



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

External Evaluation Report of Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School

2007 – 2008

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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>

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Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School **External Evaluation Report**

I. INTRODUCTION

The external inspection is part of a comprehensive oversight and evaluation system for those charter schools authorized by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (“State University Trustees”). The external inspection during the second or third year of a school’s initial five-year charter cycle and periodically thereafter provides an independent assessment of the school’s progress toward meeting the academic and, on a more limited basis, organizational Qualitative Educational Benchmarks (QEBs), a component of the State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks (“State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks”).¹

The external inspection complements the regular reviews conducted by the Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) by incorporating the Institute’s documentation of the school’s previous record of performance. This report provides an analysis of the data reviewed before and during the inspection visit and reflects any trends evident therein. In addition, this assessment provides insights which may contribute to the school’s ongoing improvement efforts and support the school’s case when it applies for initial or subsequent charter renewal. Finally, the Institute uses external inspection reports in discussions with school boards about the quality of their schools’ educational programs and the schools’ prospects for charter renewal.

This report is organized in the following sections:

- I. Introduction**
- II. Conduct of the Visit**
- III. School Description**
- IV. Executive Summary**
- V. School Progress Report**
- VI. Overall Trends Regarding the School**

Section I - the “Introduction” provides an overview of the external inspection process, as well as an overview of the organization of this report. Section II - the “Conduct of the Visit” includes a list of the members of the site visit team and their biographical sketches, along with a synopsis of the documents reviewed in preparation for the visit. Section III - the “School Description,” as the title indicates, briefly describes the charter school in terms of its establishment and history. Section IV - the “Executive Summary” provides a summary of the major conclusions reflected in the report.

Section V, entitled the “School Progress Report,” is divided into two parts: Part I, the “Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School’s Academic Success” and Part II, the “Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School’s Organizational Viability.” Both parts of the School Progress Report reflect evidence and analysis of the school’s effectiveness in meeting the standards set out in selected QEBs of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks.

¹ A full description of the *State University of New York Charter Renewal Benchmarks* and the *Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University Board of Trustees* can be found on the Institute’s website at: <http://www.newyorkcharters.org>.

The “Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School’s Academic Success” is further divided into two components: the “School Performance Review,” which provides an analysis of student academic performance for the most recent two or three years as an indication of the school’s academic success (Renewal Benchmark 1A), and the “School Educational Program Review,” which reflects the visit team’s analysis of the qualitative aspects of the school’s educational program based upon the guiding questions provided by the Institute and aligned with Renewal Benchmarks 1B - 1F.

“Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School’s Organizational Viability,” focuses on three components: clarity of the school’s mission and vision to its stakeholders; parent and student satisfaction; and the establishment of systems to monitor the effectiveness of the school’s instructional program. Renewal Benchmarks 2B, 2D.1, and 2C.1 provide the underpinnings for this part of the report.

In the final section of the External Visit report, Section VI - “Overall Trends Regarding the School,” the visit team offers its insights about any patterns that have emerged across the full spectrum of the school. Here the team offers its judgments about the school’s effectiveness at meeting the broad goals defined in the New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 as amended (Education Law §2850(2) (a-f)):

- improving student learning and achievement;
- increasing learning opportunities for all students (particularly students at risk of academic failure);
- encouraging the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
- creating new professional opportunities for teachers, school administrators and other school personnel;
- expanding parental choice in public schools; and
- moving from a rule-based to performance-based accountability system by holding schools accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results.

The judgments of the team are organized into two categories: academic program and organizational viability. The framework for the progress report discussion is shown in Appendix A. For your reference, the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks, in their entirety, may be found on the Institute’s website at <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/schoolsRenewOverview.htm>.

II. CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

The inspection of the Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School was conducted on May 13 and 14, 2008 by an independent team of experienced educators from SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA. The team included:

- **Susan Jamback**, Team Leader, is a consultant for SchoolWorks. Previous experience includes serving as principal in four public elementary and middle schools and as director of two charter schools in Massachusetts. She has mentored charter and district principals and conducted comprehensive charter and district school evaluations. She holds a BS from Plymouth University and M.Ed. from Antioch.
- **Tom Harvey**, Ed.D, is a consultant for SchoolWorks. Tom served twenty-eight years in public education in Maine. His career there included jobs in teaching, coaching, school counseling and school administration at levels spanning kindergarten through post-graduate. He has worked as a consultant with Maine’s Department of Education and as a facilitator with the Professional Development Program at Hurricane Island Outward Bound. Currently he works as an independent consultant and as an adjunct faculty member at Endicott College. He holds a Master’s degree and a Certificate of Advanced Study in the field of School Counseling and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership.
- **Linda Moriarty**, CAGS, Ed., is a consultant for SchoolWorks. After teaching for 21 years in grades 4-6 in the Boston School Department, she served as a Curriculum Specialist for a K-12 Boston Magnet Zone of 26 schools; two years as an assistant principal in two different K-5 schools in Boston and subsequently as a cabinet member for the superintendent of a K-12 Boston Public School Zone. She retired from a twelve year position as principal of a K-5 school in Marshfield MA.
- **Karl Smith**, Ed.D., is a Project Associate with SchoolWorks. Previously, he was a middle school principal and an Adjunct Professor at Lesley University. He holds degrees from Ottawa University, Boston State College, Bridgewater State College and an Ed.D. from Boston University.

As noted above, the team used the QEBs, a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks, as the guides for its evaluation. In addition, the team relied on a set of framework questions to structure the “School Progress Report” section of this document. Prior to the two-day visit, the team reviewed the school’s documents, including its annual *Accountability Plan Progress Report*, reports from previous site visits by the Charter Schools Institute or other entities, such as the New York State Education Department, and relevant sections of the school’s charter agreement. During the visit, the team observed classes, reviewed student work, interviewed school administrators, school board members, staff, parents and students, and reviewed curriculum and other documents to understand the efforts the school is making to achieve its academic and organizational goals.

III. SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application of the Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School (“Merrick Academy”) on January 21, 2000, which was subsequently approved by the Board of Regents on April 4, 2000. Originally housed in temporary space in Springfield Gardens, the school opened in September, 2000, with an enrollment of 121 students in Kindergarten through second grade. The school added one grade in each year of its initial charter term, reporting an enrollment of 448 students in kindergarten through sixth grade in the 2004-05 school year. The school is currently located at 207-01 Jamaica Avenue in Queens Village. In 2007-08, Merrick Academy served approximately 495 students in Kindergarten through 6th grade.

Merrick Academy was granted a full-term, five-year charter renewal with conditions by the State University Trustees on March 1, 2005, which was then approved by the Board of Regents on May 15, 2005. In its renewal decision, the State University Trustees limited the school’s authority to provide instruction within the term of the renewal charter to grades kindergarten through fifth grade only. On May 24, 2005, however, the State University Trustees authorized the school to once again add sixth grade for the remainder of the charter term following a more detailed request for a change in program from the school addressing the State University Trustees’ initial concerns.

At the time of the inspection visit, the board of trustees of Merrick Academy was comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. Gerald Karikari, Chair
- Ms. Kimberly Francis
- Mr. Darryl Greene
- Mr. Jacque Léandre
- Mr. Greg Meeks
- Ms. Traci Powell
- Mr. William Strader
- Ms. Valerie Williams
- Ms. Alma Alston (ex-officio)

The mission of the Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School as stated in the school’s Renewal Charter is as follows:

To create one of the finest public schools in America through use of the charter school process; to serve the “at risk” children of Springfield Gardens and Jamaica, Queens; and to create a role model for charter public school design that can be replicated in disadvantaged neighborhoods everywhere.

The Board of Trustees of Merrick Academy contracts with Victory Schools, Inc. (“Victory Schools”), a for-profit management partner to provide educational services. For an annual fee, Victory Schools provides the following services to the school: design and implementation of the educational program; selecting and acquiring instructional and curricular materials; designing, implementing, and monitoring professional development activities; business, personnel and payroll services and facility management; budgeting and financial reporting services; and insurance procurement.

Key design elements for Merrick Academy as stated in the school's Application for Charter Renewal include the following:

- a commitment to the students, parents and the southeast Queens community to provide an academic program that will prepare students to meet and exceed New York State performance standards;
- curriculum in English language arts and mathematics includes scientifically-based research to support its success;
- the use of data to inform instruction and in providing differentiated instruction to support individual student needs;
- establishment of a learning community where teachers use student work, research and best practice to improve student performance and teachers' skill;
- a comprehensive professional development program informed by a needs assessment and completed by teachers, the principal and management partner;
- strong student summer homework program to address the regression in learning that occurs over the summer;
- a two and one-half hour block of instruction based on balanced literacy, including a readers' and writer's workshop, as modeled by the National Writing Project and Great Source Writing Program;
- one hour and thirty minutes of daily mathematics instruction based on Everyday Mathematics, a curriculum resource aligned with the New York Learning Standards and assessments, with significant opportunities for enrichment and experiential learning; and
- comprehensive and rigorous assessment process, including components for pre-assessment, unit, mid-year and end-of-year tests.

School Year (2007-08)

182 instructional days

School Day (2007-08)

7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.²

² 7:30 to 8:00 a.m. is used as a breakfast period.

Enrollment

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment ³	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
2000-01	350	125	121	K-2	K-2	K-2	YES
2001-02	450	175	169	K-4	K-3	K-3	YES
2002-03	550	350	348	K-6	K-4	K-4	YES
2003-04	650	400	400	K-8	K-5	K-5	YES
2004-05	750	450	448	K-10	K-6	K-6	YES
2005-06	475	500	500	K-5	K-6	K-6	YES
2006-07	500	525	461	K-5	K-6	K-6	YES
2007-08	500	525	495	K-5	K-6	K-6	YES
2008-09	500	525		K-5			
2009-10	525	525		K-5			

Race/Ethnicity	2004-2005		2005-2006	
	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0 %	1.0 %	0.0 %	1.0 %
Black or African American	99.0 %	74.0 %	100.0 %	73.0 %
Hispanic	0.0 %	13.0 %	0.0 %	13.0 %
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	1.0 %	12.0 %	0.0 %	12.0 %
White	0.0 %	1.0 %	0.0 %	2.0 %

Source: 2004-05, 2005-06: School Report Card (New York State Education Department);
2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

Special Populations	2004-2005		2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29
Students with Disabilities	NA	NA	NA	NA	5.8 %	11.3 %
Limited English Proficient	0.0 %	7.0 %	0.0 %	7.0 %	0.0 %	6.7 %

Source: Students with Disabilities: New York State Education Department Database
Limited English Proficient: 2004-05, 2005-06: New York State Education Department School Report Card;
2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

³ 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.

Free/Reduced Lunch	2004-2005		2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29	% of Enroll. Merrick Academy	% of Enroll. Community District #29
Eligible for Free Lunch	42.0 %	54.0 %	34.0 %	60.0 %	40.1 %	61.7 %
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	28.0 %	12.0 %	26.0 %	13.0 %	21.4 %	12.7 %

Source: 2004-05, 2005-06: New York State Education Department School Report Card;
2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

School Charter History

Charter Year	School Year	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
Original Charter 1st Year	2000-01	YES	Prior Action Letter; End-of-Year Evaluation Report	NONE
Original Charter 2 nd Year	2001-02	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	NONE
Original Charter 3 rd Year	2002-03	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	NONE
Original Charter 4 th Year	2003-04	NO	NONE	NONE
Original Charter 5 th Year	2004-05	YES	Initial Renewal Report	Granted full Charter Renewal for period of five years with conditions; University Trustees approve request for change in program to add sixth grade
Renewal Charter 1 st Year	2005-06	NO	NONE	NONE
Renewal Charter 2 nd Year	2006-07	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	NONE
Renewal Charter 3 rd Year	2007-08	YES	External School Evaluation Report	NONE

IV. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Merrick Academy Charter School has the organizational capacity for continued growth and improvement. It has established a culture that is conducive to learning and high student achievement, and there is a commitment from all stakeholders to work to achieve its mission to become a top performing charter school. However, inspectors noted a lack of rigor and higher order thinking in many classrooms. Most instruction was teacher-directed for the whole class followed by guided or independent practice. In 10 out of 19 classroom observations the team did not observe any evidence of students demonstrating higher order thinking skills, in spite of the new initiatives for “accountable talk” and differentiation of instruction.

The school’s culture and environment are conducive to learning and both staff and parents talked about high expectations for academic rigor.

Although priorities are set for achieving the academic goals of the accountability plan in an environment of high expectations, key elements of instructional leadership are weak. Inspectors found little evidence of an over-arching plan developed by leadership to address the most pressing needs for instructional support and improvement. Staff observations and evaluations are summative and do not give supervisory feedback that would encourage and support individual teacher growth in instructional practice. There was little evidence of a system with accountability and oversight that would ensure consistent growth and improvement in instructional practice that could lead to higher student achievement.

Teachers have access to a curriculum that has been created in conjunction with its management company, Victory Schools, and there is a robust array of student assessment and student support services. While there is evidence of some standards-based practices in classrooms, higher order thinking activities, interactive discussion and differentiation of instruction to create a rigorous academic learning environment in classrooms are still in the beginning stages as school-wide practices. The school had recently hired a staff developer to provide instructional coaching, but this position is new to the school and has yet to demonstrate results.

Students are generally orderly and respectful. Classroom and hallway displays celebrate student achievement. There is a high level of parent satisfaction, and the board has made a renewed commitment to focus on achieving the institution’s academic goals.

Merrick Academy has a foundation in many areas for student achievement, but little evidence of an overall system of accountability for continual instructional improvement. In a similar manner, the school can make better use of the data from its many assessment tools, making the information more transparent and useful for teachers and school leaders.

V. SCHOOL PROGRESS REPORT

Part I: Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School's Academic Success

A. School Performance Review through 2006-07

Performance Summary through 2006-07: Merrick Academy came close to achieving its English language arts goal in 2004-05 but since then has not come close to meeting this goal. The school has not come close to meeting its mathematics goal in any of the last three years. Merrick Academy has met its science goal. Based on limited data, the school has also come close to meeting its social studies goal. The school reported coming close to meeting its organizational goal in 2006-07, and also reported achieving its legal and fiscal goals that year.

English language arts: Merrick Academy came close to achieving its absolute measure in 2004-05, when the school only administered the state English language arts assessment in 4th grade, with 71 percent of students scoring at the proficient level; however, the following year when consistent with the changes in the state assessment program, the school administered assessments to students in grades 3 through 6, performance declined to 50 percent proficient in 2005-06 and 55 percent in 2006-07. The school has met the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) established by the state's NCLB accountability system in each of the last three years. In 2004-05, the school outperformed its local school district, but failed to do so in the subsequent two years. In comparison to demographically similar schools state-wide, the school performed about the same as predicted in 2004-05, but since then has performed far worse than expected. In terms of growth, overall the student performance on the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) declined in 2004-05 and 2005-06, ending both years at about the national norm. In the latter year none of the six grade-level cohorts achieved their target. Looking at growth on the New York State exams, overall performance increased slightly but none of the three individual cohorts achieved their targets.

Mathematics: While 73 percent of 4th grade students scored at the proficient level in 2004-05, the following year when the state exam was first administered in grades 3 through 6 only 54 percent of students were proficient, rising to 67 percent in 2006-07. The school has met the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) established by the state's NCLB accountability system in each of the last three years. During those same years the school has failed to outperform its local school district, and has performed far worse than predicted in comparison to demographically similar schools state-wide. On the ITBS exam, overall student performance declined to below the national norm in 2004-05 and 2005-06. Looking at growth on the New York State exam, none of school's three grade-level cohorts achieved their target and overall performance declined.

Science: Merrick Academy reported that 71 percent of students were proficient on the state's 4th grade exam in 2006-07. In 2005-06 the school's proficiency rate was 85 percent, and in 2004-05 it was 75 percent. The school outperformed its local school district in 2004-05 and 2005-06; data were not available for 2006-07.

Social Studies: Based solely on outcomes from its absolute measure, Merrick Academy has come close to meeting its social studies goal. The percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on the state's 5th grade exam was 67 percent in 2004-05, 88 percent in 2005-06 and 72 percent in 2006-07. Comparison data for the local school district were unavailable.

NCLB: The school is deemed to be in Good Standing under the state's NCLB Accountability system.

Additional Goals (optional): For its organizational viability goal Merrick Academy reported in its Accountability Plan Progress Reports high levels of parent satisfaction, but this cannot be verified because the report does not include the survey response rate. The school has not met its target of 90 percent of students returning each year: the rates were 86 percent in 2004, 85 percent in 2005, and 79 percent in 2006. Attendance was close to the target with monthly attendance rates ranging between 90 and 96 percent. The school also reported achieving its legal and fiscal goals.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY: English Language Arts
Merrick Academy-Queens Public Charter School



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	2004-05 Grades Served: K-6			MET	2005-06 Grades Served: K-6			MET	2006-07 Grades Served: K-6			MET			
	Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)				
<u>ABSOLUTE MEASURES</u> 1. Each year 75 percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State exam.				NO				NO				NO			
	4	69.9 (73)	71.2 (66)		3	37.8 (74)	38.1 (63)		3	56.6 (53)	59.0 (39)				
					4	46.6 (75)	54.9 (61)		4	44.7 (76)	43.6 (55)				
					5	70.3 (74)	75.4 (57)		5	59.0 (78)	58.2 (55)				
					6	41.4 (70)	44.1 (59)		6	58.9 (56)	62.5 (40)				
	8	(0)	(0)		7	(0)	(0)		7	(0)	(0)				
			8	(0)	(0)	8	(0)	(0)							
			All	49.1 (293)	50.4 (240)	All	54.4 (263)	55.0 (189)							
2. Each year the school's aggregate Performance Index on the State exam will meet the Annual Measurable Objective set forth in the State's NCLB accountability system.	Grades	PI	AMO	YES	Grades	PI	AMO	YES	Grades	PI	AMO	YES			
	4	159	131		3-6	137	122		3-6	147	122				
	8		116												
<u>COMPARATIVE MEASURES</u> 3. Each year the percent of students enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 will be greater than that of students in the same grades in the local district.	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			YES	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			NO	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			NO			
	Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District				
	4	71.2	59.4		3-6	50.4	55.3		3-6	55.0	57.3				
4. Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the State exam by at least a small Effect Size (at least 0.3) based on its Free Lunch (FL) rate.	Grades	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size	NO	N	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size	NO	% FL	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size	NO
	4	69.9	67.8	0.16		293	49.1	66.3	-1.11		40.1	54.2	66.5	-1.07	
	8														
<u>VALUE ADDED MEASURE</u> 5. Each grade level cohort will reduce by one half the difference between the previous year's baseline and 50 NCE on a norm referenced test or 75 percent proficient on the NYSTP. An asterisk indicates cohort met target.	Assessment: ITBS				NO	Assessment: ITBS				Assessment: NYSTP				NO	
	Grades	Cohorts Making Target				Grades	Cohorts Making Target			Gr	N	Base	Target		Result
	2-6	of				1-6	0 of 6			4	58	41.4	58.2		44.8
	N	Base	Target	Result		N	Base	Target	Result	5	59	49.2	62.1		57.6
									6	49	65.3	70.2	61.2		
									7						
									8						
									All	166	51.2	63.1	54.2		

Data Sources: New York State and City data, workbooks submitted by schools and databases compiled by the Institute.
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SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY: Mathematics
Merrick Academy Queens Public Charter School



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	2004-05 Grades Served: K-6			MET	2005-06 Grades Served: K-6			MET	2006-07 Grades Served: K-6			MET		
	Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)			
<u>ABSOLUTE MEASURES</u>														
1. Each year 75 percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State exam.	4	74.7 (71)	72.9 (48)	NO	3	74.0 (74)	77.4 (62)	NO	3	86.8 (53)	92.1 (38)			
	8	(0)	(0)		4	53.0 (74)	51.7 (60)		4	59.7 (77)	63.6 (55)			
					5	56.0 (75)	59.6 (57)		5	56.6 (76)	52.7 (55)			
					6	30.0 (70)	27.6 (58)		6	61.8 (55)	66.7 (39)			
					7	(0)	(0)		7	(0)	(0)			
					8	(0)	(0)		8	(0)	(0)			
					All	53.6 (293)	54.4 (237)	NO	All	64.8 (261)	66.8 (187)	NO		
2. Each year the school's aggregate Performance Index on the State exam will meet the Annual Measurable Objective set forth in the State's NCLB accountability system.	Grades	PI	AMO	YES	Grades	PI	AMO	YES	Grades	PI	AMO	YES		
	4	166	142		3-6	143	86		3-6	159	86			
	8		93											
<u>COMPARATIVE MEASURES</u>	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			NO	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			NO	Comparison: (Queens District 29)			NO		
3. Each year the percent of students enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 will be greater than that of students in the same grades in the local district.	Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District			
	4	72.9	74.6		3-6	54.4	64.0		3-6	66.8	71.9			
4. Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the State exam by at least a small Effect Size (at least 0.3) based on the Free Lunch (FL) rate.	Grades	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size	N	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size	% FL	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size		
	4	74.7	84.3	-0.92	293	53.6	72.1	-1.09	40.1	64.9	77.6	-1.05		
	8													
<u>VALUE ADDED MEASURE</u>	Assessment: ITBS				Assessment: ITBS				Assessment: NYSTP					
5. Each grade level cohort will reduce by one half the difference between the previous year's baseline and 50 NCE on a norm referenced test or 75 percent proficient on the state exam. An asterick indicates cohort met target.	Grades	Cohorts Making Target		NO	Grades	Cohorts Making Target		NO	Gr	N	Base	Target	Result	NO
	1-6	of			1-6	2 of 6			4	59	76.3	76.4	61.0	
	N	Base	Target		Result	N	Base		Target	Result	5	59	55.9	
	326	49.7	49.9	45.6	302	49.1	49.6	47.0	6	49	57.1	66.1	65.3	
									7					
									8					
									All	167	63.5	69.3	59.9	

Data Sources: New York State and City data, workbooks submitted by schools and databases compiled by the Institute.

B. “School Educational Program Review”

Benchmark 1B: The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and to use it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.

Merrick Academy administers a broad range of assessments yearly in all major content areas. However, while the school is in its eighth year of operation, 2007-08 was its first full year of accurate cohort tracking. The Director of Student Assessment for Victory Schools has prepared assessment data and provided teacher pre-service/principal-in-service training related to data-driven decision making on an ongoing basis since 2005. However, a question remains regarding whether the resources provided by the school’s management company are utilized by the school’s staff. In addition, it appeared that the process had not been systematized to ensure that there is consistent practice in place to use assessment data effectively to improve instruction.

Merrick has established a consistent schedule for testing at all grade levels in English language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. All students in grades K-2 are administered the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a research-based standardized assessment, three times a year. DIBELS focuses on four major areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and reading comprehension. It is administered to students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade at the end of September, January, and in mid-May. New York State testing in English language arts and mathematics is administered to all students in grades 3 - 6 in January and March respectively. Fourth grade students were assessed by the state in Science this year during April. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) is given to all students in Kindergarten through 6th grade in both reading and mathematics at the end of April.

Merrick administers other assessments to selected populations of students. The Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT) is given in September to Title I students in Kindergarten through 6th grade. Title I students are assessed in reading, mathematics, writing and spelling. They are tested again using the PIAT in May to measure growth due to Title I interventions. The Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) is administered to students for whom English may be a second language (ESL). The ITBS make-up test in both reading and mathematics is given to all new students. The Victory Schools Interim Assessments in English language arts and mathematics are administered to students in grades 3 - 6 in September, November and May.

In addition to state and interim assessments, Merrick administers curriculum-embedded assessments during the year. The school has established a yearly calendar with dates for all unit assessments in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The English language arts unit assessments are drawn from the Scott-Foresman Reading program; the mathematics from Everyday Math and Impact Math; the science from the McMillan/McGraw-Hill series, and the social studies from the core knowledge curriculums developed by Victory Schools. Merrick students are assessed in all areas and in all grades.

The practice of using this copious data to improve instruction is at an emerging level and is developing at different levels throughout the school. The review team found evidence that teachers at each grade level used data to identify struggling students for intervention and for informing instruction. The principal sets an expectation at the beginning of the year that data is to be used for grouping and for planning instruction. There is a school-wide willingness and interest among teachers interviewed in using data to inform instruction but different levels of practice.

In focus groups, teachers reported that they receive assessment results for their individual students. It is the individual teacher's responsibility to use Princeton Review software to disaggregate the data to identify strengths and weakness of both individual students and the class as a whole. From there, teachers may use the data to inform their instruction or refer students for support services. The monthly staff calendars indicate data analysis as the focus for grade level meetings right after assessment results are distributed. In addition to individual teachers looking at their own class data, both grade level and cluster teams review and discuss the data as a group. There is growing collegiality and support in this area.

Although teachers are given assessment data for their individual students after testing periods, there is no graphing or aggregating of results to easily see progression and growth of student achievement as a class, for the grade level, or for the school as a whole. The progress of struggling students is not tracked or compared to grade level cohorts to note the effects of intervention toward closing the achievement gap. The leadership team does not have easily read summative results to examine and to share; thus it is difficult to see the changes over time.

The school is in the early stages of accurate cohort tracking and in consistently using data to improve instructional practice and student achievement. The school has much data and has interested teachers, but a system with oversight and accountability to ensure that there is consistent practice in using assessment data effectively to improve instruction is not yet in place.

Benchmark 1C: The school has a clearly defined and aligned curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.

Merrick has an overall set of curriculum guides for English Language arts, mathematics, social studies and science, aligned with New York State standards, that teachers use to prepare students.

Teachers use the pacing guides and scope and sequence from Scott Foresman as the curriculum guide for planning lessons and units in English language arts. There is a recommended pacing chart in the series for these units and assessments. Teachers reported that they design lessons and units based on the Scott Foresman materials. Some grade level teams plan and discuss lessons and units together. Inspectors saw samples of grade level lessons jointly planned and shared by the teachers for the week based on Scott Foresman materials. There are grade level leaders for these meetings but no formal protocol for how they are run. There is no requirement that meeting agendas or notes are reviewed by administration. The inspection team did not find evidence of consistently implemented lesson or unit planning by grade level team.

Everyday Mathematics is used for mathematics on all levels with additional support materials drawn from the program Impact Math, which particularly challenges upper grade students. The school mathematics curriculum guide and pacing chart are developed using the standards and benchmarks identified in Everyday Math. Teachers follow the scope and sequence of this program, and based on the team's review of lesson plans, there is consistency of practice in using the benchmark and unit assessments.

Teachers use the core curriculum guides developed by Victory Schools for science and social studies (based on the Hirsch curriculum). The classroom texts for both science and social studies are from Macmillan/McGraw- Hill. Teachers extend the text with units and ideas from the core curriculums in these areas.

Victory continues to update and modify these curriculums based on the New York state standards. Teachers can access curriculum updates online. Victory has developed a Subject Pacing Timeline for all the units in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies for the year, which inspectors saw posted on classroom walls.

The school has and uses curriculum guides in all content areas aligned to prepare students to meet New York state standards.

Benchmark 1D.1: The school is guided by strong instructional leadership.

The principal and assistant principal are responsible for supervising and evaluating all staff members, and a newly created position of staff developer is responsible for supporting teachers. At the time of the visit, however, the clinical supervision was underdeveloped and the support for new teachers was inconsistent.

The principal takes primary responsibility for the supervision and evaluation of teachers in Kindergarten through 3rd grade and the assistant principal supervises and evaluates teachers in grades 4 - 6. Evaluations for new teachers occur four times a year for the first two years and then twice a year after that, which is the norm for all professional staff. In focus groups most teachers reported that they were evaluated and observed on a consistent basis. Inspectors noted on Monthly Reports sent to Victory Schools that the principal reports the number of observations and evaluations completed for that month. In addition to their supervisory roles, the principal and assistant principal set agendas for faculty meetings and plans for professional development, and the assistant principal oversees the Title I program, school scheduling, general discipline and general problems as they come up during the day.

This year, Merrick hired a staff developer (SD), which is a new position for the school. The staff developer is responsible for working directly with teachers on any instructional issues and to help in providing classroom instructional support, resources and feedback when solicited by teachers. At present, the SD is new to this role as instructional leader and is working to develop the trust and respect of teachers with whom she works. The SD meets with teachers at their individual request and, at times, at the suggestion of the principal or assistant principal. The SD attends grade level and cluster level meeting to give input and to listen to teacher concerns. Inspectors heard teachers praise the work of the SD and could see that the SD is making in-roads into improving instructional practice.

Members of the school leadership team include the principal, assistant principal and the staff developer. The leadership team meets weekly to discuss the staff developer's targeted schedule for the week. Although the principal and assistant principal review the staff developer's weekly schedule, and, at times, may suggest adjustments to it, presently it is up to the SD as to how to effectively improve classroom instructional practice. There is no evidence of an over-arching plan developed by leadership, either short- or long-term, to address the most pressing needs for instructional support and improvement.

Inspectors found evidence that the process and tools used for teacher observation and evaluation are not robust or targeted at this point. The observation tool for a "walk through" is a check-off list, which has been used for all walk-through visits each year. This tool includes indicators under three broad areas: classroom environment, classroom management and instructional performance. It has

not been adjusted year-to-year to reflect current school-wide instructional initiatives and priorities or modified to address particular instructional weaknesses. For example, in the 2007-08 school year the two primary focus areas for instructional improvement at the school were: using more “accountable talk”, which encourages student/teacher and student/student discussion and interaction; and, differentiation of instruction. The walk-through indicators do not reference either of these initiatives nor was there evidence that teachers were getting feedback in these areas. There were no written expectations as to what an observer would see as evidence that a teacher is applying strategies for differentiating instruction or having students participate in “accountable talk.” There was no formal way for leadership to document if grouping and instruction were adjusted due to specific needs of individual students. Inspectors saw little written formative feedback or comments on the walk through tool next to the standard other than checkmarks.

The evaluation instrument is also a check off list to address all areas of standards-based instruction. Teachers are evaluated as Satisfactory, Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory in different areas of standards-based practice. Inspectors noted that there was minimal written feedback on the evaluations. Sample feedback included comments to encourage teachers to differentiate more or to pursue further professional development on their own. These are appropriate long-term directives, but will not help a struggling teacher adjust or modify instructional practice quickly. The review team found this to be an area of weakness – that evaluations and observations were summative and did not give supervisory feedback that would encourage and support timely redirections or corrections in instructional practice.

At the time of the evaluation visit, there were eight teachers who were in their first year at Merrick Academy and nine teachers that had continued into their second year. Although these new and novice teachers are observed and evaluated up to four times a year using the same formats as discussed above, they are not supported by a formal mentoring system. The staff developer is now available at teachers’ requests to give help and support, but she is not directed to work consistently with particular teachers except in one case. Teachers reported that they often reach out to the staff developer themselves or to each other and share ideas and suggestions. This support is varied according to the grade level team and the expertise of peers. There is no consistent system for induction, on-going supervision and support for new teachers or accountability for growth in instructional practice.

Although there is an instructional leadership team to support instructional practice and improvement, there is no consistent system or plan with accountability and oversight at Merrick Academy to ensure academic achievement.

Benchmark 1D.2: High quality instruction is evident throughout the school.

Although standards-based instructional practices are evident at Merrick Academy, instructional quality is mixed throughout the school. There were elements of standards-based instruction observed at different levels of implementation in all classrooms.

Inspectors noted a consistency of practice regarding several of the elements the principal said observers would see. All classrooms were print-rich environments with colorful posters describing learning processes such as the writing process; word walls were posted and displayed challenging vocabulary and definitions of math terms; there were bulletin boards reflecting themes and units of study for science and social studies; and student work was displayed in all classrooms and throughout

the school. Teachers did have lesson plans using Understanding by Design templates available for observers to review. Teachers were allowed to modify the lesson plan template if they wished. Lessons were objectives-based and students were generally on task in most classrooms. Although the majority of the written lessons contained learning objectives, these objectives were not clearly explained to students in half of the lessons observed. Classroom rules were seen posted in classrooms, and these varied according to teacher word-choice or grade level. There was effective use of instructional time and appropriate pace of content delivery noted in 15 out of 19 observations with variance in these areas in four classrooms. Transitions were reasonable and observers did not see a serious lack of control in any classrooms.

There was some evidence of the two foci for the year – “accountable talk” and differentiated instruction. Several classrooms displayed posted prompts for “accountable talk” interactions. The team recorded such discussion or forms of “accountable talk” in three out of 19 observations and very brief discussions, where student responses showed some higher level thinking, in six out of 19 classes. The team did not find this activity to be at a school-wide implementation level. Differentiated instruction was beginning in several classrooms, but not implemented consistently at the time of the visit.

In many classrooms, inspectors saw “dot charts” (as they were described by the staff developer) with dots indicating what learning center activities students were to participate in whenever they had extra time. The staff developer explained that the content and skills addressed within centers were identified by data review, and that the centers provided students with needed practice or review. In several classes there were charts which directed students to different center activities when they finished required work. Observers did not see students participating in these activities before the classes ended. The inspectors were unable to determine how often students engage in these activities, and how they are recorded and student progress assessed. While this form of differentiation is beginning to emerge, there was little evidence of any other differentiation during the lesson. Inspectors noted students simultaneously participating in different activities in 6 out of 19 classroom visits. Even when students were working in groups, the content, the processes being used, and the expected products were usually the same for all students. “Accountable talk” and differentiation were evident in pockets within the school, but were not as yet common practice.

Inspectors also noted a lack of rigor and higher order thinking in many classrooms. Most instruction was teacher-directed for the whole class followed by guided or independent practice. Teachers frequently asked questions, but the majority of the questions were checking for knowledge and comprehension. At times, teachers probed for deeper thinking but interactive discussion was observed in only 5 of 19 lessons observed. Student responses did not show higher order thinking at all in 10 of the 19 classrooms visited.

Inspectors concluded that although there was evidence of some standards-based practice in all classrooms, there was not yet consistency across all classrooms. Higher order thinking activities, interactive discussion and differentiation of instruction are three examples of a rigorous academic learning environment which are yet emerging as school-wide practices.

Benchmark 1D.3: 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.

The school has allocated appropriate resources, personnel, extra time and programs for students at risk. However, neither the short term nor long-range effectiveness of these programs has yet been determined.

Students with individualized education programs (IEPs) receive appropriate services. Victory provides a special education consultant who visits the school monthly to provide support or professional development for the “special progress” staff members. Merrick Academy has two and one half special progress teachers (one of whom is the case manager) to address the needs of students with individual education programs and to give support to unidentified struggling students. The special services team follows standard protocols for team meetings and the development of IEPs, which is the responsibility of the team chair. Special progress services work in a push-in/pull-out model depending on student instructional needs. Although they do not meet formally, special progress teachers collaborate informally with homeroom teachers to coordinate with the lesson plans for the class. Extra support is given to identified students during the regular education reading/language arts block either within the classroom or in a pull-out situation using the same materials as grade level peers. Extended support is given during enrichment time with a rotating schedule so that students do not keep missing the same enrichment class.

Merrick has established a Pupil Personnel Committee (PPC) which serves as a pre-referral team to support struggling students. The team is made up of the two special progress teachers, the social worker, teachers, and parents of the students in the pre-referral process. The PPC meets once a month or more often if there is a need. Teachers fill out a form describing the child’s strengths and areas of weakness, and the team decides the intervention plan.

The school has an array of specialized services for at-risk students who do not qualify for special education. The Title I program gives support to students who are struggling to reach the expected growth of typical peers. The students are tested at the beginning of the year to identify areas of weaknesses and are retested at the end of the year to measure growth. As mentioned previously, however, the school did not provide an analysis of their growth. In addition, the school has assigned grade level teaching assistants (CT) to provide extra small group and one-on-one support for students that are struggling but do not qualify for formal intervention. Administration and special progress personnel have also designed academic intervention service (AIS) plans for students whose test scores do not qualify them for Title I intervention services yet they have been identified as struggling by homeroom teachers. Teachers identify these struggling students using the results of DIBELS in the younger grades and the Victory benchmark interim assessments and teacher observation.

The AIS written intervention plans are based on this assessment data. There is surround care at all levels so that individual or small group attention and time is provided for any student not making expected progress. Students on AIS plans are tutored during enrichment times and after school by CTs assigned to their grade level.

The school provides both after-school tutoring and Saturday tutoring in both English language arts and mathematics. Title I students and students on AIS plans are eligible for this extended support.

Although this extra assistance is required for students, there is a struggle for the school to get some of the more needy students to attend. This is an issue that the school is focusing on to close the achievement gap for these students.

Overall coordination and supervision of support services can be improved. For example, although there is a template for an academic intervention plan (AIS), inspectors saw samples of plans that varied in quality and clarity. One plan was quite comprehensive and had identified a student's strengths and areas of academic need; the proposed intervention strategies were explained; the projected outcomes were in terms of students will be able to (SWBAT); the status of the student performance in that area was noted at benchmark points. Another such form only included the dates of intervention and what the student did, such as, "finished the (title) story" with no other information. Inspectors concluded that such plans are left to individual teachers to complete with no feedback or oversight from leadership regarding quality and expectations.

Although the support services in terms of personnel and resources at Merrick Academy are more than adequate, there is not a clear system of oversight and accountability to monitor the quality of these services. Teachers reported anecdotally that they are identifying struggling students more easily and that intervention is making a difference in students' progress. However, the review team did not see data or other evidence that intervention has made an impact as yet in closing the gap between students at risk and their grade level peers.

Benchmark 1E: The school's culture allows and promotes a learning environment.

The school culture promotes learning with a rich visible display of student work. In addition, there are proactive systems in place for motivating students such as PAWS (Positive Attitude with Style) behavioral rewards and daily verbal messages. While teachers handle classroom management with their own individual systems, instructional time was generally used effectively.

The majority of the school's classroom walls and hallways reflect a culture and environment for rigorous learning. Inspectors were impressed with the colorful, inviting displays and artwork on the walls of the school. Student work is on view throughout the school with samples representing content areas and from the fine arts program. Academic work seen on the walls was graded according to rubrics, which were posted next to student work samples. Black and white photographic images of students and staff are hung throughout the school. The physical environment is attractive and inviting.

Within the classrooms, rules were posted and respected. Most teachers used a variety of signals and verbal cues to get student's attention and to monitor transitions. Inspectors found the behavior of most students attentive and orderly in 15 out of 19 classroom observations. Nine out of ten parents surveyed at the end of the year agreed that student behavior is generally orderly in the school. Classrooms displayed word walls with challenging vocabulary and posters in various subject areas that reflected expectations of rigor in learning and behavior. Samples of high quality student work were seen in classrooms.

The school has systems for motivating students. Through the efforts of the student mentor, who works in a role similar to a dean of students, there is a Student of the Month ceremony held at the monthly PTA meeting. Each classroom teacher fills out a form recommending a student who excels in behavior and work habits for that month. Parents are invited to see their children receive an award

for this achievement. In addition, the student mentor provides teachers with PAWS tickets. When supervising hallways and general transitions, teachers give out PAWS awards to students who exhibit exemplary behavior during transitions. There may be a pizza party for the class who receives the most PAWS that month. In general, the decorum of the students during transitions and in hallway passing was orderly and respectful. Although there was chatter during these times, it was controlled and appropriate in most circumstances.

Motivational messages also come from the staff on a daily basis as well as through a program of giving students responsibility. The student mentor designs the daily morning message that is posted on a white board as students enter the building. This is usually an engaging quote and is posted along with a word problem for a particular grade level each day. A student leads the daily morning exercises and reads the quote and the problem of the day over the public address system. Parents and staff reported that students are delighted to have a turn participating in this and to hear their peers on the loud-speaker in the morning.

Teachers reported that they handle discipline issues in their own classrooms for the most part. In extreme cases of student off-task behavior, a teacher may send a child to the student mentor for problem solving and conflict resolution. Inspectors observed students behaving according to posted expectations in 12 out of 19 observations. Students were reinforced for positive behavior in 12 of 19 observations. Transitions and effective use of instructional time seemed appropriate in most of the classrooms. All stakeholders spoke of the high expectations for student behavior in the school. Both students and parents reported that the school is a safe environment for all.

Benchmark 1F: 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.

The school's professional development program is marked by ample time allocation and target focus areas requested by the teachers in surveys and by the decisions of leadership. According to teachers and administrators in focus group discussions, the addition of the staff developer position has had a positive effect in supporting teachers in the area of professional development. However, the overall effectiveness of the professional development program cannot be determined, because the school has not articulated clear and measurable outcomes. Currently, there is no systematic follow up and evaluation of effectiveness of professional development in improving instructional practice and student achievement has yet to be established.

There is ample time set aside each year to provide all staff with professional development. Teachers are required to participate in two weeks of professional development training before school opens. During the year, there are four half-day sessions where students are dismissed early so teachers can be trained. Four Saturdays were planned for the 2007-08 school year, but there was staff resistance to the extra time required and future Saturday sessions were cancelled.

For the past two years, teachers have had input in deciding the professional development initiatives. They filled out surveys indicating their own professional development needs and suggested professional development initiatives for the school. As a result of teacher and leader input, professional development has been focused on data analysis, differentiation of instruction and on using "accountable talk" in the classroom to create interactive discussions. Inspectors found evidence of these focus areas in staff focus group discussions, in review of grade level team meeting

minutes, and in signs in the classrooms such as charts with question and sentence starters that would encourage “Accountable Talk.” As discussed previously, however, there is not a clearly articulated way of measuring the implementation or effect of these initiatives.

Summer workshops had been focused on providing training on programs such as Scott Foresman and Everyday Math where all staff, whether experienced or not, were expected to participate. Due to teacher feedback, leadership and Victory Schools have provided more options for professional development training. New staff attend additional training on school wide programs (two days) and the rest of the staff are trained in the new initiatives decided for the school based on data analysis identifying school- wide needs.

A new initiative for professional development, called PICS, was introduced by the staff developer in the 2007-08 school year. In this lesson study model, a teacher designs a lesson to be presented to a group of peers for feedback and critiquing. Teachers volunteer to be part of the team to review the lesson. Teachers respond to the lesson using a protocol that calls for both “cool” and “warm” comments (both critical and positive). The presenting teacher adjusts the lesson according to the feedback, and the lesson then becomes a model for other teachers. Teachers reported great enthusiasm for this new initiative.

Inspectors found that there were many strong elements of a professional development program in place which addressed staff and school-wide instructional needs. However, a system for monitoring, follow-through and effectiveness of new professional development initiatives is not yet in place.

Part 2. Benchmark Analysis and Evidence of the School's Organizational Viability

A. Are the school's mission and vision clear to all stakeholders?

Benchmark 2B: The school is faithful to its mission and has implemented the key design elements included in its charter.

The mission of the Merrick Academy is to create one of the finest public schools in America through the use of the charter school process; to serve the "at-risk" population of Springfield Gardens and Jamaica, Queens; and to create a role model for charter public school design that can be replicated in disadvantaged neighborhoods everywhere.

Many of the key design elements of the charter are in place at Merrick and there are several more, including the use of data and differentiation, which are in the beginning stages of development.

All stakeholders reported interest and enthusiasm for making Merrick Academy a top-performing charter school. The school uses materials that are scientifically research-based in both English language arts and mathematics. In addition to New York state assessments, DIBELS, a research based assessment for early reading skills, has been added to assess students in Kindergarten through 2nd grades. Interim assessments developed by Victory Schools are administered three times a year and are based on New York state standards. In addition, teachers administer end-of-unit assessments in all content areas.

The areas of teacher development are less developed, however. The school has been focusing closely on the use of data to inform instructional practice for the last two years but at the time of the visit this practice has yet to be fully developed. Teachers have been trained in using data to identify student strengths and weaknesses for grouping students and developing instructional plans. Inspectors found that they are at the beginning stages of developing consistency of practice in this area, and that the use of data to inform instruction varied from teacher to teacher. Another professional development focus has been on differentiation of instruction. Although evidence supports that differentiation of instruction, too, is at the early phase of implementation. The school has yet to fully implement these key design elements.

The school has fully implemented student support systems, however. Merrick has extended time for both English language arts and mathematics to encourage more rigorous learning in these areas. The school has instituted a summer program for Title I students and other struggling students to spend additional time on English language arts and mathematics skill development, so that typical summer regression is lessened for these students.

B. Are systems in place to monitor the effectiveness of the academic program and to modify it as needed?

Benchmark 2C.1: The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and specific goals.

The current board of trustees has demonstrated a commitment to building its capacity to govern the school and has communicated a sense of urgency. The board is made up of ten members of committed professionals, two of them parents of children in the school, with expertise and experience

in both public and private sectors such as law, finance and human resources. Inspectors met with four of the ten members. The board elected a new chair last year who described a new energy on the board in looking more closely at recent assessment data, which the board felt was disappointing. As the new chair claimed, “we woke up... were reenergized” to look more closely at the school and its academic performance. The board meets every six weeks, unless there is a need for additional meetings. The board is seeking to add members to expand board expertise and fund-raising capabilities. Board members have become much more active in looking carefully at the school’s programs and academic growth. They have formed a new education sub-committee, which is focused on the educational program and is examining the role of Victory Schools versus the role of school administration in promoting student achievement.

The board chair reported that the board began to realize it should be looking more closely at data and to examine why student academic achievement is not reaching annual goals. As the chair described, “We would like to build capacity to work with school data and make decisions regarding this.” Board members in the focus group recognized the importance of having the assessment data disaggregated for their review in layman terms so that board members can immediately identify areas of strength and weakness across the school.

To assist them in understanding aspects of education such as analyzing assessment data, the board has hired a consultant. The board plans to look closely at the role Victory Schools plays in helping to develop the school’s academic program. It is actively questioning the roles and responsibilities of the management company, and it is trying to more clearly understand the services provided by Victory.

Board members voiced their surprise at the recent teacher vote to form a union. The chair stated that with the changes in the board’s focus, teachers are welcome to bring their issues to them as well as to school administration.

The board members make it a point to involve themselves in school activities and to visit the school while in session. They attend events such as those organized by the Father’s Committee, which sponsors fund-raisers while providing food and entertainment for the community. The board chair, as well as other board members, spends time in the school observing classrooms and talking to staff and students. Inspectors found that the board of trustees is committed and dedicated to providing governance and support to Merrick Academy and that it recognized the challenge of the recent decline in student performance.

C. Are students and parents satisfied with the work of the school?

Benchmark 2D: Parents/guardians and students are satisfied with the school.

Parent/guardians and student satisfaction is a strength of Merrick Academy. Inspectors heard only positive responses concerning stakeholder satisfaction with Merrick Academy during interviews with both parents and students. Parent survey results show that 90% of the parents are satisfied with the school. Parents in a focus group (four parents present) reported that their children feel safe in school and are developing self-confidence in themselves as learners. As one parent described, students develop a “sense of somebodiness” in this school.

Parents confirmed the principal’s report that there is high parent involvement in many areas of the school. Parents are offered several opportunities during the year to volunteer and to become part of

an on-going Parent Task Force, which gives suggestions on improving the school culture. The PTA president, who is also a member of the board of trustees, reported that 75-100 parents attend the monthly PTA meetings. Parents come to all events and willingly volunteer as they are needed. There is a Father's Group of 12 fathers who run family-centered fund-raising events. The funds from these family get-togethers allow families to participate in end of the year trips such as to a history museum in Baltimore. Parents reported that communication between the school and home is very strong, particularly through the use of the voice mail system reaching all families.

There is a waiting list of over 700 students for entry into the school, with potential families encouraged by the word-of-mouth of the parents involved in the school. The principal spends a great deal of time marketing the school in the community and inviting potential families to visit the school. The school ends at grade six making it difficult to attract and keep students who are approaching middle school years, yet the school's reputation in the community helps fill these early middle school classrooms.

In focus group discussions, students reported that they love the school and that teachers support them in every way. Students feel challenged and find the curriculum interesting. As one student stated, "I feel the work is challenging and just right." They reported that teachers help them when they need it. Another student described work assignments this way, "Its hard when they introduce it ...my teacher helps me when I need it....my teacher helps with strategies." Students reported that they really needed to study in order to do well in the school.

In a recent parent survey with a high number of returns (348), parents had mostly positive comments about the school. The review team concluded that both parent and student satisfaction with the school is above average in all areas.

VI. OVERALL TRENDS REGARDING THE SCHOOL

Academic Program

Inspectors found evidence that Merrick Academy is moving toward developing the areas that will increase student academic achievement. At present, however, there is not a clear system of oversight and accountability to ensure that all elements needed in this process are developing with quality and consistency.

There is evidence of a positive school climate and many aspects of standards-based best practice in the classrooms in Merrick Academy. There is adequate support for struggling students in terms of personnel, extra time and resources to provide additional help to close the gap between their academic performance and that of their peers. Yet, at present, there is no system for ensuring the effectiveness and the quality of these services. There is also evidence through focus groups that teachers are eager to continue to grow professionally. Professional development has recently been fine-tuned to reflect teacher needs for training and to focus on specific school-wide initiatives. The recent addition of a staff developer position has helped to support teachers.

At the same time, there is little evidence of effective systems of instructional supervision and support. Although there is observation and evaluation of staff members, for both experienced and new staff, formative supervision and feedback with follow-through are at a minimum level. The check list evaluation has not changed over time and does not adequately address teachers' needs. The school has focused on developing the key design elements of differentiating instruction and the use of data in the past two years. There is evidence of emerging differentiation of instruction and some examples of encouraging higher order thinking and discussion through "accountable talk." Although all teachers are involved in these initiatives at some level, they are in the beginning stages to ensure school-wide implementation. Oversight and accountability are lacking in monitoring instructional practice and the implementation of professional development initiatives.

Organizational Viability

There is high parent and community support for Merrick Academy, with parents involved in many aspects of supporting and maintaining the school culture. Both parents and students described the school as having a safe and welcoming environment, and there is a large waiting list of families who want their children to attend the school.

In response to disappointing assessment results the school's board of trustees has made a renewed commitment to issues of governance, with a specific focus on understanding and using student assessment data to improve achievement. The board reports that it is asking tough questions and evaluating the role of its management company to determine the effectiveness of provided supports such as professional development. The board will need to adjust to potentially working with a teachers union, and has hired a consultant to help guide its work. The board is clear that there are significant challenges ahead.

At the time of the visit, there was a lack of systematic evaluation and processes to ensure results. The review team found no evidence of a system or tool to measure the effectiveness of school-wide initiatives such as professional development. There was no evidence that there is a single point of accountability for results in each area of attention. The roles of the board, of Victory Schools and the school administration are not clearly defined. With better tools and systems of measurement in place, the board might be better able to anticipate the school's academic needs and/or other issues.

APPENDIX A:

Framework for Report Discussion

Category	Report Section (Relevant Benchmark(s))	Evidence Sources
Academic Program	School Performance Review (Renewal Benchmark 1.A)	Developed by Institute
	School Educational Program Review (Renewal Benchmarks 1.B – 1.F)	Classroom observations; Interviews; Review of documents and student work
Organizational Viability	School's Mission and Vision (Renewal Benchmark 2.B)	Review of documents; Interviews; Classroom observations
	Student and Parent Satisfaction (Renewal Benchmark 2.D.1)	Interviews; Review of school documents, including the Accountability Plan Progress Report
	Board of Trustees' Systems (Renewal Benchmark 2.C.1)	Review of documents; Interviews; Classroom observations