Department of Education
Dennis M. Walcott, Chancellor

Charter School Renewal Report
Charter Schools Office
2011-2012

LEFFERTS GARDENS CHARTER SCHOOL
ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

APRIL 2012

Part 1: Executive Summary

School Overview and History:

Lefferts Gardens Charter School is an elementary school serving approximately 234 students from kindergarten through second grade in the 2011-2012 school year.[1] The school opened in 2010 with grades K-1. The school is under the terms of its first charter and is projected to reach its full grade span, K-5, during its current term, which expires December 14, 2014.[2] The school is currently housed in a DOE facility in District 17, and is co-located with P.S. 92.[3]

The school enrolls new students in grades K-2. There were 470 students on the waitlist after the Spring 2011 lottery.[4] The student body includes 79.0% Free and Reduced Lunch students, compared to 76.2% in the district; 11.5% special education students, compared to 13.6% in the district; and 2.1% English language learners, compared to 9.6% in the district.[5] The average attendance rate for the 2011-2012 school year to date was 93.9%.[6] The school scored Average on the Communication, Engagement, and Safety & Respect sections of the NYC DOE School Survey in 2010-2011, and Below Average on the Academic Expectations section; 37% of the school's parents responded to the survey, and 86% of the school's teachers.[7]

The school has not yet earned a grade on the NYC DOE Progress Report and has not yet had any grades eligible for the New York State test. The school is in good standing with state and federal accountability.[8]

Annual Review Process Overview:

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) Charter Schools Office (CSO) conducts an annual site visit of charter schools authorized by the NYC DOE. The site visit is designed to address three primary questions: is the school an academic success; is the school a fiscally sound, viable organization; and is the school in compliance with its charter and all applicable laws and regulations? To ascertain matters of sustainability and strategic planning, we also ask about the school's plans for its next charter term. The visits are conducted by representatives of the CSO and last the duration of one school day. The annual site visit begins with a meeting with the school leadership team. Afterward, the reviewers visit classrooms and hold brief meetings with available administrators and teachers. Areas of evaluation include, but are not limited to: academic goals and mission; curriculum and instruction; school culture and learning environment; assessment utilization; parent engagement; government structures and organizational design; community support; special populations; and safety and security. The site visit is intended to provide a snapshot of the school and reflects what was observed at the time of the visit.

The following experts participated in the review of this school on April 23, 2012:

- Daree Lewis, Director of Oversight, NYC DOE CSO
- Gretchen Tonnesen, Analyst, NYC DOE CSO
- Laurie Pendleton, Consultant

[1] Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 4/5/2012
[2] NYC DOE ATS system and charter agreement
[3] NYC DOE Location Code Generating System database
[4] Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 4/5/2012
[5] NYC DOE ATS system as of 4/3/2012
[6] Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 4/5/2012
[7] NYC DOE School Survey – http://schools.nyc.gov/survey
[8] New York State Education Department - www.nysed.gov

Part 2: Findings

Areas of Strength:

- The school is implementing an effective co-teaching model.
    - The leadership of the school reports that all classrooms currently have both a general education and a special education teacher. Additionally, one first grade and one second grade classroom have an additional teacher to provide more intensive support.
    - In the majority of classrooms visited, the co-teacher was helping to manage student behavior during whole group instruction.
    - Co-teachers were also observed communicating with each other in order to adjust the lesson to meet student needs during instruction.
    - Both teachers were observed circulating and working with individuals and small groups during independent practice.

- In alignment with its mission statement, the school's focus on environmental science is evident.
    - The school is implementing a weekly field study program to provide students with meaningful hands-on, scientific, inquiry-based learning. Each Wednesday, students visit such places as the Prospect Park Zoo, the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum. There is evidence of the extensive academic follow up that takes place back at the school in the form of journal entries and lesson extensions. Teachers report using these field experiences as a springboard to build connections between reading, writing, math, and social studies.
    - Science classes observed were active and provided opportunities for students to be engaged in hands-on, inquiry-based science.
    - Classrooms have names such as Oasis, Ocean, and Park Zoo.

- The school provides a variety of opportunities for parent engagement.
    - Parents are invited to participate in the daily Morning Meeting sessions held in each classroom.
    - Classrooms hold Publishing Parties and other activities which parents are encouraged to attend.
    - The leadership of the school reports they communicate with parents often and encourage teachers to make positive connections with parents.

- The school has taken strides to address student behavior and school culture.
    - The school has added the position of Dean of Culture to the school's leadership team as well as three behavior support staff to work closely with students who are having behavioral and emotional concerns. The school has also created a "CARES" room which provides a place for these people to more privately support the needs of students who are struggling to maintain behavior in the classroom.
    - The Responsive Classroom approach is in the beginning stages of implementation. The leadership team shared that 17 staff members were trained in the Responsive Classroom curriculum over the summer. On the day of the visit, teachers used "cool down chairs" and "buddy teachers" to manage behavior. Each classroom begins the day with Morning Meeting. The teachers used comments such as, "I notice…" and "What should you being doing?" when redirecting student behavior.
    - Teachers interviewed report that student behavior has improved over last year.
    - The school's leadership reports these efforts have led to a drop in misbehavior.

Areas of Growth:

- The school should continue to focus on improving the use of academic, behavioral, and operational data.

    - Leaders and teachers seem to be unsure of how to best use objective data to set goals or to inform or adjust instruction.
    - During teacher interviews, teachers seemed unclear about the purpose of data and how to use it effectively to inform instruction. They also mentioned they need additional support in understanding the different assessments given by the school.
    - Teachers reported that, although Terra Nova assessments are interesting to look at, they do not match the curriculum, so the usefulness of the data is limited.

- The school should consider increasing the focus on pacing.
    - Transitions and pacing observed in classrooms were slow and instructional time was wasted.
    - Teachers interviewed did not appear to share a sense of urgency for students to meet grade level goals that would put students on track for meeting the high academic standards in the charter.
    - The school is lacking clear and consistent structures, protocols and expectations to improve lesson pacing and student engagement.

- The school should continue their efforts at improving the culture of the school.
    - On the day of the visit, there were a number of behavioral incidents that interrupted instruction.
    - Teachers reported the need for additional training and support in the implementation of the Responsive Classroom.

- The school should continue to improve the Professional Development program.
    - Teachers reported that training was often misaligned with the needs of the school, either in terms of timing (too late) or content (wrong areas of focus).
    - The school leadership should consider giving critical, frequent and routine feedback to teachers to strengthen instructional leadership.
    - Teachers noted the lack of opportunities for peer observations.
    - Teachers did not receive frequent feedback on lesson plans, lesson implementation and assessment results.
    - Teachers interviewed feel there are opportunities to maximize the roles of the positions added to the leadership team to provide support in improving the instructional program.

- The school should continue to implement operational structures that will improve communication and the support of the instructional program.
    - Teachers interviewed reported that it was challenging to get instructional materials in a timely fashion and that materials they do receive do not always match classroom needs.
    - Teachers also indicated that there do not appear to be protocols or systems for answering operational questions such as how to receive approval for personal time off.

Part 3: Essential Questions and Accountability Framework

The CSO Accountability Framework

To help NYC DOE authorized charter schools better understand what we mean by success for charter schools, the NYC DOE's Charter Schools Office (CSO) has developed an Accountability Framework build around four essential questions for charter school renewal:

1. Is the school an academic success?
2. Is the school a fiscally sound, viable organization?
3. Is the school compliant with its charter and all applicable law and regulations?
4. What are the school's plans for its next charter term?

1. Is the School an Academic Success?
1a. High Academic Attainment and Improvement
Schools that are academic successes have many of the characteristics below: • Meet absolute performance goals • Meet student progress goals • Are closing the achievement gap for at risk students, including special needs and ELL students • Are surpassing performance of DOE identified peer-schools • Are surpassing performance district and city proficiency or better averages • Are meeting other rigorous academic and non-academic goals as stated in school's charter
Evidence for success might include, but not be limited to, the following depending on school configurations: • Grades 3-8 NYS ELA Results (absolute performance, individual student progress, comparative performance to similar schools, home district or city averages, progress for at-risk populations) • Grades 3-8 NYS Math Results (absolute performance, individual student progress, comparative performance to similar schools, home district or city averages, progress for at-risk populations) • Grades 4 and 8 NYS Science Results (absolute performance, individual student progress, comparative performance to similar schools, home district or city averages, progress for at-risk populations) • Grades 8-12 NYS Regent Exam Results • When applicable, NYSAA or other approved alternate assessments results • HS 4- and 6-Year Graduation Rates (absolute and progress, overall, for at-risk student populations) • Grades 8-12 College Readiness Credit Accumulation • Percentage of Students Applying to and Being Admitted to College • Percentage of Students Taking AP Courses and/or Percentage of Students Passing AP Courses • Results on state accountability measures • Charter School Academic and Non-Academic Goals • NYC Progress Reports
1b. Mission and Academic Goals
Schools with successful missions and goals have many of the characteristics below: • Have an animating mission statement that staff, students and community embrace • Set ambitious academic and non-academic goals that entire school community knows and embraces • Have processes for regular monitoring and reporting on progress toward school goals • Have processes for adjusting strategies in support of goals as appropriate in response to monitoring data

Evidence for successful missions and goals might include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Mission statement, charter, external documents (parent and family handbooks, school website, etc.)
- Annual reports, school improvement plans, leadership board reports
- Board agendas and minutes
- Parent, student, and teacher satisfaction surveys
- Participation at parent-teacher conferences, school advocacy events, participation in academic goal related programs

1c. Responsive Education Program

Schools with successful education programs have many of the characteristics below:

- Are self-reflective and examine practice based on outcomes against goals
- Have well-thought out curricular programs that are aligned with NYS learning outcomes as described by state standards and the new Common Core Curriculum.
- Use instructional models and resources consistent with school mission and that are flexible in addressing the needs of all learners
- Have defined strategies that they can measure and monitor for closing the achievement gap
- Offer defined opportunities for remediation and acceleration
- Implement a coherent and effective interim assessment system (e.g., use of formative, interim, and summative assessment data) for monitoring progress, predicting performance, and adjusting instruction
- Have an effective process for supporting improved classroom instruction, including frequent observation and feedback
- Have effective strategies and quality instructional programs for addressing students with special needs and ELLs
- Use a defined process for evaluating curricular tasks, programs and resources for effectiveness and fit with school mission and goals

Evidence for successful education programs, in addition to positive results, may include, but not be limited to, many of the following:

- Instructional planning documents (alignments, scope and sequences, curriculum maps, unit and lesson plans, etc)
- Student/teacher schedules
- Classroom observations
- Student Intervention / Response to Intervention program description and resources
- Interim assessment results
- Student and teacher portfolios
- Data findings; adjusted lesson plans
- Self-assessment documentation
- Professional development plans and resources

1d. Learning Environment

Schools with successful learning environments have many of the characteristics below:

- Have a strong culture that connects high academic and behavioral expectations in a way that motivates students to give their best effort academically and socially
- Use a comprehensive approach to student management, including positive behavioral expectations and a clear discipline policy to build and sustain a safe, orderly, and supportive classroom environment
- Provide for safe, respectful, efficient transitions, hallways, cafeteria, yard, etc.
- Have classrooms were academic risk-taking and student participation is encouraged and supported
- Provide opportunities for students to actively engage in their own learning and in the life of the school

- Have a formal or informal character education, social development, or citizenship program that provides opportunities to develop as individuals and citizens

Evidence for successful learning environments may include, but not be limited to, many of the following:

- School mission and articulated values
- Student management plan (code of conduct, school values, discipline policy, positive incentive system, etc.)
- Student attendance and retention rates
- Student discipline data
- DOE School Survey student results
- DOE School Survey parent and teacher safety and respect results
- Self-administered satisfaction survey results
- Leadership, staff, and, if appropriate, student interviews
- Classroom observations
- Scheduled student engagement opportunities (e.g., student advisory, internships, student government, student led conferences, peer tutoring, peer mediation, etc.)

2. Is the School a Fiscally Sound, Viable Organization?

2a. Governance Structure and Organizational Design

Schools with successful governance and organizational design structures have many of the characteristics below:

- Operate with a clearly articulated governance structure, compliant with its charter and all applicable laws and regulations
- Have a capable Board of Trustees with appropriate blend of skills and experiences to provide oversight and strategic direction to fulfill the mission and goals of its charter
- Have a Board that is fully compliant with all applicable laws and regulations, particularly but not limited to open-meeting laws and conflict of interest regulations
- Have developed a succession plan for board and school leadership, consistent with the charter and Board by-laws, to ensure continuity of direction and leadership over time and despite circumstance
- Implements a school leadership structure that is aligned with charter and that is sufficient to fulfill school's mission and achieve its accountability goals; it also has clear lines of accountability for leadership roles, accountability to Board, and, if applicable, relationship with a charter management organization
- Have timely and appropriate access to legal counsel
- Implemented a process for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the school's organization and leadership structure
- Have instructional leadership staffing and support structures that holds staff accountable for student learning outcomes and provide regular feedback on instruction to teachers

Evidence for school governance and organizational design may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- School charter
- Board by-laws, roster, trustee resumes, meeting agenda and minutes
- Annual conflict of interest forms
- Staff roster, job descriptions, staff handbook, operations manual
- School calendar, professional development plan

2b. School Climate and Community Engagement

Schools with a sustaining school climate and engaged parent and community support have many of the characteristics below:

- A healthy professional school climate that is collaborative, student centered, and open to parents and community support
- An effective process for recruiting, hiring, supporting, and evaluating leadership and staff
- A flexible, data-driven approach to professional development for all staff
- An effective way of measuring and monitoring core constituency satisfaction (parent, staff, and, when age appropriate, student), including the DOE School Survey
- Effective home-school communication practices to ensure meaningful parent involvement in the learning of their children
- Strong community-based partnerships and advocacy for the school

Evidence for school climate and community engagement may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- DOE School Survey satisfaction parent, teacher, and, if appropriate student results
- Student retention and wait list data
- Staff retention data
- Leadership, staff, parent, student interviews
- Student and staff attendance rates
- Parent attendance at parent-teacher conferences
- Parent association meeting calendar and minutes
- Community partnerships and sponsored programs

2c. Financial and Operational Health

Schools that are responsible stewards of public funds and effective, sustaining organizations have many of the characteristics below:

- Consistently meet its student enrollment and retention targets
- Annual budgets that meets all short- and long-term financial responsibilities with available revenues
- School leadership and Board that oversee financial and operational responsibilities in a manner that keeps the school's mission and academic goals central to decision-making
- Boards and school leadership that maintain effective internal controls of finances to ensure integrity of financial management and a proactive approach to mitigating risk
- Consistently clean financial audits
- If applicable, strong, accountable partnerships with management organizations and other partners and significant vendors to support delivery of chartered school design and academic program
- A safe, clean and appropriately resourced educational facility with all appropriate services specified in charter and mandated by appropriate law and regulations

Evidence for a financially sound, viable organization may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- School budget, P&Ls, and monthly/quarterly cash-flow reports
- Appropriate insurance documents
- Required facility documents (lease, certificate of occupancy, fire and safety inspections, etc.)
- Financial audits
- Financial leader(s) resume and accountability documents
- Operational policies and procedures
- Operational org chart
- Secure storage areas for student and staff records
- Policies/protocols for maintaining secure records
- School safety plan

3. Is the School in Compliance with its Charter and All Applicable Law and Regulations?

3a. Approved Charter and Agreement

Schools in substantial compliance with their charter and agreement have:

- Implemented the key features of their charter as described in the original charter and as modified in approved revisions to their charter, including but not limited to mission, academic program, school organization, grade configuration, enrollment, goals, etc.
- Ensure that update-to-date charter is publicly available to staff, parents, and school community
- Implemented comprehensive academic, behavioral, oversight, management, and operational policies and procedures that are substantially aligned with the charter and the school's stated mission and vision

Evidence for a school's compliance with the terms of its charter and charter agreement may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Authorized charter and signed agreement
- Charter revision request approval and documentation
- School mission
- School policies and procedures
- Site visits
- Board meetings, agendas and minutes
- Leadership/board interviews

3b. Applicable Federal and State Law

Schools in substantial compliance with federal and state law have:

- Met all legal requirements for Title I and IDEA regulations and reporting
- Comparable enrollment of FRL, ELL and Special Education students to those of their district of location *or* are making documented good faith efforts to reach comparable percentages
- Implemented school policies related to student discipline and promotion and retention that are fully compliant with laws and regulations related to students with disabilities and due process regulations
- Conducted independently verified fair and open lottery and manage with integrity enrollment process and annual waiting lists
- Employed instructional staff with appropriate security clearances and certification requirements

Evidence for compliance with applicable federal and state law may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- School reporting documents
- School's Annual Report
- Student recruitment plan and resources
- Student management policies and promotion and retention policies
- Student discipline records
- Lottery policy, resources, and records; enrollment procedures and records
- Staff roster, fingerprint clearance for all staff, certification status of all instructional staff

3c. Applicable Regulations

Schools in substantial compliance with applicable regulations have:

- Safe and secure facilities with no significant compliance concerns with applicable regulations
- Consistently clean annual audits, up-to-date escrow accounts, and have completed all other financial reporting as required
- Boards that meet requirements for size, meeting frequency, public notice, applicable open-meeting and conflict of interest regulations, as well as complying with NYC DOE CSO's requirements for reporting changes in board membership and securing approval for new board members.
- Informed NYCDOE CSO, and where required, received CSO approval for changes in significant partnerships, such as dropping/replacing a management organization
- Effectively engaged parent associations

Evidence for compliance with applicable regulations may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- School or building safety plan; appropriate inspection documents
- Annual audits, escrow accounts, other financial reporting documents
- Board roster, calendar, agenda and minutes, conflict of interest documents, notification of changes/approval of new member request documents
- Charter revision requests, revised or new contracts
- Parent association calendar of meetings, identified officers, parent association agenda and minutes, parent satisfaction survey results
- Interviews

4. What Are the School's Plans for its Next Charter Term?

4a. School Expansion or Model Replication

In anticipation of a new charter term schools may be considering various growth options: replication, expansion to new grades or increased enrollment or altering their model in some significant way. Successful schools generally have processes for:

- Conducting needs/opportunity assessments
- Forming Board and leadership committees or subcommittees to investigate options, develop action plans, ensure capacity and resources are aligned, etc.
- Engaging school community in articulating charter revisions (or a new charter in cases of replication) to address the proposed growth plans
- Ensuring that the final proposal is ambitious but realistic in its plans
- Creating a well-reasoned and documented prospective for the school's new charter term and, if applicable, a new charter proposal (for replication)

Evidence for likely success in planning for school growth in a new charter term may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Application Part I: Retroactive Analysis, including performance results and analyses of the current charter term
- Application Part II: Prospective Analysis, including mission, program description, governance, organization, budget, etc. for new term
- Leadership and Board interviews

4b. Organizational Sustainability

Successful schools consistently perform despite change. While there is no single path for ensuring sustainability, successful schools often have the following features:

- School anticipates organizational opportunities/needs and plans for resource development (human resource policies for growing your own talent, for example, or fundraising or budget management to take care of anticipated capital needs and to mitigate risks for the unexpected, or board development to bring new talent or specific needs-based expertise to the school)

Evidence for organizational sustainability may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Board roster and resumes
- Board committees and minutes
- School organization chart
- Staff rosters
- Staff handbook
- Leadership and staff interviews
- Budget

4c. School or Model Improvements

Successful schools are thoughtful about the continued appropriateness of school design features and elements of their models. They:

- Review performance carefully and even if they don't make major changes through expansion or replication, they are careful to adjust elements to ensure continued and improved success.
- Develop plans to improve the school learning environment, including improving their facilities to expand program offerings and/or developing new partnerships to further the school's mission.

Evidence for successful improvements to a school's program or model may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Application Part I: Retroactive Analysis, including performance results and analyses of the current charter term
- Application Part II: Prospective Analysis, including mission, program description, governance, organization, budget, etc. for new term
- Leadership and board interviews
- MOUs or contracts with partners