



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of New York

Grand Concourse Academy Charter School

Evaluation Report 2005-2006

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Reader's Guide

Background on Charter Schools and the State University

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently and autonomously of local school districts and are created by civic leaders, community groups, educators and parents interested in bringing public school choice to their communities and improving student achievement, particularly for children at-risk of academic failure. The New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 authorizes the creation of charter schools.

Under the Charter Schools Act, 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) have the power to create charter schools and thereafter to renew charters of successful schools. 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 applications to renew the charters of existing charter schools. In each case the Institute makes recommendations to the State University Trustees. In addition the Institute is charged with providing ongoing oversight of State University 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 schools' 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 the State University 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 Charter Schools 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, 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 respectively recommendations and 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.

Evaluation Visits and Reports

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 evaluation report is a product of one of those visits.

In evaluating schools, 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. How these

benchmarks are used (and which are used) varies, depending on the specific year of the visit as well as whether the school is in its initial renewal cycle (the first five years) or, having been renewed one or more times, in subsequent renewal cycles.

In particular, and as this report demonstrates, the Institute uses a series of qualitative indicators to review the effectiveness of a charter school's academic programs, e.g., the strength of a school's internal assessment system, the rigor of its pedagogical approach, and the breadth and focus of the school's curriculum. In the formative years of a school (generally the first three years of operation), these benchmark indicators 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.¹

Over time of course, and particularly at the school's initial renewal (and subsequent renewals thereafter), the quantitative indicators, student test scores, take on paramount importance and the qualitative indicators concordantly diminish in importance. This is consonant with the fact that charter schools are responsible for results (outcome measures).

However, while decisions at renewal in subsequent renewal cycles involving the effectiveness of the educational program are determined almost solely by its students' collective performance on standardized tests during the most recent charter period, the Institute continues to use the qualitative benchmarks regarding the educational program's effectiveness. The reason for this is that it can give the school (and 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 Evaluation 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 a particular year in the renewal cycle. Thus for example, a school that is in its seventh year of operation may be facing renewal, having been renewed previously only for two years. It will therefore receive a renewal evaluation visit, whereas another school that 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 follow-up report, which all schools in that position receive.

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

¹ More often, of course, schools do not succeed or fail so much as parts of the highly complex organization are working well and parts are not.

The Present Report

The information contained within this report is the result of evidence obtained during the Institute's visit to the Grand Concourse Academy Charter School conducted in the spring of the school's second year of operation. In addition to this reader's guide, the report includes a brief description of the school, a summary of the Institute's conclusions from the previous visit to the school, conclusions and analysis from the present visit, a subset of the benchmarks utilized by the inspection team as the lens through which the school was examined and, finally, data on the visit, including identities of the visitors and the date of the visit.²

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); the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization, including such items as board operations and student order and discipline; and the fiscal soundness of the school. 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. Evaluation visits typically include a meeting with the principal/director, classroom visitations, and interviews of staff, students and board members, in addition to reviewing student work.

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, and not all charter schools address each challenge at the same pace. 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;

² The specific benchmarks that were used are attached to the report.

- 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 that the school is “on track” toward a subsequent renewal. It does, however, summarize the various strengths of the school and the areas that the inspection team found in need of improvement.

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

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

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

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

School Description

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application for Grand Concourse Academy Charter School (“Grand Concourse”) on May 18, 2004, and it was subsequently approved by the New York State Board of Regents on July 21, 2004. The school opened in September of 2004 at 116-118 East 169th Street Bronx, New York, serving 181 students in Kindergarten through second grades. The school plans to grow one grade at a time, projecting an enrollment of 275 students in grades Kindergarten through four by the 2008-09 school year.

The mission statement for Grand Concourse is as follows:

The mission of the Grand Concourse Academy Charter School is to create a challenging learning environment that addresses and meets the learning needs of students in New York City, especially those at risk of academic failure.

In a concentrated effort to prepare our students for entry into the very best middle and high schools of New York City, the Academy will seek to foster a sense of strong character, ethics, and personal responsibility, as well as high expectations and academic success.

The Academy will place a strong emphasis on music, math, science, and foreign languages, and will diligently seek to prepare students to meet and/or exceed New York State performance standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. In addition, Academy students will demonstrate an advanced skill in music and be able to converse in Spanish. The school will align and adjust student learning to the State performance standards, and use a variety of assessments to measure student progress in skills and content learning.

The Academy will support and encourage professional development opportunities aligned to the instructional program and will diligently seek and encourage active parental involvement and participation in the academic goals of the student. In addition, the school will seek to involve and engage a variety of community organizations and community leaders as partners to enhance the academic success of every student.

According to the Executive Summary of the final chartered agreement, the school’s educational philosophy is that “all children can become critical thinkers and life-long learners regardless of ethnicity, gender, race, creed, national origin, religion or ancestry.” The charter states that Grand Concourse will achieve its mission through the following central elements of the school:

- standards-based, back-to-basics educational program;
- student-centered attention;
- extended school day;
- high academic standards;
- professional opportunities for teachers;
- innovative teaching methods;

- school uniforms; and
- performance-based accountability.

The School's design is based upon a standards-based, research-proven educational program with a special emphasis on core skills and knowledge, especially language arts, math, science, music, art and foreign language. As described within the charter application, it includes significant time for reading and writing, 2.5 hours daily, using Scott Foresman Reading, Great Source Writing (though the school is currently implementing Zaner-Bloser Strategies for Writers), grade level trade books, and classroom libraries. Math receives approximately 1.5 hours of instructional time each day. In addition, the school has adopted the McGraw-Hill science series. Student schedules are rounded out by instruction in a foreign language, music and art.

The school contracts with Victory Schools, Inc. to provide limited back office services, such as accounting and grants management, and the school board has negotiated a revised set of roles and responsibilities regarding Victory's relationship with the charter school. The revised roles and responsibilities reflect stronger board oversight. Victory is not involved in the evaluation of the school leader, school staff, or academic program.

Enrollment

YEAR	ORIGINAL CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	APPROVED CHARTERED ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT	ORIGINAL CHARTERED GRADES SERVED	APPROVED GRADES SERVED	ACTUAL GRADES SERVED	COMPLYING
2004-2005	175	175	181	K-2	K-2	K-2	Yes
2005-2006	225	225	234	K-3	K-3	K-3	Yes
2006-2007	275	275		K-4			
2007-2008	275	275		K-4			
2008-2009	275	275		K-4			

School Year (2005-06)

180 instructional days.

School Day (2005-06)

8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

School Charter History

Charter Year	School Year	Year of Operation	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
1 st Charter – 1st Year	2004- 2005	1 st	Yes	Letter	None
1 st Charter – 2 nd Year	2005- 2006	2 nd	Yes	Evaluation Report	None
1 st Charter – 3 rd Year	2006- 2007				
1 st Charter – 4 th Year	2007- 2008				
1 st Charter - 5th Year	2008- 2009				

Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit

The Institute originally visited the school on May 17, 2005, near the end of its first year of operation. The Institute team noted that the curriculum included the core disciplines of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies. Student schedules also included instruction in physical education, music, art, and career development, as well as a half-hour period for a second language on Mondays on a rotational basis. Class schedules dedicated time for extended periods of literacy, language arts/writing, journal writing/penmanship, and read aloud. At the time of the visit the school was using Scott Foresman reading; however there was no evidence of a school-wide cohesive writing program that was aligned within and between grades. The school also used the Everyday Math curriculum for math instruction, but planned to rely increasingly on Scott Foresman math materials.

The visit team also noted that instructional leadership in the school was vested in the school's Director of Instruction and supported by the school's Principal. However, the school's instructional challenges were significant. Overall, classroom teachers demonstrated considerable weaknesses in classroom management, as minor disruptions permeated every class and were a significant impediment to teaching and learning. Although certain teachers appeared eager to provide high-quality instruction and had some mastery of the subject matter, classrooms were fairly chaotic and many students spent significant time off-task. Virtually all lessons lacked rigor and failed to impart academic skills. Most notably, there was no evidence that the leadership team had taken necessary and appropriate action to assist teachers who were struggling in instituting a classroom based management system, including, in particular, the implementation of a school wide discipline code and management system, as well as more systemic professional development and expectations for academic rigor.

Although the school had implemented a school-wide assessment system, teachers demonstrated limited ability to use the data to drive instruction. In general, teachers were in need of, and seemed eager for, additional professional development opportunities.

With regard to school culture, students wore uniforms, although it was unclear why several students were not in uniform on the day of the visit. Parent involvement was evident.

Executive Summary and Conclusions

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the present visit to the Grand Concourse Academy Charter School on March 29, 2006. On the basis of this visit, the Institute concludes that the school has made progress in addressing some of the concerns related to classroom management raised during the last visit. However, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School must now turn its attention toward capacity-building activities.

In particular, and with regard to the school's curriculum and assessment system, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School must continue to work with urgency to develop necessary curriculum documents and assessments, and ensure their alignment with state standards. The school's professional development program requires additional initiatives to build upon teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skill to increase the likelihood of long-term, sustainable improvements in student learning and performance. Furthermore, the school's board of trustees must put in place systems which allow for an objective analysis of the school's academic program.

Each of these conclusions is summarized below. The evidence base and further analysis is contained in the report's Benchmark Analysis and Evidence section.

Curriculum

In its second year of instruction, the school has built upon foundational curricular packages in English language arts and mathematics by designing detailed curriculum pacing and lesson-planning guides in reading and mathematics for grades K-3. The school has identified and implemented programs for writing, social studies, and science, though the curricula for these content areas have not yet been as fully developed as reading and mathematics. The majority of this work will be completed by the school's Director of Instruction over the upcoming summer. However, this is an ambitious goal to rest solely on one member of the school community, particularly given the existing responsibilities of the Director of Instruction.

Assessments and Use of Assessment Data

In addition to authoring the school's curricular documents, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School's Director of Instruction has also created the school's bimonthly criterion-referenced internal assessments for reading and mathematics for grades K – 3; similar assessments for the subject areas of writing, social studies, and science have not yet been created. The school's Director of Instruction analyzes the students' responses by classroom and skill set, and shares this information with the school's teachers by way of color-coded charts. That the school primarily utilizes this student assessment data for the purposes of instructional groupings suggests that the school is at the beginning stages of employing its internal assessment system for the purposes of improving instructional effectiveness and student learning; it does not yet adequately address the concern described in the Institute's evaluation letter from last year that teachers had limited ability to use the data to drive instruction beyond remediation activities.

However, it is important to note that due to the fact that these assessments are developed by the school, along with the method of administration and scoring process, the reliability (and therefore validity) of the school's internal assessment system has yet to be determined. In turn, the question of the reliability and validity of the school-created assessments may affect the extent to which the tests will be good predictors of student performance on New York State tests over time.

While the school has invested extensive resources in its curricular documents and the creation of an internal assessment system to measure students' progress towards mastery of content and skill, it will need to continue to work to ensure alignment of its curriculum as implemented and its internal assessment system with state learning standards and student performance on state exams in order to maximize the value of the assessments and the resulting data.

Academic Attainment and Improvement

In its Accountability Plan, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School includes a value-added outcome measure based on Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) results. It sets as its goal that students will close the gap between their current level of performance and grade level or an NCE of 50, based on spring-to-spring reading and math test results. However, with the school only operating for one school year, the only available value-added data is fall 2004 to spring 2005. The data from the fall 2004 to spring 2005 assessment cycle reveals that Grand Concourse Academy Charter School did not meet the measure in reading. Although students made limited progress toward scoring at grade level, their average score on the spring administration of the reading test was exceedingly low. If the scores on the ITBS in reading and the modest gains shown during the 2004-05 school year are indicative of second grade performance, only a small fraction of third graders are likely to score at Levels 3 and 4 on the third grade state English Language Arts (ELA) examination. The math ITBS results, also based on fall to spring testing, indicate that Grand Concourse Academy Charter School closed the gap between pretest and posttest by one half, as called for in the value added math outcome measure. While more encouraging than ELA, if this level of performance is indicative of the second grade and it continues, the school will not enable its third graders to achieve proficiency (Levels 3 and 4) on the state math exam.

This analysis provides further evidence of the conclusions stated above. It is commendable that Grand Concourse Academy Charter School is using a variety of assessments, but unless they are aligned with standardized tests (ITBS and the state exams), they will not provide reliable information about students' mastery of the skills and knowledge required by the state's academic performance standards.

Professional Development

Interviews of the school's board of trustees and school administrators conducted by the site visit team revealed a commitment to high levels of adult accountability for student learning. However, evidence collected on the day of the visit suggests that, as implemented, the professional development plan does not provide adequate levels of support to teachers in meeting the school's high levels of accountability. At the present

time, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School's initiatives are insufficient at addressing the significant instructional challenges facing the school. Indeed, if the school wishes to retain its teachers and benefit from a highly skilled teaching staff while it continues to hold teachers accountable for high levels of student performance, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School must also aggressively build upon teachers' pedagogical skills to increase the likelihood that they will meet such professional standards.

Pedagogy

Teachers demonstrated varying levels of skill in engaging students in focused, rigorous, and purposeful learning activities. As a result, the school's students will not benefit from consistently high quality instruction within grade levels and from grade to grade. On the other hand, the role of teacher associates has been improved from last year and is focused on providing direct instructional support.

Student Order and Discipline

In contrast to the classroom environment observed during last year's evaluation visit, the school's current classroom culture allows for and promotes a culture of learning.

School Leadership

Given the extensive scope of the Director of Instruction's responsibilities, the school may wish to consider opportunities to cultivate new sources of instructional leadership at the school, as well as to distribute core responsibilities among other individuals.

Governance

The school's trustees rely heavily on the school's Principal to inform decisions related to the academic program, including the interpretation of assessment data and recommendations regarding the investment of human and financial resources. However, in order to ensure that the school's board is able to fully maintain an appropriate level of oversight over the school, it must put in place systems which allow for an objective analysis of the school's academic program.

The school is currently engaged in a limited services contract with Victory Schools, Inc. to provide back office services. However, as has been the plan since the school's inception, the board anticipates terminating that relationship over the course of the next academic year, and assuming those responsibilities in-house. As the school moves through this process, it will be critical that serious consideration be given to determining how the functions currently provided by Victory Schools, Inc. will be provided by the school. As the board works through this process, it should anticipate that the Institute will need to review its plan to transition from the functions being provided externally to being provided internally, including the specific functions, timeframes, costs, and resources.

Benchmark Analysis and Evidence

Curriculum

Grand Concourse Academy Charter School has a clearly defined and aligned curriculum in reading, writing, mathematics, social studies and science for grades K – 3. The school has chosen to use the Scott Foresman reading and mathematics programs across those grade levels and Zaner-Bloser Strategies for Writers in grades 1 – 3. The school has also identified the Macmillan/McGraw Hill curriculum packages for use in grades K – 3 in the content areas of social studies and science. These programs are generally aligned to New York State curriculum standards.

In its second year of instruction, the school has built upon these foundational curricular packages in English language arts and mathematics by designing detailed curriculum pacing and lesson-planning guides in reading and mathematics for grades K – 3. These resources, composed by the school's Director of Instruction, provide further detail regarding the specific content and skills that students should be taught on a weekly (or in the case of mathematics, daily) basis. As a result of this detailed curricular documentation, teachers at the school consistently stated that the curriculum pacing and lesson-planning guides in reading and mathematics are valuable resources that assist them in determining which content and skills they should be teaching and when they should be teaching them. Through this process of detailed curriculum definition and alignment, the school is proactively attempting to ensure that the reading and mathematics curricula as implemented are organized, cohesive, and seamless from grade to grade.

The school has identified and implemented programs for writing, social studies, and science, though the curricula for these content areas have not yet been as fully developed as reading and mathematics. To the school's credit, both teachers and administrators acknowledged the need to move forward with the process for the school's final grade of expansion (4th grade), as well as for the content areas of writing, social studies, and science. Both parties also acknowledged that the majority of this work will be completed by the school's Director of Instruction over the upcoming summer. However, this is an ambitious goal to rest solely on one member of the school community. Given the additional responsibilities of the Director of Instruction (as mentioned throughout the body of this report), the school should consider the sustainability of this approach to curriculum development.

Assessments and Use of Assessment Data

In 2005-2006, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School's internal assessment system consists of an administration of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in grades 1 – 3 (administered at the beginning of the school year as a baseline assessment of student content knowledge and skill), and the administration of school-created bimonthly assessments in reading and mathematics.

In addition to authoring the school's curricular documents, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School's Director of Instruction has also created the school's bimonthly criterion-referenced internal assessments for reading and mathematics for grades K – 3; similar assessments for the subject areas of writing, social studies, and science had not yet been created at the time of the end of year visit. The content and skills that appear on these regularly-administered assessments in reading and mathematics are based upon the school's curriculum pacing and lesson-planning

guides as well as teachers' guides for the Scott Foresman reading and mathematics programs. Teachers at the school administer the tests using an administration guide written by the Director of Instruction, and score their students' tests using the answer key provided by the tests' author. The school's Director of Instruction then analyzes the students' responses by classroom and skill set, and shares this information with the school's teachers by way of color-coded charts.

According to members of the school's administrative and teaching staff, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School primarily uses the data generated by the school's internally-created assessment system to identify students who are in need of remediation in a particular skill or core subject area, as well as students who may benefit from Title I services. The school's Principal and Director of Instruction identified the school's data-based instructional remediation strategies to consist largely of leveled student groupings for the purposes of re-teaching and skill reinforcement, and teachers concurred. That the school's use of this student assessment data is primarily for the purposes of instructional groupings suggests that the school is at the beginning stages of employing its internal assessment system for the purposes of improving instructional effectiveness and student learning; it does not yet adequately address the concern described in the Institute's first year evaluation letter that teachers had limited ability to use the data to drive instruction beyond remediation activities.

However, it is important to note that due to the fact that these assessments are developed by the school, along with the method of administration and the scoring process, the reliability (and therefore validity) of the school's internal assessment system has yet to be determined. For example, the Director of Instruction stated that prior to administration of the assessments he makes regular adjustments to each of the tests based upon a particular grade level's performance on the ITBS. He stated that he "didn't give this year's first grade the same test as last year because this year's first grade can do more." Therefore, he concluded that if last year's cut off score was 75, maybe this year it should be 70 to "keep it fair." Based on the evidence, it does not appear that the school engages in a methodical process to determine the reliability or validity of a particular assessment or test item.

In turn, the question of the reliability and validity of the school-created assessments may affect the extent to which the tests will be good predictors of student performance on New York state tests over time. On the day of the visit, the inspection team did not find evidence that the school engages in, or plans to engage in, a process of comparing the revised, internally-created assessments with other grade-appropriate assessments, such as sample New York State tests. This process would be particularly important because Grand Concourse Academy Charter School seemingly adjusts the rigor of whole assessments or individual test items to meet students' existing skill levels, and has no current method to ensure that the assessments do not become excessively diluted and instead remain grade-level appropriate. While the school is just beginning to serve grades that participate in the state testing system (grades 3 and 4), the school may wish to monitor student achievement as measured by the state's testing system and compare the data with results from the school's internal assessment system to determine the extent to which the internal assessments can be used as a predictor of student performance on state tests. Furthermore, the school is encouraged to think critically about improvements that could be made to the process of designing and administering the internal assessment system so that these may also serve as reliable and valid predictors of students' future performance on state exams.

While the school has invested extensive resources in its curricular documents and the creation of an internal assessment system to measure students' progress towards mastery of content and skill, it will need to continue to work to ensure alignment of its curriculum as implemented and its internal assessment system with state standards and student performance on state exams in order to maximize the value of the assessments and the resulting data.

Academic Attainment and Improvement

Grand Concourse Academy Charter School is now in its second year and provides instruction only to kindergarten, first, second, and third grades. The school cannot yet present achievement results on state examinations, which provide data for most of the measures used in the subject area goals listed in the Renewal Benchmarks and in the school's Accountability Plan. The school has a third grade for the first time this year and results on the state exams in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics are not yet available. Currently, the school's achievement data are limited to results for kindergarten, first, and second grades on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in reading and math and on school-developed bi-monthly reading assessments and a text publisher's math exam administered during the 2004-2005 school year.

In its Accountability Plan, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School includes a value-added outcome measure based on ITBS results. It sets as its goal that students will close the gap between their current level of performance and grade level or an NCE of 50, based on spring-to-spring reading and math test results.

With the school only operating for one school year, the only available value-added data is fall 2004 to spring 2005. In its August 2005 Accountability Plan Progress Report, the school reports that students made modest NCE gains in reading and more substantial NCE gains in math. Experience with administering a norm-referenced test to young children generally shows that fall scores are suppressed because of a lack of familiarity with the test; that being so, the school's spring gains may reflect this exaggeration.

Even with the greater likelihood of meeting the measure by showing increased fall to spring gains, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School did not meet the measure in reading. With students making limited progress toward scoring at grade level, their average score on the spring administration of the reading test was exceedingly low. According to the progress report, students scored on the average at the 26th percentile (NCE = 36). If these scores and the modest gains shown during the 2004-05 school year are indicative of second grade performance, only a small fraction of third graders are likely to score at Levels 3 and 4 on the third grade state ELA exam.

The math ITBS results, though also based on fall to spring testing, indicate that Grand Concourse Academy Charter School closed the gap between pretest and posttest by one half, as called for in the value added math outcome measure. While more encouraging than ELA, the spring math results still indicate that students scored on average at the 34th percentile (NCE = 41). As in ELA, if this level of performance is indicative of the second grade and it continues, the school will not enable its third graders to achieve proficient levels on the state math exam.

In its progress report Grand Concourse Academy Charter School also presents results of its own bi-monthly reading assessment. The report claims that “students have made tremendous progress on the sub-skills of literacy on the bi-monthly literacy assessments.” Aside from the fact that the reported results of the three administrations of the assessment during the course of the 2004-05 school year only indicate limited progress in kindergarten and second grade (first grade is more substantial), the results do not appear to be aligned with the ITBS results. Similarly, reported results on the mathematics final examination are likely to be inflated in comparison to the ITBS results.

This analysis provides further evidence of the conclusions stated above. It is commendable that Grand Concourse Academy Charter School is using a variety of assessments, but unless they are aligned with standardized tests (ITBS and the state exams), they will not provide reliable information about students’ mastery of the skills and knowledge required by the state’s academic performance standards.

Professional Development

Interviews of the school’s board of trustees and school administrators conducted by the site visit team revealed a commitment to high levels of adult accountability for student learning. For example, the school’s trustees discussed an intense focus on student outcomes and faculty performance, being flexible to meet identified issues, and a commitment to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. The school’s Director of Instruction summarized the philosophy with this statement, “the question is not ‘Are you teaching well?’ but ‘Are the children learning?’” The school’s leadership clearly indicated that the continuation of each teacher’s contract was directly related to increased student academic achievement.

However, evidence collected on the day of the visit suggests that, as implemented, the professional development plan does not provide adequate levels of support to teachers in meeting the school’s high levels of accountability. The support that is provided appears to be of two types—initiatives that are intended to develop teachers’ pedagogical skills, and those that diminish the quantity and quality of challenges facing teachers, with the emphasis being on the latter.

For example, in a modest effort to provide skill-building professional development to teachers, content-specific professional development appears to only have been delivered prior to the start of the school year, and on a voluntary basis during the weekends. Also, teachers who wish to meet with the school’s Principal, Director of Instruction, or Reading Consultant to discuss adjustments to instruction based on assessment data typically must do so on during their lunch periods. At the present time, these initiatives are insufficient to address the significant instructional challenges facing the school.

When describing ways in which they have provided support to teachers whose classes were not scoring at acceptable levels on the school’s internal assessment system, the Principal and Director of Instruction identified initiatives that are engineered to diminish the quantity and quality of challenges facing teachers. According to the Director of Instruction, typical supports include “changing the teaching assistant, reorganizing students among classes, taking students out of classrooms, and writing lesson plans for teachers.” Furthermore, evidence collected on

the day of the site visit revealed that both a literacy coach and a mathematics coach hired by the school do not provide professional development on instructional strategies for teaching diverse learners, unless such assistance is requested by the teacher; instead, they are utilized for remedial instruction with small groups of students—coaching of students rather than teachers. While the Institute acknowledges the merit of urgently addressing student needs through these methods, concerns persist that the school is doing so at the expense of developing teachers’ content knowledge and pedagogical skill for long-term, sustainable instructional improvement.

School leaders attributed this laissez-faire approach towards professional development to their belief that teachers do not wish to have systems and practices imposed upon them. However, during interviews conducted during the site visit, many teachers stated that they would like time for teachers to meet formally as a whole staff and “grow from within on a school-wide level.” Indeed, if the school wishes to retain its teachers and benefit from a highly skilled teaching staff while it continues to hold teachers accountable for high levels of student performance, Grand Concourse Academy Charter School must aggressively build upon teachers’ pedagogical skills to increase the likelihood that they will meet such professional standards.

Pedagogy

Teachers demonstrated varying levels of skill in engaging students in focused, rigorous, and purposeful learning activities. Site visitors observed lessons wherein teachers heavily relied upon textbook teachers’ guides, as well as lesson plan outlines created by the Director of Instruction; however, lesson delivery was inconsistent. Some teachers managed instructional time masterfully, while others allowed certain activities to persist well-beyond what was appropriate for the students in their classrooms. While some teachers asked challenging questions to provoke student problem solving skills and assess student learning, others simply provided students with one worksheet after another. Furthermore, a few teachers provided both teacher-centered and student-centered learning opportunities, while others implemented primarily teacher-centered lessons. As a result, the school’s students will not benefit from consistently high quality instruction within and across grade levels.

On the other hand, the role of teacher associates has been improved from last year and is focused on providing direct instructional support. In contrast to last year, teacher associates no longer perform bus and lunch duties, as Grand Concourse Academy Charter School has hired school aides to perform those functions. Teacher associates are included in professional development initiatives targeted at instructional staff, and provide instructional support in the classroom by facilitating small group learning opportunities. Therefore, students benefit from additional adults in the classroom supporting instruction.

Student Order and Discipline

In contrast to the classroom environment observed during last year’s evaluation visit, classroom culture at the school allows for and promotes a culture of learning. There was evidence that a school-wide behavior policy is in place at Grand Concourse Academy Charter School, including clear consequences for unacceptable behavior. Teachers participated in a Responsive Classroom training prior to the start of the school year, and although visiting team members did not observe consistent implementation of this behavior management technique across all classrooms, various elements of the program were being utilized in select classrooms. On the whole, Grand

Concourse Academy Charter School has created an environment in which teaching and learning can occur.

School Leadership

Grand Concourse Academy Charter School benefits from the skills, knowledge and expertise of a pair of experienced public school educators that serve the school in the roles of Principal and Director of Instruction. Although the school's Principal is responsible for the regular observation and evaluation of teachers, the school's Director of Instruction is the clear instructional leader of the school, taking primary responsibility for creation, alignment, and maintenance of all curricular and assessment materials, as well as analysis of the school's assessment data. As the school grows, given the extensive scope of the Director of Instruction's responsibilities, the school may wish to consider opportunities to cultivate additional sources of instructional leadership, and ways to distribute core responsibilities among other staff members.

Governance

On the day of the visit, all six of the school's board trustees attended an interview with members of the visiting team (including the school Principal), as well as the parent representative to the school's board of trustees.

The school's trustees rely heavily on the school Principal to inform decisions related to the academic program, including the interpretation of assessment data and recommendations regarding the investment of human and financial resources. Although school trustees admitted that there is a "fair level of [healthy] cynicism" regarding the information that is presented to them, they have not yet gone as far as hiring an external party to perform an independent review of the assessment data presented to them. Furthermore, in the second year of the school's operation, the school board has not yet conducted a formal evaluation of the Principal, although it has plans to do so prior to the end of the current school year. In order to ensure that the school's board is able to fully maintain an appropriate level of oversight over the school, it must put in place systems which allow for an objective analysis of the school's academic program.

The school is currently engaged in a limited services contract with Victory Schools, Inc. to provide back office services. However, as has been the plan since the school's inception, the board anticipates terminating that relationship over the course of the next academic year, and assuming those responsibilities in-house. As the school moves through this process, it will be critical that serious consideration be given to determining how the functions currently provided by Victory Schools, Inc. will be provided by the school. As the board works through this process, it should anticipate that the Institute will need to review its plan to transition from the functions being provided externally to being provided internally, including the specific functions, timeframes, costs, and resources.

Appendix – Benchmarks Used During the Visit

Evidence Category	Benchmarks
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**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 | <p>The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and to use it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the regular administration of assessments, and the regular assignment of student work, e.g., projects, papers, etc., that are aligned to the state performance standards and to the school’s curricular scope and sequence; • the systematic collection of data from such |
|----|---|

Evidence Category	Benchmarks
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assessments and student work;

- the use of protocols and procedures that ensure that the scoring of standardized and other assessments as well as student work is reliable and trustworthy;
- the school’s use of assessment data to determine accurately whether the school’s Accountability Plan goals are being achieved;
- the school leadership’s use of assessment data to monitor and make improvements and changes to the school’s curriculum and instruction, e.g., changes to remediation, professional development, personnel, etc.;
- teachers’ use of assessment data to make changes and improvements to curriculum and instruction, e.g., re-teaching a key skill where data indicates that the skill was not learned the first time;
- a common understanding between and among teachers and administrators of the meaning and consequences of assessment results, e.g., access to remediation, promotion to the next grade; and
- the regular communication of assessment outcomes to the entire school community, including communication to parents not only of their children’s individual performances but of the performance of the school as a whole.

Benchmark 1C 1C

Curriculum

The school has a clearly defined and aligned curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school has defined with precision in each grade and core academic subject the essential knowledge and skills that all students are expected to achieve—at a minimum such skills and knowledge are aligned with and as rigorous as the relevant state performance standards;
- teachers are fully aware of the curricula for which they are responsible for teaching and have timely access to guidelines (scope and sequence, pacing charts, etc.) available for developing lesson plans;

Evidence Category	Benchmarks	
<p>Benchmark 1D</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>	<p>1D.1</p>	<p>The school has strong instructional leadership.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers develop lesson plans that are in alignment with the guidelines and follow those plans; and • the curriculum <i>as implemented</i> is organized, cohesive, and seamless from grade to grade. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the priorities set by the school’s leadership are responsive to and consistent with achieving the school’s academic Accountability Plan goals and addressing deficiencies; these priorities are communicated to, and understood by, the school’s instructional staff; • the school’s leadership has taken concerted and consistent action in line with these priorities; • the school’s leadership has in place a comprehensive and on-going system for evaluating teachers’ effectiveness and quality; • the school’s leadership, based on classroom visits, and other data available to it, provides direct ongoing coaching and support in classrooms as well as structured opportunities for teachers to plan for the delivery of the instructional program; • the school’s leadership makes staffing decisions that are driven by its evaluation system and has in place a system for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and other instructional personnel that the school needs to meet its academic goals and measures; • the chief executive has deployed a leadership team whose members, in executing their roles and responsibilities, are able to support the effective delivery of the instructional program; and • the school’s leadership establishes an environment of high expectations. <p>1D.2</p> <p>High quality instruction is evident throughout the school.</p>

Evidence Category

Benchmarks

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- teachers demonstrate subject-matter competency in the subjects they teach;
- lessons are focused on specific learning objectives aligned to state performance standards and reflect a clear understanding of students' current skill and knowledge;
- students are fully engaged in focused, purposeful activities;
- instruction is delivered efficiently with clear expectations for what students must know and be able to do in each lesson;
- instructional time is maximized, transitions are efficient, there is day-to-day instructional continuity; and
- teachers ask challenging questions to provoke student problem solving skills and assess student learning.

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.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- deployment of resources sufficient to support interventions and implement programs, which reflect a range of services and needs (in-class and remedial support, special education and ELL programs), depending on students' academic and/or behavioral needs;
- screening procedures for identifying students and providing them with the appropriate intervention, including appropriate Child Find procedures;
- a common understanding among classroom teachers of the interventions and services available to students at risk of academic failure, as well as

**Evidence
Category****Benchmarks**

procedures for accessing them;

- coordination of interventions and services with those of the mainstream program; and
- monitoring the performance of students and using established school-wide and legal exit criteria for students, who based on their performance or other required assessments and evaluations, no longer need special interventions or services.

Benchmark 1E**1E****The school's culture allows and promotes a culture of learning.****Student Order &
Discipline**

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- a documented discipline policy that is consistently applied;
- classroom management techniques and daily routines have established a culture in which learning is valued;
- low-level misbehavior is not tolerated, e.g., students are not allowed to opt-out of learning or engage in quiet chatter during class time;
- throughout the school, a safe and orderly environment has been established.

Evidence Category	Benchmarks	
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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.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school provides sufficient resources to support a comprehensive program;
- the content of the program dovetails with the school’s mission, curriculum, and instructional strategy;
- annual plans are derived from a school needs-assessment, based on identified instructional weaknesses, teacher interests, and analyses of student outcomes;
- the school earmarks effective, ongoing support and training to novice teachers and teachers new to the school; and
- the professional development program is systematically evaluated to determine its effectiveness.

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.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school board will have received regular reports in writing from the school leadership in regards to key indicators of the school’s academic progress; the content of those reports, and a calendar for them, will have been agreed to by the board and the leadership team;
- the board (or a committee thereof) will understand the core business of the school—student achievement—in sufficient depth to permit the

Evidence Category	Benchmarks
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board to provide effective oversight;

- the board will have conducted formal evaluations of the school’s management and will have acted on the results where such evaluations demonstrate shortcomings in management’s performance;
- where there have been demonstrable deficiencies in the school’s academic, organizational or fiscal performance, the school board will have taken effective action to correct those deficiencies and put in place benchmarks for determining if the deficiencies are being corrected in a timely fashion;
- the board will not have made financial or organizational decisions that have materially impeded the school in fulfilling its mission;
- the board will have established a set of priorities and a strategic plan that are in line with the school’s goals and mission and will have effectively worked to implement those goals and plans; and
- the board will have in place a process for selecting new members as needed and structural continuity.

2C.2

The board has implemented and maintained appropriate policies, systems and processes and has abided by them.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school board has implemented a comprehensive and strict conflict of interest policy (and a code of ethics)—which are consistent with those set forth in the charter—and has consistently abided by them through the term of the school’s charter;
- the school board has generally avoided creating conflicts-of-interest where possible; where not possible, the school has managed those conflicts-of-interest in a clear and transparent manner;
- the school board has instituted a process for dealing with complaints (and such policy is consistent with that set forth in the charter), has

Evidence Category	Benchmarks
	<p>made that policy clear to all stakeholders, and has followed that policy, including acting in a timely fashion on such complaints;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the school has abided by its by-laws, including, but not limited to, provisions regarding trustee elections, removals and filling of vacancies; and the school board has in place a set of board policies which are reviewed regularly and updated as needed.
<p>Benchmark 2E</p> <p>Legal Requirements</p>	<p>2E</p> <p>The school has substantially complied with applicable laws, rules and regulations and the provisions of its charter.</p> <p>Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> during the term of its charter, the school has compiled a record of substantial compliance with the terms of its charter and applicable state and federal laws and regulations, including, but not limited to, submitting items to the Institute in a timely manner, and meeting teacher certification (including NCLB highly qualified status) and background check requirements; at the time of renewal, the school will be in substantial compliance with the terms of its charter and applicable laws and regulations; the school will have maintained and have had in place effective systems and controls for ensuring that legal and charter requirements were and are met; the school should also be able to demonstrate that the school has an active and ongoing relationship with in-house, and where appropriate, independent legal counsel that reviews relevant policies, documents, transactions and incidents and makes recommendations as needed.

**Evidence
Category**

Benchmarks

**Renewal Question 3
Is the School Fiscally Sound?**

Benchmark 3A

3A

**Budgeting and
Long Range
Planning**

The school has operated pursuant to a long-range financial plan. The school has created realistic budgets that are monitored and adjusted when appropriate. Actual expenses have been equal to or less than actual revenue with no material exceptions.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- clear budgetary objectives and budget preparation procedures;
- the budget process starts early and input from board members, school administration and staff is solicited and considered in developing the budget;
- the school's long-range fiscal plan is compared frequently to actual progress and adjusted to meet changing conditions; and
- budget variances are analyzed routinely and material variance are discussed and addressed at the board level including any necessary budget revisions.

Benchmark 3B

3B

Internal Controls

The school has maintained appropriate internal controls and procedures. Transactions have been accurately recorded and appropriately documented in accordance with management's direction and laws, regulations, grants and contracts. Assets have been and are safeguarded. Any deficiencies or audit findings have been corrected in a timely manner.

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school follows a set of comprehensive written fiscal policies and procedures;
- the school safeguards its assets;
- the school identifies and analyzes risks and takes actions to mitigate such risks;
- the school has controls in place to ensure that

Evidence Category	Benchmarks
	<p>management decisions are properly carried out;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the school monitors and assesses controls to ensure their adequacy; • the school’s board members and employees adhere to a code of ethics; • the school makes purchasing decisions that consider price, quality and dependability and makes each purchasing selection with the intention of maintaining a top-quality school; • the school ensures duties are appropriately segregated, or institutes compensating controls; • the school ensures that employees performing financial functions are appropriately qualified and adequately trained; • the school has systems in place to provide the appropriate information needed by staff and the board to make sound financial decisions and to fulfill compliance requirements; • a staff member of the school reviews grant agreements and monitors compliance with all stated conditions; • the school prepares payroll according to appropriate state and federal regulations and school policy; • the school ensures that employees, board members and volunteers who handle cash and investments are bonded to help assure the safeguarding of assets; and • the school takes corrective action in a timely manner to address any internal control or compliance deficiencies identified by its external auditor, State Education Department, or the Institute, if needed.
<p>Benchmark 3C</p> <p>Financial Reporting</p>	<p>3C</p> <p>The school has complied with financial reporting requirements. The school has provided the State University Board of Trustees and the State Education Department with required financial reports on time, and such reports have been complete and have followed generally accepted accounting principles.</p>

**Evidence
Category****Benchmarks**

The following reports will have generally been filed in a timely, accurate and complete manner:

- annual financial statement audit reports, including federal Single Audit report if applicable.
- annual budgets and cash flow statements.
- un-audited quarterly reports of income and expense.
- bi-monthly enrollment reports to the district and State Education Department; and
- grant expenditure reports.

Benchmark 3D 3D
Financial Condition

The school has maintained adequate financial resources to ensure stable operations and has monitored and successfully managed cash flow. Critical financial needs of the school are not dependent on variable income (grants, donations and fundraising).

Elements that are generally present, and which the Institute will look for, include:

- the school maintains sufficient cash on hand to pay current bills and those that are due shortly;
- the school prepares and monitors cash flow projections;
- the school provides education services at a level that meets the needs of all students demonstrated by student results that meet or exceed state standards; and
- the school accumulates unrestricted net assets that are equal to or exceed two percent of the school's operating budget for the upcoming year.

Visit Data

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Second Year Visit at Grand Concourse Charter School on March 29, 2006. Listed below are the names and backgrounds of the individuals who conducted the visit:

MARINA BERNARD **Educational Consultant**

Ms. Bernard began her career in education during the summer of 1992 as a Teach For America corps member. Upon completion of her teaching commitment, Ms. Bernard attended NYU's Gallatin School in fall of 1994 for a Masters degree in Educational Theater and Education. In January 1996, she joined the KIPP Academy in Bronx, NY as Founding Teacher. With the KIPP Academy's established success, in February of 2000, Ms. Bernard joined the Bronx Preparatory Charter School team as Founding Principal. Her goal was to help establish yet another school of excellence in the South Bronx. In June 2004, Marina shifted her focus from Founding Principal, to working as an Educational Consultant, working with families, schools, and associations focusing on education.

MARK CLARKE **Senior Analyst**

Mr. Clarke is a recent graduate of the Building Excellent Schools program in Boston, Massachusetts, a program designed to both train future charter school leaders and to assist them in creating excellent schools. Prior to his participation in that program, Mr. Clarke had been a middle school mathematics teacher, a mathematics coach for the Office of Curriculum and Instruction for the Boston Public Schools, and a team leader for the Harbor School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Mr. Clarke has also worked with elementary and middle school children in a variety of community programs. He received his Bachelor of Science in Business Management and Finance from Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island.

PATRICK GABRIEL, JR. **Educational Consultant**

Mr. Gabriel has served as the Superintendent of New Lebanon Central School District in New Lebanon, New York since 2001. During his tenure there he has participated in union negotiations, restructured and improved special education and related services, and initiated a professional development program based upon student performance data. Prior to his work at the New Lebanon Central School District, Mr. Gabriel worked for the State Education Department in a variety of offices, including the Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Instruction and Program Development, the Office of the Associate Commissioner for School and Community Services, and the Office of School Improvement Grants Management and Compliance, among others. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education from the State University College at Oneonta, as well as two Master of Arts from the State University of New York at Albany in Advanced Classroom Teaching and Educational Administration.

SUSAN SEYMOUR
Senior Analyst

Susan Seymour is a Senior Analyst at the Charter Schools Institute, State University of New York. In the past Mrs. Seymour taught pre-kindergarten through 10th grade. From 1996 to 1999 she worked in the Governor's Office of Regulatory Reform as an analyst. There she assisted various state agencies, among others the banking department and the Office of Children and Family Services, in cutting "red tape" from their New York State regulations. Interested in education reform, she joined the Charter Schools Institute in 1999. She received her B.S. from The University of Rochester and her M.A. from Manhattanville College concentrating in Special Education and Reading.

JENNIFER SNEED, PH.D.
Senior Vice President

Dr. Sneed is a veteran educator with 29 years of experience as a public school special education teacher and administrator (Illinois and New York), an Assistant Manager for Deaf Services at the postsecondary level (Indiana), and as a state level education policymaker (New York). She received both her Bachelor of Science in Education of the Blind and Partially Sighted and Master of Science in Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing from Illinois State University in Bloomington, Illinois. Dr. Sneed earned both her Certificate of Advanced Study and her Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Administration with a focus on Education Policy, Politics and Law from the State University of New York – Albany.

KIM WECHTENHISER
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 also taught Spanish at Westfield Public 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.