



Charter Schools Institute  
State University of New York

## South Buffalo Charter School Third Year Inspection Report

### I. INTRODUCTION

The third year site visit is part of a comprehensive accountability system for New York State charter schools sponsored by the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute. The site visit during the school's third year of operation provides an independent assessment of the school's progress toward its academic and organizational goals as defined in its accountability plan.

The third year site visit complements the yearly reviews conducted by Institute staff and corroborates the school's own annual reports of progress toward the targets it defined in its Accountability Plan. The visit provides an independent assessment of the school's progress and provides recommendations to the school as it prepares to apply for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation. The recommendations represent the experienced opinions of the inspection team and are intended to offer the school guidance for enhancing the evidence base for its renewal application.

### II. CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

The third year site visit to the South Buffalo Charter School was conducted on January 7-8, 2003 by an independent team of experienced educators contracted by the Institute and led by Doug Lemov, an independent education consultant. It consisted of:

**Doug Lemov**, Independent education consultant, former Vice President for Accountability, Charter Schools Institute, Albany, NY; former Principal and Founder, Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School, Boston MA.

**Kelly Garrett**, former founder and director, Project Chrysalis [Charter] Middle School, Houston, TX; former Founder and Director, Perea Preschool, Memphis, TN, currently an MBA candidate at Harvard Business School, Boston, MA.

**Howard Scott McCue**, Building Excellent Schools Fellow, Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center; former Chair of History and Social Sciences Department and Dean of Students, Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School, Boston, MA.

**Radclani Clytus**, PhD candidate, Department of African-American Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT; former Research Analyst, Charter School Institute, Albany New York.

The team used the goals outlined in school's Accountability Plan and questions outlined by the Charter Schools Institute in the site visit protocol in guiding their observations of the school's academic and organizational effectiveness as well as their examination of the

case the school has presented to document its success. Prior to the one and a half day visit, the team reviewed the school's documents including its annual *Accountability Plan Progress Report*, its original charter application, and reports from previous informal site visits by the Charter Schools Institute. At the school, the team interviewed the school administrator, Board representatives, staff, parents, and students. They visited classes at every grade level to understand the efforts the school is making to achieve its academic and organizational goals. The team offered a brief oral summary of its findings and recommendations to school leaders and invited them to ask for clarification as needed.

Part I of this report offers the team's judgments about the school's effectiveness at meeting the broad goals defined in the charter school law (Education Law §2850(2) (a-f)):

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

The judgments of the team are organized into the same three categories as the school's other accountability documents: academic program, organizational viability, and unique programmatic areas.

The second part of the report assesses the quality of the school's own measures of its progress, and offers suggestions for enhancing the evidence base on which renewal decisions will be made at the school's fifth year of operation.

### **III. SCHOOL DESCRIPTION**

The South Buffalo Charter School opened in September, 2000, enrolling students in grades K-4. By the end of its charter, the school intends to enroll students in grades K-8. For the 2002-2003 school year, the school offers instruction in grades K-6.

The school is designed to offer students a challenging learning environment which includes learning standards and curricula in traditional subject areas and an emphasis on the Core Knowledge framework. The school augments its academic program with an emphasis on character education and technology.

All instruction is conducted in a single building located in South Buffalo. The school previously rented space in this facility, sharing space with a senior center and other community organizations. This year, however, the school's Board of Trustees purchased the building outright thus allowing the school to better tailor instructional space to the

needs of teachers and staff and providing a solution to its growing space needs in the short and long term. Though the school continues to offer space to many of the community organizations that previously occupied the building as fellow tenants, it has increased the area to which it has access, adding classrooms, a theatre and a computer lab to an already strong facility that included a gym, a cafeteria and dedicated art rooms. The purchase of the building also provides parents and teachers with a greater degree of certainty regarding the school's future program structure, location and overall viability.

The South Buffalo Charter School is governed by a Board of Trustees which has contracted with Chancellor Beacon Academies for support and management in implementing its design. In addition to its work in evaluating the principal and the school program and overseeing the school's relationship with the management company, the Board has taken an active role in the school's development, adding an assistant principal during the first year and making a difficult leadership change at the end of that year.

More recently, the school has begun implementing further aspects of the educational design described in the charter, often adapting the ideas and principles used elsewhere to fit the particular environment of the South Buffalo Charter School. Looping, for example, the practice of having students remain with one instructor for two consecutive school years, was begun this year in selected grades and in a limited manner tailored to South Buffalo Charter School's educational goals.

On the day of the site visit, the children were aware of and occasionally commented on visitors. Otherwise, the day featured no significant anomalies or schedule changes and the principal believed that visitors would observe a "typical" day.

## **PART I: SCHOOL PROGRESS REPORT**

### **I. ACADEMIC PROGRAM**

The school has established an intentional and focused academic program that appears to foster student mastery of skills and knowledge outlined in state learning standards and to provide an effective learning environment in those classrooms where it has been effectively implemented. Inspectors noted exemplary teaching in many classrooms. Students in many cases demonstrated a firm grasp of skills and knowledge and an enthusiasm for learning. Previous visitors to the school from the Charter Schools Institute have also noted such evidence and testing data indicates that many students in the school have achieved high levels of performance. At the same time, inspectors noted both significant variation in the quality of implementation of the program from teacher to teacher and inconclusive data on some performance assessments. Questions raised by these facts are made more difficult to resolve as a result of the school's difficulty in gathering necessary data during the first year of operation. Thus, despite a rigorous and thorough Accountability Plan, the evidence presented by the school does not yet provide complete insight into the performance of the school, its teachers and all of its students.

- To what extent have students attained expected skills and knowledge?

Student performance on Fourth Grade State Assessments in Math and English Language Arts suggests that students at the South Buffalo Charter School are achieving strong levels of mastery and that the level of mastery achieved by students in the school exceeds that of students in other public schools in the City of Buffalo.

During the 2001-2002 school-year, for example, 64% of SBCS fourth graders scored proficient or better (i.e. at performance levels 3 or 4) on the New York State English Language Arts Assessment. This represents an increase of 7% over the rate of proficiency among SBCS students during the 2000-2001 school year and exceeds the rate of proficiency of students in Buffalo Public Schools in 2000-2001 (36%) and 2001-2002 (35%). Further, a particularly promising fourteen percent of SBCS students scored at level 4 (exceeding standards) on the 2001-2002 New York State Assessment in English Language Arts while 6.6% of Buffalo City School District students did so.

During the 2001-2002 school-year, 60% of SBCS fourth graders scored proficient or better (i.e. at performance levels 3 or 4) on the New York State Math Assessment. This represents an increase of 14% over the rate of proficiency among SBCS students during the 2000-2001 school year and exceeds the rate of proficiency of all students in the City of Buffalo in 2000-2001 (50%) and 2001-2002 (45.3%).

In its Accountability Plan, the school has set an ambitious goal of ensuring that by the fifth year of the charter 70% of students who have remained enrolled at the school for two or more years will score at or above proficiency level on the fourth grade state assessments. To date, the school appears to be increasing the yearly percentage of students who score proficient or better on performance standards on both the English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments. As this percentage of students is already relatively high the school appears to be on course to achieve the impressive rate of student mastery outlined in the Accountability Plan. Such levels of performance, in turn, would suggest that the school was highly effective in educating its students.

Indications of strong student achievement provided by performance data are corroborated by many of the observations made during the inspection team's visit to the school. In the school's most effective classroom, students demonstrated a strong technical command of material and the great majority of students participated eagerly. Using a game of Jeopardy as a review vehicle, for example, a fourth grade social studies teacher peppered his students with demanding questions ("I need all seven nations, correctly pronounced, for credit.") and followed up to check that every student was engaged and knowledgeable. The level of understanding in the class was high and seemed to include the majority of students. Another effective teacher noted that she and her fellow first grade teachers used a chart of the skills students needed to have mastered by the end of each month to inform their lesson plans. She used a variety of methods to teach, reinforce and apply an understanding of suffixes, asking students to combine consonant and vowel sounds with them to invent words, for example. Like many of the school's most effective instructors, the teacher maximized the benefit of effective teaching by

deliberately structuring her lesson plan around specific appropriate skills covered in the school's academic standards and by teaching those specific skills in a variety of ways.

As is discussed later in this report, inspectors noted that the school's accomplishments on the fourth grade state assessments reflect the performance of students who have studied in the classrooms of those teachers whom other measures suggest may be among the school's most effective. As inspectors observed excellence as well as inconsistency in the school during their visit, they believe the school should continue to carefully assess the effectiveness of its teachers at all grade levels. Without minimizing the school's success on fourth grade state assessments, inspectors believe it is possible that measures of effective teaching on those assessments and at those grades could mask the need for continued improvement and growth elsewhere. Inspectors note that the school is favored with many exemplary teachers on whom it can rely in building a stronger and more complete foundation of excellence in all subjects and at all grades.

Finally, inspectors noted that demographic differences exist between the school's student body and that of the larger city school district. They believe that it would be to the school's benefit to demonstrate that strong performance on state assessments, especially performance relative to that of the Buffalo Public Schools is not the result of these differences or of a selection effect (i.e. a tendency of students who are already high achievers to choose the school at a higher rate) but rather is a result of the school's effective teaching and high academic standards. Longitudinal evidence of increasing scores on the state assessments from year to year is one potential form of reinforcing data (along with student growth on a yearly assessment of skills). While singular instances of such increases could be the result of variations in the student population, sustained growth of this type would indicate that the school was most likely primarily responsible for the high rate of mastery among its students. Thus the present trend of increasing scores (as distinguished from high scores) will likely provide compelling evidence of the school's excellence, should it continue and remain consistent.

- What progress have students made over time in attaining expected skills and knowledge?

Longitudinal data on student improvement on the *Stanford Achievement Test Series, Ninth Edition, (Stanford 9)*, a nationally-normed assessment of student math and reading skills, is positive in some areas but neutral or negative in others. As it is also incomplete, it is best viewed as inconclusive. The school's *Accountability Progress Report* includes clear and candid summaries of student cohort performance by grade level and subject for assessments administered in the Fall and Spring of the 2001-2002 school year. This data shows that the degree of improvement demonstrated by groups of students within the school varied significantly by grade and subject as follows:

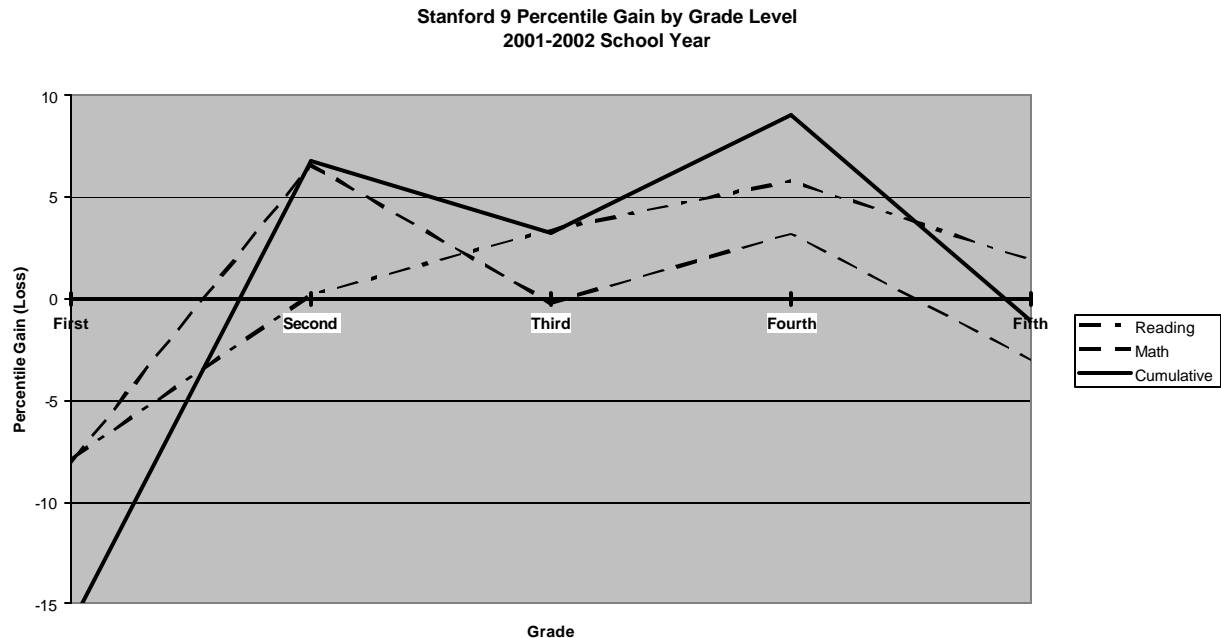
| Grade Level | Increase (Decrease) in Reading Scores (in Percentiles) | Increase (Decrease) in Math Scores (in Percentiles) |
|-------------|--|---|
|-------------|--|---|

|   |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|
| 1 | (7.9) | (8.1) |
| 2 | .2    | 6.6   |
| 3 | 3.4   | (.2)  |
| 4 | 5.8   | 3.2   |
| 5 | 1.9   | (3.0) |

While average student gains in some classrooms in the school were dramatic, students in other classrooms either failed to make similar gains or else lost ground in comparison to their peers nationwide. In its Accountability Plan the school sets a demanding goal of achieving average student gains of four percentiles per year over the course of the charter. Based on the single year's data provided, at least three cohorts of students made progress in one or all subjects that would appear to make such long-term progress likely. The data provided on two cohorts of students would not seem to predict such high levels of long-term growth.

Though the school would be right to exercise caution in drawing conclusions from a single year of data, observation confirmed, in the minds of inspectors, that the school's focused and rigorous academic program might be less effectively implemented in some classrooms throughout the school generally and at certain grades in particular. In some classrooms, transitions from one activity to the next took 5 or more minutes. In one 1st grade classroom, many students failed to complete a required sentence using adjectives to describe raindrops, and there was no apparent follow-up from the teacher. Students were subsequently allowed to play games during instructional time because, the teacher noted, "there were only 5 minutes left in the period." During a 6<sup>th</sup> grade exercise on personification, several students gave answers demonstrating questionable mastery of the concept. Students received praise almost exclusively for their effort, and were not challenged to develop, explain or improve upon their answers. In short, inspectors believe that variations in the level of academic expectation in the school may explain some part of the variation in student performance data.

In analyzing longitudinal test data provided by the school, inspectors noted that increases in student performance were, on average, strongest in the fourth grade and in the grades immediately preceding it. While this may reflect a logical decision to put the school's most effective teachers at the grade level where students take state performance assessments, it might also suggest that evidence of strong student performance on fourth grade assessments was not indicative of school wide effectiveness. As the following chart indicates, the grades in which students who participated in the state assessments have been enrolled during their matriculation at the school are also those where teaching appears to be the strongest according to value-added analysis. Thus the administration may wish to investigate further the causes for the discrepancy of the quality of performance data at different grade levels in order to ensure continued high performance on state assessments. Evidence from the inspection supported the idea that several third and fourth grade teachers were among the school's most thorough in upholding the school's behavioral and academic expectations.



As noted previously, and as the school's current administration has candidly acknowledged, the lack of data from previous years on the growth of student skills over time in reading and math represents a serious challenge to school's effort to build a case for its success. In fact, a lack of consistent data describing changes in student performance on yearly assessments makes any conclusions about the school's program difficult to sustain. Given the school's burden of proving its effectiveness and given the importance of longitudinal analysis in building that case, the school should recognize the urgency of maintaining and presenting yearly data for the duration of the charter. Further, it should recognize that, given the dearth of early data, strong progress may be required from future data to effectively demonstrate a strong upward trend in student achievement.

- Does the school's instructional program meet diverse students' needs?

Overall student achievement on state assessments at South Buffalo Charter School indicates that many students are reaching high levels of mastery in the school. Further, while much of the longitudinal data is inconclusive or incomplete, average scores on the *Stanford Achievement Test* rose in the majority of classrooms over the 2001-2002 school year. These data points suggest a generally high level of academic achievement as well as a rising tide of student growth at several grade levels in the school, at a minimum. However, inspectors were concerned that all students might not be participating in broader gains, even in otherwise effective classrooms,

This concern was raised by an unusual anomaly present in the school's academic data. At several grade levels, and in grades two and three in particular, the percentage of students scoring at performance level one (the lowest performance level) on the Stanford Achievement Test increased, often dramatically, *even while the average score in the class*

*also increased.* Put another way, it appeared that in more than one classroom, the average student might be making strong progress even while an increasing number of students were falling behind. This would suggest a possible divergence of students onto increasingly distinct paths of high and low performance. The possibility that this is the case is demonstrated by the following data, in which at least four assessments resulted in an increase in a cohort's mean score *and* an increase in the percentage of students in the lowest performance level:

| Assessment                         | Average Student Increase (Decrease) | Students Scoring at Level 1 |            |             |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------------|
|                                    |                                     | Fall                        | Spring     | Change      |
| <b>2001-2002 2nd Grade Reading</b> | <b>.2</b>                           | <b>4%</b>                   | <b>33%</b> | <b>+29%</b> |
| <b>2001-2002 2nd Grade Math</b>    | <b>6.6</b>                          | <b>11%</b>                  | <b>22%</b> | <b>+11%</b> |
| <b>2001-2002 3rd Grade Reading</b> | <b>3.4</b>                          | <b>22%</b>                  | <b>30%</b> | <b>+8%</b>  |
| 2001-2002 3rd Grade Math           | (.2)                                | 7%                          | 24%        | +17%        |
| <b>2001-2002 4th Grade Reading</b> | <b>5.8</b>                          | <b>13%</b>                  | <b>20%</b> | <b>+7%</b>  |
| 2001-2002 4th Grade Math           | 3.2                                 | 9%                          | 9%         | 0%          |
| 2001-2002 5th Grade Reading        | 1.9                                 | 9%                          | 7%         | -2%         |
| 2001-2002 5th Grade Math           | (3.0)                               | 16%                         | 40%        | +24%        |

In conversations with inspectors, many teachers stated that struggling students needed and were provided with a larger share of the school's resources. Others stated that students who were low performers were being well supported, with some noting that advanced students required further attention most urgently.

Almost without exception, teachers and administrators at the South Buffalo Charter School were direct and open in discussing the difficulties of reaching students of all ability levels in the classroom. Though many were satisfied with the school's work in this regard, few did not also feel that the school could and would improve in its ability to address this challenge. Most teachers were engaged in active efforts to find solutions. Additionally, the school has this year developed an extensive Title I program designed to remediate students who are struggling academically. The school deserves credit for channeling resources quickly and decisively into this area via a team of five tutors who provide push-in and pull out support for students individually and in small groups. Given the performance data, the effective development of this program, in particular, would appear to be critical in assuring the school's long-term success.

The school's Principal and teachers discussed their desire to improve the implementation of the Title I program. Inspectors agree that the program is both worthy of and would benefit from continued management and development. Generally, administrators and teachers seemed unsure as to the relative merits of a push-in or pull-out model. Further, observation suggested that in some cases, instruction provided via the Title I program lacked urgency or was still developing its capacity to identify and remediate the skills where each student needed support. In one case, for example, a Title I teacher led an entire first grade class through an exercise that asked them to place events from a story in sequence. This lesson appeared to be carefully planned, focused and generally well-



taught but was delivered to the full class of students while the regular classroom teacher looked on. Thus it was unclear how it specifically served to help those students who were struggling most and catch them up to their peers. Nor did there seem to be any apparent expectation for how the classroom teacher should spend the additional free time provided as a result of the pull-in. Rather, the same group of children was ably taught in a similar manner to how they would have otherwise been taught, an outcome that did not seem to fully leverage the presence of an additional instructor for the class. In another case, a pull-out tutoring session offered a general math review to three students. This model of support, unlike the push-in model described above, more clearly focused resources directly on the students who most needed the help. At the same time it lacked a sense of purpose or a clear focus on what skills the three students most needed to learn. The instructor spent most of the time during which he was observed chatting warmly but ineffectively (from an instructional perspective) with his students about issues unrelated to their schoolwork.

Documentation from the school and interviews with school staff and parents suggest that the school provides required services to identified special needs students. The school's Special Education program seemed well organized and effective, due in part to strong cooperation with the sending district. Inspectors noted that, in its *Accountability Progress Report*, the school reported data on the progress of students who took testing with modifications separately for all assessments. This practice is exemplary both in its transparency and in its commitment to ensuring successful results for all students regardless of their situation. Though it should ultimately allow for the school to assess the effectiveness of its Special Education program specifically, data samples are currently too small given a single test administration, to allow for conclusions to be reliably drawn.

- *Do the school's standards reflect implementation of high academic standards?*

In the majority of classrooms, students were ready to learn and in many cases appeared to have internalized high expectations for attentiveness and participation. When effectively developed and reinforced by teachers, these expectations resulted in a classroom environment that combined seriousness about learning with an enthusiastic and energetic tone. It was exemplified by a particularly effective third grade language arts class where students defined a wide variety of grammatical terms (e.g. linking verb), gave examples of those terms, and identified the various grammatical elements of sentences written by the teacher. Almost without exception, students took active notes at their desks and, typically, a majority of students volunteered to participate when the teacher asked a question. Further students seemed to relish answering challenging questions posed by the teacher in follow up. Their enjoyment of the lesson was unmistakable. Similarly, a kindergarten class in which all students were focused and engaged (notably, almost every student maintained strong eye contact with the teacher and appeared to listen carefully to the comments of classmates) resulted in student responses to a story that included sophisticated vocabulary (e.g. "hibernation") and a high level of student understanding of the story.

At its best, then, the school supports the sort of interaction that appears to hold students to a rigorous level of expectations and to carefully guide them towards substantive learning. The challenge for the school is to replicate this apparently successful method throughout the school. Inspectors were unanimous in their opinion that the high standards that were the clear norm in some classrooms were absent from other classrooms. Some of the most successful standards for behavior and were not yet consistent enough throughout the building to be considered a school wide phenomenon. Further, inspectors were concerned that the mean level of teacher expectations might have diminished slightly in comparison to observations made on other recent visits.

Despite the school's intentional focus on behavior – which often resulted in behavioral expectations that furthered the schools academic goals, both in classrooms and in public spaces such as hallways where an orderly and predictable air pervaded - some classrooms lacked adequate follow-through to achieve these ends. In other classrooms, teacher attentiveness to behavior did not always result in a strong academic program thriving in the orderly environment that resulted. Nonetheless inspectors note that the school's level of expectations appeared to yield dividends of its own. Many students took evident pride in their work and their knowledge (a fact that could have been underscored by more frequent posting of student work throughout the school) and others seemed dedicated to strengthening the school community. Inspectors noticed a significant number of acts of courtesy and consideration on the part of students, even when their teachers were not observing them. Parents and students, for their part, almost unanimously commented positively on the high level of student behavior in the school and on the benefits of the safe and supportive environment.

## **II. ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY**

During their visit, inspectors were struck by the readily apparent camaraderie and sense of purpose that unites teachers and staff, both personally and organizationally. The school also appears to have developed a high level of support and trust among its parents. The recent purchase of the physical plant and management by principal and board that appears to be informed, rational and considered also suggest that the South Buffalo Charter School is likely to continue to be an effective organization.

In addition, an exemplary accountability plan and high level of transparency with regards to school information and policies makes the school appear to be a good bet to avoid organizational pitfalls. Finally, the school has put in place systems for behavior management and for the ongoing monitoring of the quality of classroom instruction that can only help it achieve its laudable long-term goals. .

- Is enrollment stable and sufficient to provide the financial foundation for the school?

The school has remained at or near full enrollment during its three years of operations. Charter school demand generally, and demand for seats at South Buffalo Charter School

in particular, does not appear to be in danger of abating, particularly given the school's strong performance on state tests.

- Does the school's financial management serve the needs of the students?

Members of the school's Board of Trustees, the principal and in some cases individual teachers discussed with inspectors the goals and ramifications of organizational budgetary strategies, particularly those relating to salary. Based upon the limited information that these discussions provided as well as financial statements that are part of the public record, inspectors believe that members of the school community are generally careful and intentional in their financial management, that financial information is shared by all relevant parties and that policies are dictated by long term strategy aims rather than temporary fiscal pressures.

More empirically, the school's successful purchase and renovation of a sound and serviceable facility in just the third year of its operation suggests that school leadership has the ability and expertise to manage financial resources effectively. For its part, the Board expressed little concern about the school's financial situation with the exception of its express disappointment over the degree of transportation expense borne by the school. Board members noted that they had willingly taken on additional expense in this area in order to encourage students from other neighborhoods to attend and thus to increase the school's diversity.

- Are students and parents satisfied with the work of the school?

At the site visit, parents expressed strong appreciation for the dedication and excellence of the teachers and administration. Parents sampled felt emphatically that SBSC was superior academically to other local options (including, in several cases, parochial schools); many were particularly appreciative of the schools emphasis on values and behavior. Finally, parents uniformly praised the efforts and commitment of the school's teachers in both meeting their children's needs and in communicating with them directly and individually when necessary. During the discussion parents were specifically asked to identify concerns and complaints. Answers ranged from the lack of a full array of extra-curricular activities to the need for safer traffic control on South Park Avenue during student pick-up and drop-off.

Despite the generally strong approval of parents, inspectors noted that the school did not report upon the results of formal parent surveys with as much transparency and thoroughness as it did the results of its academic assessments, this despite narrative evidence that the school in fact uses these survey results carefully to tailor its programs to meet parent needs. As is discussed further under the discussion of the school's accountability plan, the school should make better use of this resource in presenting its case for success in its annual progress report.

- Are systems in place to promote the efficient operation of school functions?

The South Buffalo Charter School appears to be an orderly and well-run place. Even the arrival of student buses was quiet, orderly, and efficient. Among teachers, the school appears to foster a strong sense of collegiality and commitment, and staff members consistently commended the level of administrative support they received. These beliefs are likely reflected in the school's retention of its entire teaching staff from its second to its third year. While teachers seem to enjoy the opportunity to teach at the school and to focus on their teaching first and foremost thanks to a strong behavioral foundation, a number of teachers remarked that a more systematic process of mentoring and professional development would be helpful.

While the school has continued to refine and improve its programs throughout its existence, one area for potential improvement may be curricular planning. Teachers reported on lesson planning techniques that were often disconnected from the school's standards or from the process used by colleagues in the same grade level. One teacher reported planning based upon a curriculum outline obtained from the Buffalo Public Schools. Another explained, "I judge by how things are going." At the teacher focus group, one teacher said of curriculum that, "everybody does it their own way." When pressed for clear assessment guidelines, teachers at the focus group generally did not identify clear standards. One teacher simply explained that students "know the expectations by grade level."

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

Inspectors noted a generally strong awareness of academic data and its applications by the school's principal and by the Board of Trustees. Further, the School's Accountability Plan is a rigorous and thorough template for gauging school-wide success. The Accountability Progress Report filed for the most recent year presents a thorough and transparent disaggregation of student performance by grade level. (A further discussion of these documents appears in the next section of this report.) Further, the school's principal noted ways in which student performance data would be used internally to measure the effectiveness of particular programs (e.g. looping). These facts suggest that the school has strong capacity to use data to manage its effectiveness and an organizational commitment to accountability for results both internally and externally.

At the same time, not all aspects of the school's Accountability Plan have yet been implemented and the lack of data on some measures that have been implemented offers the reminder that early mistakes in the school's data gathering continue to extract their price. The result is an unusually strong accountability system on paper with question marks remaining in practice, even as the third year of the charter comes to a close.

At the classroom level, inspectors believe that in some cases the link between grading of assignments, particularly extended writing pieces, and the mastery of skills and knowledge outlined in the school's standards could be more direct. Teachers are given wide latitude to develop grading systems as they see fit but appear to receive little guidance and professional development in the area of using their grading to explicitly

track skill mastery and predict student performance on formal assessments. Finally, while the school clearly uses performance data to manage programs, inspectors were unclear as to the degree to which performance data used to evaluate the performance of individual teachers.

### **III. UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREAS**

- Is the school's mission and vision clear to all stakeholders?

In conversations with inspectors, administrators, board representatives and teachers described varying interpretations of the school's mission. Board members described versions of the school's mission ranging from giving students an "understanding of different cultures," to a "back-to-basics" approach to trying to be a great public school. Teachers offered similarly diverging versions of the school's mission, ranging from meeting the needs of each student to ensuring parent involvement.

Parents, too, tended to define the school's goals in widely varying fashion. Some emphasized the importance of core academics, others character education and still others the array of enrichment that the school offered.

- Is the school effective in addressing its unique programmatic areas?

#### *(a) Technology*

The school was slow to develop this aspect of its program but has made rapid strides this year, developing a computer lab with a teacher presentation screen and enough workstations to allow for the full participation of all students. The quality of the facility was high and its use was carefully designed to allow students to use technology to further their learning in all subject areas. The school has also used a dedicated staff member to allow teachers to integrate technology into their own classrooms and a general willingness to embrace technology in furthering learning was evident in a third grade social studies classroom where the teacher used a PowerPoint version of the game Jeopardy and an LCD projector to enhance the learning experience of students studying state History.

The school has yet to implement the assessment of its technology program described in the Accountability Plan.

#### *(b) Spanish*

Though Spanish classes were observed by visitors (on this and other occasions) the school has yet to present data on the effectiveness of this program. While the school is wise to focus its implementation efforts on those areas that are most central to its mission, its inclusion of Spanish goals in its Accountability Plan suggests that it should begin gathering reliable data on this part of the school's program in the near future.

*(c ) Character Education*

Observations during the site visit indicate that the climate and interactions between students and teachers and among students are respectful and positive. Parents and students both stressed the importance of character and behavior in their positive feelings about the school. At the same time, the school did little in its Accountability Progress Report to demonstrate or measure its work in this area- one of several situations where effective work in classrooms was not reflected in the case the school had formally presented for its success.

**PART II: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN: ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The team conducting the third year site visit of the South Buffalo Charter School commends the school and its administration for the high standards of performance and of measurement outlined in the school's Accountability Plan. Further, inspectors found the school's most recent *Accountability Plan Progress Report* to be direct and candid in presenting much of the testing data outlined in the Accountability Plan. The array of data committed to by the school in its Accountability Plan and the presentation of that data in the Progress Report underscore the seriousness with which the school measures and assesses its own performance. Further, the thorough and direct presentation of all testing data, both that which is flattering and that which is not, underscores the school's organizational integrity and its commitment to the principles of the charter school initiative in New York State.

As mentioned in Part I of this report, South Buffalo Charter School leaders have produced a thorough and candid Accountability Plan to guide their reporting of student performance and other key indicators of school performance. However, missing data from earlier years of the school's operations (discussed earlier in this report), continues to hamper the school's presentation of its findings. Similarly the quality of the presentation of findings relating to some performance measures in the most recent Progress Report was unlikely to contribute to the case for the renewal of the school's charter.

Thus despite a rigorous and thorough Accountability Plan, inspectors believe that the school should take steps to enrich and enhance quality of evidence it provides "on paper"- (i.e., in its Accountability Progress Report). Doing so will, in all likelihood, significantly improve the school's case for charter renewal). Finally, the school should work to ensure full implementation of its complete accountability plan as quickly as possible

Inspectors' recommendations regarding the school's critical accountability documents focus, then, on the degree to and manner in which the school reports back upon its findings. In several instances, for example, academic data presented a complex picture of the school as an organization. In such cases, inspectors often felt that a fuller discussion, analysis and interpretation of data in narrative form by the school might have added to

their understanding of the implications of the data (and the understanding of that data by other members of the public). In other cases, potentially promising sources of information were “under-reported” and thus failed to provide compelling data.

For the most part, recommendations discuss potential enhancements in, rather than fundamental changes to, the content and quality of the school’s reporting to state agencies and to its stakeholders. These recommendations are exclusively the opinions of the inspection visit team based on their experience with school accountability procedures.

## **I. ACADEMIC GOALS**

**Goal 1:** Each year all students at the South Buffalo Charter School will become proficient readers of the English Language and will make continuous yearly progress towards mastery of their reading skills.

### *Proposed Measures:*

- Based on the Stanford 9, the mean total reading score of student cohorts in each grade will increase by 4 percentiles per year, on average, over the course of the charter.
- 70% of all fourth grade students who have attended the SBCS for at least two full academic years will score at the proficient level or higher on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade New York State Assessment for reading.
- Students who have attended the SBCS for two full years will outperform the Buffalo Public School District on the NYS 4<sup>th</sup> grade assessment for reading.

**Goal 2:** All students will become proficient in mathematics and will demonstrate annual improvement of mathematics skills and concepts.

### *Proposed Measures:*

- Based on the Stanford 9, the mean total math score of student cohorts in each grade will increase by 4 percentiles per year, on average, over the course of the charter.
- 70% of students who have attended the SBCS for a minimum of 2 full school years will achieve at the proficient level or higher on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade NYS math assessment.
- Students who have attended the SBCS for 2 full academic years will outperform the Buffalo Public School District on the NYS 4<sup>th</sup> grade math assessment.

**Goal 3:** All students at the South Buffalo Charter School will demonstrate chronological thinking, comprehension, analysis and interpretation and research capabilities in the study of geography and social studies.

### *Proposed Measures:*

- 70% of students who have attended the SBCS for a minimum of 2 full school years will achieve the proficient level or higher on the Grade 5 NYS Social Studies Assessment.
- The SBCS will have a 5<sup>th</sup> grade cumulative Social Studies exam to measure the following outcomes: chronological order of events, interpret visual data of line graphs, pie graphs and Venn diagrams.

70% of students who have attended SBCS for at least 2 full academic years will score at the proficient or mastery level on this exam.

The exam will be part objective and part open response, and will be scored by an independent source, such as a college professor, local school or the like. Rubrics will be used to assess each child's mastery.

**Goal 4:** All students at the South Buffalo Charter School will become proficient and demonstrate improvement in developing science skills as measured by the NYS Science assessment and grade level assessments.

*Proposed Measures:*

- 70% of fourth grade students who have attended the SBCS for a minimum of 2 full academic years will achieve the proficient level or above on the NYSPET Science Test at the age appropriate levels.

## **ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Several measures in the school's Accountability Plan, for example a social studies examination and a technology assessment, are slated to be developed and implemented during this, the third year of the school's charter. The school should seek to complete this process as quickly as possible. To present as much consistent and reliable data as possible by the end of its first charter term, it must ensure that data is as compelling as possible- i.e. is rigorous, externally validated, and unambiguously demonstrates students mastery learning standards. The school may wish to discuss its implementation of these assessment tools with the authorizer to ensure that it avoids any and all implementation errors. There is little margin for error if such planned but as yet unimplemented assessments are to materially add to the school's case for renewal.

In implementing the remaining assessments outlined in the Accountability Plan, the school should demonstrate the quality of its internally designed assessments by submitting to its chartering authority further information detailing with whom it has contracted for the evaluation of the assessments and their qualifications to serve as independent evaluators. Further the school should consider submitting the rubrics it has designed (and discussed in its Accountability Plan) *as soon as possible* to ensure that tests are reliable, valid and generally effective in measuring the mastery of specific learning goals. Either way, the rubrics should certainly be submitted before



the tests are administered to ensure maximum validity. This will lend more weight to any findings from such assessments.

2. In reporting on its progress against its performance goals in its yearly Progress Report, the school may wish to discuss and analyze its own data more completely in narrative fashion and perhaps using further analysis of trends contained within the data. Though it has so far been candid in presenting data in its raw form, the school has been less effective in demonstrating in the written record that it has understood, analyzed and used the data to better inform decision-making in the school and to gain insights into its students' strengths and weaknesses. Evidence of this can often be a powerful argument on a school's behalf at renewal. Though inspectors note that in many cases the school appears to do these things, they note that it does not seize present evidence of these practices in the written record.
3. The school's most recent Accountability Plan Progress Report disaggregates certain performance measures according to whether students took assessments with or without modifications. This practice is laudable in that it provides additional clarity and evidence regarding the progress of all students in the school. The school may wish to consider providing more extensive disaggregation of its assessment results in the future. By reporting on student performance in relevant subgroups (for example, free and reduced lunch; gender; first language other than English) and tracking these groups over time, the school could more fully demonstrate its impact on the achievement of diverse student populations. This would better position the school to meet reporting requirements that are likely to be required as a result of new federal legislation (No Child Left Behind). Further, given demographic differences between the school's students and those enrolled in Buffalo Public Schools, the school could use such methods to allow for a more direct comparison to other local public school options and to demonstrate that the school was equally effective for all students.

## **II. ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY GOALS**

**Goal 1:** The SBCS will demonstrate that it will attract and maintain an enrollment that will ensure its financial viability.

### *Proposed Measures:*

- During the school year, enrollment will remain at or above 95% capacity.
- SBCS will maintain a waiting list equal to 10% of enrollment
- A minimum of 90% of students will re-enroll at the school each year. Of those students who leave, exit interviews will reveal that less than 10% left because of dissatisfaction with the school's level of academic expectation, quality of instruction, communication with families or management of student behavior.

**Goal 2:** The SBCS will maintain strong organizational viability by demonstrating sound financial practices.

Proposed Measures:

- Actual and proposed budgets for each school year will show effective use of resources.
- A yearly balance sheet will show that the school is not unsustainably in the red.
- Audited financial statements will demonstrate that the school follows responsible practices in managing public money.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The school may wish to present a fuller array of data to support its goals and measures in such areas as enrollment, attendance and attrition. For example, the school should submit surveys given and returned from all parents as an appendix to both demonstrate the full array of responses and to authenticate the validity of its own conclusions from that data. Alternatively, the school could summarize parent survey data in an appendix and make supporting documentation available at the school.
2. The school's accountability documents do not discuss the methodology used to conduct its surveys of parent opinion. With any survey, a copy of all completed responses should be included as an appendix in the submission of annual Progress Report as supporting evidence. Further, the school may wish to consider having respondents initially send their responses to a neutral third party to eliminate any possibility that responses are influenced by concerns about possible repercussions within the school. Additionally, the school should consider setting a minimum threshold for the percentage of parents who respond to the survey. That is, if a 20% of parents responded to a given survey, even conclusions based upon 100% approval might be open to question.

Generally, survey data is most compelling when it includes information on the range all given responses, sorted by questions and discussing the percentage of respondents giving each response. This can provide additional insight into the satisfaction of stakeholder groups.

## **III. UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREAS**

**Goal 1:** Students will use computers to research, report data and write reports. Students will use Internet search engines to research a given topic. They will use word processing software to develop, edit and publish their completed project. Students will also find pictures and other supporting documentation using the Internet.

Proposed Measures:

- 70% of students who have attended the SBCS for a minimum of 2 full academic years will demonstrate proficiency in the use of computers by

passing a test measuring all of the items listed in the aforementioned Technology Goal.

- 70% of students will scores proficient or mastery level on this exam. The exam will be part objective and part open response, and will be scored by an independent source, such as a college professor, local school or the like. Rubrics will be used to asses each child's mastery.

**Goal 2:** Starting in the 2002-03 school year, at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 70% of the students at SBCS who have been enrolled at the school for a minimum of two full academic years will be able to do all of the following exercises at proficiency level or higher:

Students will be able to identify 200 out of 300 [Spanish] words.  
Students will be able to correctly use verbs- present, past and future tense.  
Students will be able to write simple and complex sentences.

All of these items will be measured by a cumulative exam, given by the school. The exam will be part objective and part open response, and will be scored by an independent source, such as a college professor, local school or the like. Rubrics will be used to asses each child's mastery.

**Goal 3:** Students' behavior will give witness to the core values taught monthly.

Proposed Measures:

- At the end of the school year, each student will be able to define the school-wide monthly virtues and give an explicit example of each in written form developed by the teacher.
- Using a Behavioral Rating Scale up to 10 "guests" from the community will come to the school and rate the students' behavior and adherence to the virtues. 80% of guests will rate our students above average in their adherence to the core virtues including charity, courage and graciousness.

**Goal 4:** All students will be active community members and participate positively in building school community.

Proposed Measures:

- All students will give service to the community, some tutoring, [and some] involved with food drives or similar activities.

**Goal 5:** (Parent Involvement)

Proposed Measures:

- There will be an average yearly parent participation rate at conferences of 85%.

- There will be an average yearly parent participation rate at portfolio nights of 70%.
- The cumulative average of the survey items will be a minimum of 3.0 out of 4.0 in the areas of: fulfilling the mission, high academic expectations, quality instruction, communication with families, management of student behavior, safety of atmosphere.

## **UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREA GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. In some cases, reporting on performance goals not addressed by standardized testing appeared to be lax in the most recent Progress Report. For example the school noted that the proposed written assessment of students' knowledge of school-wide character virtues was "done orally, not in writing." The goal of ensuring that all students participate in community service "was achieved through the school year," the Progress Report summarily notes without providing further evidence. The Report notes that a cumulative average of 3.68 out of 4.0 was achieved on a parent survey. However, a copy of the survey itself was not included in the Progress Report, nor were original answer forms or any documentation of the described response. Further, no discussion of methodology or analysis of the range of or trends in the data was included. In these examples, (and in several other cases in the Progress Report) proposed measures that might have resulted in compelling data in support of the school's work generated little if any additional force to the school's argument for its success.
2. As is the case with some aspects of the academic section of the Accountability Plan, much of the measurement of the school's unique programmatic areas has yet to be implemented. Inclusion of all performance measures as quickly as possible may help strengthen the school's argument for its success at renewal. The school should consult with the Charter Schools Institute to ensure that data is presented in the most effective manner to ensure it is as relevant as possible in the consideration of renewal.
2. The school should provide its authorizer with further information regarding the assessments it plans to develop in augmenting the measures use in the Accountability Plan. Specifically, the school should identify the third parties who will evaluate performance on the assessments, should discuss those individuals' qualification to do so, and should finalize the rubrics the school will use to ensure that the assessments effectively measure the intended skills and knowledge.

**CONCLUSION:** The Board, administration, and staff at the South Buffalo Charter School appear to be successfully developing an ambitious educational program. Early evidence suggests that the program holds strong promise to provide a substantial and effective public education for students in South Buffalo. To ensure continued success, the school must continue to defend and develop both the level of academic expectation in the classroom and the consistency of the behavioral expectations that support those academic expectations, inspectors believe. These aspects of school performance, as well as the

professional and collegial climate, represent particularly promising aspects of the school's performance in its first three years.

Though initial signs are positive, the school should also recognize the importance, as it approaches renewal, of building a case for its effectiveness more thoroughly in the formal record. The data the school has so far presented may not fully reflect all of the progress it has achieved. Though the framework established in the Accountability Plan is strong, continuing to develop and present thorough and comprehensive data demonstrating excellence in achieving the school's performance goals will be critical to the school's long-term success and should be a priority for the school going forward.