to meet State performance standards.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has defined with precision the essential knowledge and skills that all students are expected to achieve (and that are aligned with the relevant State standards) and makes them a priority within the curriculum. Course offerings and outlines reflect those priorities. The curriculum as implemented is organized, cohesive, and seamless from grade to grade.</p>
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Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School’s management company, the National Heritage Academies, is responsible for providing a curriculum, aligned with New York State standards, as part of its services. The RLA curriculum includes Saxon Math, the Open Court English Language Arts program and Collins Writing. The Open Court program includes a phonics-based reading program called *Collection of Young Scholars* and *Daily Oral Language* exercises for English grammar, punctuation and spelling. Science and social studies are based on New York State standards and core curriculum and follow the Hirsch Core Knowledge sequence. The school’s curriculum is completed by the inclusion of music, art, library time, physical education or gym, and a distinct moral focus or character education component.

As indicated previously, in the first three years of the school’s charter, both student performance on the state assessments and on the school’s value-added assessment, the MAT-8, indicated that students were not learning at the level needed to achieve school goals contained in the school’s Accountability Plan or to meet state standards. In response to poor student performance, the school began to make changes in its educational program and organizational structure during the school’s second year.

One of the changes included the school adopting the Corrective Reading program for fourth through eighth grades for students needing remediation; it was implemented in the school’s third year, 2002-03. A reading specialist was hired and made responsible for implementation of the Corrective Reading program. In Kindergarten through third grades, Reading Mastery was used for remediation. Also in the school’s third year, small group instruction in reading skills was provided for students in groups of eight or fewer, and the school instituted an intensive writing program.

In addition to textbooks, teachers at RLA have had, and continue to have, access to National Heritage Academies’ online resources through AcademyLink. NHA online resources include a variety of curricular supports, from curriculum guides and scope and sequence documents to textbook references and alignment with state standards information. Teachers felt the school’s curriculum was much clearer as the school arrives at the point of renewal. Teachers also articulated their appreciation that the MAP allows them to pinpoint areas of student weakness, and to therefore more clearly focus instruction although they had not yet had much experience doing so.

In its fifth year, the focus of the school’s program is on core academic subjects: reading/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The school’s schedule has been modified to provide daily morning extended blocks of time for ELA and mathematics throughout the school. All teachers, *i.e.* art, gym, speech, special education, *etc.*, are assigned to classrooms to support the classroom teacher in teaching ELA and mathematics. The classroom teachers determine how best to use the assistance provided by other staff members.

<p>Benchmark 1D</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>	<p>1D.1</p> <p>Strong instructional leadership girds the school’s work in improving student learning and achievement.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has instructional leadership that has demonstrated the capacity to lead the comprehensive implementation of the school’s curriculum and has facilitated the alignment of classroom instruction, learning activities, instructional resources, support, and assessments. Instructional leaders at the school ensure that teacher planning time, lesson development, and internal assessment systems lead to the successful attainment of the school’s mission and academic goals.</p>
	<p>1D.2</p> <p>Quality instruction is evident throughout the school fostering an academic learning environment and actively supporting the academic achievement of children.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark is one in which classroom practice reflects competent teaching and instructional strategies that engage students. The academic learning environment at the school is one in which effective teaching and learning are valued and supported; there is a clear and strong focus on achievement goals, and student and staff accomplishments are recognized.</p>
	<p>1D.3</p> <p>The school has strategies in place to identify and meet the needs of students at risk of academic failure, students not making reasonable progress towards achieving school goals, and students who are English Language Learners.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has implemented special programs and provides the necessary resources to help students who are struggling academically to meet school goals. The programs are demonstrably effective in helping students meet goals.</p>

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has new leadership in its Principal. The hiring of this Principal during the spring of 2004 marked the beginning of significant changes in the school’s educational program and organizational structure. The new Principal has had to terminate the employment of teachers whose performance was inadequate or unacceptable. In so doing, it also required the school to hire fourteen new teachers, including all teachers at the middle school level. The Principal has had to garner the support of a fledging parent group, disgruntled instructional and administrative staff, as well as the school’s management company and Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees charged the Principal with significantly improving student performance, refocusing teachers on the school’s commitment to students, and strengthening parent involvement in the daily affairs of the school.

To meet these challenges, the Principal led in the development of a “Performance Improvement Initiative” that focused on the three areas identified by the Board noted above. As part of the “Performance Improvement Initiative,” the school hired two consultants to assess the educational program. The report from the consultants

emphasized the need for the school to increase its focus on ELA and to restructure the daily schedule around core academic subjects. In June of 2003, in an effort to begin to turn student performance around, the Board adopted a "School-Wide Plan." The new Principal used that plan as a foundation for developing a "28-Point Action Plan" to accelerate the process. It should be noted, however, that the school has a variety of "plans," *i.e.* the "28-Point Action Plan," the school improvement plan, and the school-wide plan(s). The existence of multiple plans could result in some confusion regarding the school's true top priorities. Some thought might be given to consolidating the plans to create a single, clear organizational strategy for improving student performance.

In addition to a new Principal, the Board also established and filled positions for a Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) and Director of Student Excellence (DSE) to provide more academic support to instructional staff. The TDC and the DSE provide direct support to classroom teachers by coaching, modeling lessons, and responding to curricular questions and concerns. The TDC works with teachers of students in Kindergarten through third grades. The Principal works with teachers of students in fourth and sixth grades, and the DSE works with teachers of students in fifth, seventh and eighth grades. This arrangement allows the Principal the opportunity to have some direct method of expressing the significance of the work in the classroom, although teachers in reality seek either the TDC or the DSE for actual instructional advice.

The Principal does, however, meet weekly with fourth and eighth grade teachers, and the DSE collects lesson plans and assists teachers with appropriate pacing of instruction. The weekly meetings with fourth and eighth grade teachers have been used to address issues, such as supplies, schedules, behavior, and assessment data. As reported by teachers, the Principal, as well as the TDC and DSE, are frequently found observing classes. Teachers indicated that they were "always" in their classrooms, at least once per week, which is a major change for the teaching staff. Teachers receive immediate feedback regarding these observations on a short form which they considered "helpful," but limited with regard to providing detailed instructional feedback.

At the time of the renewal visit, all teachers in the school had had their first [of two] formal evaluations for the year. The Principal, in consultation with the TDC and/or DSE, had determined which teachers were satisfactory and which needed to make significant improvement. For the teachers in need of improvement, a teacher development plan had been created.

In its fifth year, the school has made dramatic changes in the daily schedule to devote a significant block of time each morning to instruction in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. The use of the morning block of time for this purpose is consistent throughout the school in grades Kindergarten through eight. It is the hope of the school that this concentrated focus will result in significantly improving student learning and academic performance on the state assessments. Instruction during the morning ELA and mathematics period is provided to students based on the results of assessments administered in September using the Northwestern Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP).

The quality of classroom instruction varied across and within grades. While teachers appeared to more consistently use and model reading comprehension strategies during read-aloud times, teachers often synthesized, analyzed or applied information *for* students. As a result, teachers often missed opportunities to ask students to synthesize, analyze or apply information in new ways. Even outside of instruction in Corrective Reading/Direct Instruction, instruction relied heavily on textbooks and worksheets. Little evidence existed to support the notion of students learning to become proficient at comprehension, analysis and thinking skills, without the help of their teachers. Students

in the upper grades were rarely asked to take notes in class, and teachers provided little written feedback on student work.

Rochester Leadership Academy has instituted clear strategies to identify and meet the needs of students at risk of academic failure and those not making reasonable progress toward achieving the school's goals. The school employs several staff members to provide the necessary services and programs to address a variety of student academic and emotional needs. The school's staff includes three full-time, appropriately certified special education teachers, a reading specialist, a social worker/counselor and a speech pathologist. In addition to these individuals, the school's Principal is certified in special education, as is the school's Director of Student Excellence. Related services, such as occupational and physical therapy are provided for students through the Rochester City School District.

At the time of the renewal visit, Rochester Leadership Academy's student population included 36 students with disabilities, as indicated by their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The school has designated the school's social worker as the special education "facilitator" to ensure that the services and programs required, per the students' IEPs, are appropriately provided and that all necessary documentation is complete and processes are followed to be in compliance with federal laws and regulations governing special education. Based on a random sample of IEPs, student annual and triennial reviews were scheduled and held, and students' IEPs were current. The school uses a "push-in" model to provide special education services to the greatest extent possible. However, the school also uses its resource room for students requiring that level of service.

At the time of the renewal visit, the school did not have any students who were English language learners. The school does, however, have a process for identifying and providing services to such students.

In addition to these student populations, classroom teachers have access to support in identifying and addressing student needs through the school's Child Study Team. The team is comprised of the reading specialist, a special education teacher, the speech pathologist, and a regular education teacher. The team is facilitated by the school's social worker. Classroom teachers were aware of the Child Study Team, and knowledgeable regarding the process for accessing the team's assistance.

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School provides additional support to students in preparation for the fourth and eighth grade state assessment through a tutorial program. The program meets on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after school and once a month on Saturday morning. Students are eligible for this program, which is coordinated by the lead fourth-grade teacher, based upon their performance on an ELA practice test.

<p>Benchmark 1E</p> <p>Teaching Staff</p>	<p>1E</p> <p>The school’s instructional staff is qualified to implement the school as envisioned in the charter. Teachers are competent in their assigned content area and generally use instructional practices that lead to student academic success.</p> <p>A school that meets this benchmark will be able to demonstrate that teachers are competent in their assigned content area and generally use instructional practices that lead to student academic success. (While handled under the benchmark for legal and charter compliance, it is important to note that a school must also be able to demonstrate that teachers are certified or otherwise qualified under both federal and state law with few exceptions. In instances where the school has not been in compliance with this requirement of law, the school should be able to show that it has taken swift and appropriate remedial measures.)</p>
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The instructional staff of Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School appear to be appropriately certified according to New State Education Law. Although Charter Schools Institute is not ultimately responsible for ensuring legal and regulatory compliance regarding teacher certification, Institute staff did obtain certification information from the school as part of its renewal process. In addition, Institute staff reviewed the certification documents on file at the school.

Based on classroom observations and teacher interviews, most teachers at the school possess basic subject matter competence. As in any school, however, instructional staff demonstrated a range of pedagogical skills and abilities. It was not evident whether teachers’ pedagogical skills were sufficient to enable students to meet the high academic expectations of the school. Professional development provided prior to the opening of school in September included a significant focus on classroom procedures, structures and management, including the BlackBoard Configuration (“the BBC”). It was clear that the school had adopted the use of the BBC, along with teacher protocols and procedures. All classroom white Boards reflected the key components, *i.e.* “Do Now,” “Homework,” “Agenda” and “Objectives,” and classrooms conspicuously posted a variety of rules from the “Procedures” manual.

<p>Benchmark 1F</p> <p>Student Order & Discipline</p>	<p>1F</p> <p>The school has implemented discipline policies and procedures that promote learning for all students.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has documented discipline policies and procedures (for regular and special education students) and has consistently enforced those policies. As implemented and enforced, the discipline policy will have promoted calm, safe classrooms where students are required to (and not distracted from) participating fully in all learning activities. Students at a school meeting this benchmark will also generally report a reasonable sense of security. A school will also be able to provide appropriate records regarding expulsions and suspensions.</p>
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In the school's earlier years, it struggled to establish a level of student order and discipline that would support student learning, especially in the upper grades. In the school's second year, a behavior specialist was added to the staff, along with additional paraprofessionals and a special education coordinator, to assist teachers in addressing student behaviors that interfered with instruction. According to the school's renewal application, most RLA stakeholders agree that the school now has a positive learning environment; however opinions varied depending upon the stakeholder group queried. Parents generally expressed high satisfaction in the areas of school atmosphere, school safety, and classroom atmosphere on the parent surveys over the life of the charter.

The school's renewal application goes on to say that the accountability measure for a positive learning environment as determined by 90 percent of students feeling safe in school by the end of 2002-03 was met. However, the 2002-03 Student Opinion Survey also found that, of the 78 percent of students responding, only 65 percent were happy with RLA. The renewal application then refers to the Institute's March 2003 visit, where Institute visitors found older students shared dissatisfaction with the school, primarily because of classroom disorder.

One accountability measure states that incidences of student fighting and disruptive behavior that warrant the attention of the Principal will average less than five per month. This measure has not been met. The school has reduced the average number of monthly incidents from 66.2 to 13.7 per month. As a result, the school instituted two changes in 2003-04: (1) training in "A Framework for Understanding Poverty" and "Strategies for Management Behavior," and (2) support of a full-time social worker and student support person. The renewal application further states that Goal 3 of the 2004-07 School-Wide Plan provides additional strategies for the maintenance of a safe and comfortable school climate.

In its fifth year, it was evident that student behavior had significantly improved in the upper grades. One underlying reason for the change in behavior at the upper grades is that students do not change classrooms throughout the day; seventh and eighth grade teachers travel from room to room. Although this practice clearly reduces the opportunities for students to misbehave, it also has created certain restrictions for teachers in regard to creating inviting classrooms or establishing a degree of classroom ownership and permanency. In addition, based on observations, seventh and eighth grade students remaining in the same classroom all day, with the exception of specials such as physical education, did not exemplify high levels of student engagement in learning.

Under the school's new leadership and structure, the school has an In-School Suspension (ISS) room that provides a place for teachers to send students whose behavior(s) interferes with instruction and other students' learning, either briefly or for extended periods of time. Since the school instituted a "Zero Tolerance" policy during its fifth year, the ISS room appeared to be constantly in use by students from multiple grades; seventh and eighth graders were most consistently and highly represented amongst the room's clientele. RLA has documented discipline policies and procedures and keeps appropriate records regarding expulsions and suspensions. The consistent implementation of the school's discipline policy has resulted in calmer, safer classrooms where most students feel secure taking risks to promote their learning.

Based on interviews and observations, students, teachers and students were aware of the school's new "Zero Tolerance" Policy. All teachers follow the policy, and implement it appropriately depending on student grade level. Some variation occurs at the classroom level to allow teachers to establish classroom interventions that are age appropriate, such as using red, yellow and green colored cards to indicate appropriate/inappropriate behavior at the primary grade level or simply listing behaviors and the consequences at the middle school level. Teachers and parents were clear that once student behavior escalated and classroom interventions were not effective, students are sent to the ISS room and parents are contacted. Some confusion existed however among teachers and the administrators regarding the specific sequence of escalating consequences for students.

As has historically been the case since the second year of the school, students at the upper grades, especially the middle school grades, continue to "opt out" of instruction by lowering their heads, chatting quietly with friends, or reading non-academic material rather than disrupting a lesson. Evidence obtained during the renewal visit indicated students, especially in the upper grades, continue to practice "opting out" of less engaging lessons. Although students who choose to "opt out" of instruction are not disruptive, the practice reduces their time spent learning and therefore has a strong probability of negatively effecting their academic performance.

According to the school's renewal application, records of behavior management for special education students show the school complies with federal and state requirements for the discipline of students with disabilities. The School-Wide Plan provides for the needs of students with disabilities, including behavioral needs in Goals 2 and 3, through in-service opportunities for teachers, which increase their understanding of discipline procedures for students with disabilities.

<p>Benchmark 1G</p> <p>Professional Development</p>	<p>1G.1</p> <p>The school’s professional development program aligns with the school’s mission, assists teachers in meeting students’ academic needs and school goals, and addresses any identified shortcomings in student learning and/or teacher content knowledge.</p> <p>Professional development offerings at a school that meets this benchmark are aligned with the school’s educational philosophy and are effective in helping teachers improve instruction. Most importantly, professional development practices at the school are a priority of the school leadership and buttress the instructional program, meet student learning needs and result in increased student achievement. The school’s calendar reflects that professional development and instructional planning are a high priority. A school should also be able to demonstrate that necessary support for inexperienced teachers is available. Teachers and school leaders report professional development activities have resulted in gains in teacher pedagogic content, knowledge, and skills and this expertise has led to increased student academic achievement.</p>
	<p>1G.2</p> <p>The school has a system in place for ongoing teacher evaluation and improvement that supports the school’s ability to reach the goals contained in its Accountability Plan.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has leaders who spend extended time in classrooms. Teachers receive relevant and helpful written and verbal feedback, counsel, support, and opportunities to increase the instructional skills and content knowledge required for the school to meet its academic goals.</p>

National Heritage Academies, as RLA’s management company, has historically provided fundamental professional development for staff of the school prior to the start of school in the fall. It has been the responsibility of the school to determine and meet additional professional development needs through NHA, contracting with an outside vendor, or other means. In its fifth year, the school has developed and instituted a professional development plan which began with a week-long session in August. The agenda of the session focused heavily on establishing a clear understanding of RLA’s mission, vision and goals and where the students currently were in terms of their academic performance to date. The topics of the week also included review of effective instructional practices and enhancing teacher curriculum knowledge of Collins Writing, Core Knowledge, Open Court, Reading Mastery, Saxon Math, New York State assessments and classroom management. Teachers reported receiving more in-depth professional development with classroom follow-up and visitations than in previous years. Teachers indicated that professional development was not just a “one shot deal,” and they expressed their feelings of support. The school has a “Professional Development Calendar” that lays out topics, presenters and dates from November 2004 through May 2005.

Instructional staff, including specialists and paraprofessionals, are included in professional development sessions. Time is dedicated to improving teachers’ instructional skills and abilities by the school’s Principal, Director of Student Excellence and Teacher Development Coordinator. These administrators are frequently in classrooms observing

teachers, discussing lessons with teachers, providing curriculum guidance/coaching and/or modeling lessons. The Principal, DSE and TDC divided the school by grade levels to provide direct support to teachers; the Principal works with teachers of grades four and six. The DSE works with teachers of grades five, seven, and eight. The TDC works with teachers of grades Kindergarten through three. Teachers of grades five and higher reported that the DSE had modeled lessons for them and provided coaching. Teachers of Kindergarten through third grade had not had lessons modeled or received coaching at the time of the renewal visit, but felt confident these supportive services would be available upon their request.

The school has adopted three primary goals for the 2004-05 school year: (1) 75 percent of students will pass the New York State assessments; (2) students will show at least 2.5 years of academic growth per year; and (3) Rochester Leadership Academy will be viewed as the employer of choice. To achieve these three goals, the school's Principal developed a 28-point action plan. The school's focus on the professional development of its teachers, and teacher evaluation will play a critical role in the achievement of the school's primary goals. The school has instituted a new teacher evaluation process that includes two formal observations of each teacher each year. In November, the Principal had recently completed the first formal evaluations of all instructional staff. The second evaluation is scheduled to take place in May 2005. For teachers whose evaluations were less than satisfactory, the Principal worked with them to develop a Teacher Assistance Plan. The assistance plan outlines the expectations for the teacher with regard to improvement. At the time of the renewal visit, of 27 classroom teachers, five had Teacher Assistance Plans.

In addition to formal evaluations, the Principal, Director of Student Excellence and Teacher Development Coordinator are frequently in classrooms. Teachers expressed their appreciation of having these sources of support available to them. The Principal developed a classroom observation form as both a recording document and a feedback form. Whenever one of the three administrators observes a class, s/he gives the teacher a copy of the form prior to leaving the classroom. Many teachers reported that at least one of the administrators was in their classroom once per week. Although teachers received timely feedback regarding observations, the feedback was primarily positive and reflected procedural and structural process matters, such as use of the Blackboard Configuration (BBC), classroom management or room arrangement, and not issues related to instruction, such as content of lessons, depth of instruction or the use of analytical questions as a teaching tool.

Based on evidence obtained through reviews of classroom observation documents, classroom observations and teacher interviews, an area of dissonance exists with regard to the alignment of classroom observation feedback and ultimately the quality of teachers as indicated on their evaluations. Feedback comments found on classroom observation forms, even for teachers whose formal evaluations resulted in the development of a Teacher Assistance Plan, were positive.

Renewal Question 2

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Benchmark 2A
School Specific Non-Academic Goals

2A

The school meets or has made meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting the Unique Measures of non-academic student outcomes that are contained in its Accountability Plan over the life of the charter.

According to the school's renewal application, RLA has mixed progress in meeting its unique goals. Enrollment and attendance records indicate the number of students participating and their pattern of participation at RLA are in line with desired levels. The rate at which students are entering and leaving RLA is a significant concern. The school's exit surveys indicated in 2003-04 that only 50 percent of departing parents were satisfied with the RLA experience and more than 67 percent of departing students left within one year of their arrival at the school. The renewal application states that RLA staff members, under new leadership, will seek to determine the basis for the attrition and perform corrective action including: increasing response rates to parent surveys, student support for those not making progress, and change in instruction – all of which will be documented in the 2004-07 School-Wide Plan. The renewal application also refers to a statement made by some of the Institute's independent consultants in 2004 illustrating how students with moderate initial skill were not making progress, suggesting they tend to leave a school more readily than those who show progress.

<p>Benchmark 2B</p> <p>Mission & Design Elements</p>	<p>2B</p> <p>The school is faithful to its mission and has implemented the key design elements included in its charter.</p> <p>The school that meets this benchmark has school Board members, parents, teachers, school leader(s) and community partners that consistently present evidence of the school’s success with reference to the school’s mission and the key design elements included in its charter application. Key elements of the school’s design are well implemented and the school’s academic results, governance, and instructional practices reflect the mission of the school.</p>
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As part of its initial charter, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School established the following mission:

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School will provide an educational program that encompasses Kindergarten through eighth grades and exists in a safe and orderly environment. The school aims to provide a curriculum that emphasizes high academic standards with increased student accountability. The school strives to create responsible citizens through education in moral character development. The school also recognizes that parents are the primary educators of their children and encourages parental involvement throughout the learning process.

At the time of its renewal visit, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School was providing an educational program for Kindergarten through eighth grade students in a safe and fundamentally orderly environment. In the school’s earlier years, it struggled to establish the level of student order and discipline that would support student learning, especially in the upper grades. In its fifth year, it was evident that student behavior had significantly improved in the upper grades, though as noted in Benchmark 1F (student behavior), work remains to be done. The daily schedule included two moral focus assemblies for students in Kindergarten through fourth grades and students in fifth through eighth grades. Both students and parents expressed their interest in and appreciation of the moral focus component of the school’s educational program though it is difficult to assess if this focus is effective in improving moral character.

In the first four years of the charter, the school failed to establish strong parent involvement practices. In particular, the school did not institute the various parent committees which, in the application for the charter, were touted as a key design element of the NHA program, and the work of which would be coordinated by a School Leadership Team. At the time of the renewal visit, it was evident that efforts were currently underway to establish those committees as well as to create a paid staff position for a parent representative. The individual slated to assume that position was at the time of the renewal visit the parent representative of the Board of Trustees. This work is in the beginning stages.

Parents who were interviewed indicated that significant effort was being directed to increasing the number and extent of parent involvement. Parents also indicated that part of the reason for poor parent involvement in earlier years was the location of the school in downtown Rochester and the challenges presented with regard to transportation and parking. However, the Board of Trustees and NHA have acknowledged that they did not

work effectively to implement the six school committees or put in place, as envisioned, the School Leadership Team during the first four years of the charter.

A key component of Rochester Leadership Academy's mission relates to the provision of "a curriculum that emphasizes high academic standards with increased student accountability." Through its management company, the National Heritage Academies, the school has been provided with a curriculum that is aligned with New York State Standards. However, the school has not consistently implemented the curriculum during the school's initial charter period in a way that resulted in high student achievement. In addition, neither students nor teachers were held accountable for poor student performance. It is evident in the school's fifth year that the Board and the new Principal have taken steps to change the school's curricular implementation practices to achieve the school's goals. As noted in the benchmarks grouped under question 1 (Is the school an academic success?), additional steps have yet to be taken that are essential if the school is to be in a position to likely meet its academic Accountability Plan goals.

According to the school's renewal application, interviews during the renewal visit and posters in all classrooms, administrators, teachers and parents were aware of and understood the school's mission. Its governance and instructional practices strongly reflect that mission. The school acknowledges it has not implemented all of its key design elements.

<p>Benchmark 2C</p> <p>Governance (Board of Trustees & School Leadership)</p>	<p>2C.1</p> <p>The Board has implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes and has abided by them.</p> <p>A school that meets this benchmark has implemented a comprehensive and strict conflict of interest policy (and a code of ethics) and has consistently abided by them through the term of the school’s charter. Where possible, the Board has avoided creating conflicts-of-interest. The school Board has also maintained and abided by the corporation’s by-laws. In addition, a Board meeting this benchmark will have actively sought information from the staff, parents, community and student populations. The system for hearing such views and concerns will have been consistently implemented so that all views and concerns were appropriately heard and acted upon. The Board will have published, reviewed and communicated policies annually and currently maintains an up-to-date policy manual.</p>
	<p>2C.2</p> <p>The Board and school leadership clearly articulate the school’s mission and design and work to implement it effectively.</p> <p>To fully meet this benchmark, school leaders and Board members should be able to evidence a strong understanding of the school design and demonstrate that they have referred to it regularly in managing and governing the school. Moreover, the Board and the school’s administration should have deployed resources effectively to further the academic and organizational success of the school. At the Board level, the Board should have a process for selecting both Board members and the school leader or school leadership team that is timely and effective and such process should result in a stable and effective Board and leadership team. The Board should also have evaluated school leadership on an annual basis. Such evaluation should be based on clearly defined goals and measurements. The school Board and school leadership should be able to demonstrate that they are facile with the process.</p>

Board Oversight of the Academic Program and Management Company

The Board of the school, pursuant to its application for a charter, entered into an agreement with National Heritage Academies (“NHA”) to provide comprehensive management services to the school, including managing and operating the school’s academic program and selection and evaluation of the school’s leadership team and teachers. The contract is structured such that all revenues received by the school are forwarded to NHA and NHA pays the school’s expenses pursuant to a budget agreed to by NHA and the Board. NHA retains all revenue surpluses of expenses; in management company parlance, this is known as a “sweep contract.”

The Board of the school reported that in the first two-and-a-half years of operation, it had focused on procuring a permanent facility. (The school was located in downtown Rochester during the first three years in a small facility that was not ideal in its layout and had no gymnasium or library.) The Board reported that it thought that focus was generally well-placed in part because of the pressing need to secure an excellent site and

because it had retained and was paying NHA to operate and evaluate the program. In addition, the Board's focus, as reported by the Board, was due to what it believed to be generally favorable results as measured by standardized test data. As the Board subsequently discovered, and as discussed below, this data did not provide an accurate picture of the school's program.

While the Board's focus was on facility and other operational issues, the Board, from the first year of operation, did receive reports of academic progress and the health of the academic program. However, those reports were limited in scope and did not provide important data which would have revealed significant weaknesses in the school program. In particular, and pursuant to the policies of National Heritage Academies ("NHA"), the reports focused chiefly on MAT-8 data, and growth of students from fall to spring. As is typical with such data, the school's students generally showed growth in the fall to spring measurement. The data masked, however, that students who were in the program for multiple years did not experience academic growth by that measure; to the contrary there was some regression. Moreover, when reporting on state test scores, which year-to-year in the fourth grade were rising, for example, the data were not disaggregated by the number of years the students were at the school. Had they been, the Board would have seen that the scores of new students entering the school bolstered the school's test scores and were in part (and on some tests though not others) responsible for gains as evidenced on the state assessments. Indeed, the Board has noted that it believed the exact opposite: that new students entering the school from the district were depressing the overall performance of the school on the assessments the school used.

The Board also received reports from the school's Director regarding classroom environment and other qualitative factors. These reports and the Director's discussions with the Board, resulted, at the Board's insistence (though with full agreement of NHA) in the hiring of an Assistant Principal with primary responsibility for improving student behavior. This position was not budgeted for, but both the Board and NHA agreed that the increased expenditure was necessary.

Towards the end of the school's third year (2002-03), the Board received the Institute's third year evaluation report (performed by SchoolWorks, Inc.). The Board has reported to the Institute that this report, together with data from the state fourth and eighth grade assessments, caused them to be concerned about the strength of the academic program. The Board reports that it then sought out value-added data over multiple years—as well as data regarding the relative levels of proficiency for those students who had newly entered the program and those students who had been in the program for several years. The Board further reports that it sought this data in the first instance from the school principal sometime in 2002-03. After not receiving the data in 2002-03, despite what the Board characterizes as multiple and on-going requests, the Board has indicated that it made requests for that data directly from NHA in the winter of 2003-04 and that senior management at NHA then supplied it. For its part, NHA confirms that it was not disaggregating data and that it assumed that the MAT-8 data would show that the longer students were at the school the better they did—thus echoing findings from a study of other NHA schools, which did not include RLA. NHA has indicated that the company was surprised by the results.

While the Board and NHA did not review the disaggregated data until well into the 2003-04 school year, both the Board and NHA were dissatisfied with the school's performance on the state assessments by 2002-03. In 2003-04, having moved into the new school building, NHA implemented a program known as "Operation Breakthrough," which, among other things, grouped students by ability and provided greater time on task in core subject areas for those students whose assessment data indicated that they were below grade level. However, NHA has stated that the program was not well-executed and, in

fact, state test scores in 2003-04 saw some dramatic declines.¹⁴ The Board also sought to bolster the program by procuring consultants; however, the Board conceded that these efforts were, sporadic, not sustained and ineffectual.

In or about April 2004, the school received the unofficial results of the fourth and eighth grade ELA scores, showing the declines noted above, and the Principal of the school resigned. Thereafter, NHA and the Board recruited a new Principal, who currently holds the position. The Board also sought out an independent evaluation of the program as well as an analysis of the school's assessment data. That report noted candidly shortcomings in the school's educational program, including as noted elsewhere serious deficiencies in the quantity and quality of sustained, day-to-day professional development and staff evaluation. NHA has indicated that it agrees that the program was lacking in critical respects and has put together a plan for improvement, focusing on providing sustained day-in-and-day-out professional development, especially by retaining high-quality instructional leadership. The Board has indicated that finding such talent is their priority as well. As indicated elsewhere, the school and its current administrative team have begun to implement that plan but at this time the plan, in important respects, is not fully implemented, including not having the necessary personnel in place to provide the kind of high-quality instruction and coaching to teachers that is essential to academic success.

In the Institute's interview with the Board, the Board stressed that it did not believe that in the early years it had provided sufficient oversight over the management company, though it noted as well that it had asked at several points that additional resources be deployed to the school and that in each instance, NHA had agreed to do so. This gave the Board a certain level of comfort in deferring to the management company's expertise. In evaluating its performance in the first three years of the charter, one member of the Board characterized the Board as "optimistic, hopeful and counting on the management company to do the job they had promised. We were somewhat ignorant and while we were asking the right questions, we were too easily satisfied with the answers we were getting."

However, by 2003-04, the Board had concluded that the kind and quality of responsiveness to its concerns from NHA was insufficient and opened up a direct line to senior personnel at the NHA, including its president and chief operating officer. The Board reports that this has facilitated more responsiveness on the part of NHA. NHA has confirmed that a direct line of communication at a senior level has facilitated a better understanding between the school and NHA as to the school's expectations under the contract. NHA has also indicated that it has a better and more sophisticated grasp of the kind and quantity of resources that it needs to supply to the school if the school is to perform at the levels expected under the school's Accountability Plan. The Board has also created an instrument for its members to use in conducting informal reviews of the quality of classroom instruction.

Recently the Board has set forth in writing to NHA its requests for additional services and a potential re-negotiation of the existing contract as well as any renewal contract. While NHA has not yet responded, senior personnel have indicated their willingness to be responsive to the Board's requests.

¹⁴ As always, when dealing with cross-cohort numbers, *e.g.*, comparing test scores of one group of fourth graders in one year with another group of fourth graders the next year, caution should be used in drawing conclusions as to the meaning of differences between those two sets of scores.

Board Selection and Stability

The Board has been very stable. The Board has a process in place for selecting new members and understands the seriousness of the issue as well as the need to have members who bring a broad array of skills to the Board.

Evaluation of the Administrative Team and Policies and Processes Thereto

During the first four years of the charter, the Board relied on NHA to provide an evaluation of the school leader. NHA conducted that evaluation, basing it on staff and parent surveys, evidence of fall-to-spring growth in student performance on the MAT-8 assessment and “leadership perception.” NHA has conceded in retrospect that the evaluation criteria it used were flawed and did not provide as rigorous a review as was necessary. In the school’s fifth year, both NHA and the Board have developed more sophisticated tools. In addition both the Board and NHA have indicated that they will continue to have the program evaluated by outside consultants in helping them to evaluate the administrative team’s performance. The Board has set goals for the current principal to meet.

Board Policies and Procedures

The Board generally has implemented appropriate policies, systems and processes and has abided by them. The school has not implemented a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) policy. The school has a Board binder that contains the by-laws, management contract and other Board orientation material. New Board members view videos from the management company and sit down with the Board chair as part of orientation. It appears that the Board follows its by-laws, and amended them once during the charter term.

The Board has adequate mechanisms for dealing with conflicts of interest. Its code of ethics is supplemented by provisions in its by-laws dealing with conflicts of interest. Also, outside counsel reviews any interested transactions in addition to interested members recusing themselves.

<p>Benchmark 2D</p> <p>Parents & Students</p>	<p>2D</p> <p>Parents/guardians and students are satisfied with the school as evidenced by survey results as well as the volume of parents who choose the school to provide education for their children and the degree to which parents persist with that choice over the child’s academic career.</p> <p>The school that satisfies this benchmark will be able to show through generally accepted surveying standards and practices that a large majority of all parents with students enrolled at the school are satisfied with the school. As only a well-informed parent can be meaningfully satisfied, the school must be able to show that it has provided to parents detailed and accurate information about their child’s performance as well as the performance of the school as a whole. The school should also be able to provide data on application lottery, enrollment and persistence rates to demonstrate that large numbers of parents seek entrance to the school, and far more importantly, keep their children enrolled year-to-year. Ideal survey data will also provide an explanation for the persistence rate experienced by the school.</p>
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As part of its Accountability Plan, the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School established a goal of 90 percent of its parents would express satisfaction with the school and its program. According to the school’s renewal application, RLA has experienced an increase in parental satisfaction over the life of the charter as measured by parent satisfaction surveys, meeting or exceeding the school’s 90 percent satisfaction targets. The school reports that based on three summary categories – general satisfaction, effective school communication, and safe environment – it has had a successful record of achieving the goals, with the exception of the first two years when it was close. The school surpassed its goal in the 2002-03 school year by receiving ratings of 94.7 percent in general satisfaction, 93.8 percent in effective school communication, and 96.2 percent in safe environment. In that year, 58.6 percent of the parents responded to the survey. In the most recently completed year, 2003-04, parent general satisfaction was 92.5 percent and 89.6 percent of the parents thought the school effectively communicated with them. In the same year, 95.1 percent of the parents felt that school provided a safe environment for their child(ren). The response rates, however, have been relatively low each year, not reaching above 65 percent. The renewal application states that the new School-Wide Plan includes a goal and strategies for parent involvement.

Parents were interviewed as part of the school’s renewal visit and expressed satisfaction with the school. However, those parents also indicated that parent involvement was poor, and that under the school’s new leadership significant effort is being directed to increasing the number and extent of parent involvement. An example of this effort was reflected in the recent “selection” of parents as heads of the six parent/teacher committees, included on the school’s organizational chart, that comprise the School Leadership Team. The committees include: curriculum, technology, hospitality/ambassadors, library, character development, and grounds and facilities. The committee structure had been a component of the school’s original design, but never implemented under the school’s previous leader. When asked about the process for becoming a committee chair, parents shared that the Principal sent letters to all parents with the information about the committees and their purpose; the letter also invited parents to attend an informational meeting. The six chairs were the only parents who responded to the invitational letter by coming to the meeting. The Principal provided an overview of the function of the committees: to provide input and opinions about school

operations. Parents expected to receive additional training by February and that the committees would become more active after that point.

Although the survey results indicated that parents felt the school effectively communicated with them, some disparity existed between that rating and the parents' lack of knowledge regarding the school's history of poor student academic performance. Parents stated that they were aware that students had not tested well, and that the scores were low. However, they were neither aware that students had consistently scored poorly since the inception of the school nor that student performance scores were as low as they are. Parents were surprised to learn this information. In addition, parents' lack of knowledge regarding who the school's Trustees were raised a question regarding the degree of transparency between the school and its parents.

During the interview, parents enthusiastically acknowledged the changes in the school's operation, administration and culture evident in the current school year. They described the change as drastic as "night and day" from the previous year(s). They were pleased with the change in Principals and viewed the new Principal as a no-nonsense leader who focuses on improving student academic achievement. Parents even commented that the operation of the school's main office is more organized and business-like than in previous years. Teachers call parents with both good news and problems, and encourage parents to call them whenever necessary.

<p>Benchmark 2E</p> <p>Legal Requirements</p>	<p>2E</p> <p>The school has substantially complied with applicable laws, rules and regulations and the provisions of its charter.</p> <p>A school that meets this benchmark will have compiled a record of substantial compliance with the terms of its charter and applicable laws and regulations. In addition, at the time of renewal, the school will be in substantial compliance with the terms of its charter and applicable laws and regulations. Such school will have maintained and have had in place effective systems and controls for ensuring that legal and charter requirements were and are met. A school should also be able to demonstrate that the school has an active and ongoing relationship with independent legal counsel that reviews relevant policies, documents, and incidents and makes recommendations as needed.</p>
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As part of a compliance review, the Institute reviewed compliance issues raised in the New York State Education Department’s Third Year Monitoring Report, which outlined certain instances of non-compliance with the school’s charter or law. The school was in compliance or coming into compliance with most of the issues raised by the State Education Department, including provision of alternative instruction and timely compliance with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities. However, the school’s failure to seek amendment to its charter when it did not implement project-based learning and internet instruction was still not remedied. In addition, at the time of the renewal visit, the school’s social worker was responsible for facilitating the school’s special education program and services. The social worker’s lack of certification in special education may pose an issue related to Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. We also note that the State Education Department has indicated that as of January 28, 2005, the school was not in compliance with the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE) in that the school had not submitted a school safety plan pursuant to Education Law section 2801-a.

The school has not fully complied with notification provisions in the Monitoring Plan in its charter, especially with respect to notification regarding changes in Board members, Principals and by-laws. On two occasions, the school failed to notify the Institute regarding drops in enrollment below 85 percent of authorized enrollment in violation of its charter. With respect to two employees who were fingerprinted, the school failed to follow-up on background checks. The employees had no clearance for work in their files in violation of the New York Education Law. The school also has no working policy, notice or training regarding the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). As a result, parents and staff do not know of access to the full range of available school records. The school’s by-laws state that school Trustees can participate in Board meetings by conference call, which is not in compliance with the Open Meetings Law. However, there was no evidence that this provision was actually utilized. Otherwise, the school has generally implemented appropriate policies, systems and processes to ensure compliance with applicable law and has abided by them.

In the past, the school had a mixed record of compliance with submitting items to the Institute with some items being unacceptably late. In 2003 and 2004, the school’s compliance record improved substantially. The school Board has an effective relationship with independent counsel. The school’s management partner also provides limited legal support in terms of memos regarding certain educational areas.

With the exceptions noted above, including FOIL, the school otherwise appears to have been, and presently appears to be, generally in substantial compliance with the Charter Schools Act, applicable provisions of the New York Education Law and other New York law, applicable federal law (e.g., I.D.E.A., F.E.R.P.A.), and its by-laws.

Renewal Question 3 Is the School Fiscally Sound?

**Benchmark 3A
Board Oversight**

3A

The Board has provided effective financial oversight, including having made financial decisions that furthered the school's mission, program and goals.

Financial oversight by the Board has been moderately effective. The Board's oversight procedures have included a review of financial reports, approval of budgets and revisions, approval of the audit contract and authorization of the use of Board funds. The Board's oversight of its agreement with its management partner has not always been forceful and has resulted in missed opportunities regarding furthering the school's goals. For example, the school's management company historically did not submit for competitive grants. However, the Board in its fiduciary capacity should be ensuring that all feasible funding opportunities are pursued. In FY 2004, the school did not receive a grant of State Stimulus Funds because of the poor grant proposal submitted.

The Board's decision to partner with National Heritage Academies (NHA) provided access to start-up capital and some overall stability. By partnering with NHA, the school is able to benefit from economies of scale related to some purchases and was able to secure a suitable facility.

The facility arrangement with NHA provides the school with a clean modern facility that accommodates its program needs. However, the school must devote significant resources to pay for the facility. In FY 2004, the school allocated \$1.34 million to occupancy costs or 25 percent of total expenses.¹⁵ This percentage is the highest of any of the schools authorized by the Institute in 2000. Schools that spend more than 25 percent on facilities often must sacrifice many elements of a quality educational program.¹⁶

¹⁵ Source: Audited financial statements for the year ended June 30, 2004.

¹⁶ Charter School Facilities – A Resource Guide on Development and Financing.
<http://www.uscharterschools.org/pdf/gb/ncbcharterschoolguide.pdf>

<p>Benchmark 3B</p> <p>Budgeting and Long Range Planning</p>	<p>3B</p> <p>The school has operated pursuant to a long-range financial plan. The school has created realistic budgets that are monitored and adjusted when appropriate. Actual expenses have been equal to or less than actual revenue with no material exceptions.</p>
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The school developed a five-year plan as part of its initial charter application. Subsequently, it has prepared and adopted annual budgets for school operations. The school has operated pursuant to its long-range plans. Budgets providing a realistic framework for the school’s spending activities and monitoring procedures were in place. The school relies heavily on NHA to develop its annual budget and to provide the monitoring tools to oversee actual results. NHA prepares quarterly financials for review by the Board that include budget to actual expenditure comparisons.

Actual revenue exceeded the amounts budgeted in each year except the first year of the school’s charter. The risk of budget overruns is born by NHA, due to the nature of its contract with the school. NHA receives all revenue paid to the school as remuneration for its services, net of amounts returned to the school for Board discretionary funds. While not bearing the risk of budget overruns is an obvious advantage to the school, the arrangement does not allow the school to accumulate reserves or other assets. Also, when less money is spent on individual budget lines, the financial benefit inures to NHA not the school, unless budget revisions are made. As a result, the Board must carefully monitor the budget and look for opportunities to enhance program services where available. The arrangement provides a financial incentive to NHA to closely monitor the budget.

<p>Benchmark 3C</p> <p>Internal Controls</p>	<p>3C</p> <p>The school has maintained appropriate internal controls and procedures. Transactions have been accurately recorded and appropriately documented in accordance with management’s direction and laws, regulations, grants and contracts. Assets have been and are safeguarded. Any deficiencies or audit findings have been corrected in a timely manner.</p>
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The school’s annual audit reports on internal controls over financial reporting and compliance with laws, regulations and grants did not disclose any reportable conditions, material weaknesses, or instances of non-compliance. The lack of deficiencies in these independent reports provides some, but certainly not absolute, assurance that the school has maintained adequate internal controls and procedures. The purposes of the reports are not to provide assurance on internal control over financial reporting or an opinion on compliance.

The school’s independent certified public accountant (CPA) has not issued written management letters in conjunction with the annual financial statement audit of the school. Since the school has not had material deficiencies and/or reportable conditions, recommendations from its CPA have been verbally communicated. All recommendations were reportedly implemented.

The school relies on NHA to maintain all accounting records and oversee all financial matters. Through NHA, the school has established appropriate processes and controls related to grant reporting, receipts, payroll, procurement and safeguarding of assets. Back-office activities for the school are performed at NHA headquarters in Michigan.

<p>Benchmark 3D</p> <p>Financial Reporting</p>	<p>3D</p> <p>The school has complied with financial reporting requirements. The school has provided the State University Board of Trustees and the State Education Department with required financial reports on time, and such reports have been complete and have followed generally accepted accounting principles.</p>
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In its first three years, the school's financial statements have been presented in governmental format rather than the not-for-profit format as required by its charter. While a technical violation of its charter, the audits are comparable in scope to audits conducted of public schools in New York State, which is the requirement under the Education Law. The school corrected this deficiency in FY 2004. The impact of this approach did not significantly impair the school's fiscal accountability. Otherwise, the school has generally met its financial reporting requirements. The annual financial statements, budget, and quarterly financial reports were filed on time with a few exceptions.

<p>Benchmark 3E</p> <p>Financial Condition</p>	<p>3E</p> <p>The school has maintained adequate financial resources to ensure stable operations and has monitored and successfully managed cash flow. Critical financial needs of the school are not dependent on variable income (grants, donations and fundraising).</p>
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The school completed the year in weak but stable financial condition. The school's unrestricted net assets were basically unchanged at \$39,480 (\$61 per approved enrollment). Over the first four years of its charter the school received negligible amounts of contributions indicating the school was not dependent on variable income for its financial needs.

The school's financial condition is to a large extent dependent on the financial viability of its management partner and a continuance of the relationship. Under the terms of its agreement with the school, National Heritage Academies, Inc. (NHA) receives as remuneration for its services an amount equal to the total revenue received by the school from all revenue services. NHA provides a spending account to the school's Board for discretionary expenditures on an annual basis. NHA provides administration, strategic planning and all labor, materials, equipment and supervision necessary for the provision of educational services to students. NHA also provides the facility in which RLA resides and leases it to the school.

NHA, founded in 1995, is a private for-profit operator of charter schools. NHA operates 51 schools in five states with more than 26,000 students. Currently it operates four charter schools in New York State including the Rochester Leadership Academy. As a private company, NHA's finances are not public information, but it has been reported in the Wall Street Journal that the company is doing well financially.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Charter School Operator Skims 'Cheap' Students - Critics" - January 9, 2003

Renewal Question 4

Should the School’s Charter Be Renewed, What Are Its Plans for the Term of a Future Charter?

<p>Benchmark 4A</p> <p>Curricular & Assessment Plans</p>	<p>4A</p> <p>The school’s curriculum and assessment plans for the term of a future charter are reasonable, feasible, and achievable and are likely to improve student learning and achievement.</p> <p>Schools that plan to retain or augment curricular and assessment designs presented in the original charter application have provided evidence that the implementation of that design has resulted in academic success during the term of the existing charter.</p> <p>Schools that propose a material redesign to the curriculum and assessment plans for the term of a new charter have clearly articulated the new design, provided research and evidence that the proposed new design will result in the increased academic performance of children, and a plan and timeline outlining the implementation of the new curricular design. These plans are likely to improve student learning and achievement and are reasonable, feasible and achievable.</p> <p>Schools that seek to add grade levels not included in the approval of the original charter have presented an outline of the curriculum and specific assessment plans for the term of a future charter. These plans are likely to improve student learning and achievement and are reasonable, feasible and achievable.</p>
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If the charter for the Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School is renewed, the school intends to continue to provide a Kindergarten through eighth grade educational program based on New York State standards and core curriculum. The school’s academic program would continue to include the use of Saxon Math, Open Court reading and Collins Writing for English Language Arts, art, music, gym and a moral focus component. The school would grow from its currently authorized student population of 648 to a maximum student enrollment of 680, and would remain in its current location in the city of Rochester.

Under a renewed charter, the school’s organizational structure would expand to include three academic deans who would focus on teacher development and instructional strategies. The three deans would be responsible across grades, *e.g.* Kindergarten through second, third through fifth, and sixth through eighth grades. The school would also appoint an “Instructional Leader” who would function as a “super teacher,” coach/mentor and/or instructional guide to provide overall guidance regarding all issues of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Under the new organizational structure, the Director of Student Excellence position would focus primarily on student programs, student behavior and other programs that target positive school culture, and report to the building Principal.

In the next charter period, consideration would be given to revising the daily schedule for the middle school students to allow them more freedom during the day, *i.e.* to move between classes. This freedom, however, would be contingent upon their improved academic performance and demonstration of improved behavioral capacity.

The school would use the NWEA’s Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) for its value-added assessment in second through eighth grades, and the STAR Early Literacy assessment for students in Kindergarten and first grades. In addition, the school would participate in all state assessments, which will cover grades three through eight beginning in 2006.

<p>Benchmark 4B Accountability Plan</p>	<p>4B</p> <p>The school has provided a draft Accountability Plan that defines the school’s measurable goals for the term of a future charter.</p> <p>The school’s proposed Accountability Plan follows the guidelines set forth by the Institute and presents an accountability system that is reasonable, feasible, and achievable.</p>
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The school has submitted a draft Accountability Plan that is largely in line with the demands of the Institute’s Accountability Plan guidelines. The Institute will, based upon the final renewal recommendation and vote of the State University Trustees, work with Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School to finalize the school’s Accountability Plan goals and measures and will codify it in any final renewal charter document.

<p>Benchmark 4C School Calendar & Enrollment</p>	<p>4C</p> <p>The school has provided a sample school calendar that includes the number of days and proposed daily hours of instruction. Additionally, the school has provided an enrollment plan outlining the grades and growth patterns it anticipates during the term of a future charter.</p> <p>The plans are reasonable, feasible and achievable.</p>
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Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School has provided a sample school calendar that includes the number of days and proposed daily hours of instruction for Kindergarten through eighth grades. The school has also provided an enrollment plan that outlines the student enrollment growth over the term of the charter, if renewed. The school would grow in student enrollment only from being a Kindergarten through eighth grade school of 648 students to a Kindergarten through eighth grade school of 680 students beginning in the first year of the renewed charter.

<p>Benchmark 4D</p> <p>Fiscal & Facility Plans</p>	<p>4D</p> <p>The school has provided a reasonable and appropriate five-year fiscal plan for the term of a future charter.</p> <p>The school has provided a fiscal plan that includes a discussion of how future enrollment and facility plans are supported and/or impacted by the school’s fiscal plan for the term of its next charter. In addition, fiscal plans provided for a future charter term reflect sound use of financial resources that support academic program needs.</p>
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The school’s fiscal plan is reasonable and appropriate given the management company model under which it intends to continue to operate. There are no new facility issues, as the school intends to remain at its current location. Fiscally, the school plans to continue to contract with NHA to provide all aspects of the education program.

Long-range fiscal projections are more susceptible to error than those for a single year. Such projections are subject to revision due to changes in local conditions, objectives, and laws. The school will be required to develop and adopt annual budgets based on known per pupil amounts. Whether the plan as presented will sufficiently support the academic program is unclear. For example, after subtracting instructional and administrative costs provided by NHA (\$1.9 to 2.5 million per year), the plan allocates a relatively low level of spending to personnel services (between 53 percent and 55 percent). While this allocation may be appropriate given available funds, there is no indication in the renewal application that it aligns with the priorities of the Board.

The plan reasonably assumes annual increases in per-pupil aid of 1.5 percent, which is less than half the historical average of 3.4 percent. However, there is no guarantee that future increases will continue at historical levels. Paid enrollment is budgeted at 660 students or 97 percent of the planned enrollment. While this provides some cushion against student attrition, it might be inadequate given facility constraints and the natural attrition that will occur. The school’s facility has 26 classrooms,¹⁸ meaning it would need to achieve full-time equivalent enrollment of more than 25 students per classroom. Failure to achieve the planned enrollment goals would necessitate a reduction in planned expenses. A significant deficiency in actual enrollment is not anticipated. However should one occur, NHA would ultimately need to absorb any budget overruns.

¹⁸ Per renewal application page 27.