



Charter Schools Institute  
*The State University of New York*

## **Amber Charter School**

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# **School Evaluation Report 2007-2008**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT .....	2
SCHOOL DESCRIPTION.....	4
ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND IMPROVEMENT .....	8
Academic Performance .....	8
SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT.....	12
Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit.....	12
Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence .....	12
Conduct of the Visit.....	18
APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT.....	20
APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION .....	22
Charter Schools and the State University of New York .....	22
The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits .....	22
Keeping This Report in Context .....	24

## INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (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 State University Trustees, however, view their oversight responsibility more broadly and positively than purely monitoring compliance. Accordingly, they have adopted policies that require the Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) to provide ongoing evaluation of charter schools authorized by them. By providing this oversight and feedback, the State University Trustees and the Institute seek to accomplish three goals:

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

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

This annual School Evaluation Report includes four primary components. The first, titled Executive Summary of School Evaluation Visit, provides an overview of the conclusions of the inspection team regarding this year’s evaluation visit to the school. The second, titled School Description, provides descriptive information about the school, including enrollment and demographic data, as well as historical information regarding the school’s establishment. The third component, titled Academic Attainment and Improvement, is a review of academic performance based on assessment results through the previous school year. Finally, this report presents the evidence and conclusions from a one-day inspection visit conducted in the current school year titled School Evaluation Visit. Within this final section is a summary of conclusions from the previous school inspection.

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

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

The Charter Schools Institute conducted an inspection visit to Amber Charter School on April 3, 2008. Inspectors visited classrooms, reviewed documents and interviewed instructional and administrative staff. Their conclusions are summarized below, and the evidence base and further analysis are contained in the Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence section.

### Academic Attainment and Improvement

At the time of the visit, student performance results from 2006-07 were the most recent data available with which to evaluate the Amber's progress in achieving the goals in its Accountability Plan. Amber was close to meeting both of its Accountability Plan goals in English language arts and mathematics. Based on limited data, the school was meeting its science goal and close to meeting its social studies goal. The school was deemed in good standing under the state's NCLB accountability system. Amber also met or came close to meeting its non-academic goals.

### Instructional Leadership

For the 2007-08 school year, Amber Charter School appointed a new director of curriculum and instruction (DCI) and a staff developer. An assistant director of curriculum and instruction has been a member of the leadership team since 2006. The instructional leadership team appeared organized and professional, and teachers were positive about changes at the school. The DCI had conducted formal evaluations of all teachers, and she and the staff developer conducted regular observations and provided informal feedback. However, though morale has improved as leadership has set priorities and begun to implement systems, the school has not yet established a cohesive program of clinical supervision to improve instruction.

### Quality of Instruction

The quality of instruction in observed classrooms continued to vary widely. Some teachers struggled with classroom management or acknowledged limited content knowledge in the subject they were teaching. Instructional rigor and effective use of time were of particular concern to inspectors. Notably, Amber had a large number of novice teachers.

### Curriculum

Amber identified curriculum as an area in need of improvement. At the time of the visit there was little evidence demonstrating alignment of the curriculum with state standards; moreover, the curriculum was not consistent across individual classes, and was not vertically aligned between grades. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade was of particular concern, given that it was divided mid-year into two classes that did not appear to be on the same track with regards to the use of curriculum materials and pacing. The availability of curriculum materials and resources continued to be a problem, an issue noted in the previous inspection visit report.

### Use of Assessment Data

Amber is collecting a wide array of student performance data and is using the results to group students for instruction and to identify low-achieving students for interventions. Teachers appeared to be meeting on a regular basis to discuss assessment results, but inspectors found scant evidence to suggest the data was used to make adjustments to instruction within the classroom or to differentiate instruction for particular students. Given the amount of assessment data collected, relatively little training had been provided to teachers in the use of data to improve instruction.

### At-risk Students

Amber had a clear system for identifying students at risk of academic failure, and provided interventions for those students. However, these interventions did not appear to be aligned with the regular curriculum and their long-term efficacy was questioned by staff. The predominant mode of intervention involved pulling students from regular classes for instruction with a specialist or certified tutors, and some teachers noted that this interferes with students' learning in their regular classes. The focus of intervention programs was preparation for state assessments. Concern was raised by staff about the efficacy of this approach, particularly the focus on one subject to the exclusion of others, as well as about their perceived lack of communication and collaboration between teachers and tutors.

### Professional Development

Amber provided a large number of professional development opportunities, had hired numerous consultants to assist teachers, and had implemented new programs to enhance teacher development. However, while the school devoted adequate resources, professional development did not yet appear to be a cohesive program based on school-wide needs and priorities. Given the number of new teachers and the observation of weak classroom management and instruction in some classes, the need for more targeted, on-going professional development with regular follow-up was evident.

### School Culture

Amber had a climate of general order and respect, and the tone of the school and the learning environment were reported to have improved this year. Amber had some disciplinary structures in place, but observers found inconsistent enforcement and expectations for behavior.

### Governance

The school's board of trustees had a clear understanding of the school's mission and the expectations reflected in the school's Accountability Plan. With a new instructional leadership team in place the board was devoting itself more fully to governance. Prior to this year board members spent a "lot of time supporting the school" and acknowledged that the line between governance and management had been intentionally blurred the previous year. This year, with a sense of a process in place, the board reported that it has stepped back and focused on appropriate oversight. The parent and teacher representatives on the board reported no complaints; in fact, the school had renegotiated a short-form contract with the teachers' union and reported no grievances so far this year.

## SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York approved the application for the Amber Charter School (“Amber”) on January 21, 2000, which was subsequently approved by the Board of Regents on April 4, 2000. The school opened in September 2000 with an enrollment of 120 students in kindergarten and first grade, adding one grade per year through the 2005-06 school year, enrolling 370 students in kindergarten through sixth grade during the 2007-08 school year. Originally located on the second floor of a building located at 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue in East Harlem, the school moved to its current location at 220 East 106<sup>th</sup> Street in Central Harlem, a former New York City Department of Education building, in the fall of 2002.

Since its founding, Amber has partnered with the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans. The Association has a strong community service history and education experience through its extensive role in the development and operation of the Twenty-first Century Academy for Community Leadership, a New York City public school.

Amber had hoped to locate in a predominately Spanish-speaking area of New York City (Washington Heights), with the objective of enrolling a population that was one-half Spanish-language dominant and one-half English-language dominant. However, the board was unable to identify an appropriate facility in an area where such a mix of students could be enrolled. Initially, the school used a project-based, dual-language immersion curriculum, with the goal that all Amber students, both Spanish-language dominant and English-language dominant, would attain fluency in both languages. The school sustained the implementation of the immersion program for the first three years of its charter. In 2004, based on an analysis of student academic achievement, Amber requested and received an amendment to its charter, changing from a full immersion program to a modified immersion Spanish program, where students are instructed in Spanish for at least five hours each week.

Amber submitted an Application for Charter Renewal in 2004 and was granted a full-term five-year renewal with conditions by the State University Trustees on March 1, 2005. The Board of Regents approved the renewal charter on May 17, 2005. Per the renewal charter, the school is subject to enrollment limitations and the authority to offer instruction in grades kindergarten through six only.

At the time of the inspection visit, the school’s board of trustees was considering whether to continue efforts to seek a facilities expansion that would accommodate the addition of middle school grades (should such a revision be requested and approved).

As of the date of the current school inspection, the Board of Trustees of Amber Charter School was comprised of the following individuals:

- Mr. Luis Miranda Jr., Chairperson;
- Mr. Michael t. Stolper, Vice Chairperson;
- Mr. David Briggs, Secretary;
- Mr. Nicholas Rudenstine, Treasurer;
- Ms. Loraine Auer;
- Mr. Christopher J. Brown;
- Ms. Soledad Hiciano;

- Mr. Vicente M. Leon;
- Ms. Evelyn Linares;
- Ms. Elisabeth A. Mason;
- Mr. Rafael Ortiz; and
- Mr. Julio Rodriguez.

The mission of the Amber Charter School as stated in the school’s Renewal Charter is as follows:

*Amber Charter School’s mission is to provide comprehensive learning experiences that will enable all students to become fully-educated, creative adults, prepared to play leadership roles in New York City and in our global society.*

Key design elements as outlined in the school’s Renewal Charter include:

- New York Standards-based core curriculum, including humanities, applied sciences and culture as set forth in the school’s mission;
- partnership and implementation of the Success for All academic program in grades five and six;
- interdisciplinary, thematic curricular units;
- the use of the Terra Nova assessment system, including multiple assessment instruments that include literacy and mathematics beginning in grade one;
- foreign language in the elementary and middle school programs to support second language learning beginning in kindergarten;
- two hour daily literacy block from second through fifth grades that includes 45 minutes of smaller group instruction in guided reading;
- 90 minutes of mathematics instruction daily through fifth grade;
- enriched instruction in the arts that includes student performance events;
- programs for struggling students, including Title I reading and mathematics assistance, a commitment to providing special education services through inclusion models, and remediation and enrichment programs;
- parental engagement through membership on the school’s board of trustees, school planning council, parents association and parent volunteers;
- project-based and experiential learning opportunities;
- maintaining and developing teacher leadership through participation in the board of trustees, curriculum, assessment, and hiring committees as well as the school planning council;
- technologically-sound learning environment; and
- school and classroom libraries.

**School Year (2007-08)**

181 Instructional Days

**School Day (2007-08)**

School day: 8:20 am - 3:10 pm <sup>1</sup>

**Enrollment**

	Original Chartered Enrollment	Revised Chartered Enrollment	Actual Enrollment <sup>2</sup>	Original Chartered Grades	Revised Grades Served	Actual Grades Served	Complying
2000-01	120	120	120	K-1	K-1	K-1	YES
2001-02	160	160	120	K-2	K-2	K-2	YES <sup>3</sup>
2002-03	200	200	180	K-3	K-3	K-3	YES
2003-04	240	240	240	K-4	K-4	K-4	YES
2004-05	280	280	291	K-5	K-5	K-5	YES
2005-06	300	300	325	K-6	K-6	K-6	YES
2006-07	350	350	364	K-6	K-6	K-6	YES
2007-08	400	400	370	K-6	K-6	K-6	YES
2008-09	460			K-6			
2009-10	460			K-6			

Race/Ethnicity	2004-2005		2005-2006	
	% of Enrollment Amber Charter	% of Enrollment Comm. District #5	% of Enrollment Amber Charter	% of Enrollment Community District #5
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0 %	0.0%	0.0 %	0.0%
Black or African American	84.9 %	65%	78.4 %	63%
Hispanic	15.1 %	33%	21.6 %	34%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0.0 %	1%	0.0 %	1%
White	0.0 %	1%	0.0 %	1%

Source: 2004-05, 2005-06: School Report Card (New York State Education Department); 2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

<sup>1</sup> Breakfast period is from 8:00 am to 8:20. Kindergarten and first grade students are dismissed at 3:00 pm..

<sup>2</sup> Actual enrollment per the Institute's Official Enrollment Table. Note that the New York State Education Department School Report Card and Database, upon which the Free and Reduced lunch figures are calculated, may represent slightly different enrollment levels depending on the date in which this data was collected.

<sup>3</sup> The school was granted permission to reduce enrollment levels due to facility-related constraints at the original location at 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Lennox Ave.



Special Populations	2004-2005		2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5
Students with Disabilities	NA	NA	NA	NA	8.9 %	NA
Limited English Proficient	NA	NA	3.0 %	11.0 %	0.0 %	11%

Source: Students with Disabilities: New York State Education Department Database  
Limited English Proficient: 2004-05, 2005-06: New York State Education Department School Report Card;  
2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

Free/Reduced Lunch	2004-2005		2005-2006		2006-2007	
	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5	% of Enroll. Amber Charter	% of Enroll. Community District #5
Eligible for Free Lunch	61.5 %	NA	71.1 %	76%	73.9 %	66%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	10.3 %	NA	16.1 %	67%	13.3 %	5%

Source: 2004-05, 2005-06: New York State Education Department School Report Card  
2006-07: New York State Education Department Database

### School Charter History

Charter Year	School Year	Year of Operation	Evaluation Visit	Feedback to School	Other Actions Taken
Original Charter 1st Year	2000-01	1 <sup>st</sup>	YES	Prior Action Letter; End-of-Year Evaluation Report	
Original Charter 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	2001-02	2 <sup>nd</sup>	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	
Original Charter 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	2002-03	3 <sup>rd</sup>	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	School moved to current facility on 106 <sup>th</sup> Street
Original Charter 4 <sup>th</sup> Year	2003-04	4 <sup>th</sup>	NO		
Original Charter 5 <sup>th</sup> Year	2004-05	5 <sup>th</sup>	YES	Initial Renewal Report	Modified Spanish immersion program; Granted full charter renewal for period of five years
Renewal Charter 1 <sup>st</sup> Year	2005-06	6 <sup>th</sup>	NO		
Renewal Charter 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	2006-07	7 <sup>th</sup>	YES	End-of-Year Evaluation Report	
Renewal Charter 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	2007-08	8 <sup>th</sup>	YES	Annual School Evaluation Report	

## ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

### Background

Each charter school authorized by the State University Trustees has adopted an Accountability Plan, the primary purpose of which is to lay out the specific student achievement goals that a school agrees to meet and the specific measures that define what constitutes meeting these goals. The Institute currently requires a common set of goals and outcome measures which represent the expectations for student learning and achievement at the time of renewal. Individual schools may also have chosen to include in their Accountability Plans additional academic, organizational or other goals and measures. Schools should be aware that Accountability Plans developed prior to the Institute's establishment of common goals and outcome measures may not include all of the currently required measures. However, at renewal, those plans will be revised to reflect current measures.

Below is a narrative that provides an analysis of how this school measured up to the goals in its Accountability Plan as well as the Institute's required goals and measures should they not already be included in the school's Accountability Plan. The narrative summarizes the results of the relevant measures, and is followed by School Performance Summaries for English language arts and mathematics. The School Performance Summaries are one page compilations of performance data, for the last three years, based on the Institute's required measures. As noted above, the common measures used in the Performance Summaries may differ from the actual measures in the school's Accountability Plan, but are presented to provide trend data and consistency across schools. At the time of renewal, schools will be held accountable for the measures in their Accountability Plan, but the Institute will take into account other performance data as well.

Most state exams are administered in the winter and spring; official results are typically not released until at least early summer. Similarly, schools are not required to submit Accountability Plan Progress Reports until August. As a consequence, results for this current school year from state and school administered assessments were not available at the time of the inspection visit. Therefore, the following evaluation of school performance addresses assessment results up to, and including, the previous school year. These are the same data the school would have had available and considered at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year and used to make critical decisions related to this year's academic program. These are also the same data the school inspection team relied on at the time of its visit.

### Academic Performance through 2006-07

**Summary:** In 2006-07, Amber was close to meeting both of its Accountability Plan goals in English language arts and mathematics. Based on limited data, the school is meeting its science goal and close to meeting its social studies goal. The school has been deemed in good standing under the state's NCLB accountability system. Amber also met or came close to meeting its non-academic goals.

**English Language Arts:** Amber has demonstrated progress in English language arts, such that in 2006-07 the school was close to meeting its Accountability Plan goal. In 2004-05 when only 4th grade students took the state test 50 percent scored at the proficient level, which was below the 75 percent target. The following year the state administered the test to Amber students in 3rd through 6th grade, and 57 percent of those students were proficient. Last year 66 percent of students achieved proficiency. In each of the last three years the school has exceeded the Annual Measurable

Objective (AMO) set by the state's NCLB accountability system, and has also outperformed the local school district by a wide margin. In comparison to demographically similar schools state-wide, Amber performed worse than predicted in 2004-05, about the same as predicted in 2005-06, and far better than predicted in 2006-07. In terms of growth on the state exam, last year one of three cohorts achieved its target and overall performance improved. On the Terra Nova exam all five cohorts achieved their growth target in 2006-07 and all five cohorts performed above the national norm (50 NCE).

**Mathematics:** In 2006-07, Amber was close to meeting its mathematics goal. In 2004-05 on the state's 4th grade exam 65 percent of students were proficient, which is 10 points below the 75 percent target. The following year when students in 3rd through 6th grade took the state test 46 percent were proficient, but the percent proficient returned to its previous level of 65 percent last year. The school has exceeded the AMO in each of the last three years. In 2004-05 and 2005-06 Amber underperformed the local school district, but last year it outperformed the district. In comparison to demographically similar schools state-wide, the school has performed worse than predicted for the last three years, though by a shrinking margin each subsequent year. Examining growth on the state exam, last year one of three cohorts achieved its target, and overall performance remained about the same as the previous year. On the Terra Nova in 2006-07 three out of five cohorts achieved their growth target and all but one cohort performed above the national norm (50 NCE).

**Science:** Amber has made some improvement in science and, based solely on its absolute measure, appears to have met its science goal last year. On the 4th grade exam 83 percent of students scored at the proficient level, exceeding the 75 percent target. Comparison data were not available.

**Social Studies:** Based on limited data, Amber appears close to meeting its social studies goal. On the 5th grade state exam 71 percent of students were proficient in 2006-07, just under the 75 percent target. Comparison data were not available.

**NCLB:** The school is deemed to be in Good Standing under the state's NCLB Accountability system.

**Non-Academic Goals:** Amber met its parent satisfaction goal. With a 95 percent response rate for the parent survey, the parents indicated high levels of satisfaction with the school and its program. However, it was not clear if the parent teacher conference measure was achieved. In terms of student interest and engagement, the school had an average attendance rate of 89 percent, slightly below the target of 95 percent. In addition, the school reported that it achieved its legal compliance and fiscal soundness goals.

# SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY: English Language Arts

## Amber Charter School



	2004-05 Grades Served: K-5			2005-06 Grades Served: K-6			2006-07 Grades Served: K-6			MET
	Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)	Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)	Grades	All Students % (N)	2+ Years Students % (N)	
<b><u>ABSOLUTE MEASURES</u></b>										
1. Each year 75 percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State exam.	4	50.0 (58)	50.0 (54)	NO	3	70.3 (37)	79.3 (29)	3	74.3 (35)	69.0 (29)
2. Each year the school's aggregate Performance Index on the State exam will meet the Annual Measurable Objective set forth in the State's NCLB accountability system.	4 8	147 116	131 116	YES	3-6	144	122	3-6	166	122
<b><u>COMPARATIVE MEASURES</u></b>										
3. Each year the percent of students enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 will be greater than that of students in the same grades in the local district.	4 8	50.0	38.8	YES	3-6	56.8	37.4	3-6	65.5	39.5
4. Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the State exam by at least a small Effect Size (at least 0.3) based on its Free Lunch (FL) rate.	4 8	50.0	59.5	-0.54	NO	125	52.0	50.7	73.9	66.4
<b><u>VALUE ADDED MEASURE</u></b>										
5. Each grade level cohort will reduce by one half the difference between the previous year's baseline and 50 NCE on a norm referenced test or 75 percent proficient on the NYSTP. An asterisk indicates cohort met target.	2-5	of			2-6	2 of 5		4	29	75.9
								5	24	45.8
								6	25	52.0
								7		
								8		
								All	79	58.2
									66.6	64.6

Data Sources: New York State and City data, workbooks submitted by schools and databases compiled by the Institute.

# SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARY: Mathematics

## Amber Charter School



	2004-05 Grades Served: K-5		2005-06 Grades Served: K-6		2006-07 Grades Served: K-6		MET	
	Grades	All Students % (N)	Grades	All Students % (N)	Grades	All Students % (N)		
<b>ABSOLUTE MEASURES</b> 1. Each year 75 percent of students who are enrolled in at least their second year will perform at or above Level 3 on the New York State exam.	4	62.8 (59)	64.8 (54)	NO	3	91.4 (35)	92.9 (28)	MET
	8	(0)	(0)		4	56.7 (30)	60.7 (28)	
	All	48.4 (124)	45.9 (98)	NO	5	44.4 (27)	44.4 (27)	
2. Each year the school's aggregate Performance Index on the State exam will meet the Annual Measurable Objective set forth in the State's NCLB accountability system.	Grades	PI	AMO		6	60.0 (25)	58.3 (24)	NO
	4	164	142	YES	7	(0)	(0)	
	8		93		8	(0)	(0)	
<b>COMPARATIVE MEASURES</b> 3. Each year the percent of students enrolled in at least their second year and performing at or above Level 3 will be greater than that of students in the same grades in the local district.	Comparison: (Manhattan District 5)		Comparison: (Manhattan District 5)		Comparison: (Manhattan District 5)		YES	
	Grades	School	District	Grades	School	District		
	4	64.8	68.0	3-6	45.9	49.5		NO
4. Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the State exam by at least a small Effect Size (at least 0.3) based on the Free Lunch (FL) rate.	Effect Size		Effect Size		Effect Size		NO	
	Grades	Actual	Predicted	N	Actual	Predicted		
	4	62.8	79.1	-1.23	124	48.4		58.7
<b>VALUE ADDED MEASURE</b> 5. Each grade level cohort will reduce by one half the difference between the previous year's baseline and 50 NCE on a norm referenced test or 75 percent proficient on the state exam. An asterisk indicates cohort met target.	Assessment: TERRA NOVA		Assessment: TERRA NOVA		Assessment: NYSTP		NO	
	Grades	Cohorts Making Target	Grades	Cohorts Making Target	Gr	N		
	2-5	of	2-6	2 of 5	4	28		
	N	Base	Target	Result	5	25	60.7	NO
					6	24	71.5	
					7	24	65.5	
					8	24	48.0	NO
					All	78	55.1	
					All	78	55.1	
								56.4

Data Sources: New York State and City data, workbooks submitted by schools and databases compiled by the Institute.

## **SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT**

### **Background**

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

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

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

### **Summary of Previous Evaluation Visit**

Amber Charter School received a Seventh-Year Inspection Visit on April 25, 2007. Inspectors found a number of programs in place, but little coordination or follow through. The quality of instruction varied widely, with many inexperienced teachers. The school was in the process of developing assessment systems and had implemented some training to assist teachers in analyzing data, but use of data to drive instruction was limited. There were many programs for students at risk of failure, but inspectors found their potential was not maximized. Specifically, there was a lack of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of tutors, and no system for evaluating the efficacy of interventions. The school leadership did not consistently monitor the implementation of the academic program or evaluate its effectiveness in improving student achievement. Moreover, there was limited clinical supervision to improve teachers’ skills. While the school’s board of trustees had created committees, and its education committee was particularly active in school affairs, at the time of the visit the board had not adequately held school leaders accountable for improving performance.

### **Evaluation Visit Benchmark Analysis and Evidence**

#### **Instructional Leadership**

For the 2007-08 school year, Amber Charter School appointed a new director of curriculum and instruction (DCI) and a staff developer. An assistant director of curriculum and instruction has been

in that position and a member of the leadership team since 2006. Amber's director of curriculum and instruction is responsible for the overall academic program, including curriculum, instruction, professional development and teacher evaluation. The new DCI started two days before the school year began, and made her immediate focus improving the quality of instruction. At the beginning of the year she met with every teacher to discuss student performance data, develop class profiles and begin to identify their strengths and weaknesses. At the time of the annual visit, teachers made note of this goal-setting exercise, and reported that it had given them a greater sense of direction. Teachers consistently identified the DCI as the school's instructional leader and had positive attitudes about her contributions to the school. They described her leadership as professional and organized, focusing, for example, on her establishment of a professional development agenda aligned to the school's Accountability Plan.

The responsibilities of the new staff developer include providing teachers with support, training and resources. While she observes classrooms, provides informal feedback, and models lessons, her responsibilities do not include formally evaluating teachers.

The assistant DCI focuses on logistics such as coordinating substitute teachers and procuring books. These three leaders indicated that they communicate regularly among themselves and with the head of school. Teachers also reported that an open door policy had been established in which they felt comfortable approaching these new staff with questions and concerns. Finally, in addition to the school's leadership, teachers also noted their appreciation for the support they receive from TERC and Success For All (SFA) curriculum consultants.

With the introduction of the new academic leader as well as the staff developer, morale among the faculty improved. Teachers said they appreciate the support and feedback they receive and, compared to previous years, noted more clear goals, vision and expectations. For example, teachers were asked to develop individual action plans with specific goals, which became oversight tools for struggling teachers identified by the leadership. However, while these goals had been set and teachers were observed regularly, subsequent evaluation and feedback does not yet appear to be part of a systematic program of support targeted to ongoing development of teachers' skills. This would have seemed particularly valuable for the school's eight novice teachers in 2007-08.

Interviews and review of documents indicated that the DCI and staff developer conducted regular informal observations of teachers and provided feedback both verbally and through written notes. The DCI had also conducted formal evaluations of all teachers by the end of the fall, which resulted in written documents containing detailed classroom observations, comments and recommendations. That said, the focus and feedback did not yet appear to be part of a coherent system of support. For example, a teacher described a focus on goals that differed from those contained in her own written action plan. Another teacher reported that although regular observations took place, each seemed to have a different purpose with little continuity from one to the next. Feedback did not appear to be linked to formal expectations for instruction, and teachers indicated inconsistent follow up to the comments and suggestions made by instructional leaders.

Though morale improved as leaders set priorities and began to implement systems, the school has not yet established a cohesive program for developing each teacher's pedagogical skill in order to improve instruction. The new leadership team has taken clear steps to improve supervision and support, but for a school in its eighth year of operation, much work remains to be done.

## Quality of Instruction

Consistent with observations outlined in previous Institute inspection reports for Amber Charter School, the school's faculty had a range of experience and the quality of instruction varied widely across observed classrooms. For example, in one classroom a teacher implemented an effective mini-lesson and then provided guided practice before asking students to attempt independently what they had just learned. In another classroom students were divided into four groups and provided with differentiated materials and instruction; one group worked independently, one with the lead teacher, one with a teaching assistant, and one was pulled for remediation. For eight teachers it was their first year in the classroom, and five other teachers had one to three years of teaching experience. Moreover, some teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills were inadequate. One teacher acknowledged that she "struggles with the math" that she is supposed to teach. In a number of cases procedural activities were provided as lesson objectives, instead of clearly defined skills or content knowledge, and in some classes students were unclear about the purpose of the learning activity. Pacing in some observed classes did not appear age appropriate, and a number of teachers struggled with classroom management.

The school does not have clear expectations for the delivery of instruction, and low levels of rigor were observed in some classrooms. For instance, while one inspector observed a tightly organized and effective group discussion, another inspector noted the excessive use of leading questions rather than more challenging types of questions and a focus on literal comprehension as opposed to inferential thinking. In one class a student was allowed to not participate for the entire day; the teacher stated as justification that the student does not get along with his classmates. Inspectors observed predominantly whole group instruction and very little differentiation of instruction within classrooms. In some cases, grade level teams had developed common lesson plans that were followed closely in each class, but did not support instruction tailored to the needs of each class, let alone individual students. Some teachers were using small group literature circles with different texts, but the activity appeared to be based on their own initiative rather than a school-wide expectation for the differentiation of instruction.

Time for instruction was not consistently maximized as evidenced by inefficient transitions and rote activities. For example, one inspector noted that students routinely took five minutes or more to settle down at the beginning of each period. Another inspector observed an inordinate amount of time devoted to copying word problems as opposed to thinking about, discussing, and solving them. During group activities students were observed not actively participating and allowing their peers to complete group assignments.

In interviews teachers indicated that promotion standards were unclear and raised concerns about the appropriateness of grade-level placement of students. During the prior year the school had implemented "bridge classes" that mixed high achieving students from one grade with low achieving students from the next grade. In some cases, inspectors noted during the visit that students who had been in bridge classes the previous year were repeating the same curriculum this year.

In addition, the mid-year division of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade's single class into two smaller classes raised concerns about the consistency and quality of instruction for that grade. Although the resulting size of each 5<sup>th</sup> grade class was quite small, classroom management remained a problem, and the two classes did not appear to be learning the same curriculum, which would be problematic when students matriculate into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade next year.



## Curriculum

The Institute concurs with Amber leadership's identification of curriculum as an area in need of improvement. At the time of the visit there was little evidence demonstrating alignment of the curriculum with state standards; moreover, the curriculum was not consistent across individual classes, and was not vertically aligned between grades. One teacher reported that she had no idea what she is supposed to be doing day by day. Another teacher stated that she asked for lesson plans and pacing guides from the previous year, but administration was unable to provide them. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade was of particular concern, given that, as noted above, it was divided mid-year and the two classes did not appear to be following the same curriculum.

Teachers did note that they submit lesson plans to school leaders on a regular basis; yet, according to teachers, written feedback was not consistently provided. Based on school inspectors' review of lesson plans, learning standards were identified, but were not linked to objectives and clear objectives were not apparent during most observed lessons. While some teachers met regularly with their grade level peers to plan lessons, there was no formal opportunity to interact with adjacent grades to work on vertical alignment of the curriculum. The absence of a coherent curriculum left teachers on their own, particularly in the absence of consistent feedback regarding lesson plans.

Finally, the availability of curriculum materials and resources continued to be a problem, an issue noted in the previous inspection report. For instance, several teachers indicated that they did not have enough reading books and texts at the beginning of the year. One teacher said she had received science materials just weeks prior to the state assessment in that subject. Teachers also mentioned that they do not have adequate resources with which to teach writing.

## Use of Assessments

The school regularly administers a variety of assessments, such as the standardized Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and Terra Nova exams, tests and quizzes provided by commercial curriculum programs such as Scott Foresman and TERC, and teacher-developed assessments. The DRA is administered three times per year, and teachers reported using results to determine students' reading levels, assign appropriate reading materials, and identify students for reading groups and Title I interventions. Teachers also indicated using Terra Nova results from the previous years to identify general areas of weakness on which to focus during the current school year. In addition, assessment results were being used to identify students for tutoring and other interventions.

While teachers appeared to be meeting on a regular basis to discuss assessment results, inspectors found scant evidence to suggest the data was used to make adjustments to instruction within the classroom or to differentiate instruction for particular students. Given the amount of assessment data collected, relatively little training had been provided to teachers in the use of data to improve instruction, especially considering the large number of novice teachers at the school this year.

## At-risk Students

Based on assessment results and teacher recommendation, at-risk students were identified for a range of services, including tutoring and a Saturday school program. The predominant mode of intervention involved pulling students from regular classes for instruction with a specialist or certified tutors. Teachers reported the focus of these programs to be preparation for state

assessments, such that students focused on English language arts for part of the year, then switched to mathematics after the state English language arts test has been taken. The teaching staff questioned the efficacy of this approach, particularly the focus on one subject to the exclusion of others. And while the school has scheduled regular meetings between teachers and tutors, teachers continued to raise concerns about communication and collaboration between teachers and tutors. Some teachers also noted that the reliance on pull-out services interferes with students' learning in their regular classes.

### Professional Development

Amber provided a large number of professional development opportunities, had hired numerous consultants to assist teachers, and had implemented new programs to enhance teacher development. The school provided an orientation in August that addressed, among other things, school-wide goals and objectives, environment, curriculum and lesson-planning. As described above, teachers are now expected to develop individual growth plans and set goals for themselves. Teachers described a range of professional development training topics during the year, including classroom management and writing for early childhood. In addition, as part of the Empowerment Zone Network the school was implementing book study groups. Finally, consultants from Lehman College, K-12 Science, and Success For All visit regularly, evaluating implementation, modeling lessons, and observing and providing feedback.

Teachers reported positive experiences with the consultants and the school's staff developer who provides resources and advice. In addition, school leaders have begun to develop systems for identifying the professional development needs of individual teachers and providing oversight. However, while the school has devoted adequate resources, at the time of the visit professional development did not yet appear to be a cohesive program. Given the number of new teachers and the observation of weak classroom management and instruction in some classes, the need for more targeted, on-going professional development with regular follow-up was evident. For example, teachers appreciated the regularly-scheduled formal team meetings, but said explicit expectations for those meetings have not been established. Teachers also specifically identified instruction in writing as an area in need of support.

### School Culture

The climate observed on the day of the visit was one of general order and respect. Amber had some disciplinary structures in place, e.g., the card system, but observers found inconsistent enforcement and expectations for behavior. For example, on the day of the visit teachers in multiple classrooms did not enforce the described consequences for tardy students, resulting in disruption and lost learning time. Teachers indicated that the card system was ineffective in the upper grades, and a more effective discipline system was needed. With the current schedule, specialist teachers saw students a few times a week; as a result they said they felt isolated from the students and found it hard to build relationships that would allow them to maintain expectations for student behavior and performance.

### Governance

The school's board of trustees had a clear understanding of the school's mission and the expectations reflected in the school's Accountability Plan. The board utilized a committee structure to advance its work and, with a new instructional leadership team in place, was devoting itself more fully to

governance. Prior to this year, board members spent a “lot of time supporting the school” and acknowledged that the line between governance and management had been intentionally blurred the previous year. For instance, they participated in important hiring decisions and got directly involved in the implementation of more data-driven instruction.

This year, with a sense that processes were in place, the board reported that it has stepped back and focused on oversight. For example, the board began to regularly receive and evaluate attendance, enrollment and performance data and planned a more formal evaluation process of the school’s leader. While the board chair continues to meet weekly with the school’s leadership team, he indicated having a greater focus on outcomes and the school’s Accountability Plan.

The parent and teacher representatives on the board reported no complaints; in fact, the school had renegotiated a short-form contract with the teachers’ union, and reported no grievances so far this year. The board described its priorities as making more progress towards academic goals and addressing facility issues. Regarding the latter, the board indicated it needs to make a decision about whether to serve students in kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, or pursue a facility option that would allow them to provide kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Conduct of the Visit

The Charter Schools Institute conducted the Eighth-Year Inspection Visit at Amber Charter School on April 3, 2008. 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 Vice President for Charter School Evaluation at the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York. Dr. Falinski 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 the Vice President for Accountability at the Charter Schools Institute at the State University of New York. After teaching for seven years in New York City public schools, Dr. Miller joined the central offices of the New York City Department of Education, where he conducted evaluative research and organizational studies. As Director of the Office of School Planning and Accountability, he served as the educational accountability officer for the Department. In that capacity, he developed school accountability reports for the city schools and coordinated staff development on their use for district administrators in all the high school and community school districts. In addition, he worked with school leaders to develop their competence to use data for school improvement. In this role he developed PASS, a school performance review system which was adopted in 600 city schools. Dr. Miller regularly presented papers at annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association and has served as Adjunct Assistant Professor at Teachers College Columbia University and Pace University. He holds an AB degree from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology from Columbia University.

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

**Kim Wechtenhiser** is Associate Vice President of the Charters Schools Institute at the State University of New York. Ms. Wechtenhiser has 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.

In addition, the Institute was pleased to have the following consultant join the school visit team:

**Sarah Tantillo, Ed.D.**, has taught high school English and Humanities in both suburban and urban New Jersey public schools for 14 years, including seven years at the nationally-recognized North Star Academy Charter School of Newark, N.J. where she most recently chaired the Humanities Dept. and where her students achieved a 100% passing rate on the Language Arts/Literacy section of the HSPA in 2006 and 2007. She founded and directed the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center from 1996-1999 and the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Associations from 1999-2003. She consults with charter schools and other public schools (esp. urban) seeking to improve student achievement. Her specialties include: school culture-building; strategic planning for charter schools; and high school literacy, with emphasis on critical reading and writing instruction, interdisciplinary curriculum development, rubric design, and how to align curriculum with standards. Sarah holds a B.A. from Princeton, a M.Ed. from Harvard, a M.A. from Johns Hopkins, and her Ed.D. from Rutgers University. Her dissertation was on culture formation in charter schools.

**APPENDIX A: RENEWAL BENCHMARKS USED DURING THE VISIT**

Evidence Category	Benchmarks	
<b>Renewal Question 1</b> <b>Is the School an Academic Success?</b>		
<b>Benchmark 1A</b> <b>Academic Attainment &amp; Improvement</b>	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.
<b>Benchmark 1B</b> <b>Use of Assessment Data</b>	1B	The school has a system to gather assessment and evaluation data and to use it to improve instructional effectiveness and student learning.
<b>Benchmark 1C</b> <b>Curriculum</b>	1C	The school has a clearly defined and aligned curriculum and uses it to prepare students to meet state performance standards.
<b>Benchmark 1D</b> <b>Pedagogy</b>	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.
<b>Benchmark 1E</b> <b>Student Order &amp; Discipline</b>	1E	The school's culture allows and promotes a culture of learning.
<b>Benchmark 1F</b> <b>Professional Development</b>	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
	<b>Renewal Question 2</b> <b>Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?</b>
<b>Benchmark 2C</b>  <b>Governance</b>	2C.1      The school board has worked effectively to achieve the school's mission and specific goals.

## **APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Charter Schools and the State University of New York**

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Renewal Cycle and the Timing of School Inspection Visits**

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



years that a school has provided instruction. Thus for example, a school that is in its seventh year of operation may be in its fifth year of instruction and facing initial renewal, having previously received a short-term planning year renewal for a period of time equivalent to the number of planning years the school took. It will therefore receive a renewal visit, whereas another school that did not take any planning years and was renewed for five years would be in the second year of its second five-year charter. This school would therefore not receive a renewal visit but rather an evaluation visit and 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.

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

In particular, the Institute uses a subset of the State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks 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, State University Charter Renewal Benchmarks 1B-1F, is 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 3<sup>rd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, and particularly at the school's initial renewal (and subsequent renewals thereafter), the quantitative indicators (as defined by Renewal Benchmark 1A, the school's progress in meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals) take on paramount importance and the qualitative indicators concordantly diminish in importance. This is consonant with the fact that charter schools must demonstrate results or face non-renewal. However, while subsequent renewal decisions are based almost solely by the school's progress toward meeting its academic Accountability Plan goals during the charter period, the Institute continues to use the 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).

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

## 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.

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.