



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Oracle Charter School

School Evaluation Report 2006-2007

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INTRODUCTION

Background on Charter Schools and the State University

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 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. That board, while independent, is subject to public oversight. Just as traditional school boards, charter school boards of trustees must adhere to New York State’s Freedom of Information and Open Meetings laws. Public charter schools and their boards are also subject to oversight and monitoring. In the case of SUNY authorized schools, that monitoring is conducted by the Institute. 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 State University Trustees’ Oversight Process

The State University Trustees, jointly with the Board of Regents, are required to provide oversight sufficient to ensure that each charter school that the Trustees have authorized is in compliance with applicable law and the terms of its charter. The Institute, together with the State Education

Department, monitors compliance through a monitoring plan (which is contained in the schools' charter itself) and other methods.

In addition to monitoring a school's compliance with the law, the State University Trustees view their oversight responsibility more broadly and positively. Accordingly, they have adopted policies that require 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.

The first goal is to facilitate improvement. By providing substantive information about the school's 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 to recognize those strengths and weaknesses. Of course, whether the school actually takes corrective actions, and more importantly, effective corrective action, remains the school's responsibility given that it is an independent and autonomous school.

The second goal is to disseminate information about the school's performance beyond the school's professional staff and governing board to all stakeholders, including parents and the larger community in which the school is located. Ideally this information, including the present report, should help parents make choices about whether a school is serving their children well and/or is likely to continue to do so in the future. For this reason, this report (and others like it) is posted on the Institute's website and the school is asked to inform parents of its posting. By providing parents with more information, the State University hopes to enhance the market accountability to which charters are subject: if they do not attract and retain sufficient numbers of students who want the product they are providing, they cannot survive.

The third goal is to allow the Institute to build a database of the school's progress over time. By evaluating the school periodically, the Institute is better able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a school—and the likelihood for continued success or failure. Having information based on past patterns, the Institute and the State University Trustees are better positioned to make recommendations and a decision on whether a school's charter should be renewed. In turn, a school will also have a far better sense of where they stand in the eyes of its authorizer.

Inspection Visits and Reports¹

A central component of the Institute's evaluative oversight system is a schedule of periodic visits to and inspections of charter schools, resulting in letters and reports to the school's board of trustees. This inspection report is a product of one of those visits.

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 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.

¹ More information on the Institute's school oversight and evaluation system may be found online at <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/schoolsPubsReports.htm>.

In particular, the Institute uses a subset of the Renewal Benchmarks to review the effectiveness of a charter school's academic programs, e.g., the strength of a school's internal assessment system, the rigor of its pedagogical approach, and the breadth and focus of the school's curriculum. This subset, Renewal Benchmarks 1.B-1.F, is often referred to as the "Qualitative Education Benchmarks," or "QEBs." In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), the QEBs are important precisely because the quantitative indicators of academic achievement, i.e., students' performance on standardized tests (especially the state's 3rd - 8th 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 limited 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.²

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

This inspection report includes a review of academic attainment and improvement based on the school's performance on state and other assessments. The School Performance Review provides an evaluation of the school's academic achievement in the context of Renewal Benchmark 1A. Because of the timing of the release of state assessment data, the review is based on test results from the school year preceding the date of the school visit upon which the evidence for the Qualitative Education Benchmarks is based.³ The narrative refers to School Performance Summaries which follow the School Performance Review section. These one page summaries present a synopsis of the Accountability Plan outcome measures in English language arts and mathematics and the school's performance against these measures in their first year of operation:⁴

- Measure 1 (absolute) shows the grade level and aggregate performance on the state test of both all students and students enrolled in at least their second year.
- Measure 2 (absolute) presents the school's Performance Index (PI) measured against the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) set by the state's NCLB accountability system. The PI is derived by adding together the percentage of students at Levels 2 and above and the percentage at Levels 3 and above.

² 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.

³ Not all schools will have state test results because the state only administers tests in certain grades: state English language arts and mathematics tests are administered to grades 3-8, science tests in grades 4 and 8, and social studies tests in grades 5 and 8.

⁴ In indicating whether a performance measure has been met, the summaries only present a strict, narrow accounting; they do not show whether the school came close to meeting a measure or the relative weight of each measure for gauging student progress.

- Measure 3 (comparative) compares the performance of charter school students enrolled in at least their second year to all students in the same tested grades in the local school district. For instance, a grades 5-8 charter school would compare only its grades 6-8 results to the same tested grades in the district because students in its 5th grade were only in their first year at the charter school.
- Measure 4 (comparative) compares the actual overall performance of the school to the predicted level of performance of similar schools statewide using a regression analysis based on free lunch statistics. The Effect Size is a statistical measure calculated by dividing the difference between the actual and predicted outcomes by the standard deviation difference.
- Measure 5 (value added) shows both the number of grade level cohorts that achieved their target as well as the overall performance of all cohort students combined. If the baseline is above 50 NCE, then the target is an increase of any amount.

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 facing initial renewal, having previously received a short-term planning year renewal for a period of time equivalent to the number of planning years the school took. It will therefore receive a renewal visit, whereas another school that did not take any planning years and was renewed for five years would be in the second year of its second five-year charter. This school would therefore not receive a renewal visit but rather an evaluation visit and inspection report, which all schools in that position receive.

As such, each of the Institute's inspection reports contains a chart indicating the years the school has been in operation, the year of its present charter period, when it has been renewed and for how long, and the feedback that has been previously issued to the school. This chart is set forth in the following section.

The Present Report

The information contained within this report is the result of evidence obtaining during the Institute's visit to the school conducted in the spring of the school's second year of instruction of its first or second charter term. In addition to this introduction, the report includes a brief description of the school, conclusions and analysis from the present visit, the Renewal Benchmarks, and, finally, data on the visit, including identities of the school inspectors and the date of the visit.

The report reflects the observations and findings from the one-day inspection visit conducted typically by a two- to four-member team comprised of Institute staff, and, in some cases, outside experts. Consistent with the Institute's evaluation process throughout the life of the charter, Institute visitors seek evidence of effectiveness in key areas: the academic success of the school including teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment) and the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization, including such items as board operations and student order and discipline. Issues regarding compliance with state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed), and where the Institute finds serious deficiencies in particular relating to student health and safety it may take additional and immediate action; however, monitoring

compliance is not the principal purpose of the visit. The same is true with issues pertaining to the fiscal soundness of the school. Evaluation visits typically include an interview with the school board, the school leader, classroom visitations, in addition to the review of other school-based documents.

Keeping this Report in Context

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

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

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

For the reasons above, and because of the inherent complexity of an organization such as a school, this 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 the areas that the inspection team found in need of improvement. To the extent appropriate and useful, we encourage school boards to use the inspection team's conclusions in planning school improvement efforts.

While there is no one rating that the Institute gives as a result of a single-day visit, it is important to note that where the inspection team identifies area after area with not just room for improvement but significant and severe deficiencies, and few, if any, countervailing strengths, the difficulty that the

school may have in presenting a compelling case for renewal is likely to be substantially increased and this fact may well be noted. Conversely, where the inspection team finds that strengths outnumber weaknesses in both quantity and quality, the school is likely to be better positioned to build a strong case for renewal. So, too, this fact may be noted.

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

Finally, we note that this report cannot serve its three functions (providing data to the school to use for its potential improvement; disseminating information to stakeholders; and gathering data so that the Institute may come to renewal with a richer set of evidence) unless the report is not only unsparingly candid regarding the observations that the Institute has made, but also focused on those areas that are potentially in need of improvement rather than those accomplishments that the school has accumulated to date.

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

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

Oracle Charter School (“Oracle”) was approved by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York on January 27, 2004 and by the Board of Regents on March 23rd of the same year. After taking a planning year, the school began instruction in August of 2005 at 888 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, New York, serving 184 students in grades 7 - 9. The school plans to add one grade per year, projecting an enrollment of 360 students in grades 7 - 12 in the 2008-09 school year.

The school’s mission statement is as follows:

The Oracle Charter School will engage students of varying abilities in a concept-rich, challenging academic experience, enabling them to inhabit a meaningful place within their academic and civic communities, and to know and value themselves as individuals. To that end, Oracle Charter School will graduate students who are able to meet or exceed state performance standards, and who are prepared thereby to take the next step in their lives.

According to the Executive Summary of its charter, the founders envisioned Oracle Charter School as being “more effective at preparing a broad range of middle and high school students for the challenges of college and their future roles in the workplace and community than other public middle and high schools in the Buffalo district.” The charter states that Oracle will achieve its mission through the implementation of the following key design elements:

- A curriculum infused with arts and technology that emphasizes interdisciplinary study and cooperative learning, wherein students have the opportunity to act both as learners and as mentors;
- An academic community that empowers students to become life-long learners, encourages them to take responsibility for their own intellectual, career, and civic growth, and offers faculty, students, and parents a trusting, supportive, and mutually respectful environment; and
- Students with access to and an understanding of the academic, social, and technological infrastructures that shape their lives and communities as well as an understanding of the ways in which they, as individuals, impact and are influenced by their environments.

The school begins each day with a morning meeting, focuses school-wide activities around a yearly theme, adopts an honor code, requires community service of all students, and requires its upper level students to participate in an internship program. Additionally, the school provides small class sizes (20 students) and single-sex learning opportunities.

The charter states that in addition to aligning the curriculum to the New York State Learning Standards, Oracle will also apply to become part of the International Baccalaureate Organization’s (IBO) Middle Years Program, which requires exceptional student performance, as well as community service. The school’s arts integration program is modeled after a similar program at the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York. El Puente serves an economically disadvantaged student population, and maintains a high rate of high school graduation and college acceptance. Oracle’s governance structure is designed after a professional democratic model called

the Teacher Professional Model. In this model of school governance, teachers are accountable for both identifying problems and creating solutions to address those problems.

School Year

185 days (Buffalo City School District: 190 days)

School Day

7:45 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.⁵

Enrollment

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment⁶	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
2004-05	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year
2005-06	180	180	184	7-9	7-9	7-9	YES
2006-07	240	240	243	7-10	7-10	7-10	YES
2007-08	300			7-11			
2008-09	360			7-12			

Race/Ethnicity	2005-2006	
	No. of Students	% of Enroll.
American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander	1	0.6%
Black (Not Hispanic)	97	53.9%
Hispanic	13	7.2%
White	69	38.3%

Source: NYSED 2005-06 Database

⁵ 3:20 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. is available for office hours and remediation according to the school's original Charter Application.

⁶ Actual enrollment per the Institute's Official Enrollment Table. Note that the NYSED 2005-06 database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated, cited an enrollment of 180 students for 2005-06.

Free/Reduced Lunch	2005-2006	
	No. of Students	% of Enroll.
Eligible for Free Lunch	75	41.7%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	30	16.7%

Source: NYSED 2005-06 Database

School Charter History

Charter Year	School Year	Year of Operation	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
Original Charter – 1st Year	2004-05	Planning Year	NO		NONE
Original Charter – 2 nd Year	2005-06	1 st	YES	Prior Action Letter, End-of-Year Evaluation Letter	
Original Charter – 3 rd Year	2006-07	2 nd	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS EVALUATION VISIT

The Charter Schools Institute conducted a visit to the Oracle Charter School near the end of its first year of operation on April 6, 2006. Institute staff observed classrooms, interviewed administrators and teachers, and reviewed documents. In a letter to the school's board of trustees, the Institute reported the results of the school site visit which are briefly summarized below.

At the time of the visit, the Oracle Charter School enrolled 184 students in 7th through 9th grades. In its first year, the school's board of trustees obtained a facility for the school, and the school leadership had assembled a faculty with some distinguished members. Most striking, the school had created an emergent sense of school community in a short period of time.

However, Oracle Charter School had not yet created an effective and viable educational program at the time of the visit. This was clear from several key indicators. For example, Oracle Charter School was still in the process of planning and had not yet implemented its full academic program. The school had not yet aligned the curriculum to New York State performance standards and the quality of curricular materials appeared to be dependent on individual teachers. Furthermore, the school had not yet implemented a structured assessment system, and teachers generally did not utilize assessment data to inform and guide curriculum and instruction.

The roles and responsibilities of instructional leaders (including the school leader, dean of faculty, and department heads) were found to be unclear to individual staff. This was true of both the academic program and school operations. To add to the lack of clarity, neither the lead teacher nor the dean of faculty acted as an instructional supervisor. In particular, teachers had not been evaluated and a process and tools for evaluation had not been developed. Likewise, Oracle Charter School had not developed an ongoing professional development program that would provide regular observations, coaching, formal feedback, and goal-setting opportunities for teachers. Therefore teachers did not receive formative or evaluative feedback based on classroom observations, and school inspectors noted a lack of accountability for teacher performance.

The school offered a range of services for at-risk students. While interventions for students were planned (including after-school tutoring), they appeared to be ad hoc in nature and not uniformly implemented on a school-wide basis. Further, many teachers were unaware of the interventions available. At the time of the visit, a student retention policy had not yet been established.

Inspectors noted a lack of consistent discipline and weak classroom management practices in many classrooms. Although a dean of students had been identified in December, the school did not have a consistent, school-wide set of expectations for classroom management and student discipline. While the faculty had agreed on three levels of infractions, not all teachers were accepting and enforcing the written discipline policy for classroom management practices.

With regards to governance, at the time of the visit the board of trustees had been preparing to create a dashboard of achievement indicators. The board of trustees had not yet created an evaluation process for the school's leadership, and there was some confusion in the reporting relationship between the various members of the school leadership team (lead teacher, dean of faculty and operations manager) and the board of trustees.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the present visit to Oracle Charter School on March 29, 2007. Inspectors visited classrooms, reviewed documents and interviewed instructional and administrative staff. The team's conclusions are summarized below. The evidence base and further analysis is contained in the Benchmark Analysis and Evidence section.

Oracle Charter School is a school struggling to create a strong academic program. After experiencing a great deal of teacher and student turnover at the end of its first year, the school continues to experience difficulties with transitioning new students and staff.

Oracle demonstrated some improvements since last year's visit. The school has created a formal assessment program; however, teachers were not yet able to use data to improve instruction. A formal process for teacher evaluations has been created but not yet fully implemented. The board of trustees has made a change in the administrative structure of the school, which has the potential to provide greater role clarity for the school leader and the dean of faculty. The board of trustees has also obtained external support in creating a clear dashboard of indicators to monitor academic results. Notwithstanding these improvements, while Oracle Charter School seeks to be a college preparatory school, the school continues to be plagued with serious obstacles to developing and instituting curriculum and instructional practices that result in students achieving at sufficiently high levels to be successful in a college-preparatory course of study.

Instructional Leadership

From the school's first year of instruction the school has experienced a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of school administrators, especially around instructional leadership. This has remained the case despite Oracle's good efforts to clarify particular roles for the school leader and the dean of faculty. The lack of clarity in responsibilities has meant that teachers, many with little experience, have had to make instructional decisions regarding curriculum, resources and pedagogy. The use of department heads as instructional leaders who can complement and support the work of the administrative team has not yet been fully realized. Additionally, while the school has developed a tool for teacher evaluation over the last year, it has not been consistently utilized and its link to actual student results has not yet been determined.

Curriculum

Oracle Charter School has not fully developed its curricula in all academic areas. Some departments have done more work in this regard than others. Generally, individual teachers are asked to create the curriculum as they are teaching. While content-area departments are expected to identify essential standards and develop lessons around them, the school has yet to align the New York State performance standards with these essential standards. With regard to lesson planning, Oracle does not have a uniform system for creating, reviewing and providing meaningful feedback to teachers.

Pedagogy

Given the high levels of teacher inexperience and turnover, instruction at Oracle is uneven. At the time of the visit, most of the teaching faculty at Oracle were new to the school and many were new to teaching. Observers found that lessons had long transitions, lacked appropriate rigor, and were not clear regarding the objective of the lesson or alignment to state standards. On the day of the visit, inspectors noted poor classroom management skills on the part of many teachers and students who were not fully engaged in the lessons.

Professional Development

Oracle offers a range of professional development activities, many of which focus on school mission, logistics, and student discipline. Teachers indicated they are invited to receive external training; however, teachers reported not receiving consistent follow-up after professional development events. Further, these activities are often ad hoc, because the school has not established clear priorities for professional development.

Use of Assessment Data

Over the past year Oracle Charter School has identified and implemented formal and interim assessments. The school leader has made attempts to analyze student data and share this data with teachers. However, there were no common expectations articulated by the school leadership as to how teachers need to utilize the results of this data to inform and guide their instructional practices. Further, these data have not been provided to teachers in a timely fashion to make them useful for planning purposes. Oracle has not yet demonstrated a capacity to do a thorough self-evaluation based upon weak state test results from the previous school year, or to formulate a plan of action for the current school year based on such an analysis.

At-Risk Students

Oracle Charter School has begun to implement an advisory program but it is not yet sufficiently comprehensive to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure in a uniform and consistent manner. The school provides some additional support to struggling students, such as individual tutoring provided by teachers. However, the interventions are not based on well-defined criteria or a set of clear procedures. The school has begun to offer after-school tutoring, but it is voluntary and therefore, according to the teachers, many students do not attend.

Student Order and Discipline

Inspectors observed teachers with a range of abilities in managing their classrooms and adhering to the school's articulated classroom management system. Teachers had varying levels of commitment to the school's "strikes and majors" system of discipline; some teachers created their own classroom management systems which supplanted the school's system.

Governance

Oracle Charter School's board of trustees is comprised of a dedicated group of community members, several of whom were part of the school's founding board of trustees. In the summer of 2006 board members, in an effort to become more efficient and effective in their work, hired an external consultant. As a result of that work, at the time of the present visit, the board had in place a clear system of procedures to conduct its business.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The following review of academic attainment and improvement (Benchmark 1A) is based on assessment results and other data from the 2005-06 school year, Oracle Charter School's first year of operation.

Summary: As 2005-06 was the school's first year of operation, few of the measures were yet applicable. As baseline data, however, the results indicate incoming students were performing at low levels in all subjects.

English Language Arts: As 2005-06 was the school's first year of operation, no students were enrolled in their second year. Nevertheless, in absolute terms 31 percent of all students in 7th and 8th grades scored at the proficient level on the state exam. The school did not meet the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) established by the state's No Child Left Behind accountability system. While the school did outperform the local school district (23 percent), it did not outperform the comparison school specifically identified in its Accountability Plan. In comparison to similar schools statewide, the school performed well below the level predicted. The value added measure will not be applicable until 2006-07 when the school has two years of testing data; however, comparing fall to spring results on the Terra Nova Reading exam indicated both 7th and 8th grade cohorts made some progress while the 9th grade cohort remained about the same. No grades finished the year at grade level.

Mathematics: On its absolute measure, 25 percent of students in 7th and 8th grades performed at the proficient level on the state exam in 2005-06. The school did meet the AMO and outperformed the local school district (19 percent). It performed about the same as the comparison school identified in its Accountability Plan, and performed far worse than predicted in comparison to similar schools statewide. Based on Terra Nova mathematics exam results for fall and spring, all three grades (particularly 7th grade) made progress but none finished the year at grade level.

Science: None of the school's 8th grade students were enrolled in their second year at the school. Nevertheless, 48 percent of 8th grade students were proficient on the state science exam in 2005-06. The school did not outperform the local school district or the selected comparison school on the state Regents exam. Approximately one-third of 9th grade students achieved the proficient level of 65 percent on the Living Environment Regents exam in 2005-06.

Social Studies: None of the school's 8th grade students were enrolled in their second year at the school. Nevertheless, 36 percent of 8th grade students were proficient on the state social studies exam in 2005-06, outperforming the local school district and the selected comparison school.

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

Optional Goals: The school's additional goals (proficient performance and presentation skills, college placement and internship participation) were not applicable in 2005-06.

Note: The following two pages present School Performance Summaries that provide data addressing the required Accountability Plan outcome measures for English language arts and mathematics and

the school's performance against these measures. Please refer to the "Inspection Visits and Reports" section of the Introduction for full definitions of the measures used and details about the tables themselves.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

English Language Arts

Oracle Charter School



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

	2003-04			MET	2004-05			MET	2005-06			MET	
	Grades Served:	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades Served:	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		Grades Served:	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		
ABSOLUTE MEASURES 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.	Grades	4	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	Grades	4	(0)	(0)	Grades	3 4 5 6 7 8	(0) (0) (0) (0) (0) (0)	(0) (0) (0) (0) (0) (0)	
		8	(0)	(0)		8	(0)	(0)		All	31.4 (118)	(0)	(0)
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	4	0	AMO	Grades	4		AMO	Grades	7-8	114	122	
		8				8							NO
COMPARATIVE MEASURES 3. Each year the percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 on the State exam will be greater than that of students in the same tested grades in the local district.	Comparison: (Buffalo City Schools)				Comparison: (Buffalo City Schools)				Comparison: (Buffalo City Schools)				
	Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District		Grades	School	District		
	4		0.0		4				7-8	31.4	23.3	--	
	8				8								
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).					Effect:				Effect				
					Grades	Actual	Predicted	Size	N	Actual	Predicted	Size	
					4				118	31.4	48.3	-0.93	NO
					8								
VALUE ADDED MEASURE 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.	Assessment:				Assessment:				Assessment:				
	Grades	Cohorts Making Target	Target	Result	Grades	Cohorts Making Target	Target	Result	Grades	Cohorts Making Target	Target	Result	
	NA	of			NA	of			NA	of		--	
	N	Base	Target	Result	N	Base	Target	Result	N	Base	Target	Result	

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

Mathematics

Oracle Charter School



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

	2003-04		MET	2004-05		MET	2005-06		MET	
	Grades Served: None	Grades Served: None		Grades Served: None	Grades Served: 7-9					
ABSOLUTE MEASURES	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)		
										Grades
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	(0)	(0)	4	(0)	(0)	3	(0)	(0)	
	8	(0)	(0)	8	(0)	(0)	4	(0)	(0)	
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.	4			4			5	(0)	(0)	
	8			8			6	(0)	(0)	
COMPARATIVE MEASURES	Comparison: (Buffalo City Schools): Grades School District			Comparison: (Buffalo City Schools): Grades School District			7	30.9	(55)	(0)
								8	19.6	(56)
3. Each year the percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 on the State exam will be greater than that of students in the same tested grades in the local district.	4			4			8	25.2	(111)	
	8			8			All	25.2	(111)	
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).	Assessment: Grades Cohorts Making Target of N Base Target Result			Assessment: Grades Cohorts Making Target of N Base Target Result			N	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size
								111	25.2	50.0
VALUE ADDED MEASURE	Assessment: Grades Cohorts Making Target of N Base Target Result			Assessment: Grades Cohorts Making Target of N Base Target Result			N	Actual	Predicted	Effect Size
								111	25.2	50.0
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.										

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS AND EVIDENCE

Instructional Leadership

From the school's first year of instruction the school staff has experienced a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities of school administrators, especially around instructional leadership. Oracle is to be commended for assessing what did not work well in its previous structure and for taking action in creating a new administrative structure, defining more precisely the roles of the school leader and the dean of faculty. Yet, in its second year of instruction, it has not been clear where the responsibility for instructional leadership rests. "I'm the chief administrator," says the school leader. "[The dean of faculty] is in charge of the school." Yet, the dean of faculty believed her role was to be more of a support/coach/reference type of position. This lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities has meant that teachers, many with little experience, had to make instructional decisions regarding curriculum, resources and pedagogy. This ambiguity has also limited progress in using assessments, developing curriculum, strengthening pedagogical practice, and providing professional development. While Oracle is considering adding a curriculum coordinator position for the 2007-08 school year, a role dedicated to instructional leadership, the contribution of a person in such a position would be constrained by the current leadership structure.

Even though the school leader meets regularly with department heads, the desired role of an instructional leader who complements and supports the work of the administrative team has not been realized. According to the school leader, "The department heads are charged to bring their departments together to standardize some of their practices." She reported that they are presently working on curriculum development but not instructional improvement, because they are not yet comfortable with the idea of doing peer observations, and "are feeling as [if] there are so many irons in the fire . . . [that] they don't know how to pick up more." One Board member stated that "departments want to evaluate [teachers in] other departments, but not their own." The department heads' discomfort may be attributable in part to their limited teaching experience; three of the six heads are in their initial years of teaching (second or third year). Oracle's teacher hiring practices apparently do not take into account the identification of teachers who could serve as department heads. In addition, the school administration has not clearly defined the role department heads will serve as instructional leaders in their content areas as well as in the school in general. Ideally, the school leader would leverage the talent and skills of department heads to support teachers in their professional growth.

To the school's credit, the school leader has created a formal evaluation form consisting of five pages of teaching standards for the evaluation of teachers. The form has not, however, been consistently used by the administration and its link to actual student results has yet to be determined. Work with staff is not being driven by a systematic evaluation system but rather based upon informal observations that focus primarily on classroom management and student engagement, and are not content-centered or aimed at student performance. Although the school leader, the dean of faculty, the dean of students and the school social worker are conducting informal observations, based on interviews with staff, "the message coming out of the administrative team [is not yet] consistent and non-ambivalent."

Curriculum

Oracle Charter School has focused on standards and curriculum alignment by having all content-area departments develop essential standards for their discipline. Despite the priority of such development, at the time of the visit, the departments had not yet established a system for the process

of developing a coherent curriculum, aligned with the state standards, much less actually producing the curricula. Curriculum is still largely developed by individual teachers and not memorialized or archived for new teachers. As a result, teachers new to the school develop their own curriculum as they teach. For example, one teacher noted that he supplements his textbook extensively with what interested him and what he thought may interest his students, while a second teacher said he had made the decision to spend “90 percent of class time on culture and 10 percent on content.” A teacher new to the school noted that having clearly defined curricular materials would have greatly assisted him in focusing on instruction.

Given the school’s reliance on individual teachers to develop curriculum, high teacher turnover across disciplines has stunted curriculum development and implementation. For instance, there have been five new English teachers in the school over the past two years. The board of trustees, the school leader and teachers all noted that teaching and learning in English language arts has been weak, however, the school does not have a well-defined curriculum to guide the work of new, inexperienced teachers in that department. Another subject department head stated, “While teachers know [that] students’ literacy skills are weak, there is no school-wide plan to address the issue.”

At Oracle, lesson planning consists of teachers’ use of lesson plan books. Other than the use of the books, there were no required components to planning a lesson, such as stating performance standards, indicating lesson objectives, listing materials to be used, or determining how the lesson will be assessed. Teachers reported that, while lesson plan books have been sporadically reviewed, there has been little mention of curriculum alignment, critique of content, or suggestions as to instructional changes that might enhance teaching and learning.

In short, Oracle has not established a coherent curriculum for all content areas, relying instead on teacher-made curricula. While this is a legitimate option, the school has yet to provide guidance and expectations on what materials must be produced, to demonstrate how these materials align with the New York state performance standards, and to provide teachers with support to improve such materials. As was the case in April 2006, these essential parts of the curriculum development process were still being planned at the time of the 2007 visit.

Pedagogy

A lack of experience by a majority of the faculty and a great deal of teacher turnover contributes to unevenness in teaching. Long transitions, lack of differentiated instruction, lack of rigor and poorly planned lessons were observed across grades and subjects. The objective of the lesson and alignment to state standards were not clearly discernable to the inspectors. Poor classroom management skills led to students who were not fully engaged in the lessons at best and disruptive at worst. (See Student Order and Discipline section later in this report for more on this subject.) Teachers have not received regular and consistent observations and feedback concerning pedagogy. In addition, as was mentioned previously in this report, clear expectations for actual student learning outcomes had not been established.

The school leader acknowledged this issue by stating that “not all of our staff is as directly motivated [to get behind the mission of high student performance].” In fact, teachers themselves noted that they believed teaching would improve if staff and student attrition could be lowered. The school leader noted that the school’s hiring process had improved a great deal over time; however, the school leader, school board members and staff indicated that there continue to be weak teachers who need to be replaced.

Professional Development

Oracle Charter School has offered professional development for teachers during the summer and school year. Much of the effort has involved sending teachers to various forms of training. Specific areas of professional development have not been prioritized by the school leadership. Rather, the dean of faculty sends out “ideas” and teachers who are interested voluntarily sign up for the trainings. The summer training has primarily focused on school philosophy, mission, procedures, and some student discipline. In interviews, teachers were not able to describe the process or reasons for the selection of the staff development experiences, and noted that there was little follow-up in terms of coaching or mentorship after the various professional development activities. Some teachers were relying on their department heads for support, but given that many of them are new to teaching and have a full teaching load, teachers did not view their peers as a strong source of support.

Use of Assessments

Oracle Charter School administers the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments three times a year, and the Terra Nova and New York State Testing Program assessments annually. Compared to its first year of operation, the school has begun to implement a coherent assessment program. The NWEA is intended as a formative interim assessment tool to help teachers identify individual student needs and adjust instruction. However, while the school leader did share NWEA results with teachers, they were made available too late to be used effectively. In commenting on the lateness of the data, one teacher noted, “We are very well planned [in curriculum]. I would have to change everything. We need those results earlier to see what to work on.” In addition, according to one administrator, because of the incomplete records of incoming 7th grade students, many of whom were extremely behind academically, teachers could not identify and act on these students’ skill deficiencies until after the test results became available.

Oracle Charter School did not appear to have a clear, structured approach or common expectation for how to use student data collected from formal and informal assessments. Moreover, because of the Oracle faculty’s minimal teaching experience, they were unsure about how to use assessment results in general. As a result teachers were left to their own devices to interpret results and use them to inform and guide their teaching practice, e.g., differentiating instruction, or re-teaching specific skills or content.

According to the school leader, the school uses the Terra Nova to establish student groupings. Oracle is sensitive to the need to create challenging educational experiences for high achieving students, and therefore established an honors program. The school currently utilizes an “Honors Committee” of department heads to determine entrance requirements for the honors grouping. However, the school has yet to find a reliable instrument for creating the honors grouping. It was not clear how or when faculty members move students to different groups when their performance has changed. A few teachers said they discussed standardized assessment data with students in their advisories.

Oracle has not yet demonstrated a capacity to do a thorough self-evaluation based upon weak state test results from the previous school year, or to formulate a plan of action for the current school year based on this analysis.

At-Risk Learners

Oracle Charter School has begun to implement an advisory program but it is not sufficiently comprehensive to meet the needs of students at-risk of academic failure in a uniform and consistent manner. The aims of the advisory program is for students to have an immediate relationship with at

least one adult at school, to focus the students on college, and to support any particular needs the student may have. In addition, the advisor is to be the first line of communication between the parent and the school. For the 2006-07 school year, the roster for teacher advisors included between 10 and 12 students. Four academic team leaders coordinate the work of advisors at each grade level, specifically monitoring students' grades and missing student work as well as arranging parent/teacher conferences. There is time in the schedule for morning and afternoon advisory as well as 30 minutes during the day on Fridays. Staff members stated, "Some staff believe it's too much; others not enough," and that "they [teachers] feel at a loss because each academic leader does it [the advisory program] differently," symptomatic of the lack of clarity about the curriculum for the advisory program and expectations for the teacher advisors. The school may want to consider having teachers, along with the school social worker, determine what kinds of skills work (academic and social) they can develop to supplement other types of student assistance (homework checks, homework help, individual and small group tutoring, etc.) provided during advisory periods. In the 2007-08 school year, the school intends to have the curriculum coordinator oversee the work of the academic team leaders.

The school provides some additional support to struggling students such as individual tutoring provided by the teachers, but the interventions are not based on well-defined criteria or a set of clear procedures. The school has begun to offer after-school tutoring, but it is voluntary and therefore, according to the teachers, many students do not attend. According to the school leader, in the 2007-08 school year there will be intervention labs for students identified as at-risk according to well-developed criteria based on student performance on the Terra Nova, state exams and MAP assessments. The school does have a summer school program with clear guidelines for students who need to attend and criteria for promotion and/or retention.

Student Order and Discipline

The level of teaching at Oracle is uneven from classroom to classroom and many teachers were observed struggling with classroom management and discipline problems which often disrupted instruction. In addition, there was a wide range of teacher expectations for and tolerance of student behavior. Some teachers ignored blatant student disruptions while others used the school's discipline policy of "strikes and majors." A wide range of problems were observed in both classrooms and public spaces, such as the use of ipods and cell phones, eating, sleeping, checking personal emails, loud off-topic conversations during instructional time, chronic tardiness to class, back-talk or ignoring teacher instruction, and general disengagement from lessons.

The school's system of "strikes and majors" did seem to work for those teachers who chose to enforce it, but many purposefully did not. As was found in April 2006, teachers "bought in" to the discipline code at varying levels and possessed different levels of classroom management skills. In addition, teachers noted that they did not have a system for enforcing that academic work, such as homework, is completed. One teacher was observed allowing students to do homework in class.

The dean of students was sensitive to the high need to monitor student behavior in public spaces and enforcing school rules. The school reported 106 suspensions in the first two quarters of the 2006-07 school year; many for students new to the school and still adapting to the school's culture. Oracle Charter School has also invested in a school social worker who is working to help students control their behaviors. Yet, despite the goal of discipline consistency, some teachers continue to develop their own hierarchy of rules and consequences for their individual classrooms.

Governance

Oracle Charter School's board of trustees is comprised of a dedicated group of community members, several of whom were part of the school's founding board of trustees. Last summer board members, in an effort to become more efficient and effective in their work, hired an external consultant. As a result of that work, the board, had in place a clear system of procedures to conduct its business.

A noteworthy outcome of the board development work was the practice of having the school leader report on quantitative measures of student achievement at each meeting. Over the 2006-07 school year, the board continued to define its policies regarding student discipline, dress code, attendance, admission and employment practices.

APPENDIX: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT

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

Benchmark 1D Pedagogy	1D.1	The school has strong instructional leadership.
	1D.2	High quality instruction is evident throughout the school.
	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.
Benchmark 1E Student Order & Discipline	1E	The school's culture allows and promotes a culture of learning.
Benchmark 1F Professional Development	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.

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

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Second-Year Visit to Oracle Charter School on March 29, 2007. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

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

Simeon Stolzberg is a Senior Analyst at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Part of the Institute's oversight and evaluation team, Mr. Stolzberg participates in informal, annual and renewal school visits. Mr. Stolzberg also assists in the development and execution of the Institute's research agenda, performing statistical analyses of student academic data, and providing technical guidance to schools as needed. Prior to joining the Institute, Mr. Stolzberg managed his own consulting practice, advising charter schools across the country in their application and planning phases. He also served as Middle School Director for the Beginning with Children Charter School in Brooklyn, New York. In 2002, as a Building Excellent Schools Fellow, Mr. Stolzberg wrote the prospectus and application for the Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter School (BArT) in Massachusetts; the school was one of only five schools approved by the state that year. Mr. Stolzberg served as the school's founding principal. Mr. Stolzberg received his Master's Degree in Public Policy from Georgetown University and his Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy, with independent studies in education and political economy, from Williams College.

In addition, the Institute was pleased to have the following consultants join the school visit team:

Joey Gustafson (Consulting Writer) is the founder and CEO of JM Consulting Inc., which focuses on the K-12 market, specializing in assessing the needs of educational organizations, finding solutions, and assisting in their implementation. Ms. Gustafson's previous experiences include senior management at ChildrenFirst, Inc., a national corporate child care company, being the Assistant Head of School at a charter school in Massachusetts, Community Day Charter School, and doing education reform research at the Hudson Institute. Ms. Gustafson was also the education policy advisor to former New York City Mayor Giuliani. Ms. Gustafson holds an MBA from Boston University and a B.A. from Georgetown University.

Norma Figueroa-Hurwitz, Ph.D. served as a charter school principal from 2003 through 2005, after having served as a principal for 25 years in New York City public schools. She was also the founder and executive director of the Bilingual Bicultural Mini School (1973-80). Dr. Figueroa-Hurwitz was a member of the New York City Board of Education Chancellor's Leadership Academy, as well as a

Cahn Fellow at Columbia University. She was awarded a full doctoral scholarship as part of the Chancellor's cohort. She is currently providing support on instructional leadership to public and charter schools.

Piel Hollingsworth is an administrator at the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School in Boston, Massachusetts. She serves on the administrative team, mentors the middle and high school principals, oversees all state and federal compliance and reporting, and guided the school through its first and second charter renewals. Ms. Hollingsworth joined APR in 1999 as a history teacher and director of curriculum and assessment, and served as the principal of both the middle and high school from 2000-2004. Prior to her work at APR, Ms. Hollingsworth taught history at Melrose High School and all academic subjects at a maritime alternative high school in Boston. After a teaching fellowship at St. George's School for Girls in Edinburgh, Scotland, Ms. Hollingsworth began her public school teaching career with Teach for America where she taught French at Zachary Elementary in rural Louisiana. Ms. Hollingsworth received her M.A.T from Union College and a B.A. in history from Hamilton College.