



Charter Schools Institute  
*The State University of New York*

## **Albany Community Charter School**

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### **School Evaluation Report 2007-2008**

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

This annual School Evaluation Report includes four primary components. The first, titled Executive Summary of School Evaluation Visit, provides an overview of the conclusions of the inspection team regarding this year’s evaluation visit to the school. The second, titled School Description, provides descriptive information about the school, including enrollment and demographic data, as well as historical information regarding the school’s establishment. The third component, titled Academic Attainment and Improvement, is a review of academic performance based on assessment results through the previous school year. Finally, this report presents the evidence and conclusions from a one-day inspection visit conducted in the current school year titled School Evaluation Visit. Within this final section is a summary of conclusions from the previous school inspection.

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

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

The board of trustees of Albany Community Charter School (Albany Community) meets regularly and understands that the core business of the school is academic achievement for all students. The board receives regular information from school leaders regarding the instructional program. The board's planned committee structure did not appear to be clearly functional at the time of the inspection visit. The board has yet to develop a formal evaluation tool to use in assessing the performance of the school's principal.

Albany Community has begun to develop a comprehensive assessment program, including standardized and informal assessment instruments. The results of the Terra Nova standardized assessment have been used to make curricular decisions, evaluate the overall effectiveness of the instructional program, and to identify students at risk of academic failure. Other assessments, such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, are used to determine student ability groupings for targeted instruction. At the time of the inspection visit, inspection team members did not observe the use of assessment data to make day-to-day instructional decisions beyond student groupings.

The school has made some progress in using state learning standards in developing of the school's written curriculum. Further, work on curriculum "maps" has begun. However, the school's curriculum remains somewhat underdeveloped and is not seamless from grade-to-grade. Teachers continue to rely primarily on pre-packed curricular materials to pace their instruction.

The school has developed a formal teacher evaluation system, consisting of two evaluations annually conducted collaboratively by the principal and curriculum coordinator. In addition, teachers are provided constructive feedback regarding their teaching through structured informal observations and a peer observations system. However, it was unclear to inspection team members whether teachers were provided ongoing, constructive feedback regarding their lesson planning. Members of the secondary leadership team (curriculum coordinator and special education coordinator) are formally evaluated each spring.

Albany Community has implemented a structured special education program that appears to be sufficient to meet the needs of identified students. Teachers receive regular information regarding the needs of students that require special education services and assistance in meeting their needs. At the time of the inspection visit, the school had not hired a certified teacher English as a Second Language (ESL)/Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), although it had several elements of a formal program for English language learners in place. As a result, several students identified as English language learners are not receiving required services.

## SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

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. The school plans to add one additional grade each year until 2009-10, ultimately serving students in Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grades with an expected enrollment of 286 students.

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. At the time of the inspection visit, the school was located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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). The school has plans to move to its own facility in the near future.

As of the date of the current school inspection, the Board of Trustees of Albany Community Charter School was comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. Paul Thallner, Chairperson;
- Ms. Deb Docherty, Treasurer and Secretary;
- Mr. Tom Carroll;
- Mr. Carl Martin;
- Mr. Michael Strainese; and
- Mr. Mason Tolman.

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.*

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 disaggregate 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;
- 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 and includes a signed student/teacher/parent compact.

### **School Year (2007-08)**

Up to 200 instructional days.

### **School Day (2007-08)**

7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</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.’

## Enrollment

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

<b>Special Populations</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	
	<b>% of Enroll. Albany Community</b>	<b>% of Enroll. Albany City District</b>
Students with Disabilities	4.9 %	16.9 %
Limited English Proficient	0.0 %	4.3 %

Source: New York State Education Department Database.

<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	
	<b>% of Enroll. Albany Community</b>	<b>% of Enroll. Albany City District</b>
Eligible for Free Lunch	73.8 %	53.0 %
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	14.6 %	10.0 %

Source: New York State Education Department Database.

<sup>2</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.

**School Charter History**

<b>Charter Year</b>	<b>School Year</b>	<b>Year of Operation</b>	<b>Evaluation Visit</b>	<b>Feedback to School</b>	<b>Other Actions Taken</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> Charter – 1 <sup>st</sup> Year	2005-06	Planning Year	NO		None
1 <sup>st</sup> Charter – 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	2006-07	1 <sup>st</sup>	YES	Prior Action Letter; End of Year Evaluation Letter	None
1 <sup>st</sup> Charter – 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	2007-08	2 <sup>nd</sup>	YES	End of Year Evaluation Report	None

## **ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND IMPROVEMENT**

### **Background**

Each charter school authorized by the State University Trustees has adopted an Accountability Plan, the primary purpose of which is to lay out the specific student achievement goals that a school agrees to meet and the specific measures that define what constitutes meeting these goals. The Institute currently requires a common set of goals and outcome measures which represent the expectations for student learning and achievement at the time of renewal. Individual schools may also have chosen to include in their Accountability Plans additional academic, organizational or other goals and measures. Schools should be aware that Accountability Plans developed prior to the Institute's establishment of common goals and outcome measures may not include all of the currently required measures. However, at renewal, those plans will be revised to reflect current measures.

Below is a narrative that provides an analysis of how this school measured up to the goals in its Accountability Plan as well as the Institute's required goals and measures should they not already be included in the school's Accountability Plan. The narrative summarizes the results of the relevant measures, and is followed by School Performance Summaries for English language arts and mathematics. The School Performance Summaries are one page compilations of performance data, for the last three years, based on the Institute's required measures. As noted above, the common measures used in the Performance Summaries may differ from the actual measures in the school's Accountability Plan, but are presented to provide trend data and consistency across schools. At the time of renewal, schools will be held accountable for the measures in their Accountability Plan, but the Institute will take into account other performance data as well.

Most state exams are administered in the winter and spring; official results are typically not released until at least early summer. Similarly, schools are not required to submit Accountability Plan Progress Reports until August. As a consequence, results for this current school year from state and school administered assessments were not available at the time this report was written. Therefore, the following evaluation of school performance addresses assessment results up to and including the previous school year. These are the same data the school would have had available and considered at the beginning of this school year and used to make critical decisions related to this year's academic program. These are also the same data the school inspection team relied on at the time of their visit.

## Academic Performance through 2006-07

Performance Summary: 2006-07 was Albany Community Charter School's first year of operation. The school served students in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and thus did not yet have any state testing grades. As a result, most measures in the school's Accountability Plan did not apply during this year. Terra Nova results indicate that at the end of 2006-07 the school was performing just below the national norm in both English language arts and mathematics, and the 1<sup>st</sup> grade had demonstrated some growth since the fall. The school also reported meeting or coming close to meeting its organizational goals.

English language arts: Albany Community Charter School administered the Terra Nova in 2006-07. In the spring of 2007 the average Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) for the Kindergarten was 47 and for 1<sup>st</sup> grade was 48, up from 43 in the fall. Students performed better on the Language subtest than the Reading subtest. The percent scoring at the average or above average level ranged from 57 to 79 percent, based on the subtests for both grades. Albany Community also administered the Dynamic Indicators of Early Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessments multiple times throughout the year, and average scores increased in all sub-areas in each grade. Moreover, the school reported that the percent at the "at risk" level declined from 64 percent in the fall to 23 percent in the spring.

Mathematics: On the Terra Nova exam the average NCE for Kindergarten was 45 in the spring of 2007 and 48 for 1<sup>st</sup> grade, up from 39 in the fall. In the Kindergarten, 70 percent of students scored at the average or above average level, and 86 percent of 1<sup>st</sup> grade students did the same.

Science: Not applicable for 2006-07.

Social Studies: Not applicable for 2006-07.

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

Additional (optional) Goals: Albany Community Charter School reported achieving its parent and student satisfaction goal. However, since the response rate for the parent survey was not reported, satisfaction cannot be determined. In addition, while 97 percent of parents indicated their intent to return, the return rate cannot be determined until the following fall. The school's 92 percent average daily attendance fell just short of the target of 95 percent. Albany Community also reports achieving its goals in the areas of legal compliance and fiscal soundness.

## SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

### Background

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

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

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

## Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted a first-year inspection of Albany Community Charter School on February 26, 2007. The inspection team observed classrooms; interviewed administrators, board members and teachers; and reviewed documents. At the conclusion of the visit the Institute provided a letter to the school's board of trustees outlining the major conclusions from the visit, which are briefly summarized below.

At the time of the first-year inspection visit, Albany Community Charter School had begun to address essential components of its educational program, as outlined in its charter and stated in its mission statement, and was at the early stages of implementing other key design elements. The school had experienced significant turnover within the membership of its board of trustees and, due to a limited number of applicants to the first grade, opened with three Kindergarten classes and one first grade class. The school had established an elaborate discipline program with a set of well-delineated classroom procedures and engaged in school-wide team-building activities, including community rituals and celebrations, and undertook active collaboration between teachers and parents, all in the context of cheerful, well-resourced rooms.

According to the Institute's first-year letter, teachers at the time relied on pre-packaged, commercial curricular materials (Success for All in Kindergarten and Harcourt Trophies for first grade) to guide the delivery of instruction. Monthly highlight sheets were vague with repetitious lists of activities to be covered during class periods and contained no indication of learning objectives and provided no indication of state learning standards. The planned development of curriculum maps for each subject and grade level had not yet occurred.

The first-year letter also noted that the school's principal appeared to be managing the school's operation effectively, while the curriculum coordinator assumed primary responsibility for day-to-day instructional leadership. While the principal does not have prior early childhood experience, the curriculum coordinator has taught at the kindergarten through third grade levels. The coordinator provided model instructional strategies, assisted with the development of lesson plans, and provided general mentorship and coaching. Due to the school having only one section of first grade, the sole teacher at this level appeared to be functioning in isolation without the advantage of peer collaboration. It was not clear that the school's high expectations for Kindergarten and first grade academic performance had been established. The principal had in place a system for evaluating teachers' effectiveness, but had not yet developed a similar process for providing the curriculum coordinator and special education coordinator with feedback.

There was little evidence of a well-delineated structure of lessons within classrooms. Observed instruction generally lacked purpose and clear student outcomes. Teachers did not hold students accountable for their learning by asking probing questions and checking for understanding. In several classrooms, there appeared to be limited expectations for the role that assistant teachers should play. In addition, the school had not maximized the extended day instructional time within the daily schedule.

There was some evidence that assessments were used to measure the attainment of standards in Kindergarten and first grade and the school planned to implement an interim assessment system beginning in the second grade. While some processes were beginning to take place with regard to the collection of assessment data, the school had not yet begun to use ongoing assessment data to inform the delivery of day-to-day instruction.

Planned support from the Community Day Charter School, which Albany Community Charter School is modeled after, had been limited and infrequent. This arrangement did not include mentoring for the school's principal or curriculum coordinator. While professional development plans had included having Community Day Charter School host a day-long visit by Albany Community Charter School teachers and offer more professional development during the year, at the time of the first-year inspection visit the partner had not provided any further support to the school's teachers.

## Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence

### Governance

The Albany Community Charter School board of trustees meets regularly and frequently, with most members displaying regular attendance. The board receives regular written reports from the school's principal. Members of the inspection team scheduled an interview with the school's board of trustees as part of the inspection visit. However, for the second consecutive year, only one member of the board participated in this interview, severely impacting the ability of the inspection team to assess the extent to which the board is knowledgeable about providing oversight of the academic program. The chairperson of the board subsequently participated in a follow-up interview to provide further detail regarding the board's priorities, current activities, and challenges.

Both board members interviewed during the inspection process (day of the visit and follow-up interview) reported that academic achievement is the priority concern of the board and a significant amount of time is allocated for this purpose. They consistently reported the use of the Terra Nova standardized assessment, as well as the newly implemented School Performance, Inc. (SPI) interval assessments (discussed below in the section on the use of assessment data) in second grade as the metric used to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional program. One member of the board reported that, due to the school's small size, "we are able to even look at individual students and discuss trends across students with the principal." The other overwhelming priority reported by board members is the completion of the school's permanent facility. One board member indicated that the time taken to complete this project was extensive and he commended his fellow board members for their continued support of this project. According to him, "the facility will allow us to really establish our own identity as a school community as opposed to sharing a facility with another school." The school plans on moving into this facility to begin the 2008-09 school year. Finally, the board chairperson identified board membership as an ongoing effort. At the time of the visit, two new members were in the process of joining the board and the chairperson was optimistic that their expertise and diverse backgrounds would add needed value to the board.

It was unclear to the inspection team the extent to which the board operates using their planned committee structure. One member stated that "we essentially have one person committees in our areas of expertise, for example our finance chair helped review resumes for the open business manager position." However, the chairperson indicated that "the committee structure really isn't operational and we tackle issues as a whole board." In light of the planned, continued growth of the school organization, the board may want to consider solidifying its committee structure to facilitate carrying out its responsibilities.

At the time of the visit, the board had not formally evaluated the school leader during either the first year of operation or to date during the second. The chairperson indicated that he feels that expectations are clear between the board and principal, due to frequent informal communication. However, he also said that the board needed to implement a formal process to codify this exchange.

### Use of Assessment Data

Albany Community administers several formal and informal assessments and uses the resulting data for a variety of purposes. At the time of the visit, the school offered instruction to students in Kindergarten through second grades, and therefore did not yet have state testing grades. The Terra Nova is the primary standardized assessment used at the school, administered in the fall (first and

second grade), winter (Kindergarten and first grade), and spring (Kindergarten, first, and second grade). The data from these assessments is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional program and make needed curricular changes, as well as to identify students in need of academic assistance using the school's tiered intervention program. For example, several teachers and members of the school's leadership team reported that the school began using the Saxon Math program as a result of assessment data gleaned from the Terra Nova. One teacher stated, "last year we went through the test [Terra Nova] at the end of the year, saw the questions that the students got wrong and identified a trend. Kindergarten was struggling with math so we supplemented the curriculum with Saxon math. We use that [the Terra Nova results] to figure out where the gaps are." The inspection team noted a consistently understood process of using the Terra Nova results to reflect on gaps in the instructional program and make needed changes.

In addition, the school uses the results of the Terra Nova to determine overall instructional weaknesses and those of individual students by examining the available item-analysis. For example, weak student writing was identified as an overall instructional weakness and was addressed when planning for the current year. On the student level, teachers reported that some children were weak in letter blending which allowed teachers to focus instructional efforts in this area. Several teachers reported the use of item-analysis in establishing individual academic goals for each student. The principal confirmed this practice, done through the school's Personal Educational Goals (PEGs). Finally, the results of the Terra Nova are consistently communicated to parents and school stakeholders through various communiqués.

Albany Community also administers the Dynamic Indicators of Early Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) three times annually. The results of this assessment are used primarily to develop reading groups. In addition, the interval assessments developed by School Performance Inc. (SPI), which are aligned to the New York State performance indicators, have begun to be administered to the school's second grade students for the first time in 2007-08 and are planned to be used as the school moves forward in offering state testing grades (third grade and beyond). One teacher reported that the results of this assessment "pretty much confirmed what I already knew." The DIBELS assessments provide teachers with a measure of how their students may perform on future state examinations. At the time of the visit, it was unclear what the resulting data from the SPI interval assessments was used for.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the school has made progress in developing a comprehensive assessment system. Data from various assessments appears to be used to make adjustments to the curriculum and to evaluate the instructional program. Student level analysis appears to be used to develop student academic goals and to identify students at risk of academic failure. However, the inspection team did not find evidence that assessment data was used to make day-to-day instructional decisions beyond student grouping. Teachers were not able to articulate a systematic way in which they used student assessment data to re-teach skills that students had not yet acquired.

### Curriculum

Albany Community continues to use the Success for All program as the curricular basis for its Kindergarten program. As noted above, assessment data was used in deciding to supplement this program with Saxon Math. For English language art and mathematics, the school continues to use the Harcourt program in first and second grades.

The Institute's first-year visit letter noted that, "the school expects teachers to follow the commercial materials as a proxy for state standards without having made an independent systematic determination of the material's alignment with the standards." In its second year, most teachers still rely heavily on the pre-packaged curricular materials to determine what to teach and when. One teacher stated, "I always ask my students to remind me where my SFA [Success for All] manual is because it's my bible." Another teacher noted that "pacing is spelled out in the Harcourt teacher's edition."

The school has begun to create curriculum "maps" that identify commercial materials, state standards, pacing by week, and related resources. However, only one subject area within one grade level (second grade mathematics) was complete at the time of the visit. Teachers generally plan within grade levels and are assisted in doing so by the curriculum coordinator during weekly grade-level meetings. Lesson plans are collected by the curriculum coordinator, yet teachers reported that they do not receive feedback on these plans. However, as opposed to the previous year, teachers are beginning to identify standards and AIMS within their lesson plans for English language arts and mathematics in an attempt to record the sequence of their instruction and the state learning standards addressed.

The inspection team did not find evidence that planning across grades takes place at Albany Community, even though the school reported that there was an established set of exit skills for students at each grade level and in each subject area. It was not clear to inspection team members that such skills had been laid out for the school's planned expansion through fourth grade. The underdeveloped nature of the school's written curriculum suggests that the curriculum as implemented is not organized, cohesive, or aligned from grade-to-grade.

### Instructional Leadership

As was the case in the school's first year of operation, the Albany Community principal appears to be managing the school's day-to-day operations effectively. Responsibility for day-to-day instructional leadership, according to the school's organizational chart and reported by the principal, is fulfilled by the curriculum coordinator. The person in this role was new to the school in 2007-08, assuming the post the week prior to the start of the school year. The curriculum coordinator conducted weekly grade level team meetings. The agendas for those meetings were co-created by the curriculum coordinator and the principal. Both the curriculum coordinator and the principal conducted informal observations and provided instructional guidance.

The school has developed a formal teacher evaluation system. Teachers and school leaders indicate that each teacher is evaluated twice annually, using a collaborative model in which the principal and curriculum coordinator conduct the evaluation together. At the time of the visit, consistent with the previous year, the principal had not yet evaluated the special education director or the curriculum coordinator. The formal evaluation instrument includes a checklist of items in six categories: management of instructional time and materials, management of student behavior, instructional presentation, instructional monitoring, instructional feedback, and classroom culture. Each item is rated as either excellent, good, improvement desired, or not observed. Samples of completed evaluations indicated specific instructional suggestions provided to teachers and the identification of instructional strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the curriculum coordinator conducts informal observations of teachers, using an Informal Observation Form. Samples provided to the inspection team revealed the observer scripting the instruction observed and providing targeted and specific feedback to teachers.

Teachers receive some support in planning their lessons. As noted above in the section on curriculum, the curriculum coordinator meets with teachers in each grade level weekly to assist with planning activities. During the school's first year of operation the inspection team noted that due to only having one section of first grade the teacher appeared to be functioning "in isolation." However, beginning with the 2007-08 each grade was comprised of a minimum of two sections, therefore allowing each teacher to work within a grade level team. However, processes are not in place to provide detailed constructive feedback to each teacher regarding the planning of instruction. Teachers are required to submit lesson plans weekly to the curriculum coordinator, along with "standards and AIMS" forms. Yet, they receive no written feedback or suggestions regarding their planning.

Consistent with the school's organizational structure, teachers generally reported the curriculum coordinator as the day-to-day instructional leader and viewed her as a positive resource. In addition, many teachers reported their teaching peers as someone they could consult if challenges arose. This could be in part a result of the peer observation system in place at the school. The school leadership has established a schedule of peer observations and tools to assist teachers in providing each other with instructional feedback. For example, teachers are provided with suggestions to guide debriefing sessions, as well as a common format to record their observations to share with their peers. Several teachers commented that "a professional learning community has been established in which we feel safe to share our concerns with each other and receive needed support." However, the school has not provided the leadership team with the same structures to improve their performance.

### At-Risk Students

The evidence collected on the day of the visit suggests that the school has a structured special education program sufficient to meet the needs of identified students and to support teachers in meeting their needs. The special education coordinator reported a Response to Intervention model using a tiered system to identify students needing special education services, with six active Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The school utilizes a consultant teacher/resource room approach to meeting the needs of identified students, primarily through both push-in and pull-out services where needed.

Teachers reported receiving copies of their respective students' IEPs at the beginning of the school year through a staff training conducted by the special education coordinator. Teachers also received support in using individual modifications for identified students, the Response to Intervention identification process, and general education accommodations that can assist all students. The special education coordinator has maintained a strong relationship with the District's Committee on Special Education and reported receiving needed support through a monthly forum on special education with local special education coordinators.

Albany Community has not developed a program for meeting the needs of English language learners. Teachers reported ad hoc methods of meeting the needs of these students, such as working closely with parents and utilizing the instructional strategies in the teachers' manual of their curricular resources. While the principal and board chairperson noted their unsuccessful efforts to locate and hire a certified and qualified teacher for this area, they have yet to do so. Consequently, several students identified as English language learners are not receiving required services.

## Conduct of the Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Second-Year Inspection Visit at Albany Community Charter School on February 5, 2008. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

**Jason L. Sarsfield (Team Leader)** is a former Senior Analyst at the Charter Schools Institute at the State University of New York. Mr. Sarsfield fulfilled a leadership role in informal and annual visits to SUNY authorized charter schools as well as participated in the charter renewal review process, provided technical assistance to schools as needed, and contributed to the Institute's research agenda. Prior to joining the Institute in January, 2007 Mr. Sarsfield was a Contract Analyst at The Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University – Office of Academic Accountability where he was responsible for evaluating the academic performance of authorized schools, reviewing school curricula and educational programs, and measuring progress toward educational goals. While at Central Michigan University, Mr. Sarsfield worked closely with the Michigan Department of Education on annual legislative reports, grant reviews, and policy recommendations. Previously, Mr. Sarsfield taught social studies in grades 7-12 in Michigan and Alaska while also completing curriculum development responsibilities and serving as an Advanced Placement Exam Reader for The College Board. Mr. Sarsfield holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education from Northern Michigan University and is completing the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Educational Leadership from Central Michigan University.

**Joanne Falinski, Ph.D.**, is a former Vice President for Charter School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Dr. Falinski most recently served as an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Pace University in Pleasantville, New York. Her responsibilities included teaching both undergraduate and graduate education courses, supervising literacy practicum students in the field and conducting relevant research. She also presented at numerous regional and national conferences on topics of literacy, professional development and collaboration between special education and regular education. Dr. Falinski was actively involved in the University community, serving as a member of the Institutional Review Board and Writing Center Advisory Board. Prior to joining Pace, Dr. Falinski served as an Assistant Professor in the School of Education for Manhattanville College and Director of a NYS site of the National Writing Project. Dr. Falinski's vast experience in the K-12 community includes serving as an Elementary Classroom Teacher and Elementary Principal.

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

**APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT**

<b>Evidence Category</b>	<b>Benchmarks</b>	
	<b>Renewal Question 1</b> <b>Is the School an Academic Success?</b>	
<b>Benchmark 1A</b> <b>Academic Attainment &amp; Improvement</b>	<b>1A.1</b>	<b>English Language Arts: The school meets or has come close to meeting the English Language Arts goal in its Accountability Plan over the term of its charter.</b>
	<b>1A.2</b>	<b>Mathematics: The school meets or has come close to meeting the mathematics goal contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of its charter.</b>
	<b>1A.3</b>	<b>Science: The school meets or has come close to meeting the science goal contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of its charter.</b>
	<b>1A.4</b>	<b>Social Studies: The school meets or has come close to meeting the social studies goal contained in its Accountability Plan over the term of its charter.</b>
	<b>1A.5</b>	<b>NCLB: The school has made adequate yearly progress as required by NCLB.</b>
<b>Benchmark 1B</b> <b>Use of Assessment Data</b>	<b>1B</b>	<b>The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and to use it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</b>
<b>Benchmark 1C</b> <b>Curriculum</b>	<b>1C</b>	<b>The school has a clearly defined and aligned curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.</b>

<b>Benchmark 1D</b> <b>Pedagogy</b>	<b>1D.1</b>	<b>The school has strong instructional leadership.</b>
	<b>1D.2</b>	<b>High quality instruction is evident throughout the school.</b>
	<b>1D.3</b>	<b>The school has programs that are demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically to meet the school's academic Accountability Plan goals, including programs for students who require additional academic supports, programs for English Language Learners and programs for students eligible to receive special education.</b>
<b>Benchmark 1E</b> <b>Student Order &amp; Discipline</b>	<b>1E</b>	<b>The school's culture allows and promotes a culture of learning.</b>
<b>Benchmark 1F</b> <b>Professional Development</b>	<b>1F</b>	<b>The school's professional development program assists teachers in meeting student academic needs and school goals, by addressing identified shortcomings in student learning and teacher pedagogical skill and content knowledge.</b>

<b>Evidence Category</b>	<b>Benchmarks</b>	
	<b>Renewal Question 2</b> <b>Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?</b>	
<b>Benchmark 2C</b> <b>Governance</b>	<b>2C.1</b>	<b>The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and specific goals.</b>

## **APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Charter Schools and the State University of New York**

The New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 (“the Act”) called for the creation of tuition-free public schools that would operate independently and autonomously of local school districts, schools by design committed to improving student achievement for all students, particularly those at-risk of academic failure.

The Act specifies that civic leaders, community groups, educators and/or parents interested in bringing public school choice to their communities may apply to one of three chartering entities in the state to open a new charter school: the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the State University Trustees), the New York State Board of Regents (the Regents), or local boards of education (in New York City, authorizing power is vested in the Chancellor). Additionally, existing traditional district-operated schools can seek to convert to charter status through their governing boards of education.

The Charter Schools Institute (the Institute) was established by the State University Trustees to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities under the Act, including reviewing applications to establish charter schools as well as the review of renewal applications for those schools (as detailed more fully below, an initial charter is granted for a period of five years only). In each case the Institute makes recommendations to the State University Trustees. In addition the Institute is charged with providing ongoing oversight of SUNY authorized charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools in every respect. They are open to all children, non-sectarian in their programs and funded with public tax dollars. Unlike district operated schools, which are run by a board of education, each public charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees, which is directly responsible for school performance. While independent, public charter schools and their boards, like traditional public schools and school boards, are subject to oversight and monitoring. Additionally, all public charter schools in New York State are jointly subject to inspection and oversight by the State Education Department (SED) on behalf of the Board of Regents. As such, charter schools, though free from many mandates, are more accountable to the public than district-run schools.

Charter schools are also accountable for performance. In exchange for the freedom from many state rules and regulations that the Act provides, a public charter school receives a charter, or contract, of up to five years and must meet stated student performance goals that are set forth in its Accountability Plan as well as standards regarding its fiscal, legal and organizational effectiveness within the charter period, or risk losing its charter or not having its charter renewed. This tradeoff—freedom from rules and regulations in exchange for unprecedented accountability for student performance and real consequences for failure—is one of the most significant differences between public charter schools and other public schools administered by traditional school districts.

### **The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits**

Because some schools take planning years before opening (during which time their five-year charter continues to run as if they had opened) and/or receive renewal charter terms of less than five years, the number of years that a school has been in operation is not always co-terminus with the number of

years that a school has provided instruction. Thus for example, a school that is in its seventh year of operation may be in its fifth year of instruction and facing initial renewal, having previously received a short-term planning year renewal for a period of time equivalent to the number of planning years the school took. It will therefore receive a renewal visit, whereas another school that did not take any planning years and was renewed for five years would be in the second year of its second five-year charter. This school would therefore not receive a renewal visit but rather an evaluation visit and inspection report, which all schools in that position receive. As such, each of the Institute's inspection reports contains a chart indicating the years the school has been in operation, the year of its present charter period, when it has been renewed and for how long, and the feedback that has been previously issued to the school.

In evaluating schools at renewal and on a regular and ongoing basis, the Institute uses a series of benchmarks that cover not only the strength of the academic program but the strength and effectiveness of the organizational and fiscal policies, structures and procedures that the school has instituted at the time of the visit ("the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks"). How these benchmarks are used (and which are used) varies, depending on the specific year of the visit as well as whether the school is in its initial renewal cycle (the first five years) or, having been renewed one or more times, in subsequent renewal cycles.

In particular, the Institute uses a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks to review the effectiveness of a charter school's academic programs, e.g., the strength of a school's internal assessment system, the rigor of its pedagogical approach, and the breadth and focus of the school's curriculum. This subset, State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks 1B-1F, is often referred to as the "Qualitative Education Benchmarks," or "QEBs." In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), the QEBs are important precisely because the quantitative indicators of academic achievement, i.e., students' performance on standardized tests (especially the state's 3<sup>rd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> grade testing program and Regents assessments), are generally few in number and difficult to interpret. The qualitative indicators serve as proxy indicators, therefore, for student assessment data sets that are necessarily incomplete and incipient. Moreover, only by using these qualitative indicators can the Institute provide feedback not only on *how* the school is doing but also *why* it is succeeding or failing.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, and particularly at the school's initial renewal (and subsequent renewals thereafter), the quantitative indicators (as defined by Renewal Benchmark 1A, the school's progress in meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals) take on paramount importance and the qualitative indicators concordantly diminish in importance. This is consonant with the fact that charter schools must demonstrate results or face non-renewal. However, while subsequent renewal decisions are based almost solely by the school's progress toward meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals during the charter period, the Institute continues to use the Qualitative Education Benchmarks in its evaluation of charter schools. The reason for this is that it can give the school, parents, and other stakeholders information not only on how the school is doing but perhaps the reasons for its lack of performance (if such is the case).

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<sup>3</sup> More often, of course, schools do not succeed or fail so much as parts of the highly complex organization are working well and parts are not.

## Keeping This Report in Context

In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face a variety of challenges as they mature, and not all charter schools address each challenge at the same pace. The State University and the Institute recognize the difference between the challenges of starting-up a school and those involved in sustaining its viability and effectiveness over the long-term, as well as the differences in the richness of student assessment data available for a school which has recently opened compared to a school which has been in operation for an extended time. In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face major challenges in the first few years of their charter. These challenges include:

- establishing a positive, academically focused school culture that provides high expectations, support and encouragement for students and teaching staff, and any necessary remediation for students;
- establishing operational and communication patterns with the governing school board of trustees, as well as communication patterns with staff, parents and the community;
- setting up sound fiscal processes and procedures;
- establishing the school in often less-than-ideal facilities, without ready access to facilities funding mechanisms available to district administered public schools;
- creating an environment with strong instructional leadership where teachers receive timely professional development to address changing student needs;
- ensuring that all staff are familiar with and consistently use an effective system for behavior management; and
- retaining qualified staff and minimizing the frequency and rate of any staff turnover by understanding the reason for it, and providing replacement staff with an orientation to the school and its program, as well as the necessary professional development.

Readers should also keep in mind the inherent limitations of a one-day visit, which provides only a snap-shot of the school on visit day. While the Institute is confident that the majority of its observations are valid, in that they reflect an underlying reality about the school's academic and organizational structures, they are not perfect or error-free.

While there is no one rating that the Institute gives as a result of a single-day visit, it is important to note that where the inspection team identifies area after area with not just room for improvement but significant and severe deficiencies, and few, if any, countervailing strengths, the difficulty that the school may have in presenting a compelling case for renewal is likely to be substantially increased and this fact may well be noted. Conversely, where the inspection team finds that strengths outnumber weaknesses in both quantity and quality, the school is likely to be better positioned to build a strong case for renewal. So, too, this fact may be noted.

In sum, then, we urge all readers to review the entire report and not to take a particular comment in the report about the school out of context.

Finally, we note that this report cannot serve its three functions (providing data to the school to use for its potential improvement; disseminating information to stakeholders; and gathering data so that

the Institute may come to renewal with a richer set of evidence) unless the report is not only unsparingly candid regarding the observations that the Institute has made, but also focused on those areas that are potentially in need of improvement rather than those accomplishments that the school has accumulated to date.

While this level of what can reasonably be termed *brutal honesty* is necessary, as is the focus on areas for improvement, readers should remember that almost no other entity in education is held to such a high standard of review. This is especially true of public schools that traditional districts and Boards of Education oversee. In so saying, the Institute does not ask the reader to make excuses for schools that are not succeeding—and the Institute’s accountability system does not and will not—but we do note that providing this level of accountability, which almost every charter school welcomes and even advocates for, represents in and of itself a revolution in how public education is governed.