

## Independent School Evaluation Visit Reports

Attached is a school evaluation report based on a school visit conducted by an external vendor on behalf of the Charter Schools Institute. School evaluation visits are a key component of the Institute’s comprehensive oversight and evaluation system. They provide an assessment of the school’s academic program and, to a more limited degree, its organizational and governance capacity. The objectives of the school evaluation visit are to:

1. Collect and document evidence of the school’s progress toward meeting the academic and organizational standards found in the Institute’s Renewal Benchmarks; and
2. Provide the school with feedback on its current achievement of the Renewal Benchmarks that may be helpful to the school as it determines how best to improve its program in anticipation of renewal.

The Institute engages external vendors to conduct an independent school evaluation visit and write an evaluation report at least once during a school’s first charter term, and occasionally in subsequent charter terms. These evaluations provide the Institute with additional information about a school’s program from an objective external perspective and serve to inform, corroborate or challenge conclusions drawn from the Institute’s ongoing evaluation and oversight.

The vendors are selected through a competitive bidding process, and must demonstrate the capacity to conduct rigorous and reliable qualitative evaluation of a school’s academic program and organizational capacity. The vendors are contracted to specifically collect and analyze evidence pertaining to the following SUNY renewal benchmarks<sup>1</sup>:

<b>Academic Success</b>	<b>Organizational Effectiveness and Viability</b>
1B. Use of Assessment Data 1C. Curriculum 1D. Pedagogy 1E. Instructional Leadership 1F. At-Risk Students 1G. Student Order & Discipline 1H. Professional Development	2A. Mission & Key Design Elements 2B. Parents & Students 2C. Organizational Capacity 2D. Board Oversight 2E. Governance

While specific evaluation methodology is left to the discretion of the vendor, the school evaluation visits typically include classroom observation, interviews with teachers, parents, school leaders and board members, and review of relevant documents. The attached report was written by a vendor based on evidence collected during a school evaluation visit, with the school description section provided by the Institute. The school had an opportunity to review a draft of this report and provide factual corrections and comments prior to the finalization of the report.

Other evaluation reports for this or other schools can be found on the Institute’s website at [www.newyorkcharter.org](http://www.newyorkcharter.org). For questions or concerns about this report or the Institute’s school evaluation procedures, please contact Simeon Stolzberg, Director of School Evaluation, at [simeon.stolzberg@suny.edu](mailto:simeon.stolzberg@suny.edu) or 212-221-6332.

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<sup>1</sup> These reference version 4.0 of the SUNY Renewal Benchmarks; the latest version can be found on the Institute’s website at: <http://newyorkcharters.org/documents/renewalBenchmarks.doc>

# **External Evaluation Report of Albany Community Charter School**

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**Conducted by RMC Research  
on Behalf of  
the SUNY Charter Schools Institute**

June, 2009



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## ***1. Executive Summary***

Albany Community Charter School was visited by an external school inspection team from RMC Research on behalf of the Charter Schools Institute on March 30 and 31, 2009. In 2008-09, the school served students in kindergarten through third grades. This was the first year that the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP) assessments were administered by the school. Results from these assessments had not been returned to the school at the time of the visit. Based on evidence gathered, school inspectors concluded that Albany Community had made progress in developing a comprehensive, systematic assessment program and in supporting teachers to analyze and use the results to inform their instruction. However, not all data were routinely collected and teachers did not have all data immediately available.

The inspection team found that Albany Community had developed a foundation for a defined curriculum in English language arts and mathematics which was in the process of being refined and coordinated. The school relied heavily on the textbook programs used in these subjects as the basis for the school's curriculum, but the programs were research-based and aligned to New York State standards. Work on developing curriculum maps for social studies and science had not begun.

The quality of instruction was uneven throughout the school. The assistant principal was working with teachers to achieve consistency in the delivery of instruction. In all classes, teachers relied on worksheets from the textbook programs as a chief medium for student work. The absence of a wide variety of learning materials and resources in the classrooms, except for those related to the textbook programs, limited the ability of teachers to provide a full range of learning experiences for the students.

The principal and the assistant principal formed the basis for a strong instructional leadership team. The principal focused on the organizational, cultural and behavioral aspects of the school and ensured that there was a climate conducive to learning. The assistant principal was recruited for the 2008-09 school year to provide the daily instructional supervision and support to the teachers. She worked directly with teachers in each grade but there was not yet a comprehensive instructional plan in place that provided systematic support throughout all grades.

The program for at-risk students, including special education students and English language learners, was well developed. The special education coordinator and the newly recruited literacy and special education specialists provided both direct instruction to struggling students and guidance and support for teachers in the classroom to work effectively with these students. There was a system for identifying students at risk of failure and for monitoring their progress. A Response to Intervention (RtI) model was used to create a tiered approach to supporting students with special needs. After school tutoring was also provided to help these students.

The environment was safe and orderly. There had been much training and administrative support given to developing a behavior system that was consistent in all classrooms. Behavioral expectations were high for all students.

Albany Community allotted time for professional development throughout the year. Teachers reported ten days prior to the start of school for professional development. Eight half days and

four full days were designated during the year for additional training. Except for the training on developing routines and on the behavior system, the team found that the sessions were episodic in nature and not based on the assessed needs of staff or on student achievement data. There was no evidence of a comprehensive and systematic plan to address the differentiated instructional needs of teachers.

Albany Community was largely faithful to its original design elements. Curriculum maps were not fully developed and a database for academic results was in process. The practice of looping classes had not been able to be implemented. Also, the cut off date for student entry into kindergarten had been modified.

The school had a sound and effective organizational structure that had been modified in the 2008-09 school year and was providing more support for students and teachers. The board of trustees demonstrated its ability to provide the required oversight and guidance to the school.

Taking all of the evidence together, the inspection team concluded that Albany Community Charter School had made progress in developing a cohesive curriculum, addressing the academic needs of students and in establishing a positive learning environment. School administrators recognized the work to be accomplished in planning a cohesive approach to the development of new and all teachers.

## 2. *School Description*<sup>1</sup>

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application for Albany Community Charter School on July 15, 2005, and the charter became effective by operation of law on December 11, 2005. Following a planning year (2005-06) the school opened in September of 2006 with an initial enrollment of 104 students in Kindergarten and first grade, adding second grade in 2007-08 with an enrollment of 167 students and a third grade in 2008-09 for a total enrollment of 231 students. The school plans to add an additional grade in 2009-10, ultimately serving students in Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grades with an expected enrollment of 286 students.

According to its charter, Albany Community Charter School partners with Community Partners Inc. of Lawrence, Massachusetts, a not-for-profit organization that established and operates Community Day Charter Public School. This partnership includes provisions for application consultation; instructional support; leadership training and support; and other services, but does not constitute a management relationship. The initial design of Albany Community Charter School is modeled after Community Day Charter Public Schools.

Albany Community Charter School was originally located on the 2nd floor of 42 South Dove Street in Albany, New York, sharing a facility with another charter school approved by the State University Trustees (Achievement Academy Charter School). On August 1, 2008, the school moved to a new facility, its current location, at 65 Krank Street in Albany, New York.

In June of 2008, Mr. Michael Strianese replaced Mr. Paul Thallner as President of the Albany Community Charter School's Board of Trustees. The board is currently comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. Michael Strianese, President;
- Mr. Mason Tollman, Treasurer;
- Ms. Deb Docherty, Secretary;
- Ms. Laurel Colasurdo;
- Mr. Tom Minnick;
- Mr. Paul Thallner;
- Ms. Sharon Winston; and
- Ms. Juanita Nabors.

The mission statement for Albany Community Charter School is as follows:

*The mission of the Albany Community Charter School is to prepare students to meet and exceed New York state standards in the core subjects with a primary focus on literacy, which forms the bedrock of all learning.*

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this section was provided by the Charters Schools Institute.

The founders of the school planned to accomplish this mission with a “relentless focus by the student, teacher, parent, and principal on mastery of standards in each subject to ensure that all students are prepared to demonstrate proficiency on the New York State assessments, within a learning community that emphasizes achievement, respect and positive behavior as a means toward achievement.”

Key design elements of Albany Community Charter School, contained in its initial charter, include:

- teachers having a “curriculum map” of each benchmark for every grade level subject that must be taught and mastered, including the approximate time to spend on each. (A comprehensive in-school assessment system will be developed to test the skills and standards that are tested on the state exams.);
- the black board configuration being in place at the beginning of every class or subject taught, in which every teacher will outline the goal or aim of the lesson as well as the activities that support those goals with “Do Now” approaches utilized to maximize student time-on-task;
- a wall of fame of weekly posting, highlighting the academic accomplishments of individual students in the hallways;
- having a database where academic results will be entered and maintained so that individual, aggregate, and disaggregated student performance can be tracked, along with plans to engage external services in an attempt to better utilize student performance data;
- data-informed decision making processes, used for evaluating teacher performance, the development of individual student action plans, and curricular modifications;
- two instructors per class, following a lead teacher/assistant teacher model;
- an extended school day;
- weekly allotments of instructional time as follows: ELA – 10 hours; math – 6.25 hours; science – 3 hours; social studies – 3 hours;
- professional development for teachers, including teachers conducting co-grading of papers once per semester for reliability confirmation;
- character education taught and discussed throughout the day; and
- Personal Educational Goals (PEG) developed for each student with an action plan developed in conjunction with parents that includes a signed student/teacher/parent compact.

**School Year (2008-09)**

Up to 191 instructional days

**School Day (2008-09)**

7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.<sup>2</sup>

**Enrollment**

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment <sup>3</sup>	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
2005-06	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	YES
2006-07	104	104	104	K-1	K-1	K-1	YES
2007-08	182	182	167	K-2	K-2	K-2	YES
2008-09	266	266	231	K-3	K-3	K-3	YES
2009-10	286			K-4			

<b><u>Student Demographics</u></b>	<b>2006-07</b>	
	<b>Percent of School Enrollment</b>	<b>Percent of Albany CSD Enrollment</b>
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0	1.6
Black or African American	84.5	62.6
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	4.9	3.4
Hispanic	4.5	10.7
White	4.9	20.1
Multiracial	1.0	1.7
Students with Disabilities	4.9	17.9
Limited English Proficient	0.0	4.5
Eligible for Free Lunch	73.8	55.9
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	14.6	10.9

Source: New York State Education Department Database.

<sup>2</sup> The noted length of school day includes time from 7:30 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. for arrival, breakfast, homework collection, and the morning 'Do Now.'

<sup>3</sup> Actual enrollment per the Institute's Official Enrollment Table. Note that the New York State Education Department School Report Card and Database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated, may represent slightly different enrollment levels depending on the date in which this data was collected.

### **3. Benchmark Analysis**

#### Use of Assessment Data

Albany Community Charter School continued to administer formal and informal assessments in every grade, including the third grade which was added in the 2008-09 school year.

The DIAL 3 assessment was administered to incoming kindergarten students in order to assess their instructional needs and to plan for the provision of literacy support, as appropriate. Once enrolled, kindergarten students participated in the progress monitoring assessments provided by the Success For All (SFA) reading program to determine mastery of skills and concepts taught. The data gathered from these assessments were used by the teachers to know what needed to be retaught.

The Terra Nova continued to be administered in kindergarten through grade three, twice yearly in reading and mathematics. The data from these assessments were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's instructional program and were used as one component of a system for identifying students in need of academic instructional services. The results of the Terra Nova assessment continued to be communicated to parents.

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was administered to all students in kindergarten through grade two for the purpose of identifying students at risk of failure who could benefit from intervention services and as a benchmark assessment to document growth and improvement. Students scoring at the Intensive and Strategic levels were selected for additional support by the literacy specialist and the special education coordinator and special education teacher. For those students, DIBELS was administered every two weeks as a means of monitoring progress.

The School Performance New York (SPNY) assessments, aligned to the New York State performance indicators and to the school's curriculum, were administered again in 2008-09 as interval assessments to second grade students every six weeks. Data from these assessments were used to monitor the academic progress of individual students in English language arts and mathematics. The information was used by the classroom teachers to follow the progress of individual students and, additionally, by the administrators to monitor the progress of each class. Teachers and administrators reported that the SPNY results were used to modify instruction, as appropriate. The principal reported that, as part of the SPNY administration and scoring process, the school was using the Scantron system which allowed the school to score the tests in school, thus providing immediate results and quick feedback. Administrators expressed a desire to expand the use of the Scantron system so that they could create additional school-wide assessments and score them rapidly. The objective was to use Scantron to systematize the administration and scoring of informal assessments currently used by teachers on an individual basis. They felt that this would enable them to provide timely feedback to teachers which would have a positive impact on instruction.

It was reported that, rather than expand the SPNY assessments to the new third grade in the 2008-09 school year, the administration would administer practice tests that mirror the third grade New York State assessments used in past years. Since this was the first year that students

in Albany Community would participate in the New York State testing program (NYSTP), they felt that it was important to familiarize students with the format and likely content of the assessments they would be required to take for the first time.

In addition, teachers at Albany Community regularly administered unit tests taken from the Harcourt reading (Trophies) and mathematics programs used in first through third grades to assess student mastery of skills and concepts taught in those units. The tests selected were reported to have been agreed upon and discussed at weekly grade meetings, adding some consistency to their administration and use of data across each grade. Teachers regularly administered weekly spelling tests consisting of high frequency words learned through the Harcourt reading program. Individual teachers also used other assessments, such as the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), to assess the progress of their students.

The results of the Terra Nova, DIBELS and SPNY were gathered centrally by the assistant principal with the assistance of the literacy specialist and the special education coordinator. They were maintained in a binder for use by the administrators, the specialists and any classroom teachers who wanted to see them. The results were, however, disseminated to and analyzed with teachers after every assessment and at regular weekly grade meetings by the assistant principal, the literacy specialist, the special education coordinator and the special education teacher. Third grade teachers reported that the results of the New York State assessment practice tests were also discussed and analyzed at weekly grade meetings. It was reported that, in all cases, the data were used to plan for subsequent instruction, including grouping students and provision of academic interventions.

The inspection team concluded that there had been progress made since the prior year in developing a comprehensive and systematic assessment program. However, not all student assessment data were collected and inspectors did not see evidence that all teachers had relevant data available to them in their classrooms for review and ease of access. Further, school administrators had focused on individual student improvement and had not internalized the aggregate data required to make instructional modifications for whole school improvement. School administrators indicated that one of their goals was to systematize the collection and dissemination of data. In the interim, the assistant principal and instructional specialists shared the data and worked with teachers on the analysis of the data and subsequent instructional modifications based on the results. Teachers were able to articulate how they used the data for grouping, re-teaching skills and providing additional supports, as appropriate.

### Curriculum

Using Community Day Charter Public School in Lawrence, Massachusetts as a model, Albany Community employs Success for All (SFA) as the basis for English language arts and both SFA and Saxon Math as the basis for mathematics instruction in Kindergarten. Grades one, two and three continue to use the Harcourt Trophies reading and the Harcourt mathematics programs.

The team found a continued reliance on the lessons in the SFA and Harcourt programs by all classroom teachers. Teachers did create weekly lesson plans that, at minimum, indicated the objectives of the lessons they would teach. However, most lesson plans did not include specific

instructional questions or strategies to be employed since those were generally taken from the SFA and Harcourt programs.

Confident that the SFA and Harcourt programs are aligned to the New York State standards, Albany Community used these programs as a basis for on-going curriculum mapping. Progress had been made since the previous site visits in that there were curriculum maps in place for kindergarten, grade two and grade three. Grade one teachers continued to create outlines for instructional units and aims sheets, which were being collected to be used as a foundation for creating curriculum maps during the summer. These sheets are developed by each teacher and consist of aims for each lesson in English language arts and mathematics, a description of the content of the lessons, the alignment to the state standard(s), the alignment to the appropriate textbook and the sequence of instruction. The curriculum maps developed by the teachers and the assistant principal were in different formats. Some of the curriculum maps included a scope and sequence and pacing components. The assistant principal reported that she was working with teachers to decide which of the formats will become the template for all so they will be consistent. The principal reported the school's intent to "put them all up on the wall around the room to align from grade to grade and to look for gaps" when they are completed. The teachers and the administrators told inspectors that the curriculum maps in English language arts and mathematics were under continuous review and revision, which occurred at grade meetings and was planned to occur during summer 2009. There were no curriculum maps initiated in the areas of science and social studies. The assistant principal indicated the school's intent to begin the development process for maps in the content areas after the English language arts and mathematics curriculum maps had been revised and fully aligned to state standards and across grades. The teachers continued to use lists of exit skills as benchmarks for student achievement.

Although teachers reported that they had just begun to visit the classrooms of other teachers in their grades to observe best practices that could then be incorporated into their own teaching, they indicated that they knew about the curriculum in the next grades through informal personal conversations with those teachers. They expressed a desire to visit those classrooms as well. The assistant principal indicated that this practice was planned to begin and would be the first step in achieving vertical alignment through the grades.

Team members observed that teachers were in the initial stages of developing rubrics for grading student work. The teachers reported that they used rubrics for evaluating student work in their individual classrooms. Consistent with school policy, rubrics were visible next to all work posted on bulletin boards. The rubrics were taken from the Harcourt Trophies program and included the indicators for assessing the student work posted, the preponderance of which was student writing. The rubrics followed the same one to four rating scale as those used for the New York state assessments. Students interviewed could demonstrate that they had rubrics for their work and articulated that they clearly understood how to use them. One student said, "They tell me what I did right, what I need to do and help me to know what to add." Another said, "Sometimes you may need to rewrite it for homework. If you finish it for homework and the teacher corrects it again, she may hang it up." While the use of rubrics has clearly taken root, there was no evidence that the content of the rubrics from the Harcourt program were aligned to the content of the rubrics used on the third and fourth grade New York State assessments.

The inspection team concluded that Albany Community has developed the basis for a clearly defined curriculum in English language arts and mathematics. The fact that the school has selected research based programs that are aligned to New York state standards provides a foundation from which next steps can be taken. The initial and continued work in which the school is engaged, developing curriculum maps, strongly suggests that administrators and teachers understand the nature of the work to be completed quickly to create a cohesive curriculum that is consistent throughout the grades and aligned to state standards as a basis for expansion to fourth grade in 2009-10.

### Pedagogy

During this visit, the inspection team observed gaps in the consistency of high quality instruction across classes within and across grades. In every classroom, teachers had clear objectives for their lessons, which were written on the board and conveyed to students. Team members observed that most teachers relied on the content of the textbook program manual as the basis for their lessons. Teachers reported that, at grade meetings, activities and strategies presented in the Harcourt program were discussed and selected for instruction. As noted before, lesson plans were not usually fully developed by most teachers since they used the activities and questions from the Harcourt teacher's manual. However, most teachers demonstrated subject area competency. Further, the curriculum content being delivered was aligned to state standards, since the Harcourt Trophies and the Harcourt mathematics program, upon which the school's curriculum is based, are aligned to New York State standards

In some classes, lessons observed were fast paced. Teachers used individual white boards with students, so they could write their answers and hold them up for immediate assessment and feedback, as well as other strategies to engage students and keep them focused. Inspectors observed that learning time was maximized in those classes. In several other classes, instruction observed was not as effective. The pace was not as brisk and strategies to involve students were not as well-employed. As a result, some students were off-task and had to be consistently refocused.

In most classes observed, team members found little evidence that teachers consistently used questioning strategies that promoted development of higher-order thinking. It was also observed that, although many of the questions asked were taken from the teacher's manual, others were constructed extemporaneously during the lesson, without careful planning to ensure that questions were focused on the lesson's objectives or that they would require students to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information instead of simply recalling facts. The principal indicated his awareness of the need to support teachers to improve their questioning strategies and said that he planned to provide professional development in this area.

Inspectors observed that there were not enough materials in each classroom to provide a full instructional program for the students. The principal reported that \$20,000 had been allocated for books. However, classroom libraries were either not available or did not have a sufficient collection of books in various genres and on enough reading levels to provide students with opportunities to develop their reading skills. There were not enough guided reading books or decodable books for every child. In many cases, teachers had to photocopy the books for students for each student to have one to read. There were no authentic materials or resources

observed for students to use in their classrooms, especially in the areas of social studies and science. In one class, the teacher used photocopied worksheets in a lesson on reference materials since there were no dictionaries, encyclopedias, maps or globes available in the classroom. In students' work folders and on bulletin boards, inspectors observed a pervasive use of worksheets from the program workbooks which suggested that they were used as the chief vehicle for student work in the areas of mathematics and English language arts. There were, however, writing journals or writers' notebooks used in some classes.

All but two first grade classes had a cooperating teacher or a teaching assistant assigned. Teachers reported that they planned the lessons and activities for the assistants and assigned them groups of students with whom to work. The teaching assistants were clear about their roles and responsibilities and it was evident that these had been delineated and were understood by all staff. When team members observed classes engaged in whole group instruction, some teaching assistants worked with students and some performed such tasks as taking students to and from the bathroom. When classes were observed during other times, teaching assistants did work with groups of students. However, it was observed that they conducted the same lesson as did the teacher with different students. The teachers and administrators reported that the teaching assistants served to differentiate instruction to meet the academic needs of students. This was not observed by the inspection team during the visit.

School inspectors concluded that the quality of instruction was uneven from classroom to classroom. The development of an instructional team, consisting of the assistant principal, the literacy specialist, the special education teacher and coordinator, suggests that Albany Community has begun to provide needed support to the teachers to improve their delivery of instruction and to attain consistency of high quality pedagogy throughout all classes. The team also found that the paucity of appropriate learning materials and resources, in addition to those associated with the textbook programs used, created an obstacle to the provision of a full range of learning opportunities for students.

### Instructional Leadership

The principal was found to be effectively managing the school's day-to-day operations. The position of curriculum coordinator was replaced with an assistant principal position after the curriculum coordinator left Albany Community for a position with the New York State Education Department (NYSED) in June 2008. Responsibility for daily instructional leadership was assumed by the assistant principal, who was hired prior to the beginning of the 2008-09 school year to complement the strengths of the principal in school organization and culture. Her role was to focus primarily on all aspects of curriculum, instruction and assessment as well as to assist the principal with day to day operations as needed. Both the principal and assistant principal conducted observations.

The principal conducted both formal and informal observations as well as daily visits, which he called "making rounds." The daily rounds consisted of five- to ten-minute visits to observe the teachers. Written comments from the principal about his observations during the daily rounds were not always provided to the teachers. However, there was evidence of written feedback provided to teachers as a result of the informal observations which were unannounced and were between thirty and forty minutes in length. Samples provided to the inspection team revealed

that the written report consisted of a description of the lesson or activity, the number of students present, samples of teacher and student dialogue, notes on the positive aspects of the observation and suggestions for improvement. While the principal reported that the informal observations did not always result in a written report, the principal and teachers indicated that any reactions, suggestions or other instructional guidance made by the principal were often conveyed through discussion. There was no evidence of a schedule for the informal visits and there was no specific number of informal observations that were expected to be conducted. This style of monitoring instruction was noted during a previous visit; however, teachers reported that this year the feedback was inconsistent.

The formal visits were scheduled to be conducted by the principal two times each year. A formal observation checklist had been created upon which the principal would indicate what he observed. This instrument was based on a rubric that assessed the teacher's practices in the areas of: management of instructional time and materials, management of student behavior, instructional presentation, instructional monitoring, instructional feedback and classroom culture. An area for an evaluation narrative and suggestions for improvement was included on this form. The completed checklist would be given to the teacher as a written record of the observation. The principal reported that, at the time of the visit, no formal observations had yet been conducted.

The assistant principal conducted walkthroughs daily, as confirmed by the teachers. She and the teachers reported that her focus was on teachers' pacing of lessons, the alignment of the lessons to the school curriculum and on their instructional practices. The assistant principal and teachers reported that she communicated instructional concerns and other comments through email but provided no other written feedback. Follow-up meetings were scheduled as needed. Teachers consistently reported that the assistant principal was a constant presence in their classrooms and that she provided them with support and guidance in the area of instruction. In addition she conducted grade meetings, reviewed lesson plans, reviewed the results of assessments and discussed the next instructional steps to take based on the results. In one instance, the assistant principal assumed responsibility to teach an after school tutoring group of the neediest students in the grade.

In addition to the formal and informal observations, each teacher completed a self-evaluation in the middle of the year. At the end of the year, the principal completed a summative evaluation for each teacher. The summative evaluation, which served as a final rating and included information from the informal and formal observation as well as from other sources, consisted of a list of five categories: professionalism, instruction, classroom management, student achievement and mission alignment. Mission alignment was evaluated by the principal reflecting on the following criteria: participation in the development of school life and mission; policy compliance; solution orientation; building a positive environment; and supporting team members. Each area was evaluated on a one through four scale with one being unsatisfactory and four being above standard. The form provided a space for narrative comments.

The principal articulated high expectations for teachers and students. In order to provide additional support for teachers and to strengthen the delivery of instruction, the principal expanded the leadership team this year. A literacy specialist position and an additional special education specialist were added to the school's organization during 2008-09. The goal of this

expanded instructional team was to provide early intervention for struggling learners as identified by the grade level assessments and to give additional support to the classroom teachers. Teachers cited examples of support provided by the specialists in the areas of analyzing data, learning new instructional strategies and supporting teachers new to the grade with lesson planning.

The observers concluded that there is a foundation for strong instructional leadership at the Albany Community Charter School that will be fully realized as school leaders develop a formalized, focused, systematic instructional plan of action.

### At-Risk Students

The inspection team found that there was a clearly delineated plan for identifying and providing services for students at risk of academic failure that addressed the range of students' needs. Additional staff members were hired this year to strengthen the school's ability to offer the necessary supports to students and teachers. The literacy and special education specialists with the special education coordinator formed the nucleus of the school's academic intervention team. These staff members worked with identified students in and outside of the classrooms during scheduled periods and, with classroom teachers, provided tutoring to students after school. They also met with classroom teachers during weekly grade meetings to share assessment data continuously gathered and to suggest strategies for meeting the needs of the identified students in the regular classrooms.

Evidence supported that the identification of at-risk students was based on assessment data. Incoming kindergarten students requiring additional academic support were discovered using the results of the DIAL 3 assessment administered during the initial enrollment period. The results of the Terra Nova provided data to identify additional students scoring at the lowest performance levels in reading and mathematics. DIBELS was also used to discover students needing additional supports. Those students at the intensive level received the highest priority for services and those scoring at the strategic level were next for intervention and support services.

The literacy specialist administered DIBELS to the identified at-risk students every two weeks. She used the QRI for identified students in third grade. She created spreadsheets containing the results of the assessments for discussion with the classroom teachers.

Five students were identified as English language learners and were served by the literacy coach. She provided them with a full program of language and reading skill development and used New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) practice books to prepare students to take that assessment. The school was hopeful that two of the five identified students were ready for declassification. The literacy specialist was not appropriately certified but had taken courses to learn English as a second language (ESL) instructional methodologies. The principal reported that he had not been able to locate a qualified teacher to work at the school on the part-time basis required to service five students.

Albany Community continued to implement a structured special education program sufficient to meet the needs of identified students and to support teachers in providing appropriate instruction to address their needs in the classrooms. The special education coordinator continued to utilize a

consultant teacher/resource room approach to remediating the needs of identified students through push-in and pull-out models, as appropriate. The addition of the special education teacher served to strengthen the quantity of services available to the students and teachers. The three-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) model continued to be implemented and refined. It was reported by the special education staff and classroom teachers that everyone used RTI and understood the system. In order to effectively implement the first stage, in-class differentiation of instruction, special education specialists worked directly with the teachers to provide suggestions for instructional strategies and materials to aid students at risk of failure. If students at-risk did not improve in the regular classroom, they were moved to the second level and were assigned to the specialists for more intensive instruction and support. Students' progress was monitored and assessed every two weeks. The third level was referral to the district's Committee on Special Education (CSE) for special education services. This process was monitored by the school's instructional support team (IST) which provided a forum for tracking each case. At the time of the visit, there were eight students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP's) who had been identified for special education services. It was reported that five of the eight students were identified for speech and language services, two students were identified for health services and one student was diagnosed as learning disabled and required specialized instruction.

The evidence collected by the inspection team strongly suggests that Albany Community has a highly developed system that is effective in helping students who are struggling academically. However, team members concluded that the needed resources, such as books, other reading material and original materials to meet the needs of at-risk students by providing greater opportunities to develop their skills, were not available. Additionally, while specialists meet with teachers at weekly grade meetings, formalized time scheduled for articulation between the specialists, classroom teachers and other service providers was not sufficient.

### *Student Order and Discipline*

Albany Community had continued to refine its discipline program established in the prior year. There was evidence of a discipline policy and classroom behavior system that was consistent among all classrooms throughout the grades. Team members observed that all staff used common language and standardized strategies to implement routines. There was evidence of rituals to reward students for positive behavior, including weekly award assemblies and posting of "star students." Every student brought home a daily report of their behavior to their parents. Team members observed that off task behavior was not tolerated during classroom instruction or during other times in the school. The team observed classroom rules posted that were consistent with the school-wide policy. Every class displayed the schedule of the day. The discipline policy was championed by the principal and was integrated into all aspects of the school day.

During the second year of operation, Albany Community hired a safety intervention specialist who continued to be involved with the students at breakfast, lunch and during after school programs. He conducted Saturday sessions for "problem" students and led an honor guard whose participants had to "earn" membership. He reported that, when students misbehaved, referral forms were sent home to parents. If there was no response from the parents after several forms were sent, a home visit would be made. The safety intervention specialist made the home visits with the parent coordinator. He also worked with individual teachers to address problems

with specific students in their classes. Team members observed that he was a strong presence throughout the school.

The inspection team found that Albany Community had established and supported a safe and orderly environment. The culture of the school was one of high expectations for all students. Everyone appeared to be held to the same standards and there was evidence that all staff took responsibility for all students.

### Professional Development

Albany Community allotted specific time during the year for professional development. The staff returned to school for ten full days prior to the opening of school for training. Additionally, eight half days and four full days were devoted to professional development during the year.

During the summer 2008, the focus of the professional development was on school and class management, including the establishment of systems and routines. Additionally, consultants from the instructional programs, Harcourt, Saxon Math and SFA delivered professional development on refining the implementation of their respective programs. Representatives from SPNY also provided some training to second grade teachers and administrators on creating and administering the interval assessments.

Teachers and administrators reported that professional development was largely an “in-house” program, almost always delivered by administrators, teachers and other school staff and was determined by the principal. Teachers reported that the one full day of training provided by textbook company consultants was “drive-by,” not comprehensive or sufficient to meet their needs. School personnel were regularly supported to attend conferences and specific training sessions outside the school upon request with the requirement that they would turnkey what they had learned to other staff. Additionally, school personnel also attended workshops based on the principal’s request and assignment.

As noted previously, the school did utilize the specialists to provide training and support to assist teachers in meeting the needs of identified special education and other at-risk students. Teachers reported that they learned new, targeted instructional strategies that they could implement in their classrooms from the specialists. The specialists also modeled best practices, but not on a scheduled basis since their primary role was to provide direct instruction to identified students.

The assistant principal and some teachers reported that they had recently visited other classrooms to observe colleagues’ instructional practices so they could become more skilled in implementing those practices in their own classrooms. The teachers indicated how helpful the visits were and that they were looking forward to continuing this practice. The assistant principal reported that these visits would support school efforts to improve instruction in all classes and develop consistent practices and outcomes across each grade.

The inspection team concluded that Albany Community had not developed a comprehensive professional development plan to support teachers to improve their instruction and that this was an area in need of further development and refinement. The training that had been focused on developing the positive behavior system and the associated rituals and routines was

comprehensive and extremely successful. The agendas for past training sessions dealing with instructional issues reflected the episodic nature of the professional development for instruction that was provided. There was no evidence that the topics or audiences for the training were based on a systematic needs assessment of teachers' pedagogical skills and content knowledge or of student achievement data. Teachers reported that they could request additional training and support in a specific area of interest or need, but there was no evidence of differentiated professional development based on the needs of individuals or subgroups, such as new teachers. Administrators reported that feedback sheets were completed by teachers after the professional development sessions. School inspectors found no evidence that teacher requests or feedback sheet data were utilized in organizing the professional development.

### *Mission and Key Design Elements*

The principal is the driving force behind Albany Community. Although he was not involved in the original design of the school, he is the champion for the mission and vision for the school. It was reported that the former, founding principal left Albany Community after six months because it became clear that her vision was different from that which had been embraced by the board of trustees. The current principal was recruited precisely to embody and enact the school's mission and vision. The inspection team found that he was successful in sharing the mission and vision with all school constituencies. Staff and students interviewed understood and were able to articulate the mission and vision for the school clearly, resulting in a culture of cohesion and common purpose. Parents interviewed were also able to describe the mission of the school in terms of "holding students to high standards."

Albany Community was largely faithful to the original design elements of its charter. Most elements were either in place or being addressed. Curriculum maps were in the process of being developed and were not yet available for every subject. A database for academic results was emerging. At the time of the inspection visit, data was maintained on spreadsheets.

Originally, the school envisioned looping classes, which involves classroom teachers remaining with the same classes for at least two consecutive years. This presented implementation challenges that Albany Community was not able to accomplish initially since the number of classes at the kindergarten and first grade levels were not equivalent and the school program was emerging. The principal and members of the board of trustees interviewed expressed their desire to initiate looping in the future.

The principal also reported that the original cut-off date for student entry into kindergarten was changed from December 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>.

### *Parents and Students*

Parents interviewed expressed strong satisfaction with the school. They reported that they chose Albany Community because of the longer school day and longer year as well as its smaller size. One parent referred to the fact that the students were held to high standards and that the school was "strengthening their inner core." They reported that they and other parents chose to travel to the school from communities which were outside of Albany because they liked that the school made students feel that "it's uncool to do the wrong thing." Parents also mentioned the

transportation services and the courtesy bus that is provided for students who live closer to the school than eligibility requirements allow for bus transportation.

They spoke of the personal attention their children received in the school, the services for students with special needs and the emphasis on curriculum in school and during after school programs. Some parents interviewed shared that support for less experienced teachers was not always available. They cited issues of classroom management and lack of differentiation of instruction, a “one shot style for all students; no accommodation for student learning styles,” as a problem they would like to see corrected. They also indicated that they would like a second language, instrumental music and art appreciation, including theater arts, to be offered.

Albany Community’s parent coordinator served as a liaison between the parents and the school. One of her functions was that of recruiter. At the time of the visit, the enrollment was lower than expected. As a result, a lottery for admission to the school was not necessary. The principal expressed that the large number of charter schools in the Albany area was the reason for lower than anticipated enrollment. Both the principal and parents interviewed expressed that enrollment has been increasing slowly.

The parent coordinator also planned workshops based on an interest survey distributed to parents. Additionally, she mailed and collected the results of a parent satisfaction survey at the end of the school year. Through the efforts of the parent coordinator, the school had initiated such programs as student banking, a book mobile program from the local library and Seal-A-Smile, an in-school dental program for students.

The parent advisory board served as the representative council for parents. They held meetings monthly. The average attendance was 10 parents. The parent advisory board had a representative as a member of the board of trustees who served as the conduit of information to inform the board about parent issues at Albany Community.

Students interviewed were very positive about the school and about what they were learning. They expressed a clear understanding of the instructional system used to grade their work and talked about the teachers and school “helping them to learn.”

The inspection team concluded that parents and students were generally satisfied with the school and the educational program. Issues related to distance and transportation made it difficult for all parents to participate in school activities.

### Organizational Capacity

Albany Community was well-organized for daily operations. At approximately 7:15 am, buses arrived bringing students to school. The principal, assistant principal, safety intervention specialist and other staff members were available to meet the buses, greet the students and supervise them as they ate breakfast in the cafeteria. Team members observed that all operations systems for managing the movement of students and classes, following the school schedule and for ensuring that such school functions as supervising students during lunchtime in the cafeteria were routines used throughout the school which were well-implemented throughout the school day. The roles and responsibilities of supervisors and staff were clearly defined within the

school structure. The principal described his role as “steering the ship in the right direction” and “focusing on the vision and mission to develop a school of excellence.” The assistant principal described her role as “focusing on curriculum and instruction” and “being a visible presence in the building to observe and coach the pacing of instruction in ELA and math.” These roles were confirmed by all staff. The school organization chart clearly indicated the lines of accountability as well. Additionally, every teacher knew which of the other staff members was appropriate and available to provide support when needed. The school schedule was constructed to support the academic mission of the school. Built into the schedule was time for teacher planning, grade meetings, articulation with specialists and push-in/pull-out services for students.

The school’s goals and priorities had been established and internalized by all constituents. They were developed as general goals for high achievement and excellence but were translated into more specific objectives through the system designed to determine their eligibility for merit pay. The teachers received merit pay bonuses based on accountability plan targets for Terra Nova results and additional school constructed metrics. Since the school recruited the new assistant principal, the literacy and special education specialists, more attention was being paid to using data to inform instructional decisions. As was noted previously, the assistant principal reviewed achievement and progress data with teachers regularly to inform their instructional practices.

The school had allocated resources to support their goals. At the time of the visit, there were two adults in all but two newly created classrooms, two new specialist positions had been created to support the teachers and students, a technology resource teacher had been added to the school organization and new computers had been purchased to support instruction. The principal reported that the school’s usual stream of money for charter schools was frozen and, as a result he was not able to purchase much needed books and resources for the classrooms.

The administration expressed satisfaction with the initial staff recruitment process. All teachers were certified at the time of the visit. One first grade teacher left Albany Community at the end of November 2008. The principal indicated that the teacher, who was being closely supervised to support improvement in her performance, chose to leave. During the 2008-09 year, the class was reorganized into two smaller classes and cooperating teachers already in the school were taken from their classes to become the official teachers for the newly formed classes. The retention rate for teachers was high. The principal felt it was important to make expectations clear to everyone.

At the time of the visit, the enrollment from kindergarten through third grade was 230. This number was close to the planned enrollment of 232 students. Although there was stiff competition for students from other charter schools in the Albany area, the administration was confident that enrollment was within the range allowed by the charter school guidelines and that it was increasing incrementally. The principal reported that approximately 15% of students had left to attend other schools since Albany Community began in 2006.

The school had developed vehicles for communicating with parents. The parent coordinator was in place as a school liaison. Parents were invited to parent advisory board meetings monthly, school newsletters were sent home, parent interest surveys were sent to parents for information and parents were required to meet with teachers in order to obtain their child’s report cards in the first and second trimester. Additionally, teachers completed personal educational goals for each

child and sent them to parents mid year. However, communication within the school presented some challenges. Some teachers reported that the communication process between the administration and teachers needed to be refined so that they “understood the expectations to get things done”. Students appeared to be clear about what was expected of them, which was articulated by those interviewed and demonstrated through their understanding of school routines.

The inspection team concluded that a solid basis had been established for an effective school organizational structure which supported its academic program. Staff understood and were engaged in the systems that had been created but did not all feel that they were included in school decision making or that they always understood what was expected of them by the administrators.

### Board Oversight

The evidence suggested that the board of trustees had sufficient and varied knowledge to provide needed support and oversight to the school. After two members of the founding board left, the board recruited new members with expertise in such areas as business, human resources and finance. These new members became liaisons to the school to provide direct assistance in their respective fields. During the 2008-09 school year, the trustees added a representative from the parent advisory board to understand issues related to parents. The original board had dismissed the founding principal after six months and actively recruited the current principal. The current board was instrumental in the recruitment of the new business official, the school’s director of finance and operations, and was anticipating support for the school in such areas as personnel and benefit issues to make Albany Community competitive with the surrounding public schools for recruiting teachers. The stated goal of the board was that Albany Community would be “run as a business.”

The board met approximately every month. At each board meeting, the principal and director of finance and operations reported on such items as assessment results, enrollment, recruitment, past and upcoming events and compliance related issues. The board received an outline in advance of the oral presentations. The board received additional information about the school’s performance and progress from emails sent by the principal, the school newsletter and from the website.

The board had developed a procedure for conducting an annual review of the principal. The board president received feedback from other members of the board who had contact with the school in their skill areas. He used this information and data received to rate the principal using an eleven part evaluation which included both qualitative and quantitative data as the basis for the principal’s eligibility for merit pay.

Evidence suggested that the board received and understood Albany Community’s academic progress and concerns through the direct intervention of one of the board members who is affiliated with SPNY and provided support to the school on the interim assessments and their applications for the development of other assessments to be administered throughout the school. That trustee reported regularly to the other members to keep them abreast of the school’s instructional issues. The trustees interviewed expressed confidence that he brought sufficient

perspective and made appropriate suggestions to the school so that the school's instructional needs could be addressed over time without the necessity of board action.

The board demonstrated their ability to provide adequate oversight for Albany Community. The trustees interviewed were aware of the educational, fiscal, organizational and compliance issues confronting the school, such as the need for providing ESL services, transportation concerns and student enrollment challenges. The team did conclude that the board's awareness of issues relating to parent involvement and parent satisfaction was limited.

### Governance

The trustees articulated clear priorities and structured their board to achieve them. The skills based board member recruitment philosophy supported their objective to provide oversight and assistance to the school. Additionally, their focus on the operations aspects of the school buttressed their goal of having the school run as a business. The trustees understood the challenges facing Albany Community. Those interviewed indicated that they deemed transportation as a pressing issue, since so many of the parents lived outside the immediate area surrounding the school.

Evidence suggested that the board has adhered to its by-laws with regard to conducting elections of new trustees and removing and filling vacancies on the board. The trustees had also held regular meetings and appeared to have acted appropriately in approving budgets, contracts, new board members, and other relevant issues.

Although it was unclear whether the board had developed a conflict of interest policy, there is evidence to support the fact that they are aware of possible conflicts of interest and that they took preliminary steps to avoid engaging in any such conflicts. When the contract for SPNY was approved, the trustee employed by the company recused himself from discussing and voting for the contract. The proceeding was recorded in the minutes of the March 12, 2008 meeting of the board of trustees.

Although the board of trustees had incorporated a member of the parent advisory council as a trustee as their chief conduit to receive updated information about parent activities, there was evidence suggesting that, although it was reported that they attended many after school or evening celebratory functions where attendance was high, the trustees had not developed a mechanism to obtain broad-based feedback and, as a result, were not aware of the low level of parent involvement in parent advisory council meetings. Further, the trustees had limited direct contact with parents, received little feedback and were not even aware that the school administered a parent satisfaction survey at the end of the year.

The board did review its policies and modified them as needed. They had enacted a temporary policy to give the principal authority to purchase materials needed for the move to the new building. They also changed existing policy so the principal's annual review would be conducted at the same time each year. Previously, they changed policies which required charter amendments, such as reducing the number of school days and the length of the year. During the time of the visit, the board was discussing the viability of expanding Albany Community to eighth grade.

- Taken as a whole, the evidence suggested that the board of trustees had implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes consistent with their roles and responsibilities. The board actively monitored and supported the school to guide its development and growth.

#### **4. Methodology**

The inspection of Albany Community Charter School was conducted on March 30 and 31, 2009 by an independent team of experienced educators from RMC Research, New York, New York. The team was comprised of the following individuals:

- **Sandra Kase, Ed.D.** (Team Leader) is an educational consultant currently providing regular services for RMC Research. Dr. Kase began her career in the New York City public schools as a teacher, staff developer and district administrator. She served a principal of the Claremont Community School for 14 years before moving to the New York City Board of Education as an Assistant to the Chancellor for School Improvement and later Supervising Superintendent of the Chancellor's District. During that time Dr. Kase focused on improving the lowest performing schools in the city and creating high quality new schools designed to provide rigorous educational opportunities for traditionally underperforming students. During 2003, Dr. Kase worked with the incoming Chancellor and his staff to support the transition to the newly created Department of Education. In March 2004 she began to work in Peekskill, New York to support the efforts of the superintendent to raise the academic achievement of the students in that community. Dr. Kase has developed a wide array of programs, including: gifted and talented programs designed to provide opportunities for underserved students; courses at museums such as the American Museum of Natural History; university based programs for K-12 students; and extended day and year programs which blended cultural experiences with demanding learning standards to raise the academic levels of all participants. Dr. Kase holds a Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy from Fordham University.
- **Janice M. Imundi** is a Research Associate for RMC Research. She also serves as a member of the Adolescent Literacy Team for the New York Comprehensive Center (NYCC), a USED contracted project of RMC Research. Currently, she is working with the New York State Education Department to review the English Language Arts Standards. Her career of over 30 years in education was spent working with students in the New York City Public schools. Ms. Imundi was a teacher in junior high school, an assistant principal in both an elementary and middle school and a principal in a middle school. During her career, Ms. Imundi also served as an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education at Mercy College and at Long Island University. Prior to joining RMC, she worked with aspiring principals and first year principals as a mentor with *New Visions for Public Schools* and the *New York City Leadership Academy*. Ms. Imundi holds a Masters Degree in Secondary Education and a Professional Diploma in Administration and Supervision.
- **Ellen Rosenbaum** is a Research Associate for RMC Research. With over 33 years of experience in the New York City schools, Ms. Rosenbaum has served as an elementary school teacher, teacher trainer and district administrator. As the Director of School Improvement for Community School District 8 in New York City, she worked with school leaders to use data to inform instruction and to develop school reform initiatives. Ms. Rosenbaum holds a Master's Degree in Education and a Professional Diploma in School District Administration.

- **Andrea Hoffman** is an educational consultant currently providing ongoing services for RMC Research. Ms. Hoffman served as a teacher, staff developer, literacy coach and academic intervention specialist for many years. She has also served as a consultant to provide support to administrators, librarians and teachers to facilitate the alignment of instruction taking place in school libraries with literacy implementation throughout the schools. Additionally, Ms. Hoffman works in the New York City Department of Education's Peer Observation and Evaluation Program for RMC Research to conduct observations of teachers in need of improvement and to create individualized professional development plans. Ms. Hoffman has had specialized training in literacy and holds a Masters Degree in Elementary Education.

The team used the Qualitative Educational Benchmarks (QEB), a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks, as the guides for its evaluation. In addition, the team relied on a set of framework questions to structure the Benchmark Analysis section of this document. Prior to the two-day visit, the team reviewed the school's documents, including its annual Accountability Plan Progress Report and reports from previous site visits by the Charter Schools Institute or other entities, such as the New York State Education Department.

During the visit, the team used a triangulated approach to collect data, including observing classes, interviewing school administrators, board of trustees members, teachers, staff, parents and students and reviewing student work, curriculum and other school documents, such as board minutes, teacher evaluations, assessment data, school policies and school organization documents to understand the efforts the school is making to achieve its academic and organizational goals. Notes were taken by each team member during each of the activities noted above.

In order to analyze the data and generate conclusions, the team reviewed and examined the notes taken by each of the team members during classroom observations, interviews or while reviewing relevant documents for information and for data collection reliability. Team members analyzed data for patterns, correlated evidence gathered with the Renewal Benchmarks and grouped data into relevant categories. All data were verified through multiple sources.