



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 STEPPING STONE
ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL**

FEBRUARY 13, 2006

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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 *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* (revised December 13, 2005) are available at www.newyorkcharters.org. A former version of those practices, which set the criteria under which the application for renewal at issue here, is available on request at the offices of the Charter Schools Institute.

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 approves a renewal application, it is 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 the proposed charter 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; as above it will become operational upon expiration of the current charter.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 and to provide feedback to the school on the Institute's findings. 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), the school 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?

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.

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 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, as well as a preliminary 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 and recommendations in their final form. The report is then transmitted to the Committee on Charter Schools of the Board of Trustees, the other members of the Board of Trustees and the school itself. 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 and Background History, Recommendations and Executive Summary, and Renewal Benchmarks. As this guide, the Introduction, and School Description and Background History speak for themselves, no guidance is provided for these sections. Guidance as to the remaining sections is set forth below.

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 discusses 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.

Renewal Benchmarks

The Renewal Benchmark section contains each renewal benchmark together with a review of the pertinent evidence gathered during the renewal cycle and incorporates the findings (which are in bold). As noted earlier, the benchmarks are grouped under the four renewal questions.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND HISTORY

School Description

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School (“Stepping Stone” or the “School”), approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2001, and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in September of that year with 300 students in grades Kindergarten through five. (The School had sought in its application to enroll up to 600 students in its first year; the Institute recommended the much reduced 300 limit over the applicants’ vehement protests.) The School is located in Buffalo, New York. The School added a grade per year in its first four years to attain its current enrollment of 605 students in Kindergarten through eighth grades.¹¹

The School’s mission is as follows:

The Stepping Stone Academy Charter School is intended as a public, non-sectarian, non-religious, Regents chartered, Kindergarten through grade 8 elementary school designed to assist a predominately urban, culturally diverse, often disadvantaged and at-risk population of children. With a headmaster, certified teachers, smaller class size, and an extended school day and school year, the Academy will focus on preparing each individual child, and groups of children, to assume full, competent, active, and leading roles within our society.

The School leases 55,000 square feet of space in a former supermarket owned by the True Bethel Baptist Church, located at 909 East Ferry Street. The School financed the six million dollar renovation of its space through arrangements with Edison Schools, Inc., the School’s management company. A lease with the church was not signed until March 31, 2003, with prepaid rent of \$210,000 and an annual rent of \$1.00.

The executive summary in the School’s application (which itself is incorporated into the charter) notes that the School’s founders chose Edison Schools, Inc. as a management partner because it adapted several broad instructional and innovative strategies that address varied learning styles:

- individualized instruction;
- cooperative learning;
- project-based learning;
- direct instruction; and
- individual and small-group instruction through technology.

The applicants also noted in the charter application that they were attracted to Edison’s education program because it incorporates technology as an “intrinsic part of the educational process.” A keystone of this integration was a program by which all students at Stepping Stone would be loaned laptop computers (after six hours of training). This program did not begin until December 2002. As of January 2003, 48 families had completed the training. The “Home Roll Out”

¹¹ As of February 9, 2006.

program was discontinued in later years. In the third End-of-Year Visit Report (2003-04), students reported they had few opportunities to use technology.

To improve learning, the School planned to apply Edison's model of smaller schools within schools. A longer school day and school year were also noted in the charter. While the School now offers a longer school day (from 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m.), the school year contains 181 instructional days, effectively the same as the local school district.

The charter application also anticipated students participating in "Intensives," individual, small group, or entire school projects that allow students and teachers extended opportunities to tackle larger problems or areas of interest. The school-wide unit/focus on Rosa Parks, at the time of the renewal visit, was an example of an "intensive." However, no teachers referred to it as such during the renewal visit, and the School does not appear to have evidence that it has engaged in such intensives during the life of the charter.

The charter application presented an extensive list of local colleges and organizations that would serve as "program partners" providing a range of educational and social services. Such programs were envisioned as a seamless web of support for the mostly disadvantaged student population the School expected to attract. However, after an early split between the School and the St. Augustine's Center in the School's first year (which entity was to be the primary coordinator of these partnerships and programs as well as a provider) the program partner initiative was never implemented and none of these entities has had a sustained role in the School. After receiving a draft of the Renewal Report, and being provided an opportunity to comment, the School provided additional information regarding "program partners." The additional information asserts, without supporting evidence or detail, that the School currently has relationships with four outside educational and community resources, including Canisius High School (provides tutoring and mentoring for Stepping Stone students), the Boys and Girls Club of Western New York (provides educational and club programs, including recently, it is our understanding, supplemental educational services as required by No Child Left Behind), the Erie County Department of Health (provides various training programs for adolescents), and Medaille College (provides volunteers and student teachers).

Prior Observations and History

At the end of the School's first year of operation, Institute staff saw promise. "It was commonplace...to enter specific classrooms throughout the 2001-02 academic year and during the end of year inspection, and observe students engaged in challenging work and responding positively to discipline routines and procedures."

On the other hand, Institute staff also continued to notice (as based on previous informal visits) a number of teachers failing to model the high standards described in the School's charter. As a result, the quality of instruction observed appeared uneven in scope, varying across grade levels and from teacher to teacher.

Uneven instruction continued to be a problem for the School. In the second year of instruction, Institute staff noted that "some classrooms are well organized, while others are messy, and in

some cases dirty, with the few manipulatives, charts, or other instructional materials haphazardly scattered around the room.” Nevertheless there was some cause for optimism. Though student performance on state assessments continued to substantially lag behind schools in the city of Buffalo and New York State, Institute staff observed the School “appears to be on an upward trajectory.”

This assessment was not borne out by subsequent test scores and a comprehensive evaluation of the School’s academic program in the School’s third year of operation. As SchoolWorks, Inc., a company specializing in school evaluation that the Institute had retained, concluded in the Third Year report (2003-04): “By all criterion measures available, Stepping Stone students do not meet acceptable levels of proficiency.” State test scores dropped even lower subsequent to this assessment.

SchoolWorks observers also noted that various data are collected at the School in the form of “Benchmark Assessments.” Observers commented that this assessment system should help administrators improve student achievement. However, School leaders were not able to provide the SchoolWorks inspectors with a building level analysis of the results to assess whether the School’s academic programs were serving student learning needs. SchoolWorks inspectors also observed: “The written curriculum contains those components that comprise quality. The enacted curriculum reflects low expectations of student ability.”

SchoolWorks observers further noted that students were distracted and disengaged from their work, at least in part due to confusion and lack of ability to complete the assigned work. Enforcing proper student behavior was a continual problem and a source for the uneven education at the School as some teachers were better at classroom management than others. Student misconduct in some classrooms, but not others, was noted in all three end-of-year reports (2001-02; 2002-03; 2003-04). As a result, Institute staff visited the school and discussed the various short-comings identified with the principal. At that meeting, it was evident that the principal, the board and the management relationship with Edison was dysfunctional and non-existent. The principal was thereafter replaced with an interim principal for the first part of 2004-05 (fourth year of the charter).

Support for staff has been an ongoing concern at the School. The executive summary of the School’s application/charter states that “Edison places an unprecedented value on ongoing, on-site, collegial, professional development.” Staff was to be supported by regular house meetings, classroom observations, demonstration and mentoring, and regular interaction among senior subject specialists and the rest of the teaching staff.

However, in the second End-of-Year Visit Report (2002-03), teachers indicated they had little interaction with the School’s administration. A number of teachers would have liked to have a master teacher to consult. Teachers said they had no one to turn to but each other, in direct opposition to the Edison Model in which lead teachers and/or academy directors fill this role. In the Third Year Report (2003-04), the board expressed its frustration that Edison did not respond quickly to concerns about School leadership, and did not provide access to promised professional development for staff. In response to a draft of the Renewal Report, the School noted that

Edison had revamped its organizational structure in an attempt (in their view successfully) to address these shortcomings.

Based on its history, a pattern of turmoil and lack of leadership at the board of trustees and administrative level, as well as an extremely low performance on the fourth grade assessments in the School's third year (2003-04) – 0 percent of the students in fourth grade at standards who had been at the School for two years or more; 20 percent of the students proficient in math who had been at the School for two years or more – the Institute conducted a number of visits to the School or had teleconferences with board members or its leadership team.

In particular in September 2004, the Institute's executive director and director of financial accountability visited the school and addressed the school board. This visit was followed with a letter detailing a variety of deficiencies that had been set forth in the SchoolWorks report, including deficiencies in the overall quality of the educational program and, in particular, the lack of any serious plan to remediate students who were demonstrably below grade level as well as the quality of instructional personnel. At that visit, board members indicated their belief that the first two years of the School had been quite successful and that the problems in the third year were simply the result of a bad personnel decision at the principal level. Both at the meeting, and in the letter following-up on that meeting, the Institute took pains to note that the problems at the School were broad, structural and that, at present, the personnel and resources were not in place that would effect the kind of changes needed for the School to navigate successfully through a renewal review.

Following that meeting, the Institute undertook a separate and special review of the School's academic program in April 2005. The purpose of this visit was to provide the School's board of trustees and the leadership team with the Institute's assessment of the academic program based on the renewal benchmarks that the Institute uses during its renewal visits. The Institute concluded that, based on its review, the program at the time of the visit continued to be deficient in material respects, though a spirit of cooperation and focus had emerged. Accordingly, the Institute informed the board of trustees that if the Institute had had to make a recommendation on renewal at that time, it would not have been able to recommend renewal. The Institute provided a letter to the Stepping Stone board of trustees providing in writing its evaluation of the program, noting several critical deficiencies, indicating avenues for improvement and praising the changes that had been made to date – but noting the need to accelerate the pace of change and improvement.

In its five years of operation, Stepping Stone has had three principals and one interim principal who served for several months. There have been numerous departures and substitutions on the board. Four of the seven initially proposed board members were also members of the True Bethel Baptist Church. Subsequently, the board was expanded to nine, with the bylaws amended to prohibit more than 40 percent representation of the church or any other organization with which the School does business. After concerns were raised by the Institute, the board prohibited its members from being employees of the School or paid consultants.

Lapses by the School's administration have resulted in the School being placed on a Corrective Action Plan by the Charter Schools Institute. In 2002 the School failed to administer the New

York State Regents fourth grade science test, as required by law, and was placed on a corrective action plan to ensure it aggressively pursued securing copies of all state tests to be administered to its students. In 2004, the Charter Schools Institute was informed the School had not been providing accurate enrollment information to the Buffalo City School District. As a result, Stepping Stone was placed on probation on the basis that the School was in violation of its charter; after the School improved its reporting systems, and reported successfully its enrollment to the Buffalo City School District, the School was removed from probation. Finally, the School appears to have failed to make available “supplemental educational services” to students as required by federal law.¹²

Stepping Stone has undergone a number of revisions to the enrollment originally projected in the charter. As noted above, the Institute recommended that the first year enrollment that the School had originally envisioned at 600, was lowered to 300. Other enrollment revisions include the following:

- August 2002 – The Institute, with great reservation, approved an enrollment decrease from 700 to 400 students for the upcoming school year. As a result of the enrollment change, the School had to inform 66 parents, who had secured seats in the lottery, that their children would not be able to attend the School.
- September 2003 – The University Trustees approved a three-year enrollment revision, dropping enrollment by 250 students in 2003-04, and by 100 in each of the two remaining years of the charter.
- August 2004 – Enrollment was dropped from 700 to 556 students to give the School a chance to address its academic deficiencies and promote appropriate behavior with the students already enrolled.

The Institute conducted its renewal visit to the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School on November 15-18, 2005. The renewal team consisted of 10 team members.

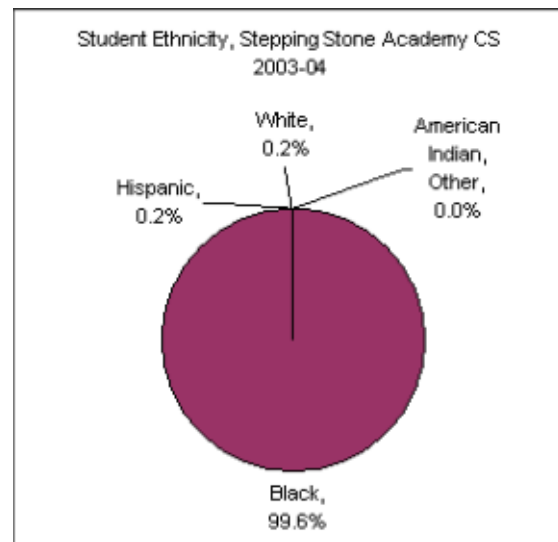
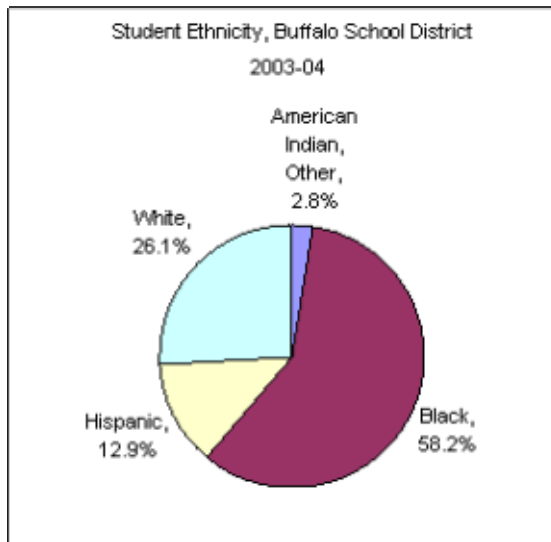
On January 20, 2006, the Institute released to the School a draft of the Renewal Report that contained a preliminary recommendation of non-renewal (except for such renewal as to allow the School to wind-up its corporate affairs in an orderly manner). Pursuant to the practices of the State University of New York Board of Trustees regarding renewal applications, the Institute offered to attend any presentation that the School wished to provide to the Institute for its consideration in finalizing the draft renewal report, as well as reviewing any written comments, arguments or evidence. The Institute met with several board members in Buffalo on February 1, 2006 and thereafter listened to a two-hour presentation that the School provided. The Institute also received a 283 page submission in writing from the School and reviewed those materials in preparing the instant Renewal Report.

¹² The status of this issue is currently unknown. The School has failed to respond to a request for information from the Charter Schools Institute, dated December 27, 2005.

Enrollment

YEAR	ORIGINAL CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	APPROVED CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT	ORIGINAL CHARTERED GRADES SERVED	APPROVED GRADES SERVED	ACTUAL GRADES SERVED
2001-2002	300	300	303	K-5	K-5	K-5
2002-2003	700	400	388	K-6	K-6	K-6
2003-2004	800	550	550	K-7	K-7	K-7
2004-2005	900	556	500	K-8	K-8	K-8
2005-2006	900	800	605	K-8	K-8	K-8

Demographics



Free/Reduced Price Lunches (2003-04)

Stepping Stone CS: 83.2%
Buffalo School District: 77.3 %

Students with Disabilities (2003-04)

Stepping Stone CS: 11.1%
Buffalo School District: 18.5 %

RECOMMENDATION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recommendation: Non-Renewal

- Based on its review of the evidence that the Charter Schools Institute has gathered and the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has provided, the Charter Schools Institute cannot make the findings that the Charter Schools Act and the practices of the Board of Trustees require, including specifically that the School would improve student learning and achievement and be operated in an educationally sound manner. Therefore, the Charter Schools Institute recommends to the State University Board of Trustees that it not approve the application for charter renewal submitted by the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School and that the educational program of Stepping Stone *i.e.*, the School, be closed at the end of the present school year (2005-06).
- As it will take time for the School to wind up its affairs in an orderly fashion, and the charter will expire shortly after the end of the school year this summer, the Institute further recommends that the charter be renewed through and including July 31, 2007. 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 2005-06 school year.¹³

Summary Discussion

In order for a charter school to make the compelling case that it needs to make to be recommended for a full-term renewal of five years (and in order for the Institute to make the required legal findings regarding educational soundness and likelihood of improving student learning and achievement), a charter school authorized by the State University Board of Trustees must have met its academic Accountability Plan goals or at least have made consistent and meaningful progress towards meeting those 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. Further it must demonstrate that its plans for the next

¹³ Pursuant to the *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* (revised December 13, 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 the end of the extended charter term, to allow the continued corporate existence of the education corporation and possible re-use of the charter.

charter period are reasonable and feasible and that approving the renewal application will materially further the purposes of the Charter Schools Act.

In order for a charter school to qualify for short-term renewal (a renewal of less than five years – usually two), and again to make the required findings regarding educational soundness and likelihood of improving student learning and achievement, the school must be able to present student assessment data that, at the very least, present 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 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.

The charter school must also be able to show that it is organizationally and fiscally sound, that its plans for the next charter period are reasonable and feasible and that approving the application will materially further the purposes of the Charter Schools Act.

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 cannot make the findings that it would need to support a positive recommendation for a full-term or short-term renewal for Stepping Stone, including, in particular that the school would be educationally sound and improve student learning and achievement.¹⁴

Stepping Stone has not accumulated a record of student achievement that qualifies it for a full-term renewal of five-years and it does not contest that conclusion. It has not met its academic Accountability Plan goals; nor has it come close to meeting them. To the contrary, after four years of student achievement data, the School remains by most measures far from those goals. Equally, it has not made consistent and meaningful progress toward meeting those same goals.

Specifically, over the course of its charter, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has met almost none of the key academic outcomes it set for itself in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. While Stepping Stone showed greater progress from 2004 to 2005 in the performance of fourth grade students on the state’s ELA and mathematics exams than did its comparison schools (its chosen method of comparison), these greater gains are a result of the School’s extremely low scores in 2003-04, in which on the ELA assessment only a single fourth grader was tested as proficient and the School was *one of the lowest if not the lowest performing School in this measure in New York State*. In the School’s fourth year, its fourth grade performance, while improved from the remarkably dismal performance in its third year, remained far below that of its identified comparison schools and far from its own chosen performance measures. Moreover, students in the fourth grade who had been in the School for at least two years performed no better than students who had been in the School for a shorter

¹⁴ Given that that the Institute finds that the School would not be operated in an educationally sound manner or that it would improve student learning and achievement, as well as the fact that the School has failed, despite the Institute’s explicit request, to provide evidence that it is in compliance with critical provisions of No Child Left Behind, the Institute has not made a formal finding that the School is substantially and materially in violation of its charter or applicable law or that it would be operated in a manner inconsistent with applicable law. However, in light of the lack of response from the School as to this issue, the Institute cannot at this time make a positive finding in that regard.

period, suggesting that fourth graders in general have not benefited from having attended the School for more time.¹⁵

In 2005, Stepping Stone's eighth graders took the state's English language arts and mathematics exams for the first time. In contrast with the fourth grade results, Stepping Stone students who had been in the School for at least two years performed as well as the School district on the ELA exam and performed significantly better than the district on the math exam (37 percent proficient compared to 24 percent proficient for Buffalo overall on the mathematics assessment). The bar set by the School district's performance, however, is extremely low, and the School was far below its eighth grade measures of having 75 percent of students at standards. Moreover, other assessment measures (and the qualitative indicators as well as conversations with board members) suggest that this result is likely anomalous, due to an unusually strong cohort. The available evidence suggests strongly that future cohorts of eighth graders will under-perform last year's cohort. In addition, the results for the eighth grade class as a whole show that in 2005, four out of five students were not proficient as measured by the ELA assessment and three of four students as measured by the math assessment, roughly equivalent to Buffalo's extremely low overall low performance.

In addition to ELA and math, results in science and social studies over the life of the charter have also placed Stepping Stone far from its stated science and social studies measures. Stepping Stone's fourth grade has consistently performed at a low level on the science exam, while the fifth grade has fluctuated on the social studies exam. Indeed, in social studies, the School in its fifth year posted the same relatively low number of students at proficient as it did in its first year.

As discussed partially above, in terms of the comparative measures in its Accountability Plan, Stepping Stone met its comparative measures in one year and its value-added measures in another year. In both instances, the School registered sufficient gains from extremely low scores on the state and TerraNova tests in the previous year. However, these successes were more short-term technical adjustments than indicators of sustained improvement. Over the life of the charter, the comparative outcome data show that the School, having started at a very low level of performance, has neither reduced the gap between itself and the school district, nor between itself and the two similar schools with a higher proportion of low income students. *Notably, the School is the only charter school that the State University has authorized that has been identified under the No Child Left Behind Act as in corrective action (as a result of being in need of improvement for three years in a row (for failing to meet the measures of annual progress in fourth grade mathematics).*

The assessment data indicate as a whole that, at the time of renewal, students are not being prepared for rigorous middle and high school programs, much less for graduating from high

¹⁵ As discussed, *infra*, the School submitted preliminary data from the fourth grade ELA assessment administered in 2006 that would seem to indicate a different and far more positive pattern for that cohort of fourth graders who had been at Stepping Stone for two years or longer. However, this data has not been verified and its validity is questionable. Even if accepted at face value, however, the fact that this cohort's pattern is so different from the previous one is inexplicable, *i.e.*, each cohort was at the school during the years that even the School concedes were chaotic and dysfunctional and may simply suggest a selection bias in that cohort as to the children who persisted in attending that school. For a further and more detailed review, see Benchmark 1A.

school having passed five Regents exams. Taken overall, they do not warrant a recommendation for a full-term renewal of five years.

At best, and looking at the data in a light most favorable to the School, the student assessment data that the School has recorded can perhaps be characterized as mixed or ambiguous. This remains true even if taking into account preliminary and unverified data that the School has provided to the Institute in response to the draft of the Renewal Report. This evidence regarding fourth graders performance on the most recent administration of the fourth grade ELA exam and a sample fourth grade math exam (as well as evidence based on non-objective and highly unreliable diagnostic reading tests in the lower grades) is problematic in numerous respects.¹⁶ However, taken as a whole, and again in a light most favorable to the School, it does not contradict the Institute's conclusion that the student assessment data is mixed, and, perhaps, presents a more positive overall picture.

However, even if so characterized, and the significant issues as to the technical problems with the newly provided student assessment data are not taken into account, the evidence that the Institute has gathered in regards to the strength of the academic program based on the qualitative indicators it uses does not indicate that the School has come close to meeting the standard for short-term renewal. This is true even if the Board of Trustees were to accept the last-minute request of the School to reduce its grade structure (though apparently not its total enrollment) to Kindergarten through grade five from the current Kindergarten through grade eight configuration. Accordingly, the Institute cannot and does not recommend that the Board of Trustees approve such renewal.

Based on its review of Stepping Stone's academic program during the Institute's renewal visit conducted in November 2005, during the School's fifth year (as well as the supplemental materials that the School submitted in response to the draft renewal report and its presentation to the Institute on February 1, 2006), the Institute is not able to find, as it must pursuant to the criteria that the Board of Trustees has set, that the programs and personnel in place were or are of sufficient strength to make it likely that the School, if given more time, would make substantial, meaningful and consistent progress towards meeting its Accountability Plan goals.

As the findings and evidence throughout the report indicate, while the inspection team found improvements in many aspects of the program from prior visits that the Institute has conducted throughout the life of the charter, particularly in terms of attitude and focus, the program, at the time of the renewal visit, was materially deficient in numerous and critical respects. Nor did the materials the School has subsequently provided – or its presentation – adduce evidence that the deficiencies have been in material respects corrected or that those deficiencies were not in fact (except with certain minor issues noted, *infra*) correctly identified at the time of the renewal visit.

First, the School did not and does not have in place a coherent, working and effective internal assessment system, *i.e.*, a way to know with precision what students know – and do not know – and a series of effective programs and personnel to remediate gaps in student learning where the internal assessments indicated such gaps existed. For instance, the School continues to rely on a

¹⁶ A review of this data is provided at Benchmark 1A, *infra*.

series of benchmark assessments that on the whole may well be generally aligned with state standards but are clearly not aligned to various scope and sequences (what is taught and when) that the School employs. As a result, these computerized tests, which are given every month, may or may not cover the material that a classroom teacher has covered during that month (and often do not) and are, therefore, seriously flawed as a diagnostic tool. A further tool – interim ten week assessments – were also in use, though it was not clear that all personnel who were to create those assessments had the experience and capacity to do so. In the early grades, the assessment system, due to the mandatory constraints and supports of the Reading First program, are better.

More importantly, however, the Institute found that when the School does employ an assessment that does indicate specific gaps in student knowledge, the School has few programs at most grade levels to close those gaps. For instance, despite the fact that four of five students had not tested proficient on the fourth grade NYS ELA assessment in the 2004-05 school year (and virtually none had done so the year previously), the School is offering limited, inconsistent, ineffective and insufficient remediation to these students (now in the fifth and sixth grades respectively). As such, these students are not being prepared for a middle school curriculum and most are certain, if severe corrections are not undertaken, to never graduate high school. More generally, and equally important, the knowledge that teachers gleaned from assessments (which was uneven and non-systematic) did not affect delivery of instruction. When teachers knew that students had not learned a lesson, the School had few structures in place to ensure that what had not been learned the first time would be re-taught a second time and in a more effective way. While some teachers were, in fact, providing such model instruction, many others were not. This was true across all grades.

In large part the School's failure in this respect is symptomatic of deficiencies that the Institute found in both quality and quantity of instructional leadership. Two curriculum coordinators are relied on by 27 classroom teachers for support in the core subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, social studies and science, one of whom was newly appointed at the time of the renewal visit. Even with the establishment of an instructional leadership team (ILT), consisting of the principal, academy director, curriculum coordinators, and others, as necessary, there was limited evidence that the instructional leaders clearly understood how to guide teachers in translating the results of student assessment into day-to-day lessons that were aligned to state standards and that addressed the identified areas of student academic needs. Nor was this leadership and professional development of teachers sufficiently accessible to classroom teachers. As a result, the Institute found evidence of many new and inexperienced teachers floundering despite their best and sincerest efforts; and the level of teaching skill overall was insufficient and ineffective. Indeed, one simple but telling marker was that as of the 2005-06 school year, 19 teachers were new to the School, of those 11 were new to the profession—and by the time of the visit, the problems that the School had in bringing on experienced and qualified teachers and retaining them had not been ameliorated. From the start of the 2005-06 school year to the time of the renewal visit in November, 10 teachers had already moved on, some let go and others who had quit of their own accord.

The School's own leadership personnel conceded what can only be termed gross deficiencies in their organization, effectiveness, ability to prioritize and to bring sufficient numbers of qualified personnel to bear on the considerable challenges before them. Thus, though the School itself had

instituted a reorganization starting in the 2004-05 school year, and the Institute had informed them of numerous deficiencies in September 2004 and again emphatically in April 2005 (including an under-resourced instructional leadership team at every level), by the start of the 2005-06 school year – and at the time of the renewal review – the School was still struggling with even basic instructional issues. For example, in late September, the curriculum coordinator for social studies could not identify how students would be prepared for the state exam and who would do so (and presumably how they would be taught the curriculum for the year). In noting this, the curriculum coordinator voiced in an internal memo what was evident to the Institute’s renewal team and symptomatic of the School as a whole: “Everyone I know already has too much on his or her plate.”¹⁷ So, too, the reading instructor noted numerous deficiencies in the instructional staff’s core skills in reading and unfamiliarity with basic instructional techniques and terminology. These very basic issues, the placement of essential and sufficient personnel, the training of teachers in their craft, were issues that the instructional leaders, if effective, should have undertaken in the fall and spring of 2004-05 and in the summer before the 2005-06 school year.

Not surprisingly, given the level of instruction (and consistent with past findings) the Institute found as well, while student behavior had improved noticeably, especially in the public spaces – hallways were quiet for example and assembly and dismissal handled well – student behavior remained a problem in the classroom. While there were few instances of gross misbehavior, minor but chronic problems existed in many classrooms and impeded instruction in significant respects. Misbehavior was far worse in the “specials” (art, music, *etc.*) with some class periods approaching chaos.

The Institute further found that the curriculum that the School uses was not uniformly implemented within, or across, grades. For example, teachers inconsistently used the School’s reading program, Scott Foresman. Teachers were observed using comprehension strategies from Success for All (another reading program used previously), but leveled readers from Scott Foresman. Writing rubrics were created by classroom teachers that, as acknowledged by the curriculum coordinator, were not aligned from grade to grade. In mathematics, the School changed from *Prentice Hall Mathematics* to *Everyday Math*. However, some teachers opted to continue using *Prentice Hall*. Regardless of which program the teachers used, the School did not generally provide teachers with scope and sequence and pacing documents to assist in guiding teachers in developing daily lessons. This lack of consistency impedes the ability of all teachers to know what students in each grade are expected to know; in turn, it makes it impossible to implement a school-wide internal assessment system – a fact noted above. Moreover, it is a further indication of the superficiality of the changes at the School as well as basic failures in instructional leadership.

In response to the Institute’s draft of this report, Stepping Stone stated that teachers “developed with their grade level teams and the Curriculum Coordinators a pacing calendar to meet these [state] standards using the curriculum materials available to them,” and that such documents were made available for review in the office used by the Institute’s inspection team. In addition, during the renewal visit, the School’s math/science curriculum coordinator indicated that the School had scope and sequence documents for each grade level in science, and the School relied

¹⁷ That coordinator subsequently resigned shortly before the renewal visit.

on New York State standards and Edison for the same in mathematics. However, while such sequences might have been available, the fact is that although team members requested from teachers copies of the scope and sequence documents that they employed on a day-to-day basis, few if any of the teachers could or did provide them, suggesting, at the very least, that they were not using them to guide their instruction – thus making their availability to the inspectors a moot point.

From an organizational perspective, the School's board of trustees has improved markedly in its internal and oversight functions after a tumultuous record of internal struggle and conflicts in the first three and a half years of the School's operation. To its great credit, in the fourth year, a number of board members realized that the board needed to make significant changes in its structure and in the design and administration of the School. Board members appear, in the last year, to have worked tirelessly to attempt to implement reforms in the School's program, including seeking new leadership and external reviews from outside groups to help the board identify deficiencies.

However, although the board believes it has made some inroads in each area of need it has identified, and there is general evidence of that, *it admits that none of the efforts have resulted in significantly affecting (in a positive manner) student assessment scores, and admits its frustration with being unable to pinpoint the causal relationships between school design elements and student learning.*

Moreover, and particularly troubling, the School leadership and the board of trustees have not established a common vision in important respects. For instance, the board of trustees reported that the School leadership team did not consult them prior to determining to separate students in seventh and eighth grades into single-sex classrooms in an attempt to solve problems with student behavior – a very serious pedagogical decision with important legal consequences and considerations that should have been discussed at the board level. Indeed, it is unclear if such a separation is legal and it certainly would have required the prior permission of the Institute and revision to the charter. The school's counsel conceded that he had not been consulted prior to the instructional leader making this change.

Overall, the Institute finds that the personnel, programs and structures in place, while having improved from the level they were at in the earlier 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. Rather the Institute concludes that numerous and material deficiencies exist such that it cannot say with any assurance that the School would be educationally sound in the next charter period or likely to improve student learning and achievement. As such, it would also not further each of the purposes set forth in the Charter Schools Act, as also required by law.

The Institute's conclusion is not altered by the School's last-minute request (in response to the Institute's draft of the Renewal Report and preliminary recommendation to not renew the School) to amend its application for renewal to restructure its enrollment and eliminate grades six through eight, reducing the grades offered to Kindergarten through five. While there is little doubt that the School has better support structures in the lower grades, almost exclusively

because of the resources, supports and structures that the federal Reading First program provides (and insists upon), the fact is that this program, exemplary as it is of its kind, is not self-executing and relies heavily on the quality of the professional staff and instructional leaders in charge of implementing it. In this regard, the Institute's renewal team found that instructors in the lower grades were often inexperienced, ineffective and unskilled. As detailed in the relevant Benchmarks, inspectors found a pattern of incorrect grammatical usage, spelling and syntax errors and lack of basic knowledge in instructional practices. Moreover, and notably, when the instructional leader was asked about the quality of particular teachers whose instructional practices were deficient, he defended those particular hires and did not indicate any plan for increasing the quality of instructors at the School or even a significant urgency that this take place. Finally, the Reading First program is a Kindergarten through grade three program; in general the same kinds of support structures that are mandated by that program were not in place in grades four and five, though the school leadership indicated that it had plans to do so. In this regard, it is worth noting that Reading First is federally funded, expensive and no such similar funds are available for programs in grades beyond grade three.

Accordingly, for all the reasons set forth above, and based on the other findings and evidence set forth in more detail throughout this renewal report, the Institute recommends that the School not be granted a short- or full-term renewal and that its application for such be denied, including its application to operate as a Kindergarten through grade five institution. Rather, the Institute recommends that the school program that Stepping Stone is currently operating be terminated at the end of the 2005-06 school year and that renewal be granted beyond the end of the current school year solely for the purpose of allowing the corporation to orderly wind up its affairs.

RENEWAL BENCHMARKS

Evidence Category	Benchmarks	
<p>Renewal Question 1</p> <p>Is the School an Academic Success?</p>		
<p>Benchmark 1A</p> <p>Academic Attainment & Improvement</p>	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

Over the course of its charter, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has met almost none of the key academic outcomes it set for itself in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. While Stepping Stone showed greater progress from 2004 to 2005 in the performance of fourth grade students on the state’s English language arts and mathematics exams than did its comparison schools, these greater gains are at least to some extent a result of the school’s extremely low scores in 2003-04. Its fourth grade performance remains far below that of its identified comparison schools and far from its own performance measures.

In 2005, Stepping Stone’s eighth graders took the state’s English language arts and mathematics exams for the first time. Stepping Stone performed as well as the school district on the ELA exam and performed better than the district on the math exam; however, the school was far below its eighth grade measures.

For its absolute level of performance on the fourth-grade state examinations, Stepping Stone made some gains in student performance from 2004 to 2005. However, notwithstanding these higher scores, the exam results have fluctuated in a narrow range of extremely low performance throughout the charter period, such that the school has remained far from the measures set in its Accountability Plan. On the eighth grade state exams, there is no trend, as Stepping Stone had an eighth grade class for the first time in 2004-05. Again, the school was far from its stated measures in both eighth grade exams.

The measures themselves specifically address the performance of students who have been enrolled in the school for at least two full years prior to taking the state exams. With the exception of the eighth grade exams in 2005, students in the fourth grade who had been in the school for at least two years performed no better than students who had been in the school for a shorter period, suggesting that fourth graders in general have not benefited from having attended the school for more time.

In addition to ELA and math, results in science and social studies over the life of the charter have also placed Stepping Stone far from its stated science and social studies measures. Stepping Stone's fourth grade has consistently performed at a low level on the science exam, while the fifth grade has fluctuated on the social studies exam. According to follow-up information provided by the school after the renewal visit, the percent of all tested students scoring at the proficient level or above on the social studies exam has swung from 50 percent in 2002-03 down to 34 percent in 2004-05 and up again to 51 percent in 2005-06. While an improvement in the past year, it is still far below the school's stated measure. The eighth grade, taking the science and social studies exams for the first time in 2004-05, performed better than the lower grades on their respective exams, but also performed at a low level.

In the comparative measure in its Accountability Plan, Stepping Stone commits itself to "exceeding the mean score increases" on the fourth grade state exams of similar schools, as well as those of the Buffalo City School District. Given this formulation, the comparison is in terms of *gains* in performance over time, rather than in actual level of performance at any one point in time. As such, the school met its comparative outcome measure in both ELA and math in 2004-05, mostly by virtue of having such low scores in 2003-04 that it showed greater gains than its comparisons. In terms of a three-year interval (since the school's first year), it registered smaller gains in ELA and math than two of the three similar schools it had selected for comparison in its Accountability Plan, and which were still operating in 2004-05.¹⁸ It showed similar gains over the three years in ELA and math to those of the Buffalo school district.

Stepping Stone has had a consistently lower level of performance on the state's fourth grade math exam than that of the similar schools and Buffalo City School District. With a few exceptions, mostly in its first year of operation, it has had a lower level of performance on the state's fourth grade ELA exam than that of the comparison schools; it has been consistently lower than the school district.¹⁹

There is no comparative outcome measure for Stepping Stone's performance on the state's eighth grade exams. As the school administered the eighth grade exams for the first time in 2004-05, there are no data to show "mean score increases" as there are for the fourth grade exams. Also, no similar schools with an eighth grade are identified in the accountability Plan. Nevertheless, in 2004-05, Stepping Stone did perform as well as the school district on the ELA exam and performed better than the district on the math exam.²⁰

Based on results on the value-added to student learning according to spring-to-spring cohort gains on the TerraNova Test, Stepping Stone met its Accountability Plan measures in reading and math during the 2003-04 school year; it did not meet them in the other two years for which data are available. However, the success of this cohort must be put in the context of its previous low performance on the TerraNova Test. These 2003-04 spring-to-spring results are based on spring 2004 gains from an average score of less than the 24th percentile on the spring 2003 tests.

¹⁸ One school closed after the 2002-03 school year; a second closed after 2003-04.

¹⁹ Two of the three comparison schools operating in 2004-05 had higher proportions of low income students (i.e., qualifying for free lunch).

²⁰ This comparison to the school district is based on the performance of students who had been in the school for at least two full years, as stated in its outcome measures. When the scores of all the eighth graders who took the tests are compared to those of the district, the school performs less well in ELA and the same in math.

For the small cohort of students who were enrolled for the four years of the charter, there were positive NCE gains in both the reading and math TerraNova tests, but they were not sufficient to close the gap between their ongoing level of performance and grade level. Indeed, at the end of the 2004-05 school year, the average score on both the reading and math tests was below the 35th percentile. As data suggests that a student must score well above the 50th percentile to be more likely than not to test as proficient on the fourth grade state assessments, this average must be viewed as extremely low.

Overall, Stepping Stone met its comparative Accountability Plan measures in one year and its value-added measures in another year. In both instances, the school registered sufficient gains from extremely low scores on the state and TerraNova tests in the previous year. However, these successes were more short-term technical adjustments than indicators of sustained improvement. Over the life of the charter, the comparative outcome data show that the school, having started at a very low level of performance, has neither reduced the gap between itself and the school district, nor between itself and the two similar schools with a higher proportion of low income students.

The assessment data indicate that, at the time of renewal, students are not being prepared for rigorous middle and high school programs, much less for graduating from high school having passed five Regents exams.

In response to a draft of this report, Stepping Stone states:

“Preliminary New York State ELA Exam scores at grade 4 indicate a cohort proficiency level of 47% (based on 2004-05 cut scores). This reflects a gain of 27% over the previous year. Fourth graders at Stepping Stone this year recently took the SED Math Sample Exam. Preliminary scores indicate that 44% of SSACS students are proficient – a gain of 20% over last year’s scores.

While these scores are, of course, preliminary, they provide an additional indicator of the academic momentum underway at Stepping Stone.”

Because the ELA scores are based on last year’s conversion of raw scores to Performance Levels, the validity of the projected proficiency level cannot be determined. The math scores, based on a sample test are even less reliable. Even if these test results are valid indicators of the performance of the reported students, they represent very limited information. Stepping Stone’s third through eighth grades are taking the state exams this year, but the school in its follow-up comments does not report on results of the other grades. The narrow reporting may be attributable to the specificity of the school’s accountability measure, which is limited to the fourth and eighth grades (since there was only a fourth and eighth grade test up to this year and the school proposes eliminating the eighth grade). The reported results are also based only on the relatively small number of students who have been in the school for at least two years, as called for in the Accountability Plan. Notwithstanding the questionable reliability of the scores and their being limited to fourth graders in the school for at least two years, the fact remains that even given the improvement, these results still reflect a low level of student performance: about the same as Buffalo in ELA, far below Buffalo in math and far below the stated ELA and math measures in the Accountability Plan.

In addition, while the School has submitted preliminary data in ELA (and test sample data in math) as to fourth grade performance and has indicated that the results show that the longer the students have been there the better the students do, the significance of this data, if any, is highly questionable. In the first place, the numbers of students are small, making it difficult to determine the significance. However, more critically, the school failed to provide the comparative percentage of students at proficient who had been at the school for less than two years. Finally, while the data the school provided undeniably shows that the longer that particular cohort of fourth graders (2005-06) had attended Stepping Stone (which cohort was all students attending for two years or more), the higher the percentage of students who may be proficient (or at least scored higher, see above), in ELA, the numbers of students in each subgroup is so small as to make any meaningful evaluation impossible. More importantly, however, this data is contradicted by data from the previous year’s cohort of fourth graders (2004-05), in which those students who had been at the school for two years or more did no better than students who had been there for less than two years. As each cohort attended Stepping Stone for some significant time during its first four years (when the School admits its educational program was grossly deficient), the difference in results between the two cohorts most likely indicates a simple selection bias on the part of the 2005-06 cohort, *i.e.*, those students who chose to continue to attend Stepping Stone were successful. Taken as a whole, therefore, the new data do not provide any basis for

claiming, as Stepping Stone has, that its academic program has turned the corner (if such metaphor is even an appropriate one in the first place).

Nor do these results strongly support, as the school suggests that the academic program in the lower grades is significantly stronger, and has been historically, than the middle school grades, though it is that assumption apparently that underlies the school's request to move to a Kindergarten through five structure and eliminate grades six through eight. In fact, from a comparative perspective, the eighth grade scores at Stepping Stone in 2004 and 2005 were stronger in ELA than in fourth grade.

Accountability Plan Outcome Measures

In its Accountability Plan, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School set outcome measures to demonstrate its academic success in the key subjects of English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, as well as science and social studies. The outcome measures include the following three required types: 1) the absolute level of student performance on state examinations;²¹ 2) the comparative level of student performance on state 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.²² The following tables indicate the specific outcomes Stepping Stone set for itself accompanied by its annual results.

In addition to being held to these accountability measures, Stepping Stone 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. Stepping Stone'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.

²¹ Please note: as Stepping Stone had a fourth grade from the first year of its charter, it administered the state's fourth grade examinations in ELA and mathematics during each year of its operation. As the school had an eighth grade for the first time in the fourth year of its charter, it administered the state's eighth grade examinations in ELA and mathematics only in 2004-05.

²² As 2001-02 was the school's first year of operation, there are no value-added cohort results for that year. As a result, year-to-year value-added cohort data was first available in 2002-03.

Absolute Level of Performance on State Examinations

Accountability Plan		Results *				
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grade	School Year			
			2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
ELA	By the end of the first charter period, 75 percent of students (who have been at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School for at least two years) will perform at level 3 or level 4 on the New York State English Language Arts Test each year and will thereby be considered proficient.	4	17%	29%	0%	20%
		8	No students in grade	No students in grade	No students in grade	30%
Math	By the end of the first charter period, 75 percent of students (who have been at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School for at least two years) will perform at level 3 or level 4 on the New York State Math Test and will thereby be considered proficient.	4	10%	27%	16%	21%
		8	No students in grade	No students in grade	No students in grade	37%
Science	By the end of the first charter period, 60 percent of students (who have been at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School for at least two years) will be considered <u>proficient</u> as defined by the 4 th grade New York State Science Exam.	4	0%	30%	17%	15%
		8	No students in grade	No students in grade	No students in grade	46%
Social Studies	By the end of the first charter period, 60 percent of students (who have been at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School for at least two years) will be considered <u>proficient</u> as defined by the 5 th grade New York State Social Studies Test.	5	N/A	N/A	30%	24%
		8	No students in grade	No students in grade	No students in grade	37%

* In 2001-02 and 2002-03, results are for all tested students irrespective of time enrolled.

Comparative Level of Performance on State Examinations

Accountability Plan		Results					
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grade	Comparison	Percent at Levels 3&4 *			
				2005	Change		
					Three Years 2002-05	Two Years 2003-05	One Year 2004-05
ELA	The yearly increase in the mean performance of 4 th grade Stepping Stone Academy Charter School students on the New York State English Language Arts Assessment will exceed mean score increases of students at PS 11, 53, 57, 63, 80, and the Buffalo School District.**	4	SSACS	20	3	(-9)	18
			Buffalo	39	5	4	5
			PS 11	28	15	1	3
			PS 53	28	12	13	(-2)
			PS 80	23	(-14)	(-57)	(-23)
Math	The yearly increase in the mean performance of 4 th grade Stepping Stone Academy Charter School students on the New York State Math Assessment will exceed mean score increases of students at PS 11, 53, 57, 63, 80, and the Buffalo School District.**	4	SSACS	35	25	8	21
			Buffalo	67	22	9	1
			PS 11	66	48	8	15
			PS 53	78	38	24	(-9)
			PS 80	49	(-9)	(-15)	(-24)

* Note: in its reporting, Stepping Stone presents results in terms of changes in the percent of students scoring at Levels 3 and 4; however, as the Accountability Plan's outcomes had been stated as students' *exceeding mean score increases*, they should be reported as changes in scaled scores. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this presentation the school's method of reporting percent at Levels 3 and above is used.

** PS 57 and 63 were closed in 2005

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

Accountability Plan		Results				
Subject	Outcome Measure	Grades	School Year			
			2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Reading	Student cohorts in grades two and above will demonstrate average progress of at least 3 NCE's per year as measured by mean scores on the Terra Nova (READING subtest.)	2	N/A	(-3.3)	4.7	6.8
		3		(-1.3)	(-0.8)	(-6.7)
		4		(-10.0)	5.3	0.2
		5		1.5	20.0	(-3.6)
		6		(-1.1)	8.2	(-2.7)
		7		--	9.4	(-0.7)
		8		--	--	0.9
Math	Student cohorts in grades two and above will demonstrate average progress of at least 3 NCE's per year as measured by mean scores on the Terra Nova (MATH subtest.)	2	N/A	0.3	20.9	6.5
		3		0.0	(-3.8)	(-11.6)
		4		(-0.3)	2.2	3.2
		5		(-8.1)	2.0	0.7
		6		(-2.1)	4.6	0.0
		7		--	2.5	(-6.4)
		8		--	--	3.3

Adequate Yearly Progress as Required by NCLB

The State Education Department's school accountability report, "Accountability Status November 3, 2005", states that, based on performance in the 2004-05 school year, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School is *In Corrective Action in Elementary Level Mathematics*. This designation is applied to schools which have been identified as in need of improvement for three consecutive years.²³

²³ The State Education Department provides the following definition of corrective action. (See <http://emsc32.nysed.gov/irts/school-accountability/about.shtml>)

"If Title I schools identified as in Need of Improvement (Year 2) continue not to make Adequate Yearly Progress, they are identified for Corrective Action."

<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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The school has devoted a great deal of time and effort to administering a large number of assessments. However, the assessment system as currently configured is incoherent in some respects and incomplete in others. While the school gathers data, there is little evidence that it systematically drives instructional improvement, especially for those students who are demonstrably below grade level.

Stepping Stone administers a variety of assessments outlined in the master assessment calendar distributed at the beginning of the school year. Students take the required New York State exams and the Terra Nova. Primary students take the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), as required by the Reading First grant. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary is given to Kindergarten and first grade students and the Woodcock-Johnson III is given to students in grades two and three.

As an Edison-managed school, Stepping Stone must administer the Edison benchmarks, a fundamental component of the school's internal assessment program. This national test, created by Edison Schools, Inc., is based on state assessments from across the country and is given to students in grades two through eight. The benchmark assessments are administered quarterly for social studies and science, and monthly for English language arts and mathematics. Each benchmark exam tests year-end standards or benchmarks, but is not aligned to the school's curriculum.

Student assessment results from Spring 2005 were shared with classroom teachers during the school's pre-opening professional development session, according to the school's principal. While some teachers reported receiving the Terra Nova results from Spring 2005, there is limited evidence that the results were analyzed. The Junior Academy house coordinator reviewed Terra Nova scores from last spring with the house teachers. They used the results to

organize students by high, middle, and low scores and subsequently, to group students. There is no evidence they were used for any other purpose. There is no evidence that the results were analyzed to assess previous instruction or to target future instruction. For example, the interviews of grade five teachers and observation of grade five classes and grade level coordinator team meetings did not betray any evidence that indicated the use of the 2005 results of grade four testing in mathematics and ELA. All references were to either the Edison benchmarks or the impending results of a ten-week test constructed by the academic curriculum coordinators.

While Stepping Stone has recently set a priority of using student assessment data for its instructional program and has laid the groundwork for using a rich array of instruments, the data and instruments are not now components of a system where performance standards, instruction, student work and assessments are integrated. This appears to be due in part to the lack of clarity that surrounds the design and usage of the benchmark assessments.

Interviews with school leaders, curriculum coordinators and numerous teachers reveal that the school does not have a common understanding of the purpose and intent of the benchmark assessments.

The two key issues in regard to having a common understanding are: (1) the degree to which the benchmarks are aligned to standards and the curricula, and (2) the extent to which the benchmarks can serve as predictors for student's individual performance on the New York State tests. According to the Institute's analysis, the benchmarks are not directly aligned with the key ideas and performance indicators of the state standards. In interviews, the principal reported that the benchmarks are not aligned to standards but rather provide "ongoing information about strengths and weaknesses." In contrast, many teachers reported that the assessments are aligned to standards. More straightforward, though equally problematic, is the lack of alignment between the benchmarks and the curricula taught in the classrooms.

The staff has been told and they believe that the Edison Benchmarks are a predictor of performance on state exams. The Junior Academy house coordinator asserted that "the Benchmarks give us a guess of how students will do on state tests." The benchmarks as a whole have been aligned with the state standards. However, to the extent that the monthly assessments only tap selected strands, these strands may not yet have been taught, and the test, by indicated selected mastery, is intended to be diagnostic and provides little predictive value.

The benchmark assessments were designed to provide teachers with ongoing monthly information about the progress of their second through eighth grade students toward meeting end-of-grade expectations, aligned with New York State and national standards. The intent is to help teachers tailor their instruction to the specific needs of students and help schools work more strategically toward higher achievement. In administering them electronically monthly, teachers use them to identify skills or strands which need to be readjusted and re-taught, to pinpoint deficits, and adjust lesson plans; they are not primarily used to gauge the effectiveness of instruction.

The data track student's abilities and skills and enable teachers to focus on the strongest and weakest students. While these data offer a general evaluation of school-wide performance, they are not used for specific decision-making on the efficacy of aspects of the instructional program, much less individual student performance. Teachers use the results to focus on general skill weaknesses of students, not on the daily instruction's impact on learning.

However, no one administration of the English language arts benchmarks during the course of the year after September contains a comprehensive set of items that represent all the skills a student is expected to master at that particular grade level, nor a set of items, aligned with a grade's scope and sequence that reflects what students have recently been taught. Rather, it is a hybrid test that provides a monthly update on the extent to which students are mastering specific skills as a proxy for the more general New York State standards.

The design and administration of these exams precludes the teachers from accurately determining whether their students are in fact meeting state performance standards. The teachers also stated that not every curriculum strand and/or skill set would be covered on each benchmark exam, and that some curriculum strands and skills would appear on the benchmark exams although they had not yet been taught to the students. For example, one consulting teacher stated that the "content is based on what students should know by the end of the grade. Every skill is not covered by each test. The strands change each month... It does not necessarily mean that those skills have been taught." This was echoed by the academy director, who stated "[the benchmarks assess] a random set of skills that don't necessarily align with the sequence of the curriculum." As a result, the benchmark exams are an unreliable

indicator of whether students are meeting state performance standards. According to the grade four teachers, if they want to determine the effect of the areas that they have covered in their classrooms, they have to do their own item analysis by omitting the questions that cover content that they have not taught.

The administration has directed the teachers to highlight items on the assessment results that the class has done the best on and the ones they have done the worst on and to focus on teaching those particular skills, by incorporating them into the planned scope and sequence, even if the items come from different standards and many other items represent similarly low performance. This is particularly true for the Junior Academy results from which, as the Math Curriculum Coordinator states, teachers have to pick from the list of weaknesses.

This type of test restricts the school's ability to evaluate the benchmark data for immediate and direct feedback on how well teachers have delivered an instructional unit or on how well students have made progress, based on general class instruction, toward meeting state standards. Because of the indirect relationship between the assessment and actual current instruction, the benchmarks are more useful to identify skill areas for supplementary instructional support, rather than for determining the effectiveness of current, focal classroom instruction. As such, it limits opportunities for teachers to understand whether or not their teaching is effective. Given the lack of teacher strength in the school, such teaching-learning assessment opportunities are sorely needed.

Currently, teachers make their own decisions about the changes and improvements they need to make in their own instruction. There is little guidance, particularly in mathematics, as to how teachers are to use the assessments to guide their own instruction. Teachers and administrators do meet regularly to review assessment data; however, there is minimal follow-through on the suggestions given by the staff developers. Also, suggestions and strategies primarily focus around changing student groupings and are not connected to specific classroom instructional modifications.

Self-reflective insight into the connection between what teachers have taught and what students have, as a consequence, learned is a critical component of developing their pedagogical practice. The benchmark system's group decision-making does not support this individual professional development. Further, because the curriculum coordinators, rather than the academy director, have the day-to-day responsibility of implementing the assessment program with teachers at their grade-level meetings, there is little opportunity to use teacher assessment of his/her students as a platform for developing pedagogical competence, something the school needs but which is beyond the role of the already overwhelmed curriculum coordinators.

Apparently in response to concerns regarding the benchmarks, the school has begun to administer a new set of "10-week" assessments. As the name implies, these assessments are to be given every ten weeks. At the time of the renewal visit, only the first, or "baseline," assessment had been administered.

When asked what additional value the school derives from this additional set of assessments, the principal responded that this gives teachers "one more tool to draw from." Despite repeated questioning, inspectors were unable to determine what additional information the 10-week assessments provide.

The curriculum coordinators are responsible for developing the 10-week assessments in the core subject areas. Although each coordinator brought certain experiences and skills to the position, neither had experience developing assessments to ensure alignment with standards and validity and reliability, or in analyzing student performance data. Additionally, the curriculum coordinator who created the English language arts exam resigned a month prior to the renewal visit.

While the newly appointed English language arts coordinator was aware that her predecessor developed the baseline assessments administered at the beginning of the year, she did not know what her predecessor did with the results from the beginning of the year and had no information about how they have been or will be reviewed.

In conclusion, Stepping Stone continues to put a great deal of emphasis on Edison's Benchmark assessments. In terms of the criteria set forth above for this renewal benchmark on the school's use of assessment, the Edison Benchmark assessments are systematically administered and are aligned with state standards, even though their predictive value is limited to the extent that any one administration (especially in ELA) represents discrete skill

mastery rather than an indication of an overall performance meeting the range of state standards. They are most useful for group information and have more limited application for assessing the effectiveness of recent classroom instruction and student learning. Moreover, as actually applied in the school, they are not in alignment with the school's various scope and sequences.

<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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The school has recently begun to revamp its curriculum. While some components are in place, the curriculum as implemented is currently not organized, seamless, and cohesive across the school. While there are rather prescriptive statements in the renewal documents as to use of programs at each of the grade levels, observations and interviews, during the school’s renewal visit, revealed that the espoused curriculum is not uniformly implemented within or across grades.

Literacy

In prior years, Stepping Stone used the Success for All model for its literacy instruction. Since the school was awarded a Reading First grant, it has established the federally designed Kindergarten through third grade program and adopted Scott Foresman, a commercially developed literacy program which is aligned to the state standards. The school is currently in the final year of the grant. It was unclear, at the time of renewal, whether the school would continue to receive funds to fully support the continuation of the program beyond the current school year. This year, the school has expanded the use of Scott Foresman to Kindergarten through sixth grades.

Classroom observations indicated that while all teachers are using Scott Foresman, its use is inconsistent. It appears to be partially implemented. Observed instruction was a mix of the Success for All reading comprehension strategies and the use of leveled readers from the Scott Foresman series. In some grades, teachers opted to eliminate the anthology portion of Scott Foresman, which teaches vocabulary story elements and reading comprehension. There was no evidence that there was a coherent and school-wide understanding of which elements should be used and why.

According to the ELA curriculum coordinator, writing instruction is based on the core curriculum of New York State standards. As resources, teachers use *Write Source 4-6* and *Step up to Writing*. ELA curriculum coordinator develops rubrics for teachers that are specific to a writing assignment. She claimed that at times teachers also develop rubrics, which she then *tries* to review. She acknowledged that, as their development is a grade level activity, they are not aligned from grade to grade.

Mathematics

The school’s application for renewal indicated that the school was changing from the *Prentice Hall Mathematics* program to *Everyday Math* in Kindergarten through fifth grades, and that sixth grade students would also use the same program. Most teachers appeared to use the *Everyday Math* program. However, a few Kindergarten through sixth grade teachers opted to continue using *Prentice Hall*. Some teachers reported receiving inadequate guidance regarding mathematics curriculum. Without a scope and sequence to ensure that the fundamental building blocks which are crucial for math understanding and development are laid, they make decisions about what to teach on their own, especially in mathematics. Moreover, as noted in the benchmark on internal assessment, the result of using two different math programs makes having a coherent and effective internal assessment program impossible.

Junior Academy

Teachers within the Junior Academy cited the New York State Curriculum Standards as the espoused curriculum of the school, and stated that they utilize various programs and other resources to teach the content and skills

recommended by the Standards to their students. For example, a consulting teacher stated, “The curriculum that is in place are the New York State standards,” and that they “really use [other programs] as resources.” Another teacher stated “there is no set curriculum for reading writing; we start with the standards... [and] plug in other materials for support.” This approach was confirmed by the curriculum coordinator for math and science, who stated “*Everyday Math* is a program, not a curriculum. New York State tells us what we have to teach, though we will use other ways to get at some standards.”

While this is a sound approach, there is very limited evidence that teachers in the Junior Academy utilize an organized and well-planned approach to the teaching of content and skills. Although teachers in the Junior Academy were asked to provide copies of the scope and sequence for each of their classes to the renewal team, they did not do so. The curriculum coordinator was also asked to provide unit plans for the thematic unit in place at the school during the renewal visit, and did not. Subsequent to the renewal visit, after the issuance of this report in draft form, the school submitted a large volume of curriculum documents that included the following:

- unit and lesson plans for the week of and week prior to the renewal visit in November (spanning November 7 – 18). The unit and lesson plans covered Kindergarten through eighth grades in English language arts, social studies, reading and writing. The topic or theme of these unit and lesson plans was “Rosa Parks” or “Civil Rights,” including “women’s suffrage”;
- rubrics for scoring student work in relation to the unit and lesson plans in the areas of writing, presentation, reading and vignettes in Kindergarten through eighth grades; and
- copies of student workbook pages or worksheets for Kindergarten through third grades, fifth grade and seventh and eighth grades.

Even with the submission of these documents, regardless of whether the documents had been in the binders for review by the renewal team, the fact remains that classroom teachers were not facile about the underpinnings for their work in the classroom and did not receive the type of support necessary to address their limited knowledge.

Although teachers posted the standard being addressed by each lesson on the white board in each classroom, there exists a deficiency of evidence to suggest that teachers in the Junior Academy have aligned the New York State Curriculum Standards with specific learning activities in an authentic and meaningful way. As a result, their students do not currently benefit from an organized and well-planned approach to the teaching of content and skills.

In determining how to use the curricular materials, teachers often seem to be left on their own. No pacing calendar was evident (Although, as noted above, the mathematics/science curriculum coordinator stated that one exists.) in order to complete the curriculum or adapt it to the students’ needs. One of the house coordinators reported that teachers create their own scope and sequence and curriculum. The *Edison Companion*, a weekly pacing guide that monitors and tracks individual teacher work requirements, embedding needs, teaching methods and assessment methods, is available from Edison, the school’s management partner. However, the principal was unsure of the extent to which it was used in the school. To his knowledge, the curriculum coordinators would use them, but he was not sure how closely they were followed as a result of student needs. Use of this document was not mentioned in any other staff interviews.

As such, inexperienced, but well meaning, teachers are determining the alignment, scope and sequence of curriculum. Such decisions are based upon collegial interactions, grade level discussions and sometimes faulty assessment of the meaning of the data that is provided or gained through other internal testing. When teachers submit lesson plans “to make sure they address standards,” there is little evidence of feedback.

As a final note, the whole school was engaged in a thematic unit about Rosa Parks during the renewal visit. Renewal team visitors were unable to ascertain how this unit was connected to the adopted curriculum or how teachers ensured that it assisted students in reaching standards. The lack of planning documents, during the renewal visit, prevented the team from determining the connection to required content and skills. Subsequently, such documentation was provided.

<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>

Instructional Leadership

While the school has redesigned its instructional leadership structure, they have not yet been able to facilitate a coherent alignment of curriculum, classroom instruction, learning activities, instructional resources, support, and assessments. As yet, instructional leaders at the school have not been able to ensure that teacher planning time, lesson development, and internal assessment systems lead to the successful attainment of the school’s mission and academic goals.

The school’s board, along with its management partner, has instituted several changes to the leadership and organizational structure of Stepping Stone, primarily this school year, in an effort to improve student academic performance. However, student academic performance has not shown signs of significant improvement. Those changes include the establishment of two curriculum coordinator positions to guide classroom teachers in the areas of English language art/social studies and mathematics/science. Previously, the Edison model included “lead teachers” to support classroom instruction. However, upon previous visits to the school, the Institute found the staff members holding those positions were ill equipped to provide the in-depth instructional knowledge and support needed by the school’s largely young and inexperienced teachers. The school also now has an instructional

leadership team (ILT), comprised of the principal, academy director, the two curriculum coordinators, the special education coordinator and the Reading First coordinator. These individuals are now responsible for guiding the school's academic program. In addition, the school was awarded a Reading First grant that funds a reading coach position for grades Kindergarten through three. To extend some of the benefits of a Reading First program to grades four through six, the school created a fourth through sixth grade reading coach position. However, due to budgetary constraints that position was combined with that of the English language arts/social studies curriculum coordinator position.

The school instituted additional school administrative and management elements this school year, including the ILT, the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School Leadership Team (SSACS Leadership Team or school-wide team), and house coordinators. It is yet unclear the extent to which these changes are effective in providing clear instructional support that links pedagogy, assessment and curriculum. The house coordinators are responsible for facilitating and communicating between teachers and school administration, and not for instructional support (although one house coordinator still fills that role within the third grade primary house/academy). The ILT's focus is professional development and teacher support in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment, although the school-wide team may also address issues related to the academic program as well. There seems to be significant overlap in the roles of the two teams.

There is limited to no evidence to suggest that instructional leaders at the school have been able to provide sufficient levels of support during teacher planning time and oversight of teacher planning time, lesson development, and internal assessment systems, such that teachers will be successful in leading to the attainment of the school's mission and academic goals. Although three Junior Academy teachers stated that the instructional leadership team consists of the school's principal, academy director, and curriculum coordinators (among other staff), they stated that they primarily receive support and oversight of teacher planning time, lesson development, and assessment from the school's curriculum coordinators. However, one first year teacher stated that she leaves her weekly lesson plans in the appropriate curriculum coordinator's mailbox, but that she has never received feedback on them. She then stated, "If I don't hear anything, that's a good thing." One of the curriculum coordinators stated that she would only set up a conference to discuss lesson plans with a teacher if there is a "lesson planning issue." As a result, teachers do not benefit from a proactive approach to planning standards-based instruction and therefore struggle with doing so effectively.

Teachers often appear to be left on their own with regards to the implementation of the curriculum. Teachers in the Junior Academy were unable to produce documentation of a curricular scope and sequences for their classes that would evidence an aligned and well-planned approach to standards-based instruction. One house coordinator reported that teachers create their own scope and sequence and curriculum. Due to the fact that there is limited communication between the instructional leadership team and teachers regarding unit plans, lesson plans, instructional activities, or assessments, the teachers do not have access to an exemplar approach to standards-based instruction.

At Stepping Stone, there are numerous personnel positions devoted to instructional leadership. The school has set up numerous leadership teams. Overall, the school has a number of people, structures and activities in place. However, there is a lack of clarity and alignment in their work. Renewal team visitors exerted considerable effort in an attempt to untangle the work of the instructional leaders. They concluded that the structures are in place but are not being used effectively to clarify priorities and guide the work of the school. For example, while some analysis of student assessment data is conducted, it has not led to the identification of instructional needs nor to the establishment of school-wide priorities. The school offers substantial professional development, but the selection does not appear to be aligned to identify student needs. While the principal stated that they analyzed the student performance data to determine the necessary changes to the instructional program, he was unable to identify the necessary changes beyond a very superficial level. For example, the principal stated that teachers should use more manipulatives because "math scores are low," that he would "make sure that teachers use the inquiry method in science" because too many students failed the science exam, and that teachers should work on reading comprehension. When asked to identify what he learned from the data analysis, he suggested that the curriculum coordinators were "better equipped" to answer. In fact, no one interviewed could clearly state the school's priorities. Parents who participated in the focus group, including the parent liaison, did not know the principal's priorities.

Quality of Instruction

At the time of the visit, the student learning objectives and learning activities reflected low levels of academic rigor. Furthermore, student work products on display throughout the school, along with the rubrics used to assess them and accompanying teacher comments demonstrated low expectations for student work.

Learning activities reflected the inexperience of the teachers. Often the instructional practices observed did not seem to maximize the acquisition of the skills or content being imparted. Lessons generally had a focus but the objective(s) of lessons were typically vaguely defined. Renewal team members observed little modeling and noted that lessons often lacked assessments (*e.g.*, questioning techniques, observation of written work) to discern whether an instructional activity generated the desired learning. The teachers did not make regular use of effective feedback techniques intended to ascertain the level of student understanding. In all observed classroom settings, sampling for student understanding was cursory and led the teacher to “move on” without a clear picture of student need and/or readiness to move on.

In too many classrooms teachers spent an inordinate amount of time maintaining order, thereby decreasing the time available to focus on academic issues. Teachers would repeatedly cut off their instruction to admonish the class about talking, not paying attention, *etc.* These episodes required the teachers to revert to the discipline tools of the color-coded cards, the Junior Academy’s *Citizen Cash*, or overpowering the class with yelling at them. These tactics had the effect of maintaining order, but did not contribute to a productive learning environment. Because the teachers did not motivate the students and the rationale for a lesson was, at best, implicit, students were not engaged.

Class periods generally included time for small group activity. In a grade four classroom, students did not know their multiplication facts and were unable to complete long division. When students worked in their heterogeneous math groups, most of the work was completed by the most *able* student, often the less able participating *passively*. In many classes, the activity was for the most part an opportunity to talk to friends. At best, one or two groups would be somewhat on-task; the others appeared to use the time as a social event. In such cases, teachers seemed to tolerate this lack of engagement or to spend most of their time admonishing the students in groups.

Despite the fact that the instructional leadership team has recognized low expectations for student performance and low levels of academic rigor as an issue at the school, many teachers continue to design learning activities and assessments that reinforce and perpetuate low levels of student academic attainment as measured by external assessments.

There is a range of evidence to suggest that the instructional leadership team has recognized the issue of academic rigor and grade-level appropriate work as a concern across grade levels. For example, in the English language arts/social studies curriculum coordinator’s notebook, a document outlining expectations around student work displays includes “evidence of critical thinking and rigor; grade level appropriate [work]” as a requirement; the same expectation was set for student writing portfolios. In addition, one of the curriculum coordinators stated that increasing teachers’ expectations for student work was a motivating factor behind the introduction of the school’s “thematic unit.” In his weekly newsletter, *William’s Weekly Words*, dated November 2, 2005, the principal reminded teachers “rubrics needs [sic] to accurately reflect student ability.”

However, despite the instructional leadership’s focus on increasing the level of student academic performance, student work displays throughout the school reflect that teachers at those grade levels continue to solicit and accept grade-inappropriate work from their students. Evidence from student work on display for grade eight social studies and grades seven and eight English language arts demonstrated similarly below grade level expectations for student performance and low levels of academic rigor, including one writing task that simply asked students to describe a “favorite relative and tell what is special about him or her.” Posted work for grade four social studies consisted of one-paragraph compositions that appeared to be at the draft stage, lacked summary statements, and contained few details.

In addition to assigning projects that do not demand grade-level skills, teachers’ use of rubrics revealed their lack of understanding that the strength of using rubrics lies in the establishment and consistent application of high standards or expectations at, and across, grade levels. In numerous cases, student work was accompanied by rubrics that assigned inappropriately high scores given the quality of the work. In some cases, the rubric itself demanded little of

students. For example, the task objective for the eighth grade mathematics student work on display stated “Students used Microsoft Excel to generate graphs that shows [sic] the difference in the number, or percentage, [sic] of African Americans who had met a particular level of academic achievement in 1954 compared to 2002.” Students had either completed a pie chart or a bar graph. Of six examples on display, each of them only compared two pieces of data. In order to earn a four (the highest score possible), students were required to do the following: “1. Student has used excel [sic] to generate a graph showing two different pieces of data and their data table. 2. Student maintains eye contact with audience, seldom turning to notes [NOTE: In order to earn a three in this category, a student needed to simply “print the graph”]. 3. Graph has a title that is grammatically correct, and very clear. 4. Graph is clearly labeled and all variables contain units. 5. Graph style chosen is unique and not one gone over as an example.”

Additionally, there were many cases in which the teacher failed to use the rubric appropriately and gave high scores for low-quality work. Student work posted for second grade was accompanied by a rubric that required the use of descriptive words. There were no descriptive words in any of the pieces of student work, yet many of them were awarded scores of three and four. In another case, a fourth grade work that was missing several words, making the sentences incoherent, was assigned a four. Some primary writing was scored with rubrics that required at least two sentences to earn a three or four. Yet many pieces of student work that contained only one sentence were marked with a score of three.

Teachers’ assignments and comments on submitted work demonstrated a tolerance for a lower level that was deemed to be exemplary, or even acceptable, work. Thus, students are not given opportunities to become practiced and accustomed to demonstrating high levels of academic performance on internal assessments, and are therefore unable to do so on external assessments.

Students At-Risk of Academic Failure

The Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has instituted the Family and Student Support Team (FASST) process through which limited numbers of students have received assistance to support learning. However, at the time of the renewal visit, the remedial needs of the majority of the school’s student population were not being addressed.

The Family and Student Support Team (FASST) was created as a proactive process of dealing with students who were experiencing academic or behavioral problems that interfered with learning. FASST, coordinated by the student support manager, meets weekly as part of the house team meetings, and includes the principal, the special education coordinator, the nurse, as well as teachers and others, as necessary. The FASST process includes the presentation of a concern, discussion and development of a support plan, and contact with parents. The support plan is implemented by classroom teachers/others and after a designated period of time, the results are presented to the team and discussed. Ultimately, the success of the FASST’s intervention plan determines whether additional steps should be taken to address the issues initially presented. Final outcomes could include referral for evaluation for special education services, the development of a behavioral intervention plan, academic intervention-type services, referral to outside agency(ies) or other forms of assistance.

From descriptions provided in interviews, the FASST process appears to be inclusive and comprehensive. However, given the requirements of the process, it appears to be very time-consuming and therefore benefits few students. Some teachers could not identify students who had been referred for review, and additional teachers could not identify the services provided to students who had been through the process. While the assessment process appears to be thorough, once a problem has been identified there are few options for interventions. The intervention is ad hoc and teacher-initiated. There is no school-wide program, other than tutoring. The availability of tutoring varies widely depending on the grade of the student.

The school has instituted a federally sponsored Reading First Program that uses a mandated curriculum to improve student reading skills in grades Kindergarten through three. This initiative supports three tutors for the fifteen Kindergarten through third grade classes. Students who score “Intensive,” the lowest of the three levels on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment, receive an extra 30 minutes of explicit, systemic instruction by tutors using the Wilson Reading Curriculum. These tutors are certified teachers, but have not yet been classroom teachers.

For grades four through six, Edison, the school's management partner, funds an additional reading tutor position. However, the individual who functions as the fourth through sixth grade reading tutor does not benefit from the same level of support and training as the Reading First tutors. Additionally, this tutor is the only available resource for the eight grade four through six classes.

Other than the limited tutoring in English language arts, teachers are responsible for all remedial instruction. Teachers all stated that they made decisions for students based on their own understanding of the data they received and got little support particularly in math in supporting the students who were below grade level. In some classes, the percentage of students below grade level exceeds 80 percent. The only adjustment of instruction appears to be grouping and, after assessment of Edison benchmark data, regrouping to address perceived and observed student deficiencies. In some cases, teachers had a learning center dedicated to remedial efforts particular to the lesson at hand, but no direct instruction designed to address individual ELA or math deficits was observed.

The situation is similar in the Junior Academy. Efforts on behalf of the school to provide targeted academic support to students in the Junior Academy who are at risk of academic failure are not well organized and are insufficient. Although one teacher in the Junior Academy described a process through which some students' needs are met through the Family and Student Support Team, the consulting teacher for the Junior Academy stated, "center activities are used to address student weaknesses." This approach was verified by one curriculum coordinator who stated that the most commonly utilized academic intervention was group instruction. She said that teachers rely on peer tutoring, small group, or one-on-one instruction, if possible, to address student weaknesses. The academy director also stated that it was the "expectation of the school" that center activities are used to address student deficiencies. Both administrators stated that teachers formed student groups. However, although the curriculum coordinator stated that there is "no specific tutoring for other kids," the academy director said that an academic intervention specialist had just been hired to work with students in the fifth through eighth grades. Because the school relies heavily on small group instruction (provided to all students), and has not yet implemented a targeted academic support program, students who have been identified as in need of intensive academic support are not receiving sufficient remedial instruction.

On the state ELA exam, all students scored at level one or two in 2003-04 and in 2004-05, 80 percent scored at levels one or two. In mathematics, 84 percent scored at levels one or two in 2003-04 and in 2004-05, 79 percent did so. Presented in another way, four out of five students that are currently in grades five and six failed to pass the state exam. **However, at the time of its renewal visit, the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School had not developed and implemented an academic support program for students who scored at levels one or two on state assessments in the core subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, science or social studies. Based on information provided in response to the Institute's draft version of this report, the school indicated that it had hired six additional math tutors, and had plans to hire a social worker.**

According to the principal, the school had not established or instituted additional remediation strategies for students who performed at levels one or two on state assessments. Although tutoring is available during the school's Timbuktu after school program, funded through Title I funds, the program is voluntary in terms of student attendance and not all students participate. The principal indicated that the school "*is thinking about*" instituting a Saturday School and that it "*will replicate*" the best remedial strategies from other charter schools. The school ran a summer school program during 2005, but admits that it did not engage in the student recruitment process early enough to ultimately enroll high numbers of students.

Special Populations: Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

The school employs a special education coordinator, who has been part of Stepping Stone Academy Charter School almost since it opened (hired during its initial three months), and is currently responsible for ensuring that eighty of the school's approximately 570 students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) receive the mandated programs and services. The school also employs four special education teachers and two paraprofessionals dedicated to the provision of programs and services for students with disabilities. Observations confirm that the special education teacher pulls out students who have a special education Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the assistant comes in during the week at designated times to lend support, "pushing in" to the classroom.

According to their IEPs, the 80 students with disabilities attending Stepping Stone Academy have been classified as “Other Health Impaired,” “Learning Disabled,” “Emotionally Disturbed,” “Developmentally Disabled,” and “Speech Impaired.” These students require not only services provided by the school’s special education teachers, but they also receive occupational and physical therapies, speech services and other services, such as counseling, provided through the city school district. In previous years, the school employed its own social worker, but as of the 2005-06 school year no longer does so. The school support manager facilitates the scheduling of counseling for students who do not have IEPs, and the special education coordinator works through the district to obtain counseling for students with IEPs.

The school has established a viable relationship with the city school district regarding the provision of services for students with disabilities. This school year, the city school district divided the total number of charter schools in Buffalo into teams and assigned district staff as liaisons. The district typically holds most annual and triennial reviews at the school. Infrequently, a student’s triennial review is held at the district office.

The school’s special education coordinator has provided professional development to the school’s regular education classroom teachers. Initially, at the beginning of the current school year, that training included information and discussion of a mock IEP and differentiated instruction for students with disabilities. The coordinator is also available to regular and special education classroom teachers and administrators during house meetings.

Stepping Stone Academy enrolled no students who were English language learners (ELL) or who required 504 plans at the time of the renewal visit.

<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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Although most teachers meet the state’s certification requirements, the school has been unable to establish a consistent, qualified staff. There has been substantial turnover over the past several years, including some attrition since the beginning of the current school year, leaving several positions unfilled.

The school has been able to hire a staff that is largely credentialed. At the time of the renewal visit, 31 of the 36 teachers were certified and two additional classes are staffed by substitute teachers, meeting or coming close to meeting the legal requirements thereby. However, overall, the teaching staff has little experience. Twenty-one of 36 teachers have two years or less of teaching experience. Thirty of the 36 teachers have been teaching for four or fewer years.

Over the life of its charter, Stepping Stone has faced significant turnover in its teaching staff. Currently, for half of the school’s 36 teachers, this is their first year at Stepping Stone. Twelve of 31 teachers, more than one-third of the teaching staff, did not return from last year. Seven of these were not renewed due to performance issues. Ten members of the instructional staff had left the school’s employment between the beginning of the school year and the renewal visit, including three terminations and seven resignations. Of the staff members who resigned, two served in key roles – English language arts/socials studies curriculum coordinator and Kindergarten through third grade reading coach.

The turnover and lack of experience is particularly apparent in the Junior Academy. All teachers within the Junior Academy are new to their respective roles. Teachers of core academic subjects within the Junior Academy are all first-year teachers to the school; one position within the Junior Academy remains vacant. Both the social studies teacher and science teacher within the Junior Academy are teachers new to the school, one of which is in her first year of teaching. The English language arts teacher, although having served as a long-term substitute and tutor in the school for four years prior to the current school year, is in her first year as a classroom teacher. In addition, a seventh and eighth grade mathematics substitute serves the school on a per-diem basis.

Recruitment and Hiring

Stepping Stone has established hiring procedures. However, the enactment of these procedures has not ensured a qualified teaching staff. School administrators describe the process as screening, interview, demonstration lesson, and resume checking. In the screening process, the principal or academy director assesses the candidates’ experience in teaching in an urban school and preparation for working in a charter environment. The follow-up interview is conducted by a team of administrators, teachers and, in some cases, parents. However, teachers who were hired after the beginning of the school year reported that they did not teach demonstration lessons. It appears that while procedures have been designed, in some cases they are not followed.

When asked to name the essential qualities to look for in a candidate for a teaching position, the school's principal indicated that he saw the following as critical: (1) receptivity to coaching/feedback, (2) willingness to collaborate with others, (3) experience and knowledge about urban children, and (4) willingness to work in a charter environment that demands long hours. He indicated that he would prefer a person with less instructional experience and more heart or passion for working in "this" environment. Although there was not a "correct" list of qualities, it might have been important to include both content knowledge and knowledge of pedagogy in the list.

In an effort to offset the hiring of primarily young teachers with limited experience, Edison has worked with the school to establish a recruitment and hiring strategy. One teacher at the school is paid a stipend to work, almost as a liaison, with Edison to facilitate the recruitment and hiring process. In this role, the teacher assists by arranging for candidate interviews, being the school's representative at teacher recruitment fairs, and communicating with the candidate. The school's physical education teacher is currently serving in this role. It is noteworthy that the teacher chosen to represent the staff in recruiting teachers does not teach the core academic subjects and as such, is likely to be less prepared to describe the school's approach to potential candidates.

At the time of the renewal visit, the teaching staff represents mixed levels of competency, ranging from low to average performance. This is not surprising given that the school tends to attract young teachers with limited experience, and with their current rate of turnover, hires many such novice teachers each year. While the principal believes that the staff is "dedicated to the mission of this school," they do not necessarily possess the expertise and knowledge necessary to realize the mission. The current hiring process does not ensure that successful candidates possess sufficient instructional skills.

While some teachers have worked diligently to develop their skills, many teachers appear to be insufficiently prepared for their positions. In at least two cases, teachers who had been substitutes at the school were hired as full-time teachers. Observations of these teachers indicate numerous errors in both oral speech and written language. The volume of errors implies that these mistakes represent deficiencies in teachers' grammatical knowledge rather than a single careless oversight. It is noteworthy that the principal was specifically questioned about the suitability of these teachers and that he reported that he believed that the decision to hire them was a good one. Renewal team members also observed teachers conveying incorrect mathematical information. For example, a teacher told a student that the word *of* in the word problem "... $\frac{4}{5}$ *of* S " meant to add $\frac{4}{5} + S$, when in fact it is to multiply $\frac{4}{5}$ by S . Another teacher told students they would measure a whole puncher using meters, when actually the appropriate unit would be centimeters.

The teachers within the Junior Academy, all novices, demonstrated low levels of pedagogical skill. Of all four teachers observed within the Junior Academy, three of them exhibited low levels of skill development in the areas of classroom management, instructional techniques, curriculum development, and student assessment. For example, although three teachers in the Junior Academy clearly had a behavior management system in place, there is significant evidence that it was ineffective in promoting a calm, safe environment for teaching and learning. With regard to the ability of these particular teachers to employ various instructional techniques to engage students, a significant number of students in all three classrooms were disengaged from the teaching and learning activities, talking to their peers or with their heads down on their desks. In particular, teachers struggled to maintain student interest and engagement in center activities. As discussed earlier, student learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments were loosely (if at all) linked to curriculum standards, often not aligned with each other, and frequently reflected below-grade level expectations for performance. As a result, teachers within the Junior Academy require significant professional development to support the improvement of their pedagogical skills.

Both the principal and academy director are aware of the shortcomings in the recruitment of teaching staff. They report that the timeliness of hiring and ability to attract experienced and capable teachers was affected by: the substantial turnover of staff at the end of the last school year; the dismissal of teachers after the opening of school; the inherent insecurity generated by impending charter renewal process; awareness of the educational community as to the academic difficulties at Stepping Stone; and decidedly lower teacher salaries.

Even though the school's board of trustees indicated that it holds the principal responsible for teacher retention, the board admits that it has not dealt well with this issue and that they are aware that many teachers and staff left for fear of the school's charter not being renewed. Unlike the principal who did not acknowledge that the school's program was negatively effected by any of the teachers who had left, the board thought there were three teachers that they

would have liked to retain from last school year. To the extent possible within its budget, the board has offered financial incentives to attract and retain teachers. They have also tried honoring teachers with gifts, gift certificates and recognition. Last school year, teachers who met certain criteria received bonuses.

It appeared to renewal team visitors that no one at the school has taken responsibility for the breakdown of the current hiring system or the large number of teachers who have left the school. Beyond the reasoning that these teachers were not meant to teach in urban charter schools, little explanation is offered. Without a greater understanding of the shortcomings of the current hiring process, the school is unlikely to improve the success of their recruitment and retention efforts.

<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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The school has documented discipline policies and procedures. While the school is more orderly, and student behavior is generally appropriate in the public spaces, classroom management is uneven and in many classrooms misbehavior interferes with instruction. The school uses a color-coded discipline system. The behavior support team binder outlines the Universal Color Card system designed to reward students who “Stay on Green.” Classroom observations and interviews confirm that teachers use this system. Teachers have been trained in its use and there is a common language throughout the building.

Parent Advisory Council reports that they assist with celebrations for students who stay on green for a month. In observed classrooms, teachers use the “color card” system to monitor student behavior and keep track of consequences of poor comportment. In the Junior Academy, the color cards travel with groups of students as they move from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher, and assess student behavior on a daily basis. In addition to the color-coded system, the Junior Academy also employs a token economy system to reward desirable student behavior, which is referred to as “Citizen Cash.” Students earn “Citizen Cash” for exhibiting favorable behavior.

The Stepping Stone Academy Charter School also has established a behavior support team (BST). The BST is a committee that monitors school-wide student behavior. The school’s school-wide behavior management system of color cards, with green representing the highest standard, was instituted this school year. Record sheets for each student are maintained on a daily basis and submitted monthly. The student support manager analyzes the student behavior data each month to determine whether the number of referrals is decreasing. However, it was unclear to reviewers the effect of this data on school policies.

There is significant improvement in student behavior from the disorderly environment of earlier years. This is particularly notable in the public spaces, for instance, the cafeteria and hallways. According to the Third Year Inspection report, all stakeholders interviewed during the visit reported that the school faced a major challenge in maintaining appropriate student behavior during its first two years of operation. In prior years, the school was the focus of media reports citing serious discipline problems, leading the board to implement an in-school suspension program during the 2004-05 school year. Inspectors noted that student behavior in the hallways was generally calm and classes moved quietly from one activity to the next.

However, classroom management is uneven and in many classrooms, misbehavior interferes with instruction. Of particular concern are the Junior Academy and the specials classes. While the discipline chart displays were evident in classrooms, the procedures for, and effective implementation of the new discipline procedures, varied widely. There were some examples of consistent and effective uses of the management system. In a few classrooms, routines appeared to be well established and students generally remained on task. In one class, the teacher highlighted the fact that staying on green was commendable and complimented individuals by name for staying on green and warned others who were too exuberant during Centers discussion. In one case a young lady persisted talking, though softly, to another trying to make a point and, when directed by the teacher, reluctantly went to the chart to turn her card to yellow after looking at the teacher trying to be given another chance. The teacher softly yet firmly said “although you usually follow directions, in this case you did not. I’m sorry but you were given an opportunity to stop talking and now you will have to turn your card to yellow.”

In many other classes, however, ineffective management interfered with learning and students were often less than engaged in the intended instructional activities. The disruptive behavior ranged from dawdling during independent work to blatant disrespect during direct instruction. In many classes, during those lessons using the learning centers and groups, there was the constant low murmur of student discussion that, in many cases, was not on task. This lack of effective student participation was further evidenced by the constant teacher reminders of the expected outcomes of group work, extensive use of countdowns “waiting for calm,” and numerous reminders to return to task. In other classes, including one first grade classroom, the students ignored the teacher and chatted throughout the lesson. One reviewer described a grade three class as “chaotic bordering on being dangerous.” Students walked around the room and left the classroom without permission while a small number of students attempted to work on the assigned mathematics workbook activity. The teacher appeared to be ignoring misbehavior. When the reviewer entered, the class already had many cards turned to blue, orange and white. Although this teacher is a day-to-day substitute, no one came to the class at any point during the day to lend support. In effect, this unacceptable behavior was tolerated by the school.

Student behavior within the Junior Academy rarely contributed to a calm, safe learning environment. Teachers within the Junior Academy relied on two behavior management systems, Universal Color Card system and *Citizen Cash*. Both programs were implemented across classrooms, but with limited success.

The token economy operates with *Citizen Cash*, enabling students to “buy” lunch with their teacher, go to special events, etc. The Junior Academy teachers were relying on the paper bills as positive reinforcement to varying extents during instruction, small group work, and class transitions. A number of the teachers used them as a motivator in lieu of engaging students in the intrinsic interest of a lesson, including holding a wad of bills in their hands as a tool for maintaining order. Teachers were observed distributing “*Citizen Cash*” for behavior that meets minimal expectations (such as sitting quietly in preparation for a transition or participating in a class discussion) rather than for exceptional behavior that would merit special recognition. As a result, teachers have resorted to rewarding students for minimally acceptable classroom behavior rather than establishing it as a minimal expectation.

A Junior Academy teacher reported that a variety of different approaches have been attempted since the beginning of the school year to improve order in the Junior Academy, including modifying procedures for instructional period changes, such as having teachers accompany students from class to class or staggering the scheduled end of instructional periods from class to class. About three weeks prior to the renewal visit when behavior had still not improved, the school administration introduced a token economy in the Junior Academy and reconstituted the seventh and eighth grade classes to single-sex grouping. While several staff members reported that this switch to single-sex classrooms has been effective, inspectors observed a pattern of unacceptable classroom behavior. In more than one class, students were observed engaging in horseplay that had the potential to be physically dangerous to one or more students. Some students were observed tossing markers and erasers into the air, or snatching writing utensils from their peers. This was particularly true in eighth grade boys’ classes, with one notable exception. In the eighth grade girls’ classes, teachers tolerated low levels of student chatter and disengagement. In one class, some girls simply decided to sit at a table in back and write song lyrics instead of participating in the lesson. Classrooms were in general disarray, including scattered papers, pencils, and food remnants on the floor. Textbooks, papers, and other materials were often strewn on top of student work surfaces. As a result, teachers were unable to create and maintain a classroom environment free of distraction from teaching and learning.

Specials

It appears that in specials classes, i.e. music, art, physical education and Spanish, students are held to a lower standard, and their behavior ranges from undermining to preventing instruction. Reviewers noted that in several cases during specials, students who had behaved well with their classroom teacher were ignoring the discipline code and the level of attention and participation was markedly reduced, and the noise level was substantially higher impacting negatively on the students’ ability to follow directions.

Specials were particularly unruly and instruction appeared to be ineffectual, at best, and students were rude, disrespectful, and loud. In a few observed instances, classroom teachers overlooked the misconduct, rather than reinforcing the discipline system. For example, a grade four teacher returned following a special class to find the specialist teacher on the verge of tears. After the specialist teacher left, the classroom teacher told the children to

“forget what happened in music that upset you” and “whatever happened in music is in the past and now let’s get going on our math” and had them do stretches and jumping jacks. This obvious lack of collegiality among faculty doesn’t help buttress the discipline policy and has a strong likelihood of resulting in an unhappy working environment.

Stepping Stone has adopted a school-wide behavior management system that is used in all classrooms and all of the teachers appear to support its implementation. However, the classroom behavior varied depending on the strength of the teacher. Throughout the school, there are significant behavior issues. It appears that there is a lack of whole school accountability to deal with and alter the behavior of students, a concern the school has faced over the life of the charter.

<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>

Professional Development

The school has devoted considerable effort into expanding and improving professional development. While professional development does appear to be a priority of the school leadership, the development needs of the novice staff appear to surpass the available resources. It is less evident whether this professional development has been effective in increasing teacher pedagogic content knowledge or in providing the skills necessary to ensure increased student academic achievement.

The school leadership has stated and teachers concur that professional development is a priority for the school. Reviews of professional development calendars, agendas and notes confirm this. Professional development at Stepping Stone takes several forms. Teachers new to Edison, the school’s management partner, hired before July spent one week at a national professional development conference. The school’s management partner, Edison Schools, provided a “summer academy” of 11 days of professional development prior to the start of the 2005-06 school year. The 11 days included a potpourri of topics, such as new standards, assessments, sample assessments from state English language arts and mathematics, community building, trust building, behavior management, classroom procedures, introducing centers, dress policies, and Stepping Stone rules and guidebooks. At a broad overview level, the school considered the 11 days as introductory for a number of topics.

In addition, the school has an extensive schedule of professional development activities slated to occur during the school year. The instructional leadership team also considers grade level meetings, and support provided by the Reading First coordinator, curriculum coordinators, academy director and principal as professional development.

During the school year, there are several structures in place for professional development meetings, including ongoing meetings with the curriculum coordinators, informal observations, weekly house meetings, and a common grade-level planning period, at least once a week.

Stepping Stone has several staff positions in its current organizational structure that include professional development as an area of primary responsibility. The school reallocated its resources to hire curriculum coordinators in English language arts/ social studies as well as mathematics/science. The Reading First grant supports a Reading First Kindergarten through third grade coach. However, not all of these positions were filled at the time of the renewal visit. As the result of the significant teacher and staff turnovers, the Kindergarten through third grade reading coach position was vacant; however, the Institute learned in response to the draft of this report, that the school had hired a reading coach. It was not clear, however, whether the reading coach was to work with Kindergarten through third grades or fourth through sixth grades. The school had yet to identify a candidate to fill the vacancy. The school began the year with a fourth through sixth grade reading coach. However, at the time of the visit, the English language arts/social studies coordinator had resigned. Due to decreased enrollment and the need to make budget cuts, the fourth through sixth grade reading coach position was eliminated and the two jobs consolidated.

The staff is comprised mostly of novice teachers with limited experience that require significant professional development to support their development. The school has attempted to address the pedagogical needs of an inexperienced and changing instructional staff to meet the needs of students. They provided two weeks of professional development to all staff and an additional week for new staff. However, the turnover in staff and number of late hires means that a significant portion of the staff could not participate. Since the highest concentration of professional development opportunities was in the summer, those staff members who were hired late in the summer or during the fall, did not have similar opportunities.

Reviewers could not identify how the school determines the professional development needs of the faculty. There is no evidence that they have a planned, systemic approach to address the needs of the faculty as a whole. It appears that they are relying primarily on a system of individual coaching although many of their faculty members have the same needs.

To address the needs of the novice teachers, each new teacher has been assigned a mentor who is a member of the instructional leadership team. The mentor is supposed to hold two meetings a week, including a classroom visit. From analyzing the schedules and responsibilities of the curriculum coordinators and other members of the ILT, it does not appear feasible that they could accommodate all of these responsibilities. Interviews with teachers corroborate this conjecture. Curriculum coordinators are supposed to provide individual, targeted assistance through co-teaching and model lessons as well as conduct support visits. However, numerous teachers who are in the targeted population of new teachers did not report receiving such visits.

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School employs 39 full time teachers of which 27 are teachers of core subject areas – English language arts, social studies, mathematics and science. In the core subjects, the school’s revised structure provides one curriculum coordinator for English language arts and social studies and one curriculum coordinator for mathematics and science. Therefore, the two curriculum coordinators are each responsible for supporting 27 teachers. Even given that each core teacher will not require the same level of support, it is very unlikely that the two curriculum coordinators will be able to provide the necessary support to ensure the critical gains in student achievement on the fourth and eighth grade state assessments, as well as the new state assessments in third, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades.

Teachers’ reports on the effectiveness of the professional development provided to them varied from useful to “mixed” and inconsistent. Reviewers found it difficult to identify professional development that resulted in gains in teacher content knowledge and pedagogic skills. With the exception of the implementation of the Universal Color Code behavior management system and the introduction of centers, inspectors could not determine the effect of professional development on classroom instruction.

In an attempt to address the numerous and varied needs of their novice teachers, the school provides professional development on a wide range of topics. However, the professional development appears too broad to be effective. Topics covered this year include: Edison Benchmarks, Differentiated Instruction, Learning Environment, Data

Driven Instruction, FASST, Planning, Math, Poverty, Reading, Print Environment, Social Studies, Standards, Technology, Writing, and Centers. Although the school does not agree with the Institute's assessment, this volume of information is likely to be too much for inexperienced teachers to incorporate into their repertoire.

Teacher Evaluation

The school has a system in place for ongoing teacher evaluation and improvement. Although the extent to which this feedback is connected to or impacts school wide or individual teacher goals is unclear.

In September, the principal shared the school's Performance Appraisal Process with staff. According to the Power Point presentation, the main components are a Professional Growth Plan (PGP), formal observation, informal observation, self-appraisal and summative assessment. In an interview conducted during the renewal visit, the principal was asked to explain the teacher evaluation process. In describing his experience with self-assessments and growth plans, he said, "teachers do not reflect" and "self-assessments are not accurate." So in response, he indicated that he "scrapped" that part of the process. Instead he conducts one-on-one meetings with staff in which they are asked to submit goals in four areas: Academics and Instruction, Data Analysis, Learning Environment and Parental Involvement.

Teachers appear to be generally familiar with the school's evaluation process. However, teacher reports vary on the subject of goals. According to the principal, the conversation during these meetings is directed towards focusing and adding to their goals. Some teachers indicated that there are no long-term goals set while others reported that the goals are not mutually agreed upon. Still others report that the goals are integrated into the evaluation process.

Prior to November, classroom visits consisted of support visits and informal observation conducted by members of the instructional leadership team (ILT). The formal visits, conducted by the principal and academy director, began about two weeks prior to the renewal visit. The first teachers to be reviewed were those that were new and/or struggling. While Edison, the school's management partner, only requires one formal evaluation, the principal plans to conduct two for each staff member.

Special education teachers receive an informal evaluation from the school's special education coordinator, but their formal evaluations are completed by the principal and academy director. The coordinator participates in the formal evaluation session with the principal and/or academy director to help them out by sharing her insights. The coordinator also obtains feedback from the regular education classroom teachers regarding the effectiveness of the special education teachers.

Members of the school's ILT, including the principal, academy director, curriculum coordinator and Reading First coach, spent extended time in classrooms and provided feedback to teachers. However, the lack of common expectations regarding focus and format of feedback indicates a need to determine how the process will enable the school to increase the instructional skills and content knowledge required for the school to meet its academic goals.

Teachers report that informal observations by the ILT team members are more prevalent and occur several times a week. The principal "pops into the class" for brief periods at least once or twice a week, and he gives teachers oral feedback soon thereafter. The curriculum coordinators are responsible for ongoing informal observations resulting in written feedback and the teachers verified that it is taking place on a regular basis as per the schedule. In addition, each member of the instructional leadership team is responsible for mentoring and developing new teachers.

There does not appear to be a required observation form or process. Each observer conducts a pre-conference, observation and post-conference, but that is where the similarity ends. The protocol for data collection, descriptors of desired teacher behavior, links to professional development and/or school initiatives, suggestions for improvement, and follow up to the observation varies amongst ILT members. One of the curriculum coordinators confirms that the school does not have a common format through which members of the instructional leadership team give feedback to teachers. Because the school has not yet defined for its teachers or leadership team expectations around curriculum and instruction, it is unclear the extent to which teacher observations and subsequent pieces of written feedback are connected to or impact school-wide or individual teacher goals. Interviews indicated that the levels of training and the philosophy of the assessment of instruction vary dramatically amongst the ILT members who were interviewed.

Teachers report that they often do not experience the post conference or receive the final report of the classroom observation in a timely manner. It is often several weeks before feedback is received and, as a result, the evaluation does not maximize opportunities to effectively adjust and accommodate instructional practices in a timely manner. While teachers do receive feedback, it is unclear the extent to which this feedback is connected to or impacts school-wide or individual teacher goals.

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.
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Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has essentially not met its non-academic or unique programmatic Accountability Plan goals that the school set for itself. Those goals and measures include the following:

Goal: All students and staff of the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School will use technology effectively as measured against the technology skill development checklist.

Measure: All students and staff who have been at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School at least two years will meet basic technology skill requirements identified in the Technology Skill Development Checklist.

Goal: Staff and students at the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School will exemplify the core values: wisdom, justice, courage, compassion, hope, respect, responsibility and integrity.

Measure: An emphasis on teaching and modeling core values will be evident school-wide. A rubric based on the Character Education Guidelines will be the basis for measuring effective implementation by visitors.

In questioning the school about the two goals and measures above during its renewal visit, the principal indicated that the school had finite resources, and decided to focus them on more pressing priorities. Therefore, the school did not have a plan in place to address the technology or core values goals. In fact, Edison eliminated the “Home Roll Out” program where parents could ultimately obtain a free computer if they completed sessions regarding the use of the computer. Edison found this program ineffective nationally and discontinued it.

The Third Year Visit Report reflected that technology had not become an integral part of classroom lessons as reported by students. None of the classes observed during the third year review included the use of the computers present in each room. They were generally dust-covered and occasionally buried under other class supplies. Teachers described the challenge of scheduling computer lab use because of the extensive testing program that occupies much of the lab’s available time.

Goal: Staff at the Stepping Stone Charter School will communicate effectively with families regarding student performance.

Measure: Eighty percent of families will participate in quarterly learning conferences.

The school was not successful in meeting this goal in terms of the percentage of the frequency of assessment. Seventy-five percent of students’ families participated in student learning conferences held *three times* during the year. In fact, the school has throughout its charter period experienced difficulty clearly communicating with parents. At the time of the third year visit, despite the contradictions from the focus group parents, results from the survey (a limited sample but broader than the focus group sample), suggested that the school had not yet made sufficient progress toward its goal of communicating effectively with families in many areas including student achievement.

Goal: All teachers at the Stepping Stone Charter School will use diagnostic assessments to inform daily classroom instruction.

Measure: One hundred percent of students will participate in the monthly online benchmark assessments, a tool designed to inform instruction.

At the time of renewal, the school noted that it was unrealistic to set a measure at 100 percent as it does not consider situations that effect student attendance, such as sickness, student withdrawals from school, suspensions. The school ultimately did not achieve the measure of 100 percent of the students taking the monthly benchmark assessments. Ninety percent of students in grades two through five and 75 percent of students in the Junior Academy (grades seven and eight) took the monthly benchmark assessments. Information was lacking about students in grade six.

During interviews and focus groups during the school's third year visit, when asked about the use of diagnostic assessments to inform daily classroom instructions, many teachers complained that the benchmarks test material had yet to be taught, leading to high rates of failure. Their comments indicated their misunderstanding of the rationale behind the mastery model of testing that characterizes the benchmarks. One teacher described adjusting writing instruction in reaction to gaps in sentence construction identified in the benchmarks, but other teachers expressed confusion about the application of test results to their curricular decisions.

<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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According to its original charter, the mission of the Stepping Stone Academic Charter School is as follows:

The Stepping Stone Academy Charter School is intended as a public, non-sectarian, non-religious, Regents chartered, kindergarten through grade 8 elementary school designed to assist a predominately urban, culturally diverse, often disadvantaged and at-risk population of children. With a headmaster, certified teachers, smaller class size, and an extended school day and school year, the Academy will focus on preparing each individual child, and groups of children, to assume full, competent, active, and leading roles within our society.

In some respects, Stepping Stone has remained true to its mission. The school accommodates the student population that it set out to serve, although its student population is not as ethnically diverse as that of the local school district. It is located in an urban site and enrolls a large percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged. More than 80 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, a common indicator of poverty.

In addition, the school has in place a school leader and, for the most part, certified teachers. Classroom observations confirm that the school has maintained small class sizes. The school day begins at 7:45 a.m. and ends at 3:15 p.m., indicating a slightly extended day schedule. However, a review of the school calendar indicates a standard, rather than an extended school year as stated in the school’s mission.

While the school does have in place some of the people and structures contained in its mission, the evidence does not suggest that they have accomplished their mission. Creating roles and establishing structures does not ensure that the programs in place are sufficiently robust and rigorous. As Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has met very few of the key academic outcomes it set for itself in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, there is no evidence to suggest that it has succeeded in “preparing each individual child, and groups of children, to assume full, competent, active, and leading roles within our society.” The school’s low performance is corroborated by numerous classroom observations that revealed low expectations for student engagement and insufficiently rigorous pedagogy.

<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 bylaws. 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>

While the school board of trustees has generally implemented appropriate policies, systems and processes, and appears to have abided by them (with exception noted below and under Benchmark 2E), certain policies have not been updated and others have technical deficiencies.

The school has a comprehensive Employee Human Resources and Benefits Guide for which each employee is supposed to acknowledge receipt. It adequately covers many topics, but fails to include a copy of the school’s code of ethics, which is not otherwise distributed to employees (as opposed to school board members) in conformance with the Charter Schools Act. While the handbook covers certain confidentiality topics it neglects to mention the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) or procedures related to student records, which should be in compliance with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Further, while it appears only one employee controls access to student files, the school did not have procedures in place to handle student files in compliance with FERPA such as a sign-out sheet, and does not provides FERPA information to parents through the Student Handbook. Also, based on the lack of compliance with the school’s obligation to conduct fingerprint supported criminal background checks for all employees (see Benchmark 2E), the school’s policy on “Pre-Employment Background Investigations” in the employee manual needs to be strengthened.

A major shortcoming of the Student Handbook is the lack of a comprehensive complaint policy. In one case, the Student Handbook directs parents with questions or requests for accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to the “ADA Office at City Hall” rather than to the school’s board of trustees. The last copy of school board minutes reviewed also mention the issue of handling complaints at the front desk of the school.

The school’s required federal and state labor notices were either incomplete or outdated. Further, the school did not have the required FOIL notice posted, its FOIL policy was deficient in terms of not identifying a records access officer and it needs to be updated for recent changes in FOIL. While the school board keeps minutes, it was admitted that some committees of the school board do not do so in violation of the Open Meetings Law.

Aside from past issues related to school trustees being compensated by the school (discussed under Benchmark 2E), the school appears to have generally abided by its Code of Ethics. A separate conflicts of interest provision in the school’s bylaws was added with direction from the Institute to guard against conflict with the school’s landlord, the True Bethel Baptist Church, of which some trustees are members. In one instance the Institute disagreed with a church member signing a lease with the church, but outside counsel for the school confirmed that it was a ministerial act. The board maintains a policy binder with key documents for school trustees, including the conflicts of interest policy, certain fiscal controls and text of the Open Meetings Law. The board stated that it currently tries to avoid conflicts and, when conflicted, board members disclose their interests and recuse themselves from voting.

Based on the foregoing and with the above exception, the school generally has met the requirements of this benchmark 2C.1 related to conflicts of interest. Separately, there was evidence that the board has maintained and abided by its bylaws, with the exception of fixing the number of trustees serving on the board (noted under Benchmark 2E).

During the early years of the charter the board of trustees of Stepping Stone Academy Charter School was characterized by fractionalization and distracted from its core duties of providing effective oversight. In the last year and a half, the board re-organized itself and began to concentrate on the core business of the school, educating students. At present the board is clearly hard working, well-intentioned and organized. However, it is still struggling with determining how it should provide appropriate oversight, including determining both measures and methods by which it will know that the programs the administration has put in place are effective and how to replicate them.

In the spring of 2004, the school board re-organized and created an Oversight Committee to assist in determining the areas of need to improve the school’s academic program, and what specifically should be done. The committee found several areas of need, including, but not limited to, curriculum, professional development, and school and classroom environment. Although the board believes it has made some inroads in each identified area, it admits that none of the efforts have resulted in significantly effecting (in a positive manner) student assessment scores, and admits its frustration with being unable to pinpoint the causal relationships between school design elements and student learning.

In addition, the board has also had to address a degree of lack of communication between itself, its management partner (Edison Schools, Inc.) and the school’s instructional leadership team (ILT) as evidenced by the re-design of the school’s seventh and eighth grades into single-sex classes to address some of the student behavioral issues at the middle school level. Notably, the board was not informed or consulted about the re-design until after the change was instituted (and thus had no opportunity to consult outside counsel as described in Benchmark 2E).

The school’s board of trustees has the responsibility of instituting an evaluation process for the school leader or principal that is based on clearly defined goals and measures, and should evaluate the school leader or principal, at least, annually. As the school has partnered with Edison, through contract or practice the development of the principal’s evaluation has been relegated to the management partner and the board can agree or disagree with their assessment of the principal’s performance. On the most recent evaluation, the board agreed with the management partner’s assessment, and when interviewed by the renewal team indicated that “*he’s [the principal] not where we want him to be...he’s improving each month.*” The board also considers ongoing principal evaluation to be another function of the Oversight Committee.

It was unclear to the renewal team if the board truly holds the principal responsible for teacher retention and, to a significant degree, recruitment, given the principal appears to not have fulfilled his responsibilities in this area. For example:

- twelve teaching staff did not return for the current school year;
- ten teachers had left between the opening of the current school year and the renewal visit;
- three of the 10 were terminated;
- all four of the Junior Academy teachers are new to the school this year; and
- the Kindergarten through third grade reading coach position was vacant at the time of the school's renewal visit, three months into the school year.

The board indicated that the issues of teacher and student retention are really *“just hitting the board's docket.”*

Stepping Stone's renewal application indicates that the current board is aware that the governance of the school has had a difficult history, and details some of the events and changes that impacted effective governance over the life of the charter. According to the renewal application, the board of trustees of the school has experienced significant turnover during its initial charter period, and as a result, the quality of governance of the school has been inconsistent. The application notes the Edison presence in the school was inconsistent over the life of the charter. “This inconsistency combined with the overwhelmingly ineffectual leadership of the school's principal contributed largely to the lack of proper implementation of the school model.” Yet despite this, according to the renewal application, the reorganized board has “embraced its educational partner, Edison schools, and began to hold them accountable to a degree that had previously not been done.”

What cannot be questioned at the time of the renewal visit, and generally over the last year and a half, is the sincere dedication of the board of trustees. In particular, the leaders of the board have shown themselves to be caring and responsible and even tireless in their efforts to force improvement at a school that had been in turmoil at every level. And, continuing in that tradition, in response to the Institute's draft renewal report and preliminary recommendation, several members of the board wrote passionate letters of support for renewal of the school's charter. The letters acknowledged the school's troubled past but sought renewal in order to have the time to continue turning the school around through the recently instituted operational policies and governance and to demonstrate its ability to improve student learning.

<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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Over the life of the charter, parents, responding to the school’s Parent Satisfaction Survey, have expressed approval of the school’s program; however, the sentiments are based on a low response rate. As such, the results cannot in themselves be generalized to apply to the entire parent population.

According to the October 2005 survey results, 82 percent of parents were satisfied most or all of the time with their decision to send their child[ren] to Stepping Stone. However, only 25 percent of parents completed the questionnaire. As such, the volume of parents who chose the school is a more generalizable indicator of satisfaction. Enrollment and waiting list figures do not suggest a high degree of parental satisfaction with Stepping Stone. Over the life of its charter, the school has had a history of low enrollment. They have been unable to attract enough students and have requested, and received, numerous approvals to reduce their enrollment targets. For the 2002-03 school year, they requested an enrollment reduction from 700 to 400 students. In the 2003-04 school year, the request was to reduce its enrollment from 800 to 550 students. In 2004-05, another request was made to reduce the enrollment from 700 to 556 students. As recently as December of 2005, the school petitioned its authorizer for another reduction in enrollment. While the school attributed its inability to recruit a sufficient number of students to uncertainty regarding the school’s renewal status and lack of a gymnasium, the history of low enrollment would suggest otherwise. Overall, parental satisfaction with the school has not been sufficient to ensure full enrollment for the past several years.

The school has an active parent group called the Parent Advisory Council that provides information about the school to parents, and provides opportunities for families to participate in school support activities, such as fundraising and information nights. Based on interviews with parents, the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) meets monthly and some parents feel that they often receive more information about the school in this forum than through school administrators.

The small group of parents who attended the parent focus group during the renewal visit expressed appreciation for the communication efforts of individual staff members, including office staff and classroom teachers. However, overall parents are not well informed regarding school policies and student performance.

During the current school year, the school held three Open House events to recruit and register students. At the time of the renewal visit, there had not yet been an event for current parents. The school’s Curriculum Night had been postponed. While several members of the school staff stated that all parents are invited to Student Learning Contract

conferences each quarter, none of the parents interviewed had heard of these meetings (nor were they familiar with the formal name, *Quarterly Learning Conference*).

Parents were not satisfied with school attempts to send written communication home via student book bags, claiming that those documents were often lost or never received. However, parents interviewed seemed satisfied with the open communication between classroom teachers and parents, although there appeared to be a variety of methods teachers used in communicating with parents. Apparently, some teachers called parents, many wrote frequent notes or memos, and still others sent quarterly reports. While parents said that they had access to information about their own child's performance through progress reports and teacher contact, they were largely unfamiliar with the school's low performance on the state exams.

Based on parent interviews, it did not appear that the school had a parent handbook or that it had instituted a policy or practice regarding the distribution of such a policy document. Parents whose children had attended the school longer referred to an older parent handbook that they received upon enrollment of their child(ren). Parents whose children were more recently enrolled, did not recall receiving such a document. None of the parents interviewed were familiar with the school's current discipline policy.

Parents were neither aware of the members nor roles of the school's board of trustees, and indicated a lack of communication between the board of trustees and parents. Parents were not informed regarding the identity or role of the school's management partner, or about the identity or functions of the school's board of trustees. Several of the parents who were interviewed indicated their lack of knowledge regarding the school's management partner – in terms of specific identity of the company, the company's school design model, and ultimately the effects of both on Stepping Stone. While some parents knew that they were allowed to attend board meetings, they did not know when or where the meetings took place.

In interviews with parents, they expressed concern about the high rate of teacher turnover and its effect on the education of their children. Additionally, parents stated that they are not informed by the school administration when their child[ren]'s teachers are replaced.

In response to the Institute's draft renewal report and the preliminary recommendation for non-renewal of the school's charter, the school submitted copies of petitions signed by approximately 550 parents and community members in support of the school. The petition indicated that there had been a turnaround towards academic success, and that the progress deserved more time. The request included on the petition was for the school to receive, at least, a two-year renewal to prove the overall growth of the school, since test scores for this year were not yet available. In addition to the petitions, the school also submitted several letters of support for keeping the school open from parents and grandparents of current students.

<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 steps the school took in response to the New York State Education Department’s Third Year Monitoring Report (May 17, 2004) and other communications of the Department, which outlined certain instances of non-compliance in the areas of the provision of Special Education (SPED), school safety plan, display of religious symbols, teacher certification, disciplinary notice, provision of alternative instruction and facilities issues. With the exception of the provision of alternative instruction, the school was either in compliance or was in the process of coming into compliance for most or all areas noted by the State Education Department.

In May of 2004 and January of 2005, the Department informed the school that its school safety plan required by the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE) was only in partial compliance with the SAVE legislation. In May and June of 2005, the school sent revised versions of its SAVE plan to the Department for approval. At the time of the renewal visit, the school stated that the Department had not yet responded to whether or not the school’s SAVE plan was fully compliant.

The Department had faulted the school for displaying religious symbols in the entrance area of the school, which the school shares with the True Bethel Baptist Church, and the school’s use of the church vestibule for school activities. Prior to and at the time of the renewal visit the entrance area was divided such that students would not be exposed to religious symbols. In addition, school representatives stated that the school no longer uses the church vestibule for activities and there was no evidence to the contrary.

At the time of the Department’s Third Year visit, it found 24 of 36 teachers certified with eight in process and four not certified, which fails to comply with Education Law subdivision 2854(3)(a-1). During the renewal visit, the Institute found only four teachers were not certified and all four met the criteria in subdivision 2854(3)(a-1) for non-certified teachers in compliance with the New York Education Law. However, two of those teachers were not “highly qualified” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The NCLB qualification requirements were applicable to the school at the time of the renewal visit rather than at the end of the 2005-06 school year because the school has accepted federal Title I funding.

The school’s disciplinary notice for SPED students was found deficient by the Department because it did not include the full complement of parental rights (notice, right to counsel, right to confront witnesses, etc.). The Institute’s review found that this deficiency was largely remedied as it appeared the school is now using one set of notices for both regular and SPED discipline. In at least one version of the disciplinary policy, however, the right to counsel was omitted. The Department also noted that alternative instruction for suspended and expelled regular and SPED students was not being offered to parents within 24 hours of suspension or expulsion. Despite this notice, the Institute found that the school’s disciplinary policies for both regular and SPED students are still unclear on when alternative instruction should commence and the practice is to only give assignments (as opposed to instruction) for suspensions of less than five days. Thus, the school is not in compliance with state compulsory education law. The other deficiencies of the school’s SPED program noted by the Department (implementing Individualized Education Programs as written and having appropriately certified SPED teaches) appear to have been corrected.

Facilities issues raised by the Department, which also were the subject of informal complaints to the Institute, all appeared to have been remedied upon inspection during the Institute's renewal visit. The Institute noted, however, that many of the classrooms and other rooms in the school did not have the emergency evacuation routes posted in violation of the school's SAVE Plan and likely local ordinance.

In terms of compliance with the reporting requirements in the school's charter, the school started off with a fairly poor record of compliance in its first year of operation with eight items 30 – 90 days late, two items more than 100 days late (110 and 171) and a few items less than a week late. In the second year of its charter, the school improved greatly with one item 37 days late, one item 27 days late and one item two days late. The school's third year marked a return to a weaker compliance record with an audit submitted 128 days late, an application/admissions summary overdue 137 days and the annual report submitted 11 days late. The school's on-time performance through April 2005 again shows improvement with two items 15 days late and the application/admission summary 28 days late.

While the Institute received several informal complaints from parents and former employees of the school, the Institute received only one formal complaint regarding student testing and discipline pursuant to Education Law subdivision 2855(4). The Institute noted, however, that while the school has a communication policy for parents, it lacks a working complaint policy, and parents sometimes stated that it was a "waste of time" to bring complaints to the school's board of trustees.

On two occasions, official action was taken against the school for lack of compliance with applicable law. A failure to test fourth grade students in conformance with Department guidelines developed pursuant to the NCLB led the Institute to place the school on a corrective action in September 2002. The school did not accept the terms of the corrective action until October 2002 and was removed from corrective action in July 2003. As detailed in the Renewal Question 3 (Fiscal) section, the school was placed on probation and a remedial action plan instituted by the State University Trustees in December 2004 for not properly billing the districts of students' residence pursuant to Education Law section 2856 and regulations promulgated thereunder. The school's probationary status was terminated in July 2005 after the school substantially complied with the remedial action plan.

The school has also had difficulty operating within the terms of its charter. For example, the school has made several requests to lower its enrollment from that set forth in its charter for various reasons (sometimes at the direction of the Institute) as late as December 2005. Also, in 2002, the school failed to finalize its enrollment plans prior to the date of its enrollment lottery resulting in 66 students having to be refused admission and seek late enrollment in the Buffalo City School District. In addition, the school board has not fixed the number of school trustees as directed by the school's bylaws, which makes it difficult to determine quorum for board action on any given date. Lastly, the Institute had to unofficially warn the school's board of trustees regarding school trustees being employed by, or paid consultants of, the school.

With the exceptions noted above, in Benchmark 2C.1 (policy deficiencies), and below (fingerprint supported background checks), the school's board of trustees generally has in place effective systems and controls for ensuring that legal and charter requirements were and are met. An exception was noted in the area of fingerprint supported criminal background checks for all employees of the school as required by Education Law subdivision 2854(3). Review of documentation at the school showed a number of instances where employees did not have current clearance from the Department or an emergency conditional clearance from the school board. In the case of at least six administrative or teaching employees, there was no documentation of clearance or fingerprinting because the school did not keep copies of fingerprints, but it was stated that many of those employees had submitted fingerprints. The situation was the same for two cafeteria workers and two substitute teachers. Another four employees had been cleared at the time of their certification by the Department, but the school had not submitted Office of School Personnel Review and Accountability (OSPRA) 102 forms for those employees identifying them to the school in compliance with the Education Law. Six other employees had been fingerprinted and cleared to work at another school, but the school had yet to file an OSPRA 102 form for them with the Department in violation of the Education Law and had no emergency conditional clearances on file for the employees. There was also evidence that the school sent a memorandum on November 2, 2005 stating employees should be fingerprinted, which is arguably four years late. The foregoing background check lapses would, at a minimum, warrant corrective action or probation.

The school board has had an ongoing and fairly active relationship with independent legal counsel. On occasion, it may have been better if the school consulted its counsel prior to consulting the Institute or the Institute contacting the school regarding certain issues (payment of school trustees for example). Also an issue raised for the first time during the renewal visit, single-sex instruction in certain upper grade classes, was started prior to consultation with counsel, or in this case, the school board. While there is limited evidence at this time to state that the school violated Education Law subdivision 2854(2) (gender discrimination – the Charter Schools Act explicitly allows single-sex schools as opposed to classes) or federal Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 or regulations promulgated thereunder, it is clear that counsel should have been consulted prior to commencing such instruction.

In terms of the NCLB, the school has not made annual yearly progress in fourth grade mathematics for two years after being initially identified as a “school in need of improvement,” and is now identified as a school “in corrective action.” While status under NCLB is generally beyond the scope of the Institute’s renewal review, under the NCLB certain remedial steps must be taken by schools “in need of improvement” or “in corrective action.” The Institute is separately engaging the school regarding these issues and states that neither the application of the NCLB to charter schools nor the role of the State University Trustees (on whose behalf the Institute acts) has been completely defined to date. While the Institute is not prepared to make a negative finding regarding NCLB compliance, it nonetheless cannot find, based on the limited evidence to date, that the school is in compliance with the school improvement provisions of the NCLB.

With the significant exceptions noted above, the school has compiled a record of substantial compliance with the terms of its charter and applicable laws and regulations. With further exceptions in the following areas: provision alternative instruction; disciplinary policy due process notice, fingerprint supported background check compliance; Freedom of Information Law and Open Meetings Law compliance; FERPA and NCLB compliance; and certain school policies and procedures; other internal controls, board minutes and other documentation, as well as responses to interview questions by board members and school personnel, demonstrate the school’s general and substantial compliance with the Charter Schools Act, applicable provisions of the New York Education Law and other New York law, applicable federal law, its bylaws and the provisions of its charter.

Renewal Question 3

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

Benchmark 3A

3A

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

Board Oversight

The school acknowledges that the board has experienced significant turnover and the quality of governance of the school has been inconsistent. The board's financial oversight became more exacting and effective in the later years of the charter. The board's implementation of a formal committee structure was an important part of this process.

A turning point in improved board oversight occurred in January 2004 when the school's treasurer prepared and the board eventually approved revised internal control policies that conveyed the importance of internal controls at the school and provided tools to help establish, document, maintain and adhere to such policies. Other policies have been developed and adopted as needed.

During most of the school's existence, the board was partly distracted from its financial oversight responsibilities by a fixation on a proposal to build a gymnasium for the school. The focus on the gymnasium proposal conveyed misplaced priorities and a misunderstanding of the fiscal realities facing the school. The significant resources required to complete the gymnasium project would undoubtedly have hamstrung the school's efforts to meet its academic goals by tying up scarce fiscal resources of the school.

The board's decision to partner with Edison Schools Inc. has added to its overall financial stability, especially the access to working capital for cash flow needs. In addition, by partnering with Edison, the school was able to secure and rehabilitate a suitable facility.

The board has relied heavily on its management partner for the overall financial management of the school. Budget to actual fiscal reports are prepared by the school's management partner and reviewed by the board on a monthly basis. Monthly monitoring of the resource allocations by the board and its Oversight Committee are ongoing and will help to ensure that the academic program is fully supported.

<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 has operated pursuant to long-range plans beginning with the five-year plan included as part of its charter application. The school’s charter planned aggressive student enrollment growth from 300 students in grades Kindergarten through five in its first year to 900 students in grades Kindergarten through eight by its fifth year. Actual student enrollment has not met these aggressive enrollment targets, particularly in years three through five. The school acknowledges in its renewal application that failure to meet these enrollment targets has required cash reserves from Edison Schools, Inc. to meet the direct site expenses of the school.

Historically, the school has relied considerably on its management partner to develop long-range plans and its annual budget. The budget is monitored and there is evidence of board discussions and involvement throughout the process. However, in each of the school’s first three years, actual expenses exceeded budgeted expenses and in all but the first year, actual expenses exceeded actual revenues. As a result, the effectiveness of monitoring procedures was not demonstrated.

<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 has been marginally effective in establishing appropriate internal controls and procedures. While the school’s management partner has extensive policies and procedures under which it operates, its Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual has not been updated since October 1, 2000. In addition, during the last year, the school’s management partner moved to a new financial support model. The Institute has concluded that the new model provides limited site-based support and has been ineffective in providing the school sufficient support.

The school’s fiscal year (FY) 2005 audit report 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 has experienced staff turnover throughout its existence and in certain cases such turnover has strained the school’s operational continuity. For example, when the school’s onsite business manager left near the end of the 2004 school year, there was not a swift transition of the person’s responsibilities either in terms of finding a replacement or having someone else perform the critical functions required. As a result, the school did not invoice the school districts of residence of its students in a timely manner. This failure was considered so basic and fundamental to the school’s operations that the school was placed on probation by the State University Trustees at their December 14, 2004 meeting and a remedial action plan was entered into with the school. After successfully completing the terms of the remedial action plan, the school was removed from probation on July 15, 2005.

The school does not have an effective system for reporting grant expenditures in a timely manner. For example in FY 2005, the school was not timely in submitting required grant forms to the State Education Department, especially final expenditure reports. Similarly, in the prior year the school was significantly late in submitting claims for federal Charter School Program grant funds administered by the Institute. The lack of an effective system to ensure that such reports are filed timely impacts the receipt of funds. Because of the school’s agreement with its management partner, this has not negatively impacted the school.

The school has generally addressed management letter comments that it has received from its independent auditor in a timely manner. The school prepared a corrective action plan to address FY 2005 recommendations, although the plan lacks certain specifics such as the person(s) responsible for corrective action as well as time frames for implementation. Also, the corrective action plan did not indicate whether the school will require that laptop computers that were supplied to two former board members are returned to the school.

Proposed corrective actions are shown below:

- A policy will be implemented to prevent fixed asset purchases from being incorrectly recorded as an expense.
- A policy outlining the business use expectation for computers will be prepared. Additionally, a signoff that the user understands that they are responsible for the asset and that the asset will be returned when they are no longer associated with the school.
- A policy to keep the business office secure when unattended will be enforced.
- A policy to keep the personnel files and payroll records secure at all times will be enforced.
- The management company is in the process of preparing an update to their Accounting Policies and Procedures Manual.
- The school will prepare future budgets for Title grants with an indirect cost rate in order to maximize their grant funds.

<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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Generally, the school has met its financial reporting requirements. The school acknowledges that during the first two years of operations, there were instances in which a financial report may not have been submitted on time, or to the proper agency. Otherwise, the school has filed its annual financial statements and quarterly financial reports on a timely basis with the major exception of its audit report for FY 2003, which was filed more than four months late. Subsequent year reports were filed on time.

Each financial statement audit report received an unqualified opinion. An unqualified opinion on financial statements indicates that, in the auditor’s opinion, the school’s financial statements and notes fairly represent, in all material respects, the financial position, changes in net assets and its cash flows in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.

Benchmark 3E Financial Condition	3E 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).
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The school completed FY 2005 in weak financial condition and it has the largest net asset deficiency of any charter school authorized by the State University Trustees. However, under the management company model in which it has operated, the school has not needed a significant accumulation of cash reserves, and operations have not been adversely impacted.

The school had a net asset deficiency of \$506,458 at year end and its cash position decreased by \$496,611, including net cash used by operating activities of \$49,066. The accumulated net asset deficiency represents seven percent of projected FY 2006 revenues. The school owes Edison Schools, Inc. \$1.4 million in management fees and an additional \$4.4 million in long-term debt.

The school has not relied on any philanthropic support to meet its program needs. Federal grants (primarily Title I and Reading First) contribute significantly to school operations and totaled \$912,191 in the last fiscal year (about 18 percent of total revenue).

The school has fixed assets (net of accumulated depreciation) totaling \$3,945,487 that consist of building improvements and office equipment. The school leases its facilities from the True Bethel Baptist Church. Terms of the agreement called for \$210,000 in prepaid rent and annual rent of \$1 per year through 2036.

Spending per student (total expenses divided by the revised approved enrollment) in each year was as follows:

2002	2003	2004	2005
\$ 9,755	\$ 10,492	\$ 9,386	\$ 9,432

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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As the result of poor academic performance during the initial charter period, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School's board has adopted a plethora of changes aimed at improving student performance. For the most part, at the time of the school's renewal visit, the school had instituted many of the changes that would be part of the school's curriculum and assessment plan for the next charter period, if awarded. It should be noted that several of the initiatives listed below have been discussed within the benchmarks of this report, and have not been well implemented during the current school year. These items are marked with an asterisk (*).

Specifically, the school's plans include the following:

- During the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School, in its attempt to build capacity in the school, will be modifying the Edison Educational Design. Deliberate changes have been made within the structure of the school to better meet the academic needs of all students. Beginning in 2005-06, grade six will no longer be included in the Junior Academy, but will become a part of the Elementary Academy. This change is based upon the great academic needs of the grade six student population, especially in the area of literacy.
- Teachers in the school have been encouraged to loop with their students as a way to continue the relationship between student, teacher, and parent, and collaboratively build upon the team approach to academic success which was developed during the previously year. Two third grade teachers are looping with their students to fourth grade during the 2005-06 school year, and one fifth grade teacher is looping with her students to grade six.

- Beginning in the 2005-06 school year, professional development will be led by members of the instructional support team which includes the principal, an experienced academy director, two fulltime curriculum coordinators in English language arts/social studies, and science/mathematics, two Reading First coaches, and a special education coordinator. Professional development will be driven by ongoing classroom observations by members of the instructional support team and student achievement data. Daily grade level planning will be facilitated by instructional support team members to ensure quality lesson planning which reflects the rigor of the New York State Standards, which are explicit in regard to meeting the needs of all students, and include ongoing assessment.*
- Deliberate modifications have been made in regard to the choices in reading and mathematics curriculum. In collaboration with the Curriculum and Instruction Division of Edison Schools, the decision was made to designate the Scott Foresman Reading Program, which was used as a Reading First Supplement, the primary reading program in the building, replacing Success For All. This change in reading instruction was based upon the ability of the program to address the New York Standards for Reading and the promising student achievement data in reading for grades Kindergarten through third, in association with Reading First. In addition, the mathematics curriculum for grade six will be *Everyday Mathematics*, replacing *Prentice Hall Mathematics*.*
- Stepping Stone Academy Charter School recognizes that direct instruction is the delivery of choice for most teachers, especially those who are at the novice level. The creation of the instructional support team will enable regular professional development to occur which fosters the expectation that all teachers will vary their instructional methods to include, project based learning, cooperative learning, and differentiated instruction. The establishment of model classrooms for reading, mathematics, writing, science, social studies, and learning environment will be in place at the commencement of the 2005-06 school year. Led by the instructional support team, novice and developing teachers will be required to regularly visit these model classrooms, debrief with the academy director or curriculum coordinators, and collaboratively plan lessons that will enable them to deliver intentional and meaningful instruction in a variety of methods.*

Based upon the review of the school's record of performance, as well as previous school visit documents, a conclusion cannot be drawn that the curriculum and assessment plans adopted as part of the initial charter were effective in providing instruction sufficient to ensure students meet, or exceed, Regents performance standards.

In response to the draft renewal report, the school acknowledged that the school has "continued to struggle in its upper grades and may not yet have in place a program sufficient to meet the needs of its Junior Academy." The school also acknowledged that "the academic performance of the Junior Academy has substantially and consistently lagged behind that of the lower grades." Therefore the school is requesting consideration be given to awarding a two-year renewal for a Kindergarten through fifth grade school.

Since many of the aforementioned modifications were instituted within the current school year or within the previous calendar year, there is no evidence of the success of the strategies and approaches at any grade level. As such, the Institute cannot reasonably determine that these plans going forward would be either feasible or achievable regardless of whether the school was Kindergarten through fifth or eighth grades.

<p>Benchmark 4B</p> <p>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 Stepping Stone 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</p> <p>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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Stepping Stone Academy Charter School has provided a sample school calendar and a sample daily school schedule for House Three, third and fourth 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 567 students to a Kindergarten through eighth grade school of 710 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 needs to overcome significant obstacles to successfully implement its five-year plan for the proposed new charter period. There is no assurance that the plan is achievable.

The school’s weak financial condition and a glaring error in its proposed fiscal plan are the largest obstacles that the school faces. The plan projects operating deficits in each of the first three years and includes cash flow deficits in the first two years. In addition, for the current school year the school is estimating a deficiency of revenues over expenses of \$118,371. Combined with the accumulated net asset deficiency of \$506,458 at the start of the school

year, the school's future financial condition is precarious and may lead to insolvency. As part of its current management agreement, Edison Schools, Inc. provides cash flow/working capital support to the school. Without a continuation of this support, the ongoing fiscal viability of the school would be in doubt.

The school's assumptions related to transportation costs are unreasonable and have understated estimated expenses by more than \$478,148²⁴ over five years. The five-year budget projects net gains to the school ranging from \$10,696 in year one of the new charter to \$67,424 in the fifth year. This assumption is nonsensical. There will unquestionably be a net cost, not gain, to the school for transportation of its students. Under terms of an agreement²⁵ with the Buffalo City School District, the school lends the district 85 percent of the cost of its gross student transportation costs. The remaining 15 percent represents the net cost to the charter school. For example, in FY 2005 the district deducted \$42,000 from payments to the school for transportation expenses and an additional \$238,000 as the loan for the remaining 85 percent of expenses. The loan will be repaid in the current year and the withholdings will occur in the same manner based on actual costs.

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. Regardless of the assumptions embedded in the fiscal projections, the school would be required to develop and adopt annual budgets based on known per pupil amounts.

The school's projected enrollment is estimated to reach levels it has never before reached (710 students in the final year of the proposed new charter period), although it has sufficient facility space to accommodate those students. The school anticipates a three percent increase in revenue in each year of the new charter period. These estimated increases are slightly less than the historical average increase in per pupil funding over the life of the school's charter (four percent). Expense assumptions vary depending on category, but are overall considered reasonable, except related to transportation. Assumptions for expense increases range from two percent per year (for salaries) to 10 percent per year (for utilities).

²⁴ The estimated expense for 2005-06 (\$53,286) conservatively increased by three percent per year totals \$291,390 over five years plus the estimated "net gains" (which will never be realized) included in the budgets totaling \$186,758 equals the estimated understatement of \$478,148.

²⁵ By law transportation services shall be provided by the public school district to resident pupils attending a charter school in the same manner as such services are provided to resident pupils attending a nonpublic school. It is the policy of the Buffalo City School to not provide transportation to pupils attending nonpublic schools. As a result, a separate agreement was reached between the district and participating charter schools in Buffalo.