



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Girls Preparatory Charter School of New York

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 go out of business.

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, are 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 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.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).

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.

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.

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

The Girls Preparatory Charter School of New York (“Girls Prep”) was approved by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York on January 27, 2004, and the New York State Board of Regents issued its charter (certificate of incorporation) on March 23, 2004. After taking one planning year, the school opened in August of 2005 at 333 East Fourth Street, Fifth Floor, New York, New York, with an enrollment of 90 students in Kindergarten and first grades and added grade two in 2006-07 with a total enrollment of 139 students. The school plans to grow one grade each year, projecting an enrollment of 285 students in grades Kindergarten through fourth by the 2008-09 school year. The founders eventually hope to expand the school to include middle and high school grades.

The mission statement for Girls Prep is as follows:

Our mission is to provide a nurturing single-sex environment and a rigorous education that will enable the girls of Girls Prep to learn to read, write, think critically and perform mathematically at levels that exceed city-wide averages. Our goal for Girls Prep students is that they achieve academic excellence, learn skills for success in life and in college, acquire confidence in themselves and their abilities, learn healthy lifestyle habits, and develop a sense of personal responsibility and a commitment to making a contribution to society.

In the initial application for a charter, the founders of Girls Prep stated that they “believe that girls and boys have different ways of learning, that single-sex schools give each the ability to grow in an environment that understands their differences, and that all children should have the option to attend a single-sex school.” The school planned to achieve its mission through the following key design elements:

- high academic standards in a college preparatory environment;
- a maximum of 22 students per classroom;
- a rigorous educational approach stressing basic skills, literacy, reading comprehension, critical thinking, mathematics, science and social studies;
- a longer school day and year;
- extensive professional development of teachers together with incentives for performance;
- school uniforms for students and a dress code for teachers;
- clearly articulated and consistently upheld behavior standards;
- accountability for academic performance as well as attendance and adherence to the uniform policy;
- not labeling students, but rather allowing their individual learning styles to be understood though not used as an excuse;
- holding students accountable for their behavior and progress and celebrating their individual accomplishments. Students will be known well by the adults in the school;
- students will be taught good habits regarding nutrition and physical exercise; and
- a focus on ethics and personal responsibility.

The school is committed to encouraging parental involvement, including classroom volunteers and board representation. Further, the school wants all its teachers to attain New York State certification.

School Year (2005-06)

192 instructional days³

School Day (2005-06)

8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.⁴

Enrollment

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment⁵	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
2004-05	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning Year	Planning year	YES
2005-06	80	90	90	K-1	K-1	K-1	YES
2006-07	140	155	139	K-2	K-2	K-2	YES
2007-08	200	220		K-3	K-3		
2008-09	260	285		K-4	K-4		

	2005-2006	
Race/Ethnicity	No. of Students	% of Enroll.
American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander	0	0.0%
Black (Not Hispanic)	50	55.6%
Hispanic	39	43.3%
White	1	1.1%

Source: NYSED 2005-06 Database

³ Due to facility concerns the school requested authorization to reduce the school calendar from 200 days to 192 for the 2005-06 school year only, while providing the originally planned 200 days each following year. The Institute granted this request in May 2005.

⁴ Girl's Prep originally proposed a school day of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in their original charter. The school requested a reduction in the length of the school day for grades K-2 only, while partnering with a community organization for before and after school programming. The school's request was approved by the Institute in May 2005 prior to the start of the 2005-06 school year.

⁵ 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, also cited an enrollment of 90 for 2005-06.

	2005-2006	
Free/Reduced Lunch	No. of Students	% of Enroll.
Eligible for Free Lunch	55	61.1%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	10	11.1%

Source: NYSED 2005-2006 Database

School Charter History

Charter Year	School Year	Year of Operation	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
Original Charter – 1 st Year	2004-05	Planning Year	NO		School received authorization to change enrollment levels and school calendar.
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 formal site visit to the Girls Preparatory Charter School of New York (Girls Prep) on March 14, 2006, during the school's first year of operation. The school was in the process of developing its curricula in the content areas and utilizing a variety of curricular resources to deliver instruction. The school had been administering a number of early childhood assessments, including the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests, Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

School inspectors found that the school was just beginning to put in place the essential components of the educational program outlined in its charter and described in its mission statement. A rigorous educational approach stressing basic skills, literacy, reading comprehension, critical thinking, mathematics, science and social studies and high academic standards in a college preparatory environment are central key design elements for the Girls Preparatory Charter School. At the time of the visit the school was not devoting equal instructional time in each of the content areas, choosing to focus the majority of daily learning time on explicit literacy initiatives. Consequently, students were only afforded minimal instructional time in the area of mathematics, General Knowledge and science.

Instruction at Girls Prep generally reflected sound pedagogical practices. Each classroom had a teacher and teacher assistant guiding and supporting student learning.

Teachers were creating scope and sequences for Kindergarten and first grades in all the content areas; however, the school had not yet aligned its curricular documents with the New York State Standards. The quality and quantity of writing solicited from the students was particularly noteworthy. Yet to be developed was a school-wide writing rubric or a detailed scope and sequence for writing.

Administrative duties were shared between an executive director and a principal. The adaptive nature of the executive director's role and responsibilities freed the principal to focus on instructional issues. The teachers reported that the principal regularly reviewed lesson plans and conducted informal observations.

Members of the Girl's Prep board of trustees were able to articulate the board's roles and responsibilities with regard to school oversight, but the board as a whole had yet to implement systems essential to these functions, such as familiarity with the school's draft Accountability Plan. The board had a commitment to setting unprecedented and high goals for student performance on state tests in the future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Girls Preparatory Charter School of New York (Girls Prep), a charter school in its second year of operation, was visited by the Charter Schools Institute on March 15, 2007. In 2006-07 the school served students in Kindergarten through second grade and thus had not yet administered any of the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP) assessments. Results from other assessments, however, indicated students were making progress in English language arts, but were inconsistent in mathematics. It is unclear how well these results will predict performance on future state tests.

Staff turnover in administrative and teaching fellow positions has been a continuing area of concern for Girls Prep. At the time of the visit, the school had recently terminated its relationship with its founding principal. Teachers were working without strong instructional leadership in the areas of curriculum development, and supervision and evaluation of teachers. Although the school supported the autonomy of teachers' growth in instruction, curriculum and assessment, the school lacked someone with the authority and expertise needed to supervise and evaluate teachers' progress, as well as to set clear priorities for teacher performance and organizational development.

Curricula were based upon the scope and sequence provided by the commercial materials in use (e.g., Recipe for Reading, Saxon Math). Well-articulated goals and objectives linked to the state standards for each strand in the English language arts and mathematics curricula, as well as clear alignment of instruction and assessment to the curricula, had not yet been developed. Though Girls Prep will add grade three with state exams in English language arts and mathematics in the 2007-08 school year, a well-coordinated curriculum in the major content areas (K-3) had not yet been developed.

Girls Prep had a safe and orderly climate conducive to learning. However, the quality of instruction observed in the classes throughout the school was mixed with individual teachers demonstrating a wide range of pedagogical skills. Inspectors generally observed attentive students in all classrooms but weak student engagement, particularly during lessons focused on the rote drilling of skills in reading and mathematics.

Teachers were aware of the need to embrace data driven instruction. They were also well-versed in using many formal assessment tools in reading and mathematics. The school had not yet, however, been very deliberate and purposeful in the design of its overall assessment program. Teachers were devoting a significant amount of instructional time to the conduct of multiple assessments which did not appear to add value to making instructional decisions; at the time of the visit, the data was used more to confirm informal assessment information and to support grouping decisions.

Professional development activities at Girls Prep during the 2006-07 school year, in contrast to the school's first year of operation, were less about establishing school culture, routines and policies and more about instruction and assessment. Teachers reported positive feelings about the help provided by the external consultants who work with them individually as well as in grade level teams.

The Girls Prep board of trustees was knowledgeable about and understood its role and responsibilities regarding school oversight, and had established structures and systems to carry out its duties. At the time of the visit, the board demonstrated a strong commitment to the improvement of student performance as well as the use of data driven instruction at Girls Prep.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS AND EVIDENCE

Academic Attainment and Improvement

In 2005-06 the school served students in Kindergarten and first grade and therefore had not yet administered any of the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP) assessments. However, in its 2005-06 Accountability Plan Progress Report, the school described student outcomes on other assessments. Results of Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS) and Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) indicated students were performing well in English language arts and seemed to be on track toward achieving their goal in this subject. Mathematics data were limited to ITBS test results and showed one grade performing at grade level and another below grade level. However, it is unclear how well these results predict performance on future state tests.

English Language Arts: In 2005-06 on the ECLAS, students in Kindergarten achieved their measure with 90 percent meeting the target in Phonemic Awareness and 80 percent in Spelling. First grade students met their target of 75 percent proficiency in Comprehension, Accuracy and Sight Words, but only 50 percent were proficient in Decoding. On the ITBS, the average Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) for Kindergarten students was 64; for 1st grade students it was 52 for Comprehension and 54 for Word Analysis.

Mathematics: On the ITBS, Kindergarten students approached grade level (considered to be 50 NCE) with an average NCE of 49; however, 1st grade students had an average NCE of 34.

Instructional Leadership

Staff turnover in administrative and teaching fellow positions has been a continuing area of concern for Girls Prep. To the school's credit, all of the lead teachers returned for the second year, however three of the six classroom teachers were new to the school due to the planned expansion of grade ranges served. The school had hired a new business manager, new director of student and family affairs, and new special education coordinator in its first year. Consequently, the need for strong instructional leadership was evident at the time of the visit.

Most significantly, Girls Prep terminated its relationship with its founding principal at the end of January, 2007. It was reported to the inspection team that the principal had devoted too much time to discipline and parental concerns and not enough to the instructional program and improvement of student performance. Although the founding principal "did a great job with parents and in getting a school up and running," stated a trustee, the executive director and board decided to terminate the principal and seek a new principal who would function more exclusively as an instructional leader (60-80% of his/her time to be spent in classrooms). At the time of the visit, there were nine candidates under review with the goal of presenting two to three candidates to the board for its review.

The staff interviewed by the inspection team stated that the loss of a principal in the middle of the school year was difficult for parents, teachers and students. Staff reported that the action had negative effects on morale in the building; teachers reported feeling vulnerable and insecure in their own positions, stating that they were afraid that they would lose their jobs. One staff member summarized the situation as follows: "It was far worse [when it first happened], but everyone is settling down now. We are dealing with it. We don't know what to think about it. We liked both of

our leaders so we were a little shocked and confused [when this happened]. It felt as if you sided with mom or dad.” Another stated, “We all love the school. If we didn’t like the school, something like this would have ended it [the school’s existence].” There did seem to be a collaborative spirit in the school at the time of the visit and a general sense that the school was moving beyond the shock of losing its founding principal.

In general, the teachers had been working without strong instructional leadership in the areas of curriculum development and teacher supervision and evaluation. Although the school supported teachers’ autonomous growth in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, the school, at the time of the visit, lacked someone with the authority and expertise needed to supervise and evaluate the teachers’ performance, as well as the expertise to set clear priorities for teacher performance and organizational development. From January to March of 2007, a retired principal conducted classroom observations on a regular basis, one or two days per week, but the school was in need of a full-time instructional leader who could communicate regularly with teachers about their performance, especially about their instructional goals and how those goals were contributing to improved instruction and student performance. Peer observations were completed in the beginning of the 2006-07 year, but had not been conducted since then, except at the initiative of individual teachers. At the time of the visit, a classroom observation form was still being developed, so to date teachers had not received written feedback concerning classroom observations. The teachers and the executive director were also developing a teacher evaluation tool to be piloted during the 2006-07 year and implemented in the 2007-08 school year.

To address the issue of teacher turnover through stronger hiring practices, the school utilized a hiring committee to review applicants for new teacher and fellow positions for the 2006-07 school year. To better ascertain the ‘fit’ of prospective teaching candidates with the school’s mission, the applicants were required to answer two questions in their cover letter: “Why do you want to teach at an all-girls school?” and “What is your philosophy about teaching reading, mathematics and science?” Teaching applicants were asked to give a demonstration lesson, while the fellows spent time interacting with students in classrooms. Three years of classroom teaching experience aligned with the educational philosophy of the school was also required. Twenty four people were interviewed for six positions. The teaching staff during the 2006-07 school year had three to six years of teaching experience, with the majority being in their sixth year at the time of the visit. As a result of this newly-implemented, well-defined hiring practice, the executive director felt that, in the second year of the school, they were “good at hiring for the culture of the school, who will fit with us and who will not” and that, as a result, teacher turnover will be reduced significantly.

Girls Prep utilized a teaching fellow model with one fellow assigned to each classroom to maximize student-teacher ratios. However, in the school’s first year, fellow positions also suffered from considerable turnover, and therefore the school changed its recruitment practice to only hire fellows who are interested in pursuing a teaching career. In the 2006-07 school year fellows were given an opportunity to have more teaching responsibilities and to work closely with a cohort leader who was assigned to assist them with their classroom responsibilities and professional development. In addition to working directly with students in their assigned classrooms, fellows developed and taught the science program at the school.

At the time of the visit, one of the strengths of Girls Prep was the executive director’s strong commitment to the school’s mission and educational philosophy, a vision shared by its staff and board of trustees. In fact, in the 2005-06 school year, the board of trustees formed an Academic Advisory Committee comprised of a group of educators from various educational institutions in the

local region who provided advice regarding the school's educational program. In the school's first year, the Academic Advisory committee met as a group and observed in classrooms to give the school leaders objective feedback on classroom pedagogy. One significant accomplishment, at that time, was their identification of the phonics program as a weak area, and the recommendation of the use of the Recipe for Reading program. In the school's second year of operation, the executive director relied on individual members of the Academic Advisory Committee to advise her on instructional issues, especially possible changes as the school searched for a new principal. Although the committee had not met as a whole during the 2006-07 school year, committee members provided support to the school in different ways. For example, one of the committee members was affiliated with Greenwich Academy in Greenwich, Connecticut, which was identified as Girls Prep's curriculum partner. During the 2006-07 school year, several Girls Prep teachers visited Greenwich Academy to observe the Recipe for Reading and the Stern mathematics programs and one of the school's staff members trained the Girls Prep teachers in the use of Recipe for Reading. Another committee member served as a professional developer in science and had been working closely with the school's fellows. The committee has potential to support the new principal as that person assumes a more active role as the school's instructional leader.

Curriculum

Girls Prep, in its second year of operation, continued to rely on teachers and external staff developers to develop many aspects of the educational program. The school's curricula are based upon the scope and sequence documents provided by the commercial programs in use (e.g., Recipe for Reading, Saxon Math). Absent were well-articulated goals and objectives linked to the state standards for each strand in the English language arts and mathematics curricula, as well as clear alignment of instruction and assessments. Girls Prep had not yet developed a unifying school-wide curriculum for all subject areas, one that is linked to the New York State standards and articulated horizontally and vertically across all the grade levels through the fourth grade, the terminal grade in the initial charter term. Although teachers were aware of the need for this type of curriculum development work, they were unsure of the expectations for when and how that work would be accomplished. To the school's credit, the school leaders did use formal assessment data from 2005-06 to guide several changes to its instructional program in reading and mathematics. The effectiveness of the school's educational program in preparing students for success on state assessments could not be determined at the time of the visit since the school did not yet include grades that participated in the New York State Testing Program.

Girls Prep has worked diligently to develop a strong reading program and the school's leadership felt that the program was a real strength. In 2005-06, based upon weak student performance in decoding and recommendations from external evaluators, the school adopted the Recipe for Reading program to strengthen the teaching of decoding skills. The reading curriculum consisted of a scope and sequence based on the Recipe for Reading program, the Urban Education Exchange (UEE) Concepts for Comprehension materials and a writing, spelling, grammar and usage strand. Leveled books were also in use in grades one and two. The School Performance, Inc. (SPI) reading exams in grade two were dictating the pacing of the reading program at that grade level. There was not clear alignment of the separate components of the reading/English language arts curriculum and articulation across the grade levels to ensure strong student performance in each grade level.

Based on formal and informal assessment data from 2005-06, the school identified shortcomings in the Saxon mathematics program in the area of conceptual mathematical thinking, mathematical language and problem solving. Therefore, the teachers added a "Problem of the Day" and a

manipulatives-based mathematics program (Stern). A professional development consultant from the Australian and United States Services in Education (A.U.S.S.I.E) program worked with teachers to give them support with the teaching of mathematics and was helping teachers integrate the two different mathematics programs. Additionally, the SPI assessments in mathematics in grade two did not align well with the Saxon mathematics program, and therefore teachers were asked to make modifications in their program as well as the testing protocol.

The executive director spoke of the importance of “having our girls be strong writers” and saw writing as an area in need of improvement. The retired principal acting as a consultant was charged with assessing the quality of the writing program. Although the girls wrote daily and teachers had begun to implement journal writing in their classroom programs, there was no identifiable writing program at Girls Prep. The writing in second grade appeared to be an outgrowth of the UEE reading comprehension activities. As a result of some projected summer professional development, the school plans to do more genre writing by month during the 2007-08 school year.

The school’s science program centered on units developed by the teacher fellows. The units contained identifiable objectives, assessments and standards as well as suggested lessons. The Girl’s Prep Fellows were asked to archive their science curricula for future use. Given the significant turnover in the teaching fellow staff in the school’s second year, this was a good first step to building a strong science program.

Instruction

At the time of the visit the quality of instruction observed in the classes throughout the school was mixed with individual teachers demonstrating a wide range of pedagogical skills. Inspectors generally observed attentive students in all classrooms but weak student engagement, particularly during lessons focused on mathematical computations and drills of number facts or phonics. When teachers asked questions, responses were accepted without probing or challenging the students. The quality of student work as viewed through posted displays was generally adequate though not all work was graded using a common expectation or standard for quality work. The use of rubrics was inconsistent from teacher to teacher, even within grade levels.

In some classrooms fellows took an active role in delivering lessons. For example, students were grouped for reading with both the lead teacher and fellows conducting small group lessons. In other classrooms, the fellow acted more like a teaching assistant, e.g., grading homework and taking attendance, and observing the teacher but not interacting with the students. It was not clear to the inspection team who was responsible for coordinating and supervising the fellows outside of their work with an external staff developer for science, or whether a common expectation for the role and responsibility of the teaching fellows had been articulated to all classroom teachers.

Grade level meetings were used for common planning time for instruction, and as a result teachers generally stayed at the same pace within the grade levels. Although teachers were required to turn in lesson plans to the executive director each week, there was no formal feedback mechanism in place. The executive director concentrated on ensuring that assessments were included in plans and that the administration of formal assessments was regularly scheduled. At the time of the visit, teachers reported that the person who gives them targeted feedback on the quality of their individual lesson plans was the A.U.S.S.I.E consultant.

Use of Assessment Data

Girls Prep has collected a large amount of student performance data but at the time of the visit had not yet correlated the data from the various assessments to determine their use beyond grouping for instruction. The school administered the DIBELS (three times a year), Rigby (three to four times a year), ITBS, and Terra Nova exams (twice a year). The Gates MacGinitie reading test was dropped in 2006-07 because it duplicated data collected in other reading assessments. Interim assessments by School Performance, Inc were administered in reading and mathematics in grade two every six weeks. Teachers stated that while the SPI exams appeared to align with the Terra Nova, ITBS and ECLAS exams, SPI exams were not as well-aligned to DIBELS and Rigby tests also used by the school.

The school's director of business and operations creates forms to analyze the assessment data and works with teachers to help them interpret the results. He disaggregates data by question or student, specifically flagging questions with a success rate of less than 80% in the class. It is the teachers' responsibility to adjust instruction to address the needs of individual students. Some teachers felt "on their own" in doing this analysis, that they could benefit from more support. Other teachers felt that because of small class sizes and two teachers in a classroom, they could handle this responsibility.

Teachers were provided with external assessment results, and indicated that the data was primarily used for grouping students within individual classrooms, e.g., for tracking student progress in particular skills and teaching specific skills in small groups. While teachers had access to a considerable amount of assessment data, there was little evidence they were using the data to inform their instruction beyond grouping for phonics and reading instruction. Some teachers felt that the ECLAS test was redundant and the information duplicative of data generated from other reading assessments. While teachers were aware of the Terra Nova tests, they were not using those results to modify instruction. The DIBELS test was used to determine where the students were with pre-reading skills and then used to retest students as they moved from "at-risk" to "strategic" to "benchmark."

Members of the board of trustees, the school leaders and the teachers all talked about the weak performance of Girls Prep students on mathematics assessments, particularly on specific mathematics concepts. "We all recognize the math problem!" stated a board member. At the time of the visit, the school had administered two sets of mathematics assessments during the 2006-07 school year, and the executive director reported that the girls performed much better in Kindergarten and grade two than last year, but results were mixed for grade one. New interventions, such as the mathematics problem of the day and the use of the Stern mathematics program had been implemented, but the inspection team could not ascertain the effect of these initiatives at the time of the visit.

Teachers also created and administered their own internal assessments, including running records every six weeks, and other forms of anecdotal record keeping. Running records, along with the DIBELS test, were used primarily for determining student reading groups in the lower grades while grade two added the use of leveled-readers. Saxon assessments as well as SPI assessments in grade two were used to create groupings for mathematics. There did not appear to be consistent expectations for the choice and use of formative assessment; teachers reported experimenting with various assessment tools at the different grade levels.

In summary, teachers were aware of the need to embrace data driven instruction. They were also well versed in using many formal assessment tools. At the time of this visit however the school had

not been very deliberate and purposeful in the design of its overall assessment program but has begun to take steps to re-evaluate the assessment program. For example, the assessment committee of the board of trustees which “takes the deep dive into the data” had been charged with determining which assessments were best and which could be eliminated. (See also Governance section.)

At-Risk Students

One of the programmatic goals for the 2006-07 school year was to design and implement a high quality after-school program, one that would ultimately provide tutoring for students at-risk of academic failure. At the time of the visit, eight students from each grade (Kindergarten through grade two) had just begun to be served in the after-school reading program for two days a week (as of December); therefore, it was not possible to judge the effectiveness of the program. Students were selected by teachers based on classroom performance and running records as well as results from the DIBELS. The aim of the program was for the students to reach a designated reading level based on re-administration of running records, teacher observations and perhaps a re-administration of the DIBELS. The tutoring staff consisted of in-house staff for grades one and two, but not all were classroom teachers; for example, a clerical person was functioning as a tutor for the Kindergartners. The special education coordinator was responsible for training the reading tutors. Also, after school tutoring for students weak in mathematics had just been implemented prior to the inspection visit.

The special education coordinator reported seven identified students with disabilities, with some referrals in process at the time of the visit. A special education teacher provided support services to four students in both a pull-out and push-in model. Related service providers (counseling, speech and occupational therapy) were not on-site and their services were reported as difficult to procure. The school had a clear child find procedure which included child study team meetings held every two weeks by grade level. Two special education consultants provided professional development to teachers. (See section on Professional Development). At the time of this visit, it was noted that due to the lack of an elevator in the building and the school’s location on the fifth floor, accessibility by individuals with certain disabilities or impairments would be an issue. The special education coordinator was working with the principal in the main building to seek some remedies for this problem, especially as Girls Prep continues to grow and expand in numbers and grade levels.

There were no identified English language learners at Girls Prep nor was there an identifiable process for screening and identification of students who had limited proficiency in English.

Student Order and Discipline

Girls Prep has a safe and orderly climate conducive to learning. Attendance and punctuality were key goals. Students with perfect attendance earned a pizza party and received certificates at a weekly school-wide community meeting called Unity. Parents were called when a student was not in school, and, if the child was tardy, parents had to escort their daughter to the fifth floor, an unpopular practice with the parents according to school staff.

Girls Prep utilized a Heartwood curriculum to teach ethics and values. Unity meetings, a regular school-wide celebratory event, highlighted positive accomplishments (attendance, birthdays) and addressed school-wide behavioral issues, such as inappropriate behaviors in the lunchroom and recess. Three teachers were trained in the use of techniques from the Responsive Classroom program and modeled it for the rest of the staff. Some of the Responsive Classroom tenets around issues such as how the girls will walk the halls and treat each other were incorporated into “a little boot camp”

during the first three days of school this year. Behavioral management techniques include a “Star of the Week” program and a face system (happy face or sad face) utilized in classrooms. The school had not yet institutionalized behavioral expectations for breakfast, lunch and recess.

Professional Development

Professional development activities at Girls Prep during the 2006-07 year, in contrast to school’s first year of operation, were less about establishing school culture, routines and policies and more about instruction and assessment. Girls Prep faculty had grade level meetings scheduled for every Tuesday and full faculty meetings monthly, some of which were devoted to professional development. There was no evidence, however, that regularly scheduled professional development sessions were selected to improve areas of pedagogical weakness identified in classroom observations or student academic deficiencies identified through assessment results.

During the 2005-06 year the Urban Education Exchange (UEE) provided professional development on Tuesdays for the areas of phonics and reading instruction, namely concepts of comprehension coaching and training. In 2006-07 UEE was utilized for some professional development in the area of writing. Additionally, teachers had access to the UEE online network to share lesson plans and other resources. Topics for Tuesday meetings were not yet well-developed in a year long plan. It was reported by staff that every teacher was expected to lead at least one Tuesday meeting per year; topics for the 2006-07 school year included dealing with children with epilepsy and child abuse. Other training available to teachers included summer workshops on the use of Saxon and Stern programs, as well as Recipe for Reading. Teachers also received five days of training on the Orton-Gillingham method. According to the teachers, the quality of the summer professional development experiences ranged from “so-so” to “awesome.” Teachers expressed some concerns about the quality of the professional development sessions and some changes were made to include teachers in the development and implementation of professional development experiences.

Teachers reported positive feelings about the help provided by the special education and A.U.S.S.I.E consultants who worked with them individually as well as in grade levels. Two special education consultants provided professional development services in the 2006-07 school year. One special education consultant came to the school weekly to observe in the classrooms and talk to the teachers. Occasionally, she assessed a student informally and reported her findings and made suggestions for how the teacher could work more effectively with the student. A second special education consultant, contracted for 16 sessions, worked exclusively with the teachers, giving them specific feedback on pedagogy. The A.U.S.S.I.E consultant worked directly with teachers on a weekly basis to strengthen the mathematics program at the school during the 2006-07 year. Teachers reported that she helped them develop their mathematics groupings and shared instructional techniques that they found very valuable. The consultant also modeled lessons, met with the teachers to debrief their lessons and gave them support for differentiating instruction in their classrooms. The school was considering hiring a mathematics specialist during the 2007-08 school year to provide additional staff support and guidance.

Governance

At the time of the visit, the Girls Prep board of trustees was knowledgeable about and understood its role and responsibilities regarding school oversight, and had established structures and systems to carry out its duties. The 12-member board worked closely with the school’s executive director and received regular reports on all aspects of the school’s functioning from operations and finances to

instruction and assessment over the course of ten meetings annually. In 2006-07 the board requested that more staff attend board meetings to give reports and share what they were doing, as a way of broadening their base for obtaining information beyond that of the executive director. The board members participated on three active committees: assessment, finance and development.

Recruitment of students was one of the ongoing concerns for the board of trustees. At the time of the visit the school had a wait list of 60-80 girls. Some of the concerns expressed by potential parents were the difficulties in transporting their child to the school (without access to a subway system) as well as the general location of the school on the fifth floor.

The school facility was another ongoing concern for the board of trustees and the executive director. Currently, Girls Prep is housed on the fifth floor of an existing New York City Department of Education-operated public school building on the Lower East Side of New York City. Space constraints forced the school to abandon initial plans to have three sections per grade (currently two sections per grade) and to reduce school enrollment (currently approximately 138 girls in grades Kindergarten through two). Girls Prep shares a gymnasium and cafeteria with the other school at the site, requiring students and staff to walk up and down four flights of stairs to do so. The board was hopeful that further consolidation would free up space needed for 100 more girls in the next two years. Future space will be needed to extend the school day to add Spanish instruction to the curriculum (at least for 3rd graders) and to expand the after-school program.

At the time of the visit, the board demonstrated a strong commitment to the improvement of student performance as well as the use of data driven instruction at Girls Prep. The board consistently stated that their performance goal was to have 85% of the girls performing at Levels 3 and 4 on the applicable New York State Testing Program exams, higher than the minimum 75% required by the State University. The board established an assessment committee which includes four trustees, the executive director, a teacher, the principal and the director of business and operations to review school-wide data and identify trends, as well as monitor areas of weakness such as student performance in mathematics. The committee members also felt that they needed to determine whether the school was using “the right assessment tools at the right time.”

RENEWAL BENCHMARKS

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 Inspection Visit at Girls Preparatory Charter School of New York on March 15, 2007. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

Joanne Falinski, Ph.D. (Team Leader) is the Vice President for Charter School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute. She 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.

Ron Miller, Ph.D. is Vice President for Accountability of the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Dr. Miller was the Educational Accountability Officer for the New York City Department of Education. After teaching grades three through five in New York City public schools for seven years, he joined the central offices of the New York City schools where he conducted evaluative research and organizational studies. As Director of the Office of School Planning and Accountability, he worked with school leaders to develop their capacity to use data for school improvement. In this capacity he developed PASS, a school performance review system which was adopted in 600 city schools. Dr. Miller holds an AB degree from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology from Columbia University.

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

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.