



Charter Schools Institute  
*The State University of New York*

## Icahn Charter School 1

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### School Evaluation Report 2008-2009

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Charter Schools Institute  
State University of New York  
41 State Street, Suite 700  
Albany, New York 12207  
518/433-8277, 518/427-6510 (fax)  
<http://www.newyorkcharters.org>

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION .....	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT .....	4
SCHOOL DESCRIPTION.....	6
SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT .....	9
Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit .....	9
Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence .....	10
Conduct of the Visit.....	10
APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT.....	18
APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION .....	24
Charter Schools and the State University of New York .....	24
The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits .....	24
Keeping This Report in Context .....	25

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”), jointly with the New York State Board of Regents, are required by law to provide oversight sufficient to ensure that each charter school that the State University Trustees have authorized is in compliance with applicable law and the terms of its charter. The State University Trustees, however, consistent with the goals of the New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998, 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 information 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 its renewal recommendation. These data include student performance results, financial audits, any legal records of issues addressed, board meeting minutes, and reports from regular evaluation visits conducted by the Institute (or external experts contracted by the Institute) and other agencies with oversight responsibilities.

This annual School Evaluation Report includes three primary components. The first section, titled Executive Summary of School Evaluation Visit, provides an overview of the primary conclusions of the evaluation team regarding this year’s visit to the school. The second section, titled School Description, provides descriptive information about the school, including enrollment and demographic data as well as summary historical information regarding the life of the school. Finally, this report presents the evidence and conclusions from an evaluation visit conducted in the current school year in a third section, titled School Evaluation Visit. Within this section is a summary of conclusions from previous school evaluations.

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 with respect to the school’s performance as compared to the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks. To the extent appropriate and useful, we encourage school boards to use this evaluation report in ongoing planning and school improvement efforts.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT**

Based on the analysis of evidence gathered during an evaluation visit to Icahn Charter School 1 on April 23, 2009, the school appears to be making substantial progress towards achieving its mission. Although this conclusion is drawn from a variety of indicators, which are discussed more fully later in this report, some of the more salient indicators include the following:

### *Academic Success*

The school regularly administers useful diagnostic, formative and summative assessments that are aligned to the curriculum. Procedures are in place to systematically collect student performance data and analyze results. The school effectively uses results to improve student performance through the adjustment of classroom instruction as well as to identify students for remediation and enrichment. A wide variety of communication methods are used to inform parents and the community about student and school performance.

The school has developed a comprehensive curriculum, based on Core Knowledge, that is aligned to standards. Teachers are sufficiently supported in what to teach and when to teach it and believe that the curriculum guides for their grades give them a clear framework for unit and lesson planning. Based on the understanding that the current teachers have produced exemplary results and that the school's documents should reflect their instruction, the school is in the process of revising its "At a Glance" pacing charts to more accurately reflect how teachers have implemented the curriculum.

Overall, quality instruction is evident in classes throughout the school, though the degree of cognitive engagement, rigor, higher-order thinking and use of learning time varies. Within their own classrooms, teachers use limited teaching strategies to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students. School leaders have identified differentiated instruction as a professional development focus for classroom teachers this year, particularly through the use of technology.

The school has set very high expectations for student achievement and has achieved exemplary results on the state examinations. Instructional leaders provide teachers with ongoing support, though there was no formal teacher evaluation system in place at the time of the visit. While the current informal procedures seem to provide enough feedback for some teachers, several teachers expressed the desire for a more formal, written process and to receive more feedback than they are currently receiving.

Teachers were not familiar with the school's procedures for identifying students with disabilities, and there is no regularly-convening Child Study Team or equivalent committee that discusses and enacts pre-referral steps. Interviews with school leaders suggest that their aim is to avoid referring students for services if their needs can be met without special education identification. The school does have an effective, data-driven Targeted Assistance program that meets the needs of at-risk students.

The school has established an exceptionally safe and orderly environment where learning is valued and promoted. Classroom observations revealed that students were engaged in the learning process. The school's discipline policy is delineated in the handbook distributed to teachers and parents at the beginning of the school year.

The school has a sustained and individualized approach to professional development that adequately

addresses the needs of teachers and students. Interviews with the school leaders and staff developers reveal that there are both school-wide and individual professional development goals and opportunities.

*Organizational Capacity*

The school has faithfully followed its mission and key design elements. Families appear to be highly satisfied with the school as indicated by attendance and application rates.

Icahn Charter School 1 has established a well-functioning organizational staff, systems and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program, and is supported by staff and resources at Icahn Associates. The school's organizational structures support distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and provide oversight to the total educational program. The members are provided with sufficient information from school leaders to provide effective oversight and evaluation.

## **SCHOOL DESCRIPTION**

The application to establish the Carl C. Icahn Charter School was approved by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York on January 23, 2001. The New York State Board of Regents approved the school in March of that same year. Note: The school requested, and the State University Trustees approved, a charter revision changing the school's name to: Icahn Charter School 1 ("Icahn 1") in May of 2009.

The school opened in August of 2001 serving 105 students in kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. The school added one additional grade in each year of its first charter term, ultimately serving 252 students in kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade during the 2005-06 school year. On March 13, 2006, the State University Trustees granted the school a Full-Term, Five-Year Renewal, which was approved by the Board of Regents on May 23, 2006. The school has continued to expand during its second charter term, adding a 7<sup>th</sup> grade in 2006-07 and an 8<sup>th</sup> grade in 2007-08. Located at 1506 and 1525 Story Avenue in the Bronx, the school's two buildings currently house 317 students in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Icahn 1 partners with The Foundation for a Greater Opportunity ("The Foundation"), a not-for-profit organization which supports organizations that assist children from low income, financially needy families, including educational programs, with specific commitment to charter schools in New York City. The Foundation provided essential financial resources to the school during its first few years of operation, helping to cover the initial gap between expenses and revenue. The school is located on land leased by the Foundation, which also paid for construction of the building for students in kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The school leases the facility from the Foundation. The school also receives a range of administrative support through Icahn Associates.

As of the date of the current evaluation visit, the school's board of trustees was comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. Carl C. Icahn, Chair;
- Ms. Gail Golden, Vice-Chair;
- Ms. Julie Goodyear;
- Mr. Robert Sancho;
- Mr. Seymour Fliegel;
- Mr. Edward J. Shanahan;
- Ms. Karen Mandelbaum; and
- Ms. Robin Williams.

The school's mission is as follows:

*Icahn Charter School 1, using the Core Knowledge curriculum developed by E.D. Hirsch, will provide students with a rigorous academic program offered in an extended day/year setting. Students will graduate armed with the skills and knowledge to*

*participate successfully in the most rigorous academic environments and will have a sense of personal and community responsibility.*

The school utilizes the Core Knowledge curriculum with a focus on assessment so that individualized work can be organized to ensure that each child reaches his/her potential. Other key design elements include:

- small class size (18 students per class);
- extended school day and year to have more time for instruction and to reduce the loss of mastery over school vacations;
- employment of real life applications and hands-on learning opportunities to make curriculum “immediate” for students;
- high standards for instruction through ongoing professional development;
- encouraging strong parental involvement; and
- offering numerous after school academic, recreational and sports programs as well as Saturday Academy classes in English language arts and mathematics.

The founding board and applicant team have built on the strength of the academic program at Icahn Charter School 1 and, at the time of the current school evaluation visit, have opened two replication schools (Icahn Charter School 2 and Icahn Charter School 3) and will soon open Ichan Charter School 4. All of these schools are authorized by the State University Trustees.

**School Year (2008-09)**

190 instructional days

**School Day (2008-09)**

8:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

## Enrollment

School Year	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment <sup>1</sup>	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
<b>2001-02</b>	108		105	K-2		K-2	Yes
<b>2002-03</b>	144		143	K-3		K-3	Yes
<b>2003-04</b>	180		180	K-4		K-4	Yes
<b>2004-05</b>	180	216	216	K-4	K-5	K-5	Yes
<b>2005-06</b>	180	252	252	K-4	K-6	K-6	Yes
<b>2006-07</b>	288		280	K-7		K-7	Yes
<b>2007-08</b>	324		317	K-8		K-8	Yes
<b>2008-09</b>	324		314	K-8		K-8	Yes

## Demographic Data<sup>2</sup>

	2005-06		2006-07		2007-08	
	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #9 Enrollment	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #9 Enrollment	Percent of School Enrollment	Percent of CSD #9 Enrollment
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>						
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	1	0	0	0	0
Black or African American	59	34	61	34	58	34
Hispanic	41	63	39	63	42	63
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0	2	0	2	0	2
White	0	1	0	1	0	1
Multiracial <sup>3</sup>	N/A	N/A	0	0	0	0
<b>Special Populations</b>						
Students with Disabilities	2.0	N/A	4.3	15.2	1.3	N/A
Limited English Proficient	0.0	23.6	0.0	23.5	1.0	N/A
<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>						
Eligible for Free Lunch	76	81	82	81	67	82
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	13	5	9	6	19	5

<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup> Source: 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 School Report Cards (New York State Education Department). Note that the State Education Department does not report special education data.

<sup>3</sup> Multiracial enrollment data were not collected statewide in the 2005-06 school year.

## **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 and assessment, as well as 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 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); where the Institute finds serious deficiencies relating to student health and safety in particular, 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 previous visits to the school. This information is used by evaluation teams in preparation for the visit and assists the observers in understanding the accomplishments and challenges that 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 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 evaluation, along with supporting evidence. Finally, information regarding the conduct of the evaluation, including the date of the visit and information about the evaluation team is provided.

### **Summary of Previous Evaluation Visits**

The Charter Schools Institute conducted an initial renewal evaluation of Icahn Charter School 1 in September 2005. The evaluation team observed classrooms; interviewed administrators, board members and teachers; and reviewed student work and other documents. As a result of the renewal visit, a report was provided to the school's board of trustees outlining the major conclusions from the visit, which are briefly summarized below.

Strong instructional leadership, provided by a combination of administrators and consultants, guided the school's work at the time of the renewal visit. A rigorous curriculum, based on Core Knowledge, was in place, though the school did not have a comprehensive school-wide writing program. Students came to school ready to learn, and teachers had high expectations that were reflected throughout the school environment resulting in a calm and secure atmosphere. The academic learning environment was one in which teaching and learning was valued and supported. Inspectors found instruction to be efficient with clear expectations, yet the primarily whole class instruction did not always address individual students' needs.

The school used standardized test data to evaluate student performance and to identify students in need of assistance, but did not use data to assess the effectiveness of instruction. Students at risk of academic failure were supported through the school's Targeted Assistance program, Saturday Academy, subject specialist assistance and/or the Waterford program.

The school provided multiple opportunities for teachers to obtain support in refining their craft, including the hiring of a new staff developer, coaching by consultants and mentoring. There was much informal opportunity for teacher evaluation and feedback, but a formal systematized process for evaluating teachers was not evident.

### **Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence**

#### *Use of Assessment Data (Benchmark 1.B)*

The school regularly administers useful diagnostic, formative and summative assessments that are aligned to the curriculum. In the spring of each year, students take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). The school's testing calendar indicates that, the school administers interim assessments that mirror the NY state examinations (in the form of commercially produced or past state exams) every four weeks throughout the year. Teachers give weekly and unit assessments in their classrooms. Students' reading levels are assessed using running records, and the Fox in the Box assessment kit is used in early childhood classes.

The school has procedures in place to systematically collect student performance data and analyze results. Approximately three times prior to each state exam, students take an interim assessment designed to predict their performance on the exam. The assessments are submitted to the Director of Assessment, who scores them, enters the results into an item analysis spreadsheet and shares the document with classroom and Targeted Assistance teachers within a day.

The school effectively uses results to improve student performance through the adjustment of classroom instruction as well as to identify students for remediation and enrichment. Results from the ITBS exam taken in the spring are analyzed by the Director of Assessment to identify the students who will be placed in the Targeted Assistance Program, as well as their particular areas of need. The interim assessment spreadsheet allows the teachers to analyze which skills need to be remediated and for whom. According to the principal, the spreadsheet is analyzed both vertically and horizontally. The vertical analysis indicates which skills are problematic for the class; if 10 or more of the 18 students in class answer incorrectly, the skill is retaught within the classroom. Teachers interviewed indicated that they are at liberty to adjust their lesson plans and change instruction to make certain that all students are mastering the academic program. They very often consult with the staff developer when making these adjustments and reported having plenty of supplemental materials to use for additional instruction. The horizontal analysis identifies students who will receive supplemental instruction during small group time, tutoring during preparation periods or be placed into the Targeted Assistance program. The director of assessment meets with teachers who provide Targeted Assistance to those students in need of intervention so that they are able to focus on the areas of specific skills deficiency.

The school uses a wide variety of communication methods to inform parents and the community about student and school performance. Student report cards, which Icahn calls "progress reports," are sent home six times per year. They contain grades and narrative feedback for each subject and provide a space for parents to write comments and questions as well. Parents are informed of their children's Fountas & Pinnell reading level. Parents whose children do not pass a practice test receive a letter about their child's performance. Many teachers also send the weekly classroom tests home for parents to sign.

### *Curriculum (Benchmark 1.C)*

The school has developed a comprehensive curriculum grounded in Core Knowledge that is aligned to New York State standards. According to the superintendent and founder, social studies is the “heartbeat” of Core Knowledge. The principal stressed that “everything is an outgrowth of social studies” and that other curricular areas such as English language arts and science should reflect that. Teachers reported that the school’s curriculum is based on Core Knowledge and that the curriculum guides are aligned across grades, allowing students to build upon their knowledge each year.

Teachers reported that they are sufficiently supported in what to teach and when to teach it. They believe that the curriculum guides for their grades give them a clear framework for unit and lesson planning and that they have sufficient textbooks and resources to carry out their teaching responsibilities. Teachers plan individually and meet as needed with the staff developer and other grade level teachers to collaborate on what is being taught. They said that they viewed the curriculum guides as a scope and sequence that dictates the subject matter to be covered in each grade. Teachers reported that the commercial materials available to them are well-aligned to their curriculum guides. Several teachers also reported that they have the flexibility to rearrange units and to adjust the guides as they see fit, as long as they document the new order so that it could be reflected in curriculum guide revisions.

Based on the understanding that the current teachers have produced exemplary results and the school’s documents should reflect their instruction, the school is in the process of revising its “At a Glance” pacing charts to more accurately reflect how teachers have implemented the curriculum. The staff developer interviewed teachers to “capture the reality” of what was being taught and revised the documents to accurately reflect the order of the units as presented. For example, in 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies, the units have been adjusted so that certain topics are covered before the state test. At the time of the visit, she was in the process of working with teachers to record the supplementary materials they utilize so that the other Icahn schools have access to their resources.

### *Pedagogy (Benchmark 1.D)*

Overall, quality instruction is evident in classes throughout the school though the degree of cognitive engagement, rigor, higher-order thinking and use of learning time varies. Interviews with school leaders suggest that teachers are given substantial latitude with regard to their lesson design as long as their students perform; according to the director of assessment, “The goal is to get there—however you get there.”

As an example of highly rigorous instruction, students in one class were conducting a character analysis of “A Mid Summer Night’s Dream” in preparation for a play that they would be performing. As part of this activity, the teacher asked many higher-order questions that required the students to analyze, synthesize and explain why characters were acting in particular ways and what would happen if they took on different characteristics.

In other observed classes, although the students were focused and well-behaved, the level of rigor was at a more basic level. Though the activity directions were clear, it was less apparent what students were expected to be able to do by themselves by the end of the lesson, and teachers appeared to do more of the cognitive work for students. For example, students were repeatedly asked *who*,

*what and where* recall questions, rather than questions that would require more rigorous cognition on their part.

Within their own classrooms, teachers use limited teaching strategies to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students. A few teachers do use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction, such as independent literacy centers that allow them to work with small groups to provide needed remedial instruction as indicated by assessments. Reading instruction using leveled readers also allows them to provide differentiated lessons. However, interviews with classroom teachers suggest that many of them believe that the Targeted Assistance teachers are responsible for differentiated instruction. They stated that students who are struggling receive supplemental instruction through pull-out or push-in interventions or via before and after school tutoring. Within their classrooms, these teachers rely on methods such as sitting a high-level student next to a low-level student and encouraging them to ask questions and provide guidance to one another. Small class sizes, combined with the pull-out of students for the Targeted Assistance program, enable teachers to work with a smaller number of students.

School leaders have identified differentiated instruction as a professional development focus for classroom teachers this year, particularly through the use of technology. According to the principal, “Previously, a gifted child would have sat idly by while his classmates finished their work.” He is working to support teachers in using technology to direct students to individualized work. As of last year, teachers have had access to KnowledgeBox, a program that provides them with a “wealth of resources to use with kids who are challenged or gifted” and that teachers report is more flexible than the previously used Waterford program, allowing them to create lessons for individuals or groups of students. The school has recently purchased SuccessMaker, a program that assesses each student’s skills and provides an individualized instructional program based on the results. One teacher reported that she will be receiving a tool to use with her Smartboard that will allow her students to record their answers to her oral questions, thereby enabling her to assess students’ understanding during the lesson and make necessary adjustments.

#### *Instructional Leadership (Benchmark 1.E)*

The school has set very high expectations for student achievement. School leaders strive to surpass the Accountability Plan goals and believe that scoring a level 3 on the state tests is the minimum standard, not a target that they set for themselves. As the superintendent said, “You don’t get a cookie for being where you are supposed to be.”

As noted above, the school has achieved exemplary results on the state examinations. Though they are pleased by the results, school leaders indicated that their goal is to produce “educated child[ren] who can compete with the best.” The superintendent stated, “The real mission is to get your child into a specialized high school or a top program so that they get in and are successful in college.” To do so, the school’s instructional program surpasses the elements required for success on the Accountability Plan. Students take the high school Regents exam in Algebra, and the school has been developing a process for writing instruction to improve students’ skills. Graduates of the school attend highly competitive prep schools, parochial schools and local specialized high schools. None of the students who graduated in 2008 attended neighborhood schools.

Instructional leaders provide teachers with ongoing support. Teachers, particularly newer staff members, reported that they receive substantial, informal feedback. They said that they felt satisfied by the level of support that they receive, have many staff members from whom they can seek

assistance (including the principal, staff developer, math consultants and technology consultant), and understand who best to approach for specific issues. Teachers stated that the principal visits their classrooms daily; although the duration of the visits is between 5-15 minutes, they are provided with verbal feedback on their performance and student behavior.

More experienced teachers reported that they receive feedback and support if they request it. One teacher said that when she first started teaching her subject, the math consultant would come to her classroom frequently to observe and support her, which she found very helpful. Now that she is more comfortable with her subject, the consultant comes less frequently but is still available.

At the time of the visit, there was no formal teacher evaluation system in place, although the staff handbook provided to teachers states that they will receive two formal, written evaluations of their performance per school year. The principal expressed that he does not wish to replicate a “DOE” (New York City Department of Education) model of evaluation. Instead, he wants to create an environment with a “personal touch” where “teachers want to grow.” The principal is a frequent and consistent presence in classrooms and informally offers constructive criticism or suggestions for improvement. While this seems to be enough feedback for some teachers, others expressed the desire for a more formal, written process and more feedback than they are currently receiving.

#### *At-Risk Students (Benchmark 1.F)*

The school has an effective, data-driven, robust Targeted Assistance program that meets the needs of at-risk students. Using the results of the ITBS, the director of assessment creates groups of students with similar needs. For example, the particular needs of fourth grade students who are underperforming in English language arts are identified to form a listening group and a comprehension group. Small group instruction is then directed to their areas of weakness. The Targeted Assistance program is supplemented by a Saturday Academy, offered to students three to four months prior to the State test, and teacher tutoring.

Last year the school had four students who were classified as English Language Learners; though they have all since been declassified, school leaders are still “cognizant” of their needs and monitor their progress. In the Targeted Assistance class, the teacher reviews mathematics vocabulary at a slower pace using pictures.

Teachers were not familiar with the school’s procedures for identifying students with disabilities. They said that they report their concerns about students’ progress to the principal. There is no regularly-convening Child Study Team or equivalent committee that discusses and enacts pre-referral steps. Within the school, the process is initiated by teachers contacting the principal, who then handles next steps. Interviews with school leaders suggest that their aim is to avoid referring students for services if their needs can be met without special education identification and to decertify the previously-identified students when possible. In comparison to the surrounding community, Icahn has a significantly lower percentage of students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs).

The students who have been identified as having disabilities receive the services directed by their IEPs from the certified Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) teacher, a Board of Education speech teacher and/or a counselor.

### *Student Order and Discipline (Benchmark 1.G)*

The school has established an exceptionally safe and orderly environment where learning is valued and promoted. Class rules were posted in each room, and each teacher had his/her own management program in place. The school hired a dean of discipline, who is very effective in handling students' disciplinary issues and assists in minimizing any disruption to the instructional program. Inspectors reported that the climate was serious and scholarly.

Classroom observations revealed that students were engaged in the learning process and that teachers placed emphasis on the quality of the work the students produced and the expectation for proper behavior. Inspectors noted very well-managed classrooms where the exchanges between teachers and students were very respectful—indicative that the expectations for proper classroom behavior had been emphasized by the teachers and internalized by the students.

Standards for student behavior appeared to be focused on learning. For example, during a whole-class read aloud, several students called out relevant questions during the story. The teacher answered the questions, illustrated them with examples, and then continued with the story. In that classroom, the interruptions contributed to the students' learning and appeared to be a part of the routine. However, when another student called out to the teacher about a conflict with a classmate, the disruption was not tolerated. The classroom culture was to stay focused on learning.

The school's discipline policy is delineated in the handbook distributed to teachers and parents at the beginning of the school year. According to the Icahn superintendent, teachers spend minimal time on discipline. Classroom observations confirm this and suggest that students have internalized the school's expectations for behavior.

### *Professional Development (Benchmark 1.H)*

The school has a sustained and individualized approach to professional development that adequately addresses the needs of teachers and students. Teachers have access to in-house staff, consultants and outside resources to meet school-identified and self-identified needs.

Interviews with the school leaders and staff developers reveal that there are both school-wide and individual professional development goals. At the beginning of the school year, teachers receive a "menu" of professional development topics, based in part on their requests at the end of the previous year that will be addressed during the coming year. As a school, the professional development emphasis this year has been on technology, writing instruction and balanced literacy. Prior to the beginning of the school year, the school's staff participated with the faculty from the other Icahn schools in professional development on Core Knowledge, 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, and writing in the mathematics classroom, as well as how technology can support the principles of learning.

During the year, most of the professional development is individualized and based in teachers' own classrooms. Teachers work one-on-one with a cadre of instructional coaches, including the staff developer for literacy, two mathematics consultants, a Writing Matter consultant and a technology consultant, to incorporate these school-wide foci into their classrooms.

In addition to the school-wide professional development, there is professional development targeted to individual teachers' needs. According to the principal, he works with teachers to recognize their own challenges in a "non-threatening environment" and then encourages them to "lease with an

option to buy”—in other words, to try out new instructional strategies. Teachers report that their requests to attend external professional development activities that they feel will be beneficial are almost always granted.

#### *Mission & Key Design Elements (Benchmark 2.A)*

The school has faithfully followed its mission and key design elements. Its instructional program continues to be based on the Core Knowledge curriculum, as stated in its original charter. As evidenced by its exemplary performance on the New York State examinations and the high school placements of its graduates, the school has prepared its students with skills and knowledge to “participate successfully in the most rigorous academic environments.”

#### *Parents & Students (Benchmark 2.B)*

Families appear to be highly satisfied with the school, as indicated by attendance and application rates. On a bulletin board outside the school hallways is an attendance chart highlighting the classes with the best attendance and an overall attendance rate of over 97 percent. The school had 868 applications for the April 1 lottery, resulting in an admittance rate of 3 percent. According to New York City Department of Education 2007-08 data, the school had a 45 percent response rate to its parent survey, and the majority of parents were satisfied with academic expectations, communication and school safety.

#### *Organizational Capacity (Benchmark 2.C)*

Icahn Charter School has established a well-functioning organizational staff, systems and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program and is supported by staff and resources at Icahn Associates. The school’s organizational structures support distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Teachers report that they understand the responsibilities of each member of the leadership team and know whom to see for their concerns. The school has hired and retained quality personnel. The school’s principal is a highly experienced administrator, who spent a year as the assistant principal in preparation for assuming his current role. The school has established an experienced and stable teaching staff. Key leadership support roles, including the director of assessment and staff developer, are filled by experienced and knowledgeable educators. Finally, the school has maintained adequate enrollment with a waiting list.

#### *Governance (Benchmark 2.D-E)*

The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school’s mission and provide oversight to the total educational program. Board members are focused on student achievement; given the school’s record of exemplary achievement, they believe that they have a “winning formula.” The board has adequate skills, structures and procedures to govern the school and is comprised of representatives from the educational and financial worlds as well as a parent representative from each Icahn school, who is elected by his/her Parent Guardian Association. Since the oversight of the Icahn board of trustees has expanded from one school to three, it has added the position of superintendent. Although the site principals continue to report to the trustees at board meetings, the board relies on the superintendent to “monitor the principals.”

The board receives sufficient information from school leaders to provide effective oversight. Board members report that the superintendent and principal are “meticulous in their data reporting” and that

they receive regular updates on student performance on state and internal assessments as well as information about the atmosphere and issues in the buildings. According to a board member, their job is to know about everything, to set policy, and to “keep their hands off,” allowing the administration to implement that policy.

The new leadership structure has necessitated a new evaluation structure. The superintendent will complete the principal evaluation, as delegated by the board. The board will then evaluate the principal, based on the outcomes, including student performance data, teacher turnover and complaints, contained in the evaluation document.

### **Conduct of the Visit**

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Subsequent School Evaluation Visit at Icahn 1 Charter School on April 23, 2009. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

**Dr. Hillary Johnson (Team Leader)** is an independent educational consultant with 18 years of experience as a teacher, staff developer and researcher. She has conducted over 25 school inspections with the Charter Schools Institute, primarily as a consulting writer. Past projects include providing professional development in reading and writing instruction, analyzing the alignment between standards and curriculum, and designing video-based professional development to support principals in developing instructional monitoring skills. She began her career as a Spanish bilingual teacher and a Reading Recovery teacher in Oakland, CA. Subsequently, she served as a Literacy Content Coach and Whole School Change Coach to several Boston Public Schools. Dr. Johnson earned her B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, her M.Ed. from Harvard University and her Doctorate of Education from Harvard University with a concentration through its Urban Superintendents Program.

**Sue 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.

**Ileana Gomez (External Consultant)** has over twenty-five years of experience in the field of education and administration. Ms. Gomez holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Childhood Education, a Master of Science degree in Elementary Education, and certification in K-12 Leadership and Administration. She has served as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, principal, and most recently as the interim Executive Director of the Florida Schools of Excellence Commission, an alternate sponsor of charter schools in the State of Florida. Ms. Gomez is currently the President of Creative Educational Concepts, LLC, where she provides a multitude of consulting services for public, private, and charter schools. Services include curriculum development, school improvement planning, quality assurance and compliance reviews, leadership development and coaching, SACS/CASI accreditation, professional development, and charter school design and implementation.

**Jessica Willis (External Consultant)** is the Curriculum Specialist for Math and Science at Girls Prep Charter School, an all-girls elementary school on the Lower East Side. As Curriculum

Specialist, Jessica works on the design and implementation of the math and science curriculum and assessments and works with small groups of students for math intervention. Additionally, Jessica is participating in the Emerging Leaders Fellowship through the New York City for Charter School Excellence. This is Jessica's third year at Girls Prep. Prior to becoming a Curriculum Specialist, Jessica was a 2nd grade Lead Teacher at Girls Prep as well as a New York City Teaching Fellow in Brooklyn. Jessica is strongly committed to the opportunity that charter schools provide in ensuring that all students have a chance to achieve their potential. She graduated from New College of Florida with a degree in Art History, and earned a Masters of Education from Brooklyn College

## APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT

An excerpt of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks follows.

Visit the Institute's website at: <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/documents/renewalBenchmarks.doc> to see the complete listing of Benchmarks.

Benchmarks 1B – 1H, and Benchmarks 2A – 2E were used in conducting this evaluation visit.

<b>Renewal Question 1 Is the School an Academic Success?</b>	
<b>Evidence Category</b>	<b>State University Renewal Benchmarks</b>
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1B</b>  <b>Use of Assessment Data</b>	<p><b>The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the school regularly uses standardized and other assessments that are aligned to the school's curriculum framework and state performance standards;</li><li>• the school systematically collects and analyzes data from diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, and makes it accessible to teachers, school leaders and the school board;</li><li>• the school uses protocols, procedures and rubrics that ensure that the scoring of assessments and evaluation of student work is reliable and trustworthy;</li><li>• the school uses assessment data to predict whether the school's Accountability Plan goals are being achieved;</li><li>• the school's leaders use assessment data to monitor, change and improve the school's academic program, including curriculum and instruction, professional development, staffing and intervention services;</li><li>• the school's teachers use assessment data to adjust and improve instruction to meet the identified needs of students;</li><li>• a common understanding exists between and among teachers and administrators of the meaning and consequences of assessment results, e.g., changes to the instructional program, access to remediation, promotion to the next grade;</li><li>• the school regularly communicates each student's progress and growth to his or her parents/guardians; and</li><li>• the school regularly communicates to the school community overall academic performance as well as the school's progress toward meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals.</li></ul>
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1C</b>  <b>Curriculum</b>	<p><b>The school has a clearly defined curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the school has a well-defined curriculum framework for each grade and core academic subject, which includes the knowledge and skills that all students are expected to achieve as specified by New York State standards and performance indicators;</li><li>• the school has carefully analyzed all curriculum resources (including commercial materials) currently in use in relation to the school's curriculum framework,</li></ul>

	<p>identified areas of deficiency and/or misalignment, and addressed them in the instructional program;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the curriculum <i>as implemented</i> is organized, cohesive, and aligned from grade to grade;</li> <li>teachers are fully aware of the curricula that they are responsible to teach and have access to curricular documents such as scope and sequence documents, pacing charts, and/or curriculum maps that guide the development of their lesson plans;</li> <li>teachers develop and use lesson plans with objectives that are in alignment with the school's curriculum;</li> <li>the school has defined a procedure, allocated time and resources, and included teachers in ongoing review and revision of the curriculum; and</li> <li>the curriculum supports the school's stated mission.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1D</b></p> <p><b>Pedagogy</b></p>	<p><b>High quality instruction is evident in all classes throughout the school.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teachers demonstrate subject-matter and grade-level competency in the subjects and grades they teach;</li> <li>instruction is rigorous and focused on learning objectives that specify clear expectations for what students must know and be able to do in each lesson;</li> <li>lesson plans and instruction are aligned to the school's curriculum framework and New York State standards and performance indicators;</li> <li>instruction is differentiated to meet the range of learning needs represented in the school's student population, e.g. flexible student grouping, differentiated materials, pedagogical techniques, and/or assessments;</li> <li>all students are cognitively engaged in focused, purposeful learning activities during instructional time;</li> <li>learning time is maximized (e.g., appropriate pacing, high on-task student behavior, clear lesson focus and clear directions to students), transitions are efficient, and there is day-to-day instructional continuity; and</li> <li>teachers challenge students with questions and assignments that promote academic rigor, depth of understanding, and development of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1E</b></p> <p><b>Instructional Leadership</b></p>	<p><b>The school has strong instructional leadership.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the school's leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for student achievement;</li> <li>the school's leadership establishes an environment of high expectations for teacher performance (in content knowledge, pedagogical skills and student achievement);</li> <li>the school's instructional leaders have in place a comprehensive and on-going system for evaluating teacher quality and effectiveness;</li> <li>the school's instructional leaders, based on classroom visits and other available data, provide direct ongoing support, such as critical feedback, coaching and/or modeling, to teachers in their classrooms;</li> <li>the school's leadership provides structured opportunities, resources and guidance for teachers to plan the delivery of the instructional program within and across grade levels as well as within disciplines or content areas;</li> <li>the school's instructional leaders organize a coherent and sustained professional development program that meets the needs of both the school and individual</li> </ul>

<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1F</b></p> <p><b>At-Risk Students</b></p>	<p>teachers;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school's leadership ensures that the school is responding to the needs of at-risk students and maximizing their achievement to the greatest extent possible in the regular education program using in-class resources and/or pull-out services and programs where necessary ; and</li> <li>• the school's leadership conducts regular reviews and evaluations of the school's academic program and makes necessary changes to ensure that the school is effectively working to achieve academic standards defined by the State University Renewal Benchmarks in the areas of assessment, curriculum, pedagogy, student order and discipline, and professional development.</li> </ul> <p><b>The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school deploys sufficient resources to provide academic interventions that address the range of students' needs;</li> <li>• all regular education teachers, as well as specialists, utilize effective strategies to support students within the regular education program;</li> <li>• the school provides sufficient training, resources, and support to all teachers and specialists with regard to meeting the needs of at-risk students;</li> <li>• the school has clearly defined screening procedures for identifying at-risk students and providing them with the appropriate interventions, and a common understanding among all teachers of these procedures;</li> <li>• all regular education teachers demonstrate a working knowledge of students' Individualized Education Program goals and instructional strategies for meeting those goals;</li> <li>• the school provides sufficient time and support for on-going coordination between regular and special education teachers, as well as other program specialists and service providers; and</li> <li>• the school monitors the performance of student participation in support services using well-defined school-wide criteria, and regularly evaluates the effectiveness of its intervention programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>State University Renewal Benchmark 1G</b></p> <p><b>Student Order &amp; Discipline</b></p>	<p><b>The school promotes a culture of learning and scholarship.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has a documented discipline policy that is consistently applied;</li> <li>• classroom management techniques and daily routines have established a culture in which learning is valued and clearly evident;</li> <li>• low-level misbehavior is not being tolerated, e.g., students are not being allowed to disrupt or opt-out of learning during class time; and</li> <li>• throughout the school, a safe and orderly environment has been established.</li> </ul>
<p>State University Renewal Benchmark 1H</p> <p><b>Professional Development</b></p>	<p><b>The school's professional development program assists teachers in meeting student academic needs and school goals by addressing identified shortcomings in teachers' pedagogical skills and content knowledge.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school provides sufficient time, personnel, materials and funding to support a comprehensive and sustained professional development program;</li> <li>• the content of the professional development program dovetails with the school's</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mission, curriculum, and instructional programs;</li> <li>annual professional development plans derive from a data-driven needs-assessment and staff interests;</li> <li>professional development places a high priority on achieving the State University Renewal Benchmarks and the school's Accountability Plan goals;</li> <li>teachers are involved in setting short-term and long-term goals for their own professional development activities;</li> <li>the school provides effective, ongoing support and training tailored to teachers' varying levels of expertise and instructional responsibilities;</li> <li>the school provides training to assist all teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities, English language learners and other students at-risk of academic failure; and</li> <li>the professional development program is systematically evaluated to determine its effectiveness at meeting stated goals.</li> </ul>
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<b>Renewal Question 2</b> <b>Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?</b>	
<u>Evidence Category</u>	<u>State University Renewal Benchmarks</u>
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2A</b>	<p><b>The school is faithful to its mission and has implemented the key design elements included in its charter.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stakeholders are aware of the mission;</li> <li>• the school has implemented its key design elements in pursuit of its mission; and</li> <li>• the school meets or comes close to meeting any non-academic goals contained in its Accountability Plan.</li> </ul>
<b>Mission &amp; Key Design Elements</b>	
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2B</b>	<p><b>Parents/guardians and students are satisfied with the school.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has a process and procedures for evaluation of parent satisfaction with the school;</li> <li>• the great majority of parents with students enrolled at the school have strong positive attitudes about it;</li> <li>• few parents pursue grievances at the school board level or outside the school;</li> <li>• a large number of parents seek entrance to the school;</li> <li>• parents with students enrolled keep their children enrolled year-to-year; and</li> <li>• the school maintains a high rate of daily student attendance.</li> </ul>
<b>Parents &amp; Students</b>	
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2C</b>	<p><b>The school has established a well-functioning organizational structure with staff, systems, and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school demonstrates effective management of day-to-day operations;</li> <li>• staff scheduling is internally consistent and supportive of the school's mission;</li> <li>• the school has established clear priorities, objectives and benchmarks for achieving</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational Capacity</b>	

	<p>its mission and Accountability Plan goals, and a process for their regular review and revision;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school has allocated sufficient resources in support of achieving its goals;</li> <li>• the roles and responsibilities of the school's leadership and staff members are clearly defined;</li> <li>• the school has an organizational structure that provides clear lines for accountability;</li> <li>• the school's management has successfully recruited, hired and retained key personnel, and made appropriate decisions about removing ineffective staff members when warranted;</li> <li>• the school maintains an adequate student enrollment and has effective procedures for recruiting new students to the school; and</li> <li>• the school's management and board have demonstrated effective communication practices with the school community including school staff, parents/guardians and students.</li> </ul>
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2D</b>  <b>Board Oversight</b>	<p><b>The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and provide oversight to the total educational program.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school board has adequate skills and expertise, as well as adequate meeting time to provide rigorous oversight of the school;</li> <li>• the school board (or a committee thereof) understands the core business of the school—student achievement—in sufficient depth to permit the board to provide effective oversight;</li> <li>• the school board has set clear long-term and short-term goals and expectations for meeting those goals, and communicates them to the school's management and leaders;</li> <li>• the school board has received regular written reports from the school leadership on academic performance and progress, financial stability and organizational capacity;</li> <li>• the school board has conducted regular evaluations of the school's management (including school leaders who report to the board, supervisors from management organization(s), and/or partner organizations that provide services to the school), and has acted on the results where such evaluations demonstrated shortcomings in performance;</li> <li>• where there have been demonstrable deficiencies in the school's academic, organizational or fiscal performance, the school board has taken effective action to correct those deficiencies and put in place benchmarks for determining if the deficiencies are being corrected in a timely fashion;</li> <li>• the school board has not made financial or organizational decisions that have materially impeded the school in fulfilling its mission; and</li> <li>• the school board conducts on-going assessment and evaluation of its own effectiveness in providing adequate school oversight, and pursues opportunities for further governance training and development.</li> </ul>
<b>State University Renewal Benchmark 2E</b>  <b>Governance</b>	<p><b>The board has implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes, and has abided by them.</b></p> <p>Elements that are generally present include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school board has established a set of priorities that are in line with the school's goals and mission and has effectively worked to design and implement a system to achieve those priorities;</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the school board has in place a process for recruiting and selecting new members in order to maintain adequate skill sets and expertise for effective governance and structural continuity;</li> <li>• the school board has implemented a comprehensive and strict conflict of interest policy (and/or code of ethics)—consistent with those set forth in the charter—and consistently abided by them through the term of the charter;</li> <li>• the school board has generally avoided creating conflicts of interest where possible; where not possible, the school has managed those conflicts of interest in a clear and transparent manner;</li> <li>• the school board has instituted a process for dealing with complaints (and such policy is consistent with that set forth in the charter), has made that policy clear to all stakeholders, and has followed that policy including acting in a timely fashion on any such complaints;</li> <li>• the school board has abided by its by-laws including, but not limited to, provisions regarding trustee elections, removals and filling of vacancies;</li> <li>• the school board and its committees hold meetings in accordance with the Open Meetings Law, and minutes are recorded for all meetings including executive sessions and, as appropriate, committee meetings; and</li> <li>• the school board has in place a set of board and school policies that are reviewed regularly and updated as needed.</li> </ul>
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## **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 report, which all schools in that position receive. As such, each of the Institute's evaluation 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 (Benchmarks 1.B—1.H) 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. In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), the focus on these academic benchmarks is 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>4</sup>

Over time, and particularly at the time of 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 academic 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).

### **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

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<sup>4</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.

University Trustees 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 evaluation 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 evaluation 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.