



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Renewal Report

Harlem Link Charter School

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The final version of Institute renewal reports should be broadly shared by the school with the entire school community. This report will be posted on the Institute’s website at: www.newyorkcharters.org/pubsReportsRenewals.htm.

REPORT INTRODUCTION

This report is the primary vehicle by which the Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) transmits to the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”) its findings and recommendations regarding a school’s Application for Renewal, and more broadly, details the merits of a school’s case for renewal. This report has been created and issued pursuant to the *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* (the “State University Renewal Practices”).¹

Information about the State University’s renewal process, as well as an overview of the requirements for renewal under the New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 (as amended, the “Act”), are available in the [Appendix](#) of this report. Note too that the Institute’s website provides additional details and resources regarding renewal, including: the Institute’s comprehensive *Charter Renewal Handbook*, at: www.newyorkcharters.org/schoolsRenewOverview.htm.

RECOMMENDATION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recommendation

Short-Term Planning Year Renewal of One Year

The Charter Schools Institute recommends that the State University Trustees approve the Application for Renewal of Harlem Link Charter School (“Harlem Link”) and renew the charter through and including July 31, 2010 with authority to provide instruction to students in kindergarten through 5th grade with a projected enrollment of 324 students, and consistent with the other terms set forth in its Application for Renewal.

Required Findings

Based on all the evidence submitted in the Application for Renewal, the Institute makes the following findings required by the Act. Harlem Link as described in its renewal application meets the requirements of the Act and all other applicable laws, rules and regulations. The school has demonstrated the ability to operate in an educationally and fiscally sound manner in the next charter period. In addition, given the programs it will offer, its structure and its purpose, approving the school to operate through and including July 31, 2010 is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes set out in Education Law subdivision 2850(2). Finally, granting a one year short-term planning year renewal will assist in building the school’s academic record which will result in sufficient data to be analyzed as part of the Institute’s full renewal review.

¹ The *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 <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/schoolsRenewOverview.htm>.

Consideration of School District Comments

In accordance with the Act, the Institute notified the school district in which the charter school is located, as well as public and non-public schools in the same geographic area, regarding the school's Application for Renewal. Through the date of this report, no comments were received in response.

Summary Discussion

Academic Success

Now in its third year of operation, Harlem Link serves students in Kindergarten through the 3rd grade. As of this writing, test scores from 2007-08, the first year in which the school administered state assessments are not yet available. As a result, none of the required measures in the school's Accountability Plan applied. The school did report results from administration of Terra Nova and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) assessments for the fall and spring of 2006-07. Based on Terra Nova results, neither the 1st nor 2nd grades are performing at the national norm in English language arts or mathematics. Further, the 2nd grade performance declined in both subjects. These 2006-07 results suggest the Harlem Link is not yet on track to meeting its key Accountability Plan goals.

On the Terra Nova exam in June, kindergarten was below the national norm in reading (46 NCE) and above the national norm in language (57 NCE). The 1st grade had an average NCE of 43 on the reading subtest in the spring, which was about the same level of performance as in the fall. On the language subtest, the spring performance was 48 NCE, up 5 points from the fall. The 2nd grade class declined from 50 NCE in the fall to 44 on the reading test, and declined from 55 to 47 on the language test. Harlem Link also reported improvement in reading skills based on the DRA, with students enrolled longer in the school showing larger gains. However, fall to spring comparisons often show greater change than spring to spring comparisons, which is the method used for the value-added measure in the school's Accountability Plan.

On the mathematics Terra Nova, the 1st grade finished the year below the national norm with an average NCE of 44, up 7 NCE from the fall. The 2nd grade declined from 43 NCE in the fall to 38 NCE in the spring, well below the national norm. In terms of value-added, in the 1st grade returning students outperformed new students by 9 NCE. In the 2nd grade, there was little difference between the two sets of students.

The school is deemed to be in Good Standing under the state's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability system.

In the school evaluation report generated as a result of the Institute's Second-Year Inspection Visit, inspectors reported that Harlem Link Charter School had made improvements in student order and discipline since its first year of instruction by developing school-wide systems to set expectations for and manage classroom behavior. However, inspectors also found that the school's leadership had not yet set clear priorities for instruction; had not yet articulated a clear approach to the co-teaching model; and had not yet established a coherent program of clinical supervision. Further, the school relied on teachers to develop many aspects of the educational program, and the inspectors found little evidence that teachers use student assessment data to inform their instruction.

According to the school's application for short-term planning year renewal, Harlem Link has taken steps to address the concerns raised within the evaluation report. In particular, the application notes that the school leader has established priorities for the delivery of instruction, including tight pacing and time management, full implementation of social studies units, and full use of planning tools available in support of the school's writing program. The school reports that it has also hired an assessment coordinator to work regularly with teachers to collect student assessment data monthly and use student assessment to identify, address, and track deficits in student learning. The school's leadership indicates that it has revised core curricular guidelines to make them more comprehensive and user-friendly for teachers. With regard to clinical supervision, the school reports that it has implemented a quarterly evaluation protocol for use with its teachers. In addition, the school states that it has provided teachers with professional development and greater clarity of expectations for its co-teaching model.

Organizational Effectiveness and Viability

The school's mission statement is as follows:

Harlem Link Charter School, a K-4 public school, links academics, values and community to graduate articulate scholars who will meet or exceed New York State Performance Standards and active citizens who learn and serve in their communities. Families, staff and community join together to provide a safe, supportive learning environment that empowers students to take an active role in their learning and demonstrate good character.

In an effort to meet the component of its mission statement that refers to the joining together of "families, staff and community," the school asserts in its application for short-term planning year renewal that it strives to hire parents with appropriate skills as staff members at the school, and that it maintains an open door policy for parents. The school has also established a Community Outreach Group to act as a parent association and also to bring in resources from outside the school to assist and support families.

Harlem Link has been sufficiently governed during its first four years of operation. According to its application for short-term planning year renewal, over half (six of eleven) of the school's board of trustees were part of the founding team. In the school's second year of instruction, inspectors found that the school's board of trustees had not yet completed an evaluation the school's leaders (the school has one academic leader and one non-academic leader). The school did not respond to this conclusion in its application for short-term planning year renewal.

In its application for renewal the school notes the lack of a permanent facility as a weakness. Currently the school operates in two separate NYCDOE facilities. Its kindergarten is located at 425 West 130th Street in New York City, and 1st through 3rd grades are located at 134 West 122nd Street.

The school cites the re-enrollment rate of students (82.7%) as evidence of the effectiveness and viability of the school. Due to the separate location of the school's kindergarten and the fact that the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) did not provide transportation to the school's students during the first month of school, Harlem Link notes that there are some vacancies in the school's kindergarten. However, the school maintains a waiting list of 75 students for 1st through 3rd grades. In addition, Harlem Link presented data from a parent/family satisfaction survey conducted at the conclusion of the 2006-07 academic year. The response rate on the survey was approximately 55.9%. Of the respondents, 94.1% indicated that they were satisfied with Harlem Link's academic

program; 88.2% indicated that they were satisfied with opportunities for involvement in the school; and 91.8% indicated that they were satisfied overall with Harlem Link.

Two complaints regarding the school have come to the attention of the Institute. In both cases, however, the complainants were directed to use the school's complaint policy, which the Institute reviewed and found to be sufficient. Neither complaint resulted in an official grievance to the Institute.

In May of 2007, the school was placed on a corrective action plan regarding failure to abide by the teacher certification provisions of the Act. The school took measures in response, which remedied the problems.

Also in 2007, the school requested to lower its enrollment because of insufficient space in which to grow as outlined in its chartered enrollment plan. The State University Trustees approved such a resolution, but the school later withdrew its request, when the NYCDOE found an additional site for the school, and the revision was withdrawn from the Board of Regents.

Fiscal Soundness

Since its inception, the school has operated pursuant to its long range fiscal plan included in its application. Harlem Link completed its second instructional year in a strong financial position. At the start of the 2007-08 school year, net assets totaled \$1,075,076. Harlem Link filed all of its financial reports late this fiscal year, but was on time the prior year. The school had unqualified fiscal audits its first two years and had no management letters issued.

Although Harlem Link operates its program at two different sites, this space has essentially been provided at no cost by the NYCDOE.

Plans for the Next Charter Period

Should the school be awarded a short-term planning year renewal, it seeks to expand instruction through the 5th grade. This request was not contemplated in the school's original charter application, yet is aligned with Harlem Link's vision of becoming a kindergarten through 8th grade school in the future. The proposed grade configuration is also consistent with the traditional public schools located within the school's Community School District. Due to the proposed change in grade configuration, Harlem Link proposes a slight modification to its mission statement:

Harlem Link Charter School, a K-5 public school, links academics, values and community to graduate articulate scholars who will meet or exceed New York State Performance Standards and active citizens who learn and serve in their communities. Families, staff and community join together to provide a safe, supportive learning environment that empowers students to take an active role in their learning and demonstrate good character.

According to the school's application for short-term planning year renewal, Harlem Link would enroll a new kindergarten class of 54 students, fill seats emptied through attrition, and add a 5th grade to accommodate its future 4th grade students. The total projected enrollment would be 324 students for the 2009-10 school year, which represents an overall increase of 54 students when compared with the school's total approved enrollment for the term of its current charter. The school does not propose any modifications to its school policies or the length of its school day. Harlem Link will

reduce the number of instructional days offered from a minimum of 200 to approximately 190, and will generally follow the NYCDOE calendar.

The school has submitted a curriculum framework template in the subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, technology, social studies, the arts, and health and physical education, as well as a curriculum crosswalk to the state standards for each subject area and grade level. The proposed curriculum meets the Institute's standard of review.

The school has not significantly amended its management structure or staffing plan, with the exception of teaching staff consistent with the addition of the 5th grade.

The school's Accountability Plan would be amended under the guidance of Institute staff, primarily to reflect the addition of a 5th grade, as well as other updates required by the Institute.

With regard to facilities, the school hopes to maintain a presence in one of its current locations and to find private space for the other. If no NYCDOE space is available to the school, it has proposed a budget that includes funding to locate its entire program within private space.

In sum, although the school has not demonstrated that it is yet meeting or coming close to meeting the State University Trustees' criteria for a full-term, five year renewal, the short-term planning year renewal and expansion through 5th grade, if approved, will provide the State University Trustees with a more complete data set to be analyzed as part of the school's full renewal review.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

The State University Trustees approved the application for Harlem Link on June 22, 2004, which was subsequently approved by the Board of Regents on September 10, 2004. The charter will expire in September 2009 unless renewed. After taking a planning year in 2004-05, the school opened in September of 2005 at 134 West 122nd Street in New York City with an enrollment of 101 students in kindergarten and 1st grade. The school added a grade in each of the following two years, enrolling 159 students in kindergarten through 3rd grades in 2007-08. The school plans to add the fourth grade in 2008-09, if facility space permits, projecting an enrollment of 270 students.

The founders of Harlem Link stated in the charter’s executive summary that because “charter schools are mission-driven and locally governed, they are able to design a coherent school program that capitalizes on the strengths of the community in order to meet the needs of the students.” After exploring effective practices at successful charter schools, the founders developed the following key design elements:

- rigorous, high expectations and a belief in students;
- data-driven instruction;
- extended school year, and eventually an extended day program;
- structured academic programs, including “fieldwork;”
- high levels of professional development;
- co-teaching model;
- strong connections to community-based organizations for the arts;
- a “focus” period, specifically designed for individualized or small-group instruction based on children’s academic needs;
- family and community involvement strategies; and
- supportive school culture.

School Year (2007-08)

Minimum of 200 days

School Day (2007-08)

8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.²

² According to the school’s charter, 8:00 – 8:30 a.m. is used as an optional breakfast time.

Enrollment

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment³	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Complying
2004-05	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year
2005-06	108		101	K-1	K-1	YES
2006-07	162		162	K-2	K-2	YES
2007-08	216		205	K-3	K-3	YES
2008-09	270			K-4		

Race/Ethnicity	2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0 %	0.0 %	NA	NA
Black or African American	81.0 %	35.0 %	NA	NA
Hispanic	19.0 %	37.0 %	NA	NA
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0.0 %	6.0 %	NA	NA
White	0.0 %	22.0 %	NA	NA

Source: 2005-06: NYSED School Report Card; 2006-07: NYSED database

³ Actual enrollment per the Institute’s Official Enrollment Table. Note that the NYSED School Report Card and database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated, may represent slightly different enrollment levels depending on the date in which this data was collected.

Special Populations	2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3
Students with Disabilities	NA	NA	8.6 %	13.0 %
Limited English Proficient	0.0 %	11.0 %	0.6 %	9.8 %

Source: Students with Disabilities: NYSED database; Limited English Proficient: 2005-06: NYSED School Report Card; 2006-07: NYSED database

Free/Reduced Lunch	2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3	% of Enroll. Harlem Link	% of Enroll. Community District #3
Eligible for Free Lunch	61.0 %	52.0 %	69.1 %	47.4 %
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	17.0 %	7.0 %	14.2 %	8.2 %

Source: 2005-06: NYSED School Report Card; 2006-07: NYSED database

School Charter History

School Year	Year of Operation	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
2004-05	Planning Year	NO		NONE
2005-06	1 st	YES	Prior Action Letter, End-of-Year Evaluation Letter	
2006-07	2 nd	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	
2007-08	3 rd	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report (pending)	Applied for a Short-Term Planning Year Renewal of One Year
2008-09	4 th			

APPENDIX

An Overview of Renewal Requirements

The New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998 (as amended) (the “Act”) authorizes the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York 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 independent 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.⁴

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

This report is the primary vehicle by which the Institute transmits to the State University Trustees its findings and recommendations regarding a school’s renewal application, and more broadly, details the merits of a school’s case for renewal. This report has been created and issued pursuant to the *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* (the “State University Renewal Practices”).⁵

Statutory and Regulatory Considerations

Charters may be renewed, upon application, for a term of up to five years. There is no limitation upon the number of times that a charter may be renewed. 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;

⁴ See § 2850 of the New York Education Law.

⁵ The *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 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.⁶

The Institute’s processes and procedures mirror these requirements and meet the objectives of the Act.⁷

As a charter authorizing entity, the State University Trustees can renew a charter so long as the Trustees can make each of the following findings (“Required 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;
- granting the application is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes of the Act; and,
- (if applicable) in a school district where the total enrollment of resident students attending charter schools in the base year is greater than five percent of the total public school enrollment of the school district in the base year: (i) granting the application would have a significant educational benefit to the students expected to attend the proposed charter school; or (ii) the school district in which the charter school will be located consents to such application.⁸

Where the State University Trustees approve a renewal application, they are required under the Act to submit the application and a proposed charter to the Board of Regents for its review.⁹ The Regents may approve the proposed charter or return the proposed charter to the State University Trustees with the Regents’ comments and recommendation(s). In the former case, the charter will then issue and become operational on the day the current charter expires. In the latter case (return to the State University Trustees), the State University 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 State University 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.¹⁰

⁶ Education Law § 2851(4).

⁷ Further explication of these policies and procedures is available on the Charter Schools Institute’s website. See www.newyorkcharters.org/schoolsRenewOverview.htm.

⁸ See Education Law § 2852(2).

⁹ See Education Law § 2852(5).

¹⁰ See Education Law §§ 2852(5-a) and (5-b).

Process for Short-Term Planning Year Renewals

This report contains the findings and recommendations of the Institute regarding a school's application for charter renewal, specifically, a short-term planning year renewal.

Because the charter period begins upon final approval of the proposed charter (as opposed to upon the commencement of the school's operation), charter schools that have taken one or more planning years come to renewal with, at most, three years of data regarding school and student performance. The limited time of operation (and the concomitant reduced amount of student assessment outcomes) makes it extremely difficult for the Institute to determine any trends in student performance as well as make a well-reasoned determination as to whether the school should be renewed for a full-term of five years. To address this issue, the State University Trustees approved the use of the short-term planning year renewal option. This option is available to schools that have taken one or more planning years. These schools are able, with limited though legally and programmatically sufficient review, to obtain renewal for a period equal to the number of planning years taken. In turn, therefore, a school will not be required to seek renewal for a full-term of five years until it has been in operation for at least four full years.

The Institute's protocol for short-term planning year renewal is based on the same fundamental questions all schools must address in applying for renewal of their charters:

1. Is the school an academic success?
2. Is the school an effective, viable organization?
3. Is the school fiscally sound?
4. What are the school's plans for the term of the next charter and are they reasonable, feasible and achievable?

The Institute also makes the same legal findings as it does for any Application for Renewal submitted to it. However, in the case of a short-term planning year renewal, where the renewal period is for a limited period, the Institute employs a somewhat abbreviated process to determine its recommendation and make the necessary findings.

In addition to the application itself, the Institute reviews the following sources of evidence in making a determination on an application for short-term planning year renewal.

1. **Academic Success:** the Institute will review the school's most recent Accountability Plan Progress Report (due each year that the school has been in operation on August 1st), and, as needed and available, any prior Accountability Plan Progress Reports that the school has filed. Where school's file for short-term planning year renewal early in the initial renewal period, the information that is available is likely to be limited.
2. **Effective, Viable Organization:** the Institute will conduct a desk audit of the school's visit and inspection reports, if any have been promulgated. This will include visits conducted by the Institute or other entities, such as the State Education Department (SED) or other external reviewers. In addition, the Institute will review records regarding the school's compliance with existing laws, regulations and policies to determine whether the school has been in

3. Fiscal Soundness: the Institute will refer to the most current desk audit of the school and will review other related materials and documents as it deems necessary.
4. Future Plans: the Institute will look primarily at the school's plans as set forth in the Application for Renewal. The Institute will take cognizance of other data in its possession to determine the reasonableness of the school's proposed plans, especially where the school proposes a new program, a different management structure, additional grades or other significant changes.

Finally, the Institute reserves the right to make a renewal inspection visit where necessary, although doing so would be the exception and not the rule with regard to short-term planning year Applications for Renewal.

The Institute then prepares a renewal report, which is reviewed by key staff members. The report is then transmitted to the Committee on Charter Schools of the State University Board of Trustees, the other members of the State University Trustees, and the school itself. This report is the product of that process.