



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School

School Evaluation Report 2008-2009

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INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (the “State University Trustees”), jointly with the New York State Board of Regents, are required by law to provide oversight sufficient to ensure that each charter school that the State University Trustees have authorized is in compliance with applicable law and the terms of its charter. The State University Trustees, however, consistent with the goals of the New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998, view their oversight responsibility more broadly and positively than purely monitoring compliance. Accordingly, they have adopted policies that require the Charter Schools Institute (“the Institute”) to provide ongoing evaluation of charter schools authorized by them. By providing this oversight and feedback, the State University Trustees and the Institute seek to accomplish three goals:

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

Based on the analysis of evidence gathered during an evaluation visit to the True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School (“Rochester Prep”) on April 14, 2009, the school appears to be making substantial progress towards achieving its mission. Although this conclusion is drawn from a variety of indicators, which are discussed more fully later in this report, some of the more salient indicators include the following:

Academic Success

Rochester Prep has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning. The school has a clearly defined curriculum which prepares students to meet state performance standards, as well as a process for selecting, developing and reviewing curriculum. Teachers are well supported in what to teach and when to teach it; they plan and implement purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to standards. High quality instruction is generally evident. Students are cognitively engaged with instruction in the 5th and 6th grades focusing on foundational skills and instruction in the 7th grade providing more opportunity for higher order thinking skills. Instruction is differentiated to meet the individual needs of students by class grouping, tutoring and targeted attention.

Rochester Prep has strong instructional leadership. School leaders set high expectations for student achievement and provide teachers with ongoing and systematic support. They effectively monitor and evaluate the academic program. The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically and has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs, including those with disabilities. Rochester Prep promotes a culture of learning and scholarship. It has a sustained and cohesive professional development program, which assists teachers in meeting student academic needs and school goals.

Organizational Capacity

Rochester Prep has established a well-functioning organizational structure with staff, systems, and procedures that allow the school to carry out its academic program. Its day-to-day operations are managed competently. In beginning to develop a cadre of mid-level leaders, the school’s organizational structure supports distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The school has hired and retained quality personnel.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application to establish True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School (“Rochester Prep”) on January 24, 2006, and the school’s charter became effective by operation of law on June 27, 2006. The school opened in September of 2006 with 80 5th grade students, adding one grade each year to reach its current enrollment of 215 students in 5th through 7th grade. The school is located at 630 Brooks Avenue in Rochester.

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

- Mr. James Gleason, Chairman;
- Mr. Joseph Klein;
- Mr. Doug Lemov;
- Ms. Jean Howard;
- Mr. Bob Howitt;
- Mr. Geoffrey Rosenberger; and
- Ms. Susan Miller Barker.

Rochester Prep’s mission statement is as follows:

The mission of True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School ("Rochester Prep") is to prepare all students to enter and succeed in college through effort, achievement and the content of their character. All Rochester Prep students will demonstrate excellence in reading, writing, math, science, and history, while consistently exemplifying the virtues of diligence, integrity, responsibility, duty and perseverance.

In the Executive Summary of the school’s charter application, the founders indicated that the school would strive to prepare students to compete for admission to selective high schools and colleges on “equal footing with all students.”¹

Rochester Prep partners with Uncommon Schools, Inc. (“USI”), a not-for-profit charter management organization, for the development and implementation of the school’s educational program. USI provides the school with a broad range of services including: a managing director, responsible for supervising and managing the head of school and principal and for managing and implementing the academic and non-academic operations of the school; development and implementation of the academic program and assessment protocol; recruitment of staff; professional development; school inspection services; budgets; reporting requirements; coordination of audit services and back office functions; technology coordination; fund development, facility management, and marketing and advocacy.

¹ The initial charter stated that the school seeks to replicate the success of schools such as Amistad Academy, Roxbury Prep Charter School, and North Star Academy Charter School.

Key design elements include:

- intentional standards-driven teaching and the systematic use of objective student performance data to inform decision-making, including the use of internal diagnostic assessments;
- meticulously planned and designed in-house professional development activities for teachers, including a two week pre-service training;
- upon entry into the school, students take a diagnostic assessment evaluating the skills they have mastered and will be provided enrichment and remediation opportunities accordingly;
- structured and rigorous system of behavioral standards and the development of a school culture which inspires students to seek excellence;
- emphasis on building relationships, evidenced by each student assigned to a teacher that will serve as his/her “advisor;”
- shared decision-making process that involves teachers in important school decisions; and
- a character education curriculum taught twice each month.

The school maintains a longer school day (and year) as compared to the district in which it resides, allowing for a daily double-block of English language arts and mathematics for its students.

School Year (2008-09)

195 instructional days

School Day (2008-09)

7:40 a.m. to 5:40 p.m. (Monday through Thursday)²

7:40 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. (Friday)

Enrollment

School Year	Original Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment³	Original Chartered Grades	Complying
2006-07	78	80	5	Yes
2007-08	153	145	5-6	Yes
2008-09	227	215	5-7	Yes
2009-10	299		5-8	
2010-11	299		5-8	

² According to the school’s charter, 7:40 to 7:55 a.m. and 4:30 to 4:40 p.m. is used for homeroom, 3:15 to 4:30 p.m. for pull-out enrichment, and 4:40 to 5:40 p.m. for Homework Club/Club Teams.

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.

Demographic Data⁴

	2006-07		2007-08	
	% of Charter School Enrollment	% of Rochester CSD Enrollment	Percent of Charter School Enrollment	Percent of Rochester CSD Enrollment
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	3%	0%	0%
Black or African American	89%	65%	90%	65%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0%	2%	0%	2%
Hispanic	6%	21%	9%	21%
White	1%	12%	1%	11%
Multiracial ⁵	4%	0%	0%	0%
Special Populations				
Students with Disabilities	5%	15%	NA	NA
Limited English Proficient	0%	7%	0%	9%
Free/Reduced Lunch				
Eligible for Free Lunch	67%	71%	67%	73%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	11%	8%	12%	8%

⁴ Source: 2006-07, 2007-08 School Report Cards (New York State Education Department). Note that the State Education Department does not report special education data.

⁵ Multiracial enrollment data were not collected statewide in the 2005-06 school year.

SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

Background

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

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

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

Summary of Previous Evaluation Visits

An independent evaluation of True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School was conducted by Class Measures on behalf of the Charter Schools Institute on March 31 and April 1, 2008. The evaluation team observed classrooms; interviewed administrators, board members and teachers; and reviewed student work and other documents. A report outlining the major conclusions from the visit was provided to the school's board of trustees; these conclusions are briefly summarized below.

True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School ("Rochester Prep") used well-documented and organized diagnostic assessment procedures to gather and analyze student performance, to make placement decisions, and to determine the enrichment and remediation needs of each student. Rochester Prep's curriculum was clearly defined, documented, articulated across grade levels, and aligned with the New York State performance standards. The school's Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices and Instructional Guidelines established clear expectations for consistent instruction and efficient use of instructional time, and the school's discipline policy set clear expectations for student behavior. Lessons at Rochester Prep were focused on specific learning objectives aligned to state performance standards. Rochester Prep was making progress toward its mission to prepare all students to enter and succeed in college. The board of Trustees clearly understood Rochester Prep's core business of improving student achievement.

Current Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence

Use of Assessment Data (Benchmark 1.B)

True North Rochester Prep has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and uses it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning. The school regularly administers useful assessments, centering on interim assessments in English language arts and mathematics. In the 5th and 6th grades, School Performance New York (SPNY) assessments are used; in the 7th grade, the school uses an interim mathematics assessment developed by Uncommon Schools and a customized English language arts assessment, which was developed collaboratively with SPNY based on the school's scope and sequence and focuses more on writing skills. Teachers develop science and history unit assessments that mirror 8th grade state assessments in the respective subjects. Teachers used a variety of informal assessments to check for understanding, including do-nows and exit tickets; they also regularly administered quizzes and summative unit tests to assess unit skills.

Rochester Prep has procedures in place to systematically collect and analyze the results of these assessments. Teachers analyze interim assessment results to create action plans for whole-class, small-group and individual student level re-teaching and tutoring. Action plans are submitted to department heads and school leaders for review. Wrong item analysis is performed to identify general skill deficits and individual student needs and to pinpoint student misunderstandings, allowing for tailored re-teaching.

All subject-area departments follow a common set of procedures for developing and systematically scoring multiple-choice and open-ended questions on unit assessments. Teachers meet weekly to conduct a clinical discussion of assessment items in order to determine why students are not better able to answer particular questions. Department heads conduct brainstorming sessions during which teachers analyze how their instruction has contributed to a specific assessment result. Similarly, teachers evaluate daily exit tickets and end-of-unit tests to monitor learning.

Mathematics teachers reported that the SPNY interim assessments are very well aligned with the content covered in class. Math teachers also grade short-answer questions together using a rubric. Writing teachers use school-wide rubrics for grammar, sentence fluency, and punctuation. In addition, one writing teacher indicated that she has created specific rubrics for essays in order to evaluate the extent to which students are mastering relevant skills; she also reported using state test exemplars as standards against which to assess student work.

The school effectively uses assessment results to improve student and teacher performance. The ongoing assessment practices demonstrate that the school leadership is relentless in monitoring instructional activity and quickly making corrections, if needed. Department heads work with teachers to develop individual action plans, detailing what needs to be retaught to specific students in a *different* way. Teachers reported using data gathered from exit tickets, weekly quizzes, end-of-unit assessments and interval assessment results to determine pacing of future lessons and to re-teach content as needed. Teachers also use these results to identify students for targeted assistance during enrichment periods and to pull students from electives when necessary.

Finally, teachers reported regularly distributing progress reports and report cards to parents, who are expected to sign and return graded end-of-unit assessments. Teachers indicated that students in danger of failing are notified well before the end of the school year, and parents are given a specific

outline and action plan regarding what steps that need to be taken and what goals need to be met in order for their children to be promoted to the next grade.

Curriculum (Benchmark 1.C)

The school has a clearly defined curriculum that prepares students to meet state performance standards, as well as a process for selecting, developing, and reviewing curriculum. Mathematics and English language arts curricula are organized around a scope and sequence called “Superstandards,” developed in consultation with Uncommon Schools. Using the Superstandards, teachers create unit plans from which they generate daily lessons and activities. Teachers reported that they are free to select materials and texts to address the Superstandards. As such, they are given the professional autonomy to develop their own instructional program within the parameters of the predetermined scope and sequence. Department chairs work with teachers to develop the unit plans, making sure that the material is aligned from grade to grade.

At the time of the inspection visit, development of the writing curriculum was a top priority. The principal had a clear model of an integrated reading and writing curriculum, recognizing that the broad state standard of “response to literature” requires aligning the two subjects. The managing director from Uncommon Schools and the principal were both focused on instilling rigor into the writing program by integrating writing with reading. The principal was working with reading and writing teachers to emphasize student competencies that span both subjects, such as understanding authors’ styles, speaking deliberately and correctly, and selecting particularly well-written novels for study in reading class. Further, the school was reinforcing the importance of writing in mathematics as well as in science and presenting history as an applied subject for developing reading and writing skills. At the time of the inspection visit, reading and writing teachers reported that, while their respective curricula were not aligned, they were moving closer together because teachers were using the same genre concurrently and following a school-wide focus on vocabulary development.

While the school’s mathematics curriculum is also based on a set of Superstandards, it is not inflexible. The scope and sequence has been modified based on interim assessment results. Given the school-wide attention to writing and higher order skills, there has been a shift to more writing in mathematics, including a requirement that students explain their solutions to mathematics problems and defend their answers. During a three-week professional development session in August, teachers were expected to annotate the Superstandards with specific state standards, noting how questions in old state assessments are posed. After analyzing learning objectives, teachers developed their first sequential unit plan for the year. While the school has such plans from previous years, the teachers were expected to develop their own.

Unit plans list a subset of the Superstandards to be covered in individual lessons and specify assessments to be administered at the end of each unit. Teachers submit these unit plans to their grade level chair and to the school’s principal for review. They receive feedback on the proposed assessments and sequencing of the Superstandards and then use these plans to design daily lessons. Lesson plans vary in depth and content from teacher to teacher but consistently include the daily objective and agenda items/activities for the day. Teachers are given the freedom to develop lessons using whichever resources they determine to be best for reaching the stated objective.

Math teachers, who are mostly new to the school, rely upon resources created by veteran teachers and on resources found on the school’s shared computer drive. A social studies teacher reported that he creates the majority of his lessons using resources he has found on the Internet and from other

sources. In general, teachers reported that the use of textbooks is limited, given that other resources are better suited to their students' needs.

Pedagogy (Benchmark 1.D)

Rochester Prep teachers plan and deliver purposeful lessons with objectives aligned to standards. High quality instruction is generally evident. Observed students were cognitively engaged; 5th and 6th grade students were focused on foundational skills, while 7th grade students were provided with more opportunity to use higher order thinking skills. Instruction was differentiated to meet individual student needs by class grouping, tutoring, and targeted attention.

Teachers had all posted clear learning objectives and agendas consistent with the school's Superstandards. In their lesson plans, some teachers listed specific questions and expected responses while others limited plans to a bulleted list of agenda items. In all observed lessons, students were, for the most part, successful in accomplishing the lessons objectives.

Student engagement was high in all observed classes with teachers using a variety of methods (e.g., rewards/demerits, praise, humor, and proximity) to keep students engaged in the lesson. Pacing varied between classes and student attention waned at times in lessons that did not progress at a rapid rate. Lessons were generally delivered as teacher-centered, direct instruction with teachers calling on all students, not just those raising their hands, and with limited student-to-student interaction. One teacher said "group collaborative work doesn't work for our kids." Students were asked and answered questions that were mainly factual recall in nature rather than ones that would promote higher order thinking skills. In contrast to the younger grades, the 7th grade honors reading class carried on a sophisticated discussion about *The Great Gatsby*. Students addressed each other by agreeing or disagreeing with others' points and supporting their comments with textual evidence. For example, one student said, "I agree, but want to add more." An example of the procedural nature of instruction was a writing class devoted to breaking down an essay-outline format line by line.

Instruction is differentiated between homogenously grouped classes by providing varied lesson objectives and by pacing. Teachers reported that students in higher level classes cover the school's Superstandards at a faster rate than those in lower level classes. Teachers created worksheet packets that differentiate work between classes. Reading teachers reported using varied texts, adapting homework, and differentiating pacing and level of guidance between classes within the same grade; teachers model more for some classes than others. Aside from differentiating whole group instruction, the school provides individual pull-out for low-performing groups and uses the exit tickets to monitor day-to-day individual learning so that teachers will know which students to target with follow-up questions in future lessons. Notwithstanding these differences in instruction, teachers reported that all classes take the same interval assessments on the same dates and are expected to master the same objectives.

Instructional Leadership (Benchmark 1.E)

Rochester Prep has strong instructional leadership. School leaders set high expectations for student achievement and provide teachers with ongoing and systematic support. Instructional leaders conduct useful teacher evaluations and effectively monitor and evaluate the academic program. As the leaders fully expect students to attend college, they deliberately focus on modifying the program in order to enable students to be better prepared for facing the challenges of higher education. Given their recognition of the critical importance of writing in preparing students for

future academic success, enhancement of the writing program is a top priority. With this in mind, the managing director and principal are fashioning the middle school curriculum to emphasize writing; concurrently, they are making the 7th grade interim assessments more rigorous by incorporating on-demand writing assignments.

Using Uncommon Schools' *Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices* as a guide, the leadership team is focused on developing teachers' questioning skills. They expect teachers to refine their practice by concentrating on the content of instruction rather than behavioral routines. First-year teachers reported that they are expected to implement elements of the school's *Taxonomy* and to pay attention to creating and fostering a classroom environment consistent with the school's "Cultural Blueprint." In general, teachers are familiar with the school's mission and reported that they expect their students to not only be highly successful on state tests, but also to gain acceptance to top high schools and colleges.

Instructional leaders provide teachers with ongoing and systematic support. To the extent that the leaders expect teachers to remain on the staff for five or six years, they are committed to developing the staff's talents and sustaining their professional growth. Despite being a young school, more than half of Rochester Prep's teachers had at least three years of teaching experience at the time of the inspection visit. The leaders provide special accommodations for those staff members who are parents, and the board of trustees has initiated a concierge service on behalf of the teachers.

Teachers are allotted at least three hours each day for tutoring, developing materials and lessons and developing and analyzing assessments, as well as engaging in conversations with parents and observing other teachers. With a ten-hour day, teachers are able to complete grading, exchange e-mail and conduct a variety of informal meetings. Teachers indicated that there are weekly planning meetings during which they review each other's plans, assignment packets, and data protocols.

Teachers reported valuing the support of their department chairs, who review their unit and action plans and tutoring logs and provide them with informal verbal and e-mail feedback. They reported having been observed regularly at the beginning of the academic year, but mentioned that observations had tailed off as the year progressed. They attributed the decline to instructional leaders' confidence in their teaching and reported that teachers deemed in need of additional support continue to receive more regular observations with feedback. For a number of chairs with a full teaching load, their schedules preclude their ability to conduct regular observations. This limitation is presumably an outgrowth of the school's departments not yet being at scale. As an alternative to direct observation, there has been some video-taping of lessons, but the school has not yet developed a system for recording and providing feedback.

Instructional leaders conduct useful teacher evaluations, though at the time of the visit in April, the mid-year evaluations had not been completed. The managing director evaluates the principal mid-year and at the end of the year by reviewing the principal's self-evaluation and comparing her scoring of the evaluation protocol to his own. Follow-up steps are developed collaboratively. In turn, the principal evaluates the teachers mid-year and at the end of the year, focusing on professionalism, instructional ability, and communication with parents. She also evaluates teachers' self-evaluations, scores the protocol and then compares her scores with theirs. Teachers consider the standards for teacher performance laid out in the protocol to be fair and rigorous. At the time of the inspection visit, they reported that principal had conducted a mid-year evaluation but had not yet given them feedback. Teachers were unaware of when the process would be completed and were eager to find out about their evaluations.

At-Risk Students (Benchmark 1.F)

The school is demonstrably effective in helping students who are struggling academically and has clear procedures in place for identifying students with special needs, including those with disabilities. At the time of the inspection visit, the school had a full-time reading specialist and a half-time remedial reading teacher on staff who worked with 20 students. The school's special education coordinator also plays the role of resource room teacher for the 27 students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). For these students, the school has a mainstream intervention strategy in which the resource room teacher provides reinforcement of their classroom work and helps implement their individual action plans.

Teachers are familiar with students' IEP goals and required accommodations and modifications. Teachers reported that while students with IEPs take the same tests as the rest of the students, their accommodations include: taking an exam in the resource room, receiving preferential seating, and being given extended time for certain assignments.

The school provides supports for struggling students with targeted tutoring during elective classes and during the school's enrichment period. In the afternoon, a reading specialist works with small groups of students identified for remedial reading. The school had a bi-weekly Saturday program for the first two-thirds of the year in which 40 percent of the students in each grade were reported to have attended.

Teachers stated that they take the initiative to provide tutoring during school meals and after school. They indicated that the program is fluid, with students being singled out for specific needs and to address their specific skill deficiencies. Teachers follow action plans and tutoring logs to track student progress in meeting learning objectives. Given that no 7th grade students have been targeted for tutoring, the program is considered effective in enabling students to eliminate the skill deficits they had prior to entering Rochester Prep.

Teachers are provided with adequate training to help them meet the needs of at-risk students. They reported receiving pre-service training on how to meet the needs of struggling students, as well as follow-up training during professional development days throughout the year. Teachers indicated that much of this training is derived from the *Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices*, which they believe to be particularly effective for teaching at-risk students.

The school has clear procedures for identifying students with special needs, including those with disabilities. Baseline tests, administered to students upon entry, as well as subsequent interim assessments, determine class placement and teacher tutoring. The DIBELS and WADE exams are used for identifying students in need of remedial reading. Teachers send referral inquiries to the special education coordinator, who then reviews each case with the school's Student Study Team, which consists of the leadership team and invited teachers. The coordinator monitors the follow-up, keeps teachers informed about the process, and provides them with general information about students with disabilities. Teachers are aware of the steps in the referral process and are able to review the IEPs of students who have previously been classified. During the current school year, one student was ultimately referred for special education evaluation and services.

Student Order and Discipline (Benchmark 1.G)

Rochester Prep promotes a culture of learning and scholarship. The school is safe and orderly. Hallways and public spaces are quiet, students pass through the hallways in an orderly fashion, and clear procedures are in place for transitioning between classes. A teacher desk is set up in the hallway; a teacher was stationed at the desk at all times during the visit.

The school has created and fostered a culture where learning is valued. Students were observed to be well behaved and compliant, having internalized Rochester Prep's procedures. With few exceptions, classrooms were well managed and students responded to all behavioral corrections issued by teachers. Classroom procedures included an explicit ongoing focus for students to track each other when talking. Students raised hands before speaking, said "please" and "thank you," and were kind and respectful to each other; they sat in "SLANT" position with their hands folded in front of them while the teacher gave instructions and tracked other students when they were given permission to speak. All classrooms had posters conveying hand signals, listing paycheck deductions for infractions and SLANT rules.

The school has an effective discipline system. The principal reported that the school's reward system has achieved remarkable buy-in and that a behavioral intervention called "Perch" is effective. Students lose privileges when they are consistently off task and non-productive in their behavior; PERCH Plus is an added level of supervision for students who are aggressive or especially chronic in their resistance to PERCH. Adults also engage students in protracted discussion about the circumstances in which he/she has gotten off task and such discussions are then communicated to parents.

The school-wide paycheck system provides teachers with a clear and consistent behavioral management system which is implemented in every classroom. All teachers post information detailing paycheck rewards and deductions for specific student behaviors. Students were observed to respond quickly to positive reinforcement and paycheck rewards and deductions, and they earned scholar dollars for performing deeds in line with the school's values. Students are issued a weekly paycheck detailing contributions and deductions. They bank these paychecks in order to spend them at school auctions to buy rewards. The school staff has been creative in identifying attractive rewards. For example, high paycheck-earners have been rewarded with a limousine trip home, steak barbeque, and meals at local restaurants with school staff members. A medley of food items prepared at a local restaurant is a particular student favorite.

Professional Development (Benchmark 1.H)

Rochester Prep has a sustained and cohesive professional development program, which assists teachers in meeting student academic needs and school goals. To support their professional development as emerging school leaders, a number of the department heads deliver some of the school-wide professional development activities. Observed professional development documents included a plan for the year and agendas indicating a range of topics that were to be covered on an ongoing basis. Teachers reported receiving focused and sustained professional development through videos of effective classroom practices based on the *Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices*.

The professional development is differentiated to meet individual teachers' needs. For example, veteran teachers recounted having attended Uncommon Schools' Master Teacher retreats, and mathematics teachers have participated in math team retreats. Two teachers have attended a school leadership retreat in anticipation of their assuming administrative roles in the future.

Organizational Capacity (Benchmark 2.C)

Rochester Prep has established a well-functioning organizational structure with staff, systems, and procedures in place that allow the school to carry out its academic program. Its day-to-day operations are managed competently. The chief operating officer (COO), whose primary responsibilities are recruiting staff, monitoring the hiring process, and addressing personnel issues, indicated that he receives a great deal of support for operational functions from Rochester Prep's management organization, Uncommon Schools. He reported continually tapping into the expertise and institutional knowledge of his fellow COOs at other Uncommon Schools.

The school's organizational structure supports distinct lines of accountability with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. In beginning to develop a cadre of mid-level leaders, the school leadership has established a clear understanding of their respective roles by gradually giving them increasing responsibility, especially in assuming supervisory roles in the school's subject-area departments. This deliberate development process has appeared to lay the groundwork for a sustainable model going forward.

The school has hired quality personnel, usually well in advance of the summer staff training program. As indicated above, it has generally recruited teachers with a track record of prior success and seeks to retain staff for a number of years. The selection process appears to have been effective to the extent that only three teachers left the school at the end of the previous school year, two of whom reportedly did not meet the administration's expectations.

Governance (Benchmark 2.D-E)

Rochester Prep's board of trustees has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and provide oversight of the educational program. With effective structures and procedures to govern the school in place, the board is focused on student achievement and on meeting the school's academic Accountability Plan goals.

The board members have extensive experience on non-profit boards, as well as working with educational and youth organizations. They are familiar with public education and charter schools in particular. The members provide an adequate skill set to enable the board to carry out its responsibilities. With a managing director from Uncommon Schools serving as a member of the board, the school has solid educational expertise. The board has four active committees, including finance and management. Board meetings consist of committee reports, student assessment reports and a review of strategic initiatives. The principal provides program updates and test results, including year-to-year comparisons.

At the time of the inspection visit, the board was concerned with: monitoring the increased complexity of the organization, including planning to expand the school to kindergarten through 8th grade; sustaining the organization by developing a stable teaching staff; and maintaining good relations with the Rochester school district. The board receives general reports about the school staff, including personnel actions, which provides members with a broad awareness of staff strengths and weaknesses.

The board is aware of the school's performance. Members cited comparative statistics about the school's rank in the county (at or near the top) on state English language arts and mathematics exams, as well as the school's percent of students eligible for free-lunch.

The board understands the process by which the managing director evaluates the principal and receives verbal summaries of her performance from him. While these principal evaluations have regularly taken place, the board has not established a formal process for evaluating the managing director's performance. Board members hold the managing director accountable for his performance through their discussions with him and indicate that they are satisfied with his performance.

Conduct of the Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Third-Year Evaluation Visit at Rochester Prep on April 14, 2009. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

Ron Miller, Ph. D. (team leader) is the Vice President for Accountability at the Charter Schools Institute. After teaching for seven years in New York City public schools, Dr. Miller joined the central offices of the New York City Department of Education, where he conducted evaluative research and organizational studies. As Director of the Office of School Planning and Accountability, he served as the educational accountability officer for the Department. In that capacity, he developed school accountability reports for the city schools and coordinated staff development on their use for district administrators in all the high school and community school districts. In addition, he worked with school leaders to develop their competence to use data for school improvement. In this role he developed PASS, a school performance review system which was adopted in 600 city schools. Dr. Miller has regularly presented papers at annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association and has served as Adjunct Assistant Professor at Teachers College Columbia University and Pace University. He holds an AB degree from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology from Columbia University.

Kevin Flynn is an Accountability Analyst for the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. He is responsible for providing technical support related to school accountability plans, as well as the reporting and analysis of individual school performance. Prior to joining the Institute in November 2008, Mr. Flynn served as the Chair of the Science Department at KIPP 3D Academy Charter School in Houston, TX, where he authored curriculum, instructed 7th and 8th grade students, coached peers, and managed the Saturday School program. Prior to his service at KIPP 3D Academy, Mr. Flynn served as a science teacher via Teach For America at the John Marshall Middle School, also in Houston. A recipient of the school's Excellence in Teaching Award, his responsibilities included curriculum development and instruction for at-risk students as well as English Language Learners. Mr. Flynn received his Master's degree in Education, with a concentration in Policy, Organization and Leadership Studies, from Stanford University and his Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences from Cornell University.

Simeon Stolzberg is Director of School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Mr. Stolzberg coordinates ongoing school evaluation visits, which are part of the Institute's oversight and evaluation system. 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 founded the Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter School (BArT) in Massachusetts, and served as the school's founding principal. He also taught high school history and street law in the D.C. public schools, and served in the Clinton administration at the U.S. Department of Education. 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.

APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT

An excerpt of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks follows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

achieve those priorities;

- the school board has in place a process for recruiting and selecting new members in order to maintain adequate skill sets and expertise for effective governance and structural continuity;
- the school board has implemented a comprehensive and strict conflict of interest policy (and/or code of ethics)—consistent with those set forth in the charter—and consistently abided by them through the term of the charter;
- the school board has generally avoided creating conflicts of interest where possible; where not possible, the school has managed those conflicts of interest in a clear and transparent manner;
- the school board has instituted a process for dealing with complaints (and such policy is consistent with that set forth in the charter), has made that policy clear to all stakeholders, and has followed that policy including acting in a timely fashion on any such complaints;
- the school board has abided by its by-laws including, but not limited to, provisions regarding trustee elections, removals and filling of vacancies;
- the school board and its committees hold meetings in accordance with the Open Meetings Law, and minutes are recorded for all meetings including executive sessions and, as appropriate, committee meetings; and
- the school board has in place a set of board and school policies that are reviewed regularly and updated as needed.

APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Charter Schools and the State University of New York

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

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

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

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

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

The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits

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

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

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

In particular, the Institute uses a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks (Benchmarks 1.B—1.H) to review the effectiveness of a charter school’s academic programs, e.g., the strength of a school’s internal assessment system, the rigor of its pedagogical approach, and the breadth and focus of the school’s curriculum. In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), the focus on these academic benchmarks is important precisely because the quantitative indicators of academic achievement, i.e., students’ performance on standardized tests (especially the state’s 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 incomplete and incipient. Moreover, only by using these qualitative indicators can the Institute provide feedback not only on *how* the school is doing, but also *why* it is succeeding or failing.⁶

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

Keeping This Report in Context

In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face a variety of challenges as they mature, and not all charter schools address each challenge at the same pace. The State

⁶ More often, of course, schools do not succeed or fail so much as parts of the highly complex organization are working well and parts are not.

University Trustees and the Institute recognize the difference between the challenges of starting-up a school and those involved in sustaining its viability and effectiveness over the long-term, as well as the differences in the richness of student assessment data available for a school which has recently opened compared to a school which has been in operation for an extended time. In reviewing this report, readers should keep in mind that charter schools face major challenges in the first few years of their charter. These challenges include:

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

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

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

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

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

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