



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Harlem Link Charter School

School Evaluation Report 2006-2007

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INTRODUCTION

Background on Charter Schools and the State University

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

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

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

Charter schools are public schools in every respect. They are open to all children, non-sectarian in their programs and funded with public tax dollars. Unlike district operated schools, which are run by a board of education, each public charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees which is directly responsible for school performance. That board, while independent, is subject to public oversight. Just as traditional school boards, charter school boards of trustees must adhere to New York State’s Freedom of Information and Open Meetings laws. Public charter schools and their boards are also subject to oversight and monitoring. In the case of SUNY authorized schools, that monitoring is conducted by the Institute. Additionally, all public charter schools in New York State are jointly subject to inspection and oversight by the State Education Department (SED) on behalf of the Board of Regents. As such, charter schools, though free from many mandates, are more accountable to the public than district-run schools.

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

The State University Trustees’ Oversight Process

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

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

In addition to monitoring a school's compliance with the law, the State University Trustees view their oversight responsibility more broadly and positively. Accordingly, they have adopted policies that require the Institute to provide ongoing evaluation of charter schools authorized by them. By providing this oversight and feedback, the State University Trustees and the Institute seek to accomplish three goals.

The first goal is to facilitate improvement. By providing substantive information about the school's strengths and weaknesses to the school's board of trustees, administration, faculty and other staff, the Institute can play a role in helping the school to recognize those strengths and weaknesses. Of course, whether the school actually takes corrective actions, and more importantly, effective corrective action, remains the school's responsibility given that it is an independent and autonomous school.

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

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.

school, conclusions and analysis from the present visit, the Renewal Benchmarks, and, finally, data on the visit, including identities of the school inspectors and the date of the visit.

The report reflects the observations and findings from the one-day inspection visit conducted typically by a two to four member team comprised of Institute staff, and, in some cases, outside experts. Consistent with the Institute's evaluation process throughout the life of the charter, Institute visitors seek evidence of effectiveness in key areas: the academic success of the school including teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment) and the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization, including such items as board operations and student order and discipline. Issues regarding compliance with state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed), and where the Institute finds serious deficiencies in particular relating to student health and safety it may take additional and immediate action; however, monitoring compliance is not the principal purpose of the visit. The same is true with issues pertaining to the fiscal soundness of the school. Evaluation visits typically include an interview with the school board, the school leader, classroom visitations, in addition to the review of other school-based documents.

Keeping This Report in Context

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

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

Readers should also keep in mind the inherent limitations of a one-day visit, which provides only a snap-shot of the school on visit day. While the Institute is confident that the majority of its

observations are valid, in that they reflect an underlying reality about the school's academic and organizational structures, they are not perfect or error-free.

For the reasons above, and because of the inherent complexity of an organization such as a school, this report does not contain a rating or a single comprehensive indicator that would indicate at a glance the school's prospects for renewal. It does, however, summarize the various strengths of the school and the areas that the inspection team found in need of improvement. To the extent appropriate and useful, we encourage school boards to use the inspection team's conclusions in planning school improvement efforts.

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

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

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

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

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

Harlem Link Charter School (“Harlem Link”) was approved by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York on June 22, 2004 and the New York Board of Regents on September 9, 2004. After taking a planning year, the school opened in September of 2005 at 134 West 122nd Street, New York, New York, with an enrollment of 101 students in the Kindergarten and first grades. The school added grade two in 2006-07 and currently has an enrollment of 162 students. The school plans to add one grade each year, projecting an enrollment of 270 students in grades Kindergarten through fourth by the 2008-09 school year.

The mission statement for Harlem Link is as follows:

Harlem Link Charter School, a K-4 public school, links academics, values and community to graduate articulate scholars who will meet or exceed New York State Performance Standards and active citizens who learn and serve in their communities. Families, staff and community join together to provide a safe, supportive learning environment that empowers students to take an active role in their learning and demonstrate good character.

The founders of Harlem Link stated in the charter’s Executive Summary that because “charter schools are mission-driven and locally governed, they are able to design a coherent school program that capitalizes on the strengths of the community in order to meet the needs of the students.” After exploring effective practices at successful charter schools, the founders developed the following key design elements:

- Rigorous, high expectations and a belief in students;
- Data-driven instruction;
- Extended school year, and eventually an extended day program;
- Structured academic programs, including “fieldwork;”
- High levels of professional development;
- Co-teaching model;
- Strong connections to community-based organizations for the arts;
- A “focus” period, specifically designed for individualized or small-group instruction based on children’s academic needs;
- Family and community involvement strategies; and
- Supportive school culture.

The curriculum at Harlem Link is custom-designed for the school using elements of Core Knowledge, and includes: Reading Workshop, Word Study, and Writing Workshop for English Language Arts; Calendar Math and Math Workshop; Discover Science (FOSS) and Discover Social Studies; Enrichment (physical fitness, computer technology, tutoring, or extensions); Community Circle (classroom discussions three days per week around community building activities); School Assemblies twice a week; Fieldwork (ranging from museum visits to soup kitchen service); and T.E.R.C. – a modular program that engages students in inquiry-oriented experiences guided by the 5-E instructional model (engage, explore, explain, elaborate, evaluate). The school also administers the Stanford-10, ECLAS-2, E-Pal2 and E-Pal3 assessments, together with internal assessments and portfolios to track student progress.

School Year (2006-07)

201 instructional days

School Day (2006-07)

8:00 a.m. (breakfast); instruction from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Enrollment

| | Original Chartered Enrollment | Revised Chartered Enrollment | Actual Enrollment³ | Original Chartered Grades | Revised Grades Served | Actual Grades Served | Complying |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| 2004-05 | Planning Year | Planning Year | Planning Year | Planning Year | Planning Year | Planning Year | Planning Year |
| 2005-06 | 108 | 108 | 101 | K-1 | K-1 | K-1 | YES |
| 2006-07 | 162 | 162 | 162 | K-2 | K-2 | K-2 | YES |
| 2007-08 | 216 | | | K-3 | | | |
| 2008-09 | 270 | | | K-4 | | | |

| Race/Ethnicity | 2005-2006 | |
|--|------------------------|---------------------|
| | No. of Students | % of Enroll. |
| American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander | 0 | 0.0% |
| Black (Not Hispanic) | 88 | 81.5% |
| Hispanic | 20 | 18.5% |
| White | 0 | 0.0% |

Source: NYSED 2005-06 Database

³ Actual enrollment per the Institute's Official Enrollment Table. Note that the NYSED 2005-06 database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated cited an enrollment of 84 for 2005-06.

| | 2005-2006 | |
|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Free/Reduced Lunch | No. of Students | % of Enroll. |
| Eligible for Free Lunch | 66 | 61.1% |
| Eligible for Reduced Lunch | 18 | 16.7% |

Source: NYSED 2005-06 Database

School Charter History

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

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS EVALUATION VISIT

The Charter Schools Institute undertook a formal site visit to the Harlem Link Charter School on March 15, 2006, during the school's first year of operation. The school was in the process of developing its curriculum and was utilizing a co-teaching model for instruction. It had been administering a number of early childhood assessments, including the Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills (CIBS), 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 its educational program, as outlined in its charter and stated in its mission statement, and that the core characteristics of a productive and orderly setting had not yet been established. Moreover, poor discipline and the absence of a consistent, school-wide discipline policy were undermining the implementation of a rigorous academic program.

In its first year of operation the school experienced delays in administration of its assessments due to their time-consuming nature. In addition, visitors did not find evidence of defined standards for high levels of academic performance or other systems for evaluating student work. As a result, the limited availability of data at mid-year precluded the possibility of systematically monitoring student progress in general.

Given the school's ambitious plan to develop its own curriculum and use co-teaching methods, professional development was considered a critical component of the school's education program. However, at the time of the visit, school inspectors concluded that staff development lacked coherence and clear priorities. In particular, teachers had received little training in classroom management or collaborative teaching which contributed to the discipline and rigor problems noted above.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Harlem Link currently serves students in Kindergarten through second grade and thus has not yet administered any of the New York State Testing Program (NYSTP) assessments. Results from other assessments, however, indicate students are making some progress in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, but it is unclear how well these results predict performance on future state tests.

Harlem Link has made improvements in student order and discipline since last year, including the development of school-wide systems to set expectations for and manage classroom behavior. In addition, the school has established common language, routines and procedures for discipline, and has explicitly taught students these standards for behavior. Furthermore, a new “Dean Team” has established norms for positive behavior outside the classroom. As a result, an academic culture is beginning to form, but still needs to be extended to all classrooms and fully implemented.

In its second year of instruction, the school continues to develop curriculum and assessments, and hone its instructional practices. However, it was not evident to school inspectors that the school’s leadership has set clear priorities or expectations for these areas. The school has chosen to create much of its own curriculum and, while it has provided teachers with standards, scope and sequences and other guidance documents, continues to rely on teachers to develop many aspects of the educational program. The school has devoted considerable resources to staff development, but has not yet established a coherent program of clinical supervision.

Harlem Link has two teachers in each classroom who utilize a variety of co-teaching methods to implement the curriculum. Evidence suggests that the decision by teacher teams to use a particular model of co-teaching was based on teachers’ preference, and teams within the same grade level employ different models. At the time of the inspection visit, the school had not yet articulated a clear approach to or strategy for the use of the co-teaching model. Teachers felt the training and guidance they received was insufficient and indicated the need for additional professional development and support in order to make co-teaching a more effective practice.

The school is collecting a substantial amount of formal and informal assessment data, and planning to collect more through a portfolio system. Teachers are provided with regular external assessment results and indicated they primarily use it for grouping students. While teachers have access to assessment data, there is little evidence they are using the data to inform their instruction beyond grouping.

The Harlem Link board of trustees appears to know and understand its role and responsibilities regarding school oversight, and has established structures and systems to carry out its duties. While the school board currently sees itself as moving “to oversight from a mentoring role,” it has not yet conducted an evaluation of the school’s leaders. It is, however, in the process of creating a formal evaluation protocol and is planning to institute it at the end of the current school year.

BENCHMARK ANALYSIS AND EVIDENCE

Academic Attainment and Improvement

In 2005-06, Harlem Link Charter School served students in Kindergarten and first grade and therefore did not administer 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. While data on the absolute level of performance in Kindergarten and first grade was limited, the results described below suggest that students are making some progress in both English language arts and mathematics. However, it is unclear how well these results predict performance on future state tests.

English Language Arts: According to the school's Accountability Plan Progress Report, 81 percent of Kindergarten students and 68 percent of first grade students were at or above the grade level benchmark on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) at the end of the 2005-06 school year. Overall performance improved from 52 percent at or above benchmark in the fall to 74 percent in the spring. On the Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills (CIBS) both Kindergarten and first grade students showed an increase in average Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs) on all sub-tests in 2005-06, although the school did not report where students stood in absolute terms with respect to grade level performance.

Mathematics: Although the Early Childhood Assessment of Mathematics (ECAM) was administered to Kindergarten students in both the fall and spring of the 2005-06 school year, only overall spring results were reported: 63 percent scored proficient or advanced on 11 skill areas. The Kindergarten increased its average NCE on the CIBS Mathematics test; the first grade showed no gain in the Mathematics subtest and a gain on the Mathematics Computation subtest. However, without actual NCE levels it is impossible to ascertain how well students performed in absolute terms.

Student Order and Discipline

Harlem Link has made improvements in student order and discipline since last year, including the development of school-wide systems to set expectations for and manage classroom behavior. As a result, at the time of the visit, an academic culture had begun to form, but needed to be extended to all classrooms and more fully implemented.

The school's board of trustees, staff and teachers all indicated that improving student behavior was a school-wide priority this year, and that the disruptive behaviors observed last year had diminished. During the summer of 2006, the school's leadership team developed classroom expectations for student behavior and collaborated with external consultants during the school's Summer Institute to develop common language and more consistent school-wide routines and consequences. The school also focused on explicitly teaching students these systems and procedures and explaining to students the reasons for consequences. In addition, the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence has helped the school develop tools for measuring specific behaviors that impact school culture. A new Dean of Students working with a team of Associate Deans (paraprofessionals) has established norms for positive behavior outside the classroom, e.g., in the hallways and cafeteria, and is credited with promoting a calmer climate for learning. In addition, two of the Associate Deans now ride the school buses as matrons to extend the school's culture.

Within classrooms the school implemented a green, yellow and red card system to signal each student's level of adherence to acceptable behaviors, and inspectors observed the system in place throughout the school. It seemed to have been most effectively used by teachers and more fully internalized by students in the second grade, where both teachers and students appeared to be more focused on teaching and learning than student behavior. In the Kindergarten and first grade classrooms, however, classroom management was less consistent and teachers still devoted considerable time to addressing student behavior.

Instructional Leadership

In its second year of instruction, it was not evident to school inspectors that the school's leadership had set clear priorities or expectations for curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Teachers receive feedback on their pedagogical practice from numerous sources, including external staff developers and internal support staff; however, the school had not yet established a coherent program of clinical supervision. External staff developers participate in the school by observing instruction, providing feedback, modeling lessons, and working with teachers on developing curriculum; teachers were positive about the support they received from these staff developers, especially in the area of mathematics, and indicated the desire for more. The school's Student Support Coordinator, in addition to her duties administrating the special education program, has also devoted considerable time to professional development of the teaching staff, providing instructional guidance and modeling lessons. Specifically, she worked closely with individual teaching pairs on co-teaching and differentiating instruction for eight week cycles. However, the professional development work of the Student Support Coordinator is conducted independent of the staff developers and is not explicitly aligned with a professional development plan or school goals.

Despite a substantial investment in resources to improve instruction, teachers still indicated a heavy reliance on peer observation and support. The school's instructional leader is developing a tool for observation and evaluation but reported that she has found it difficult to visit classrooms and provide feedback on a consistent basis; moreover, at the time of the visit formal observations had not yet been conducted. While the school has demonstrated a serious commitment to improving teaching and learning, in the absence of clear priorities and coordination it is not clear resources are being used as effectively as possible.

Curriculum

Harlem Link has chosen to develop its own curriculum. The school has developed frameworks and guidance materials and continues to rely on teachers to develop many aspects of the educational program.

The school has devoted considerable resources to supporting teachers in the area of curriculum development, including hiring a consultant to develop curriculum scope and sequences over the summer as well as external staff developers to work with teachers in literacy and mathematics during the school year. Although the instructional program is informed by Readers' and Writers' Workshops in literacy and TERC mathematics, it is still incumbent upon grade level teacher teams to create units of study and lessons aligned with the school's scope and sequences, state standards, and school standards and guidance documents. While teachers appreciate having been entrusted with responsibility for curriculum development, some teachers indicated frustration with a lack of school-

wide priorities or direction with regard to curriculum development. For example, teachers noted that “grade level team meetings are not formalized” and teacher teams are in different places with respect to curriculum development. As a result, the school’s curriculum does not appear to be uniformly developed from grade to grade or from classroom to classroom. Since the school will not include a third grade until the 2007-08 school year, the effectiveness of the school’s educational program in preparing students for success on state assessments cannot be determined at this time.

Instruction

Harlem Link has two teachers in each classroom who utilize a variety of co-teaching methods to implement the curriculum. Inspectors observed teachers co-teaching whole class lessons together, parallel teaching classes divided into smaller groups, lead teaching with a second teacher in a support role, and solo teaching while the other teacher was present but not engaged in the learning activity or was not in the classroom. The school has not identified nor articulated a clear approach to or strategy for use of the co-teaching model. For instance, during interviews, teachers indicated that the relationship between level of experience and division of responsibility within a team had not been clearly articulated. In addition, the school’s instructional leader said the school is “trying to find a supervision model for both individual teachers and teams,” indicating unclear expectations for both teachers as individuals and as members of teaching pairs. As a result, the decision by teacher teams to use a particular model of co-teaching is based on preference as opposed to a clearly articulated set of priorities and goals.

Only one of the teacher teams from the previous year remained intact this year, requiring most returning teachers to adjust to working in a new team. Both administrators and teachers reported large amounts of time had been devoted to nurturing the working relationship of team members, and this has been helpful in working through differences and tensions. Nevertheless, teachers felt the training and guidance they received was insufficient and indicated the need for additional professional development and support in order to make co-teaching a more effective practice.

Use of Assessment Data

Harlem Link collects a large amount of student performance data. It currently administers the DRA three times per year, and ECLAS and Terra Nova each two times per year.⁴ To minimize disruption to instruction, the school hired a substitute teacher this year to administer the ECLAS. The school’s instructional leader analyzes the assessment data and works with teachers to interpret the results. It is then the teachers’ responsibility to adjust instruction to address the needs of individual students.

Teachers are provided with external assessment results, and indicated that the data is primarily used for grouping students within individual classrooms, e.g., teaching specific skills in small groups and conferencing with students. In some cases, the co-teaching model is appropriately employed for targeted instruction. In addition, the school employs a Title I reading teacher who pulls students who are below grade level on the ECLAS and DRA out of the classroom for remedial phonics and comprehension instruction. While teachers have access to a considerable amount of assessment data, there is little evidence they are using the data to inform their instruction beyond grouping. The

⁴ Harlem Link no longer administers the CIBS because it was too time consuming and did not easily translate into instructional action.

school is planning to hire an Assessment Coordinator next year to provide further support to teachers in this core competency.

Teachers also create and administer their own internal assessments, including running records, conferencing notes and other forms of anecdotal record keeping. They utilize teacher created assessments in mathematics. There did not appear to be school wide expectations for the choice and use of formative assessment and teachers reported experimenting with various assessment tools. In addition, the school is planning to implement a portfolio assessment system, but has not yet defined its structure or purpose.

Governance

The Harlem Link board of trustees appears to know and understand its role and responsibilities regarding school oversight, and has established structures and systems to carry out its duties. The board works closely with the school's two directors and receives regular reports on student performance, discipline and financial stability. The board officers are in regular communication with the school's two co-directors, and the Finance and Education committees in particular are active and closely involved with the operation of the school. While the board currently sees itself as moving "to oversight from a mentoring role" and believes the school's novice administrators are developing in their roles, it has not yet conducted an evaluation of school leadership. It is, however, in the process of creating a formal evaluation protocol and is planning to institute it at the end of the present school year.

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. |

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

CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Second Year Visit at Harlem Link Charter School on March 13, 2007. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

Simeon Stolzberg (Team Leader) 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.

Joanne Falinski, Ph.D., is the Vice President for Charter School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. 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 at 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.

Kim Wechtenhiser is Associate Vice President at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Ms. Wechtenhiser maintains primary responsibility for the Institute's charter renewal process; overseeing a comprehensive evaluation of each SUNY authorized charter school as it comes up for renewal. Ms. Wechtenhiser joined the Institute in September 2005 as a

Senior Analyst. Prior to her work with the Institute, Ms. Wechtenhiser served as the Coordinator of New Schools Development in the Charter School Office at the Massachusetts Department of Education, where she led the review of new charter school applications, provided technical assistance to newly chartered schools, participated in the ongoing review of their academic and organizational performance, and oversaw the charter amendment process. Ms. Wechtenhiser is the former Lead Teacher of Spanish at City on a Hill Charter Public School in Boston, where she also served as faculty representative to the school's Board of Trustees. She taught Spanish at Westfield Public High School and English at the Universidad de Córdoba in Spain. Ms. Wechtenhiser holds a B.A. in Spanish and Secondary Education and a M.A. in Spanish Language and Literature, both from Simmons College. She earned an Ed.M. in School Leadership from Harvard University Graduate School of Education.