



Charter School Renewal Report
Charter Schools Office
2011-2012

BROOKLYN ASCEND CHARTER SCHOOL ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

FEBRUARY 2012

Part 1: Executive Summary

School Overview and History:

Brooklyn Ascend Charter School is an elementary/middle school serving approximately 567 students from kindergarten through fifth grade in the 2011-2012 school year.¹ The school opened in 2008 with grades K-2. The school is under the terms of its first charter and is projected to expand to grades K-6 during its current term, which expires January 14, 2013. If approved for renewal, the school is projected to reach its full grade span, K-12, during the 2018-2019 school year.² The school is currently housed in a private facility in District 18.³

The school enrolls new students in grades K-5. There were 2,744 students on the waitlist after the Spring 2011 lottery.⁴ The student body includes 79.9% Free and Reduced Lunch students, compared to 72.5% in the district; 7.2% special education students, compared to 14.2% in the district; and 0.4% English language learners, compared to 5.5% in the district.⁵ The average attendance rate for the 2011-2012 school year to date was 96.7%.⁶ The school scored Above Average on the Academic Expectations, Communication, and Safety & Respect sections of the NYC DOE School Survey in 2010-2011, and Average on the Engagement section; 54% of the school's parents responded to the survey, and 85% of the school's teachers.⁷

The school earned a C on its NYC DOE Progress Report in 2010-2011, and a B in 2009-2010.⁸ The school has outperformed its Community School District in ELA for each of the past two years and in Math in 2010-2011. The school has outperformed the city averages in ELA in each of the past two years.⁹ The school is in good standing with state and federal accountability.¹⁰

Brooklyn Ascend Charter School is part of the Ascend Learning network, a charter management organization (CMO). The CMO provides back office support, curriculum assessment; student assessment data gathering, and technology support, among other services.

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 February 29, 2012:

- Sonya Hooks, Senior Director, NYC DOE CSO
- Laurie Price, Director of Operations, NYC DOE CSO
- Angela Chubb, Consultant

¹ Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 2/17/2012

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 2/17/2012

⁵ NYC DOE ATS system as of 4/3/2012

⁶ Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 2/17/2012

⁷ NYC DOE School Survey – <http://schools.nyc.gov/survey>

⁸ NYC DOE Progress Report – <http://schools.nyc.gov/progressreport>

⁹ NYC DOE website – <http://schools.nyc.gov/> (search: test results); District and city averages are for the grade levels corresponding to the school's testing grades in specified years

¹⁰ New York State Education Department - www.nysed.gov

Part 2: Findings

Areas of Strength:

- The school has well defined intervention programs to support all students and provides students at all academic levels with opportunities for growth.
 - The school leaders began planning earlier in the academic year to address struggling students and developed a consistent approach to address skill weaknesses across all grade levels.
 - The school developed a Kindergarten Task Force that works together to create formative assessments for each Kindergarten classroom. The task force is made up of Kindergarten staff and some support personnel.
 - The school holds regular grade level meetings for all teachers and “re-teaching” lessons for specific skills identified through data collection.
 - The school holds small group tutoring sessions in each classroom as pull-asides.
 - School leadership reported that data tools provided by Ascend Learning are improved from last year and provide more insight into student skill acquisition. These improvements include DAKS (SABIS curriculum assessments) and 2 full mock exams.

- The school displays a positive, safe, and productive learning environment with strong attention paid to behavior management.
 - On the day of the visit, the school, teachers and students were observed to share a common language of learning, and behavior norms were communicated in each classroom.
 - Interviewed teachers commented on the school's strong commitment to and focus on student behavior.
 - Observed classroom teachers were using positive language to support student learning, redirecting student behavior with agreed upon non-verbal cues and signals.
 - The school added a Director of Student Life to focus on the leadership development of students and helping students become invested in their own learning. New programs have been designed to help students put their leadership roles into practice across the school, including having students act as Prefects in each classroom.
 - Core Values are implemented across the school. Teachers explicitly teach the Ascend Learning Core Values during morning motivation, morning meeting and character education lessons. The school utilizes shared language to teach these values.

- The school has developed an Associate Teacher Program to support learning.
 - The program provides support for the lead classroom teacher with one associate teacher assigned to each grade level.
 - The program allows two teachers to work together to meet the needs of all students with both teachers sharing the instructional responsibilities for all students.
 - The program allows time for small group instruction within in each lesson; one teacher is able to pull a small group while the other provides direct instruction for the class.
 - The program provides authentic professional development for new teachers and on-the-job training.
 - The program serves as a “grow your own” teacher recruitment initiative. Currently, school leadership plans for two of the Kindergarten associates to take on their own classrooms next year.

- The school has an engaged and supportive family community, with an active Family Association Program.
 - The principal communicates effectively and regularly with parents and families.
 - The school has an established parent organization with targeted roles and responsibilities.
 - There is parent representation on the board and steering committee.
 - The Family Association Program raised \$11,000 for the school.
 - Parents participate in monthly breakfasts with the leadership team to discuss any concerns through an open round-robin discussion led by the principal.

- The school provides a robust professional development plan for all staff members.
 - The school provides a three week summer institute for staff. The institute is focused on procedures, management, and culture. Plans for the upcoming summer include more focus on instruction for returning staff members.
 - Summer professional development is differentiated by grade level (content and curriculum) and delivered by team leaders.
 - The professional development plan is driven by the leadership team and based on results of a staff survey, which indicated staff would like grade-specific professional development focused on instructional practice. Interviewed teachers reported that the focus on management was helpful, but they needed more support with instruction.
 - The school revamped the schedule to create common team planning for grade level lead teachers.

Areas of Growth:

- The school is encouraged to continue to build upon the established culture and climate that is currently in place.
 - The school should consider displaying student work throughout the hallways and classrooms, including rubrics for scoring and exemplars to demonstrate proficiency and as a way to showcase student work.
 - The school should continue to improve behavior management and the implementation and consistent use of behavior systems in each classroom. In some observed classrooms, there were varying degrees of use of the red/yellow/green school-wide system described in the leadership team meeting.
 - The school should explore ways to balance the focus on behavior with time spent on academics. In observed classrooms, the teachers spent more time redirecting student behavior and managing student behavior than teaching.

- The school is encouraged to continue to focus on effective and consistent instructional delivery in all classrooms and grade levels.
 - Interviewed teachers were not familiar with the academic standards and assessments in other grade levels. The school should explore opportunities for teachers to work on vertical alignment of all academic expectations, particularly as the school continues to add middle school grades.
 - The school should work to improve the pacing and rigor of each lesson through ongoing and frequent observations by the principal and instructional leaders.
 - School leaders are encouraged to explore ways to provide specific feedback to teachers about lesson pace and rigor.
 - In observed classrooms, learning objectives were not consistently posted or communicated. The school should work to ensure clear learning objectives are posted and communicated to students for each lesson.
 - In some observed classrooms, the associate teachers did not appear to have a specific role related to instruction. The school should continue to provide additional direction and professional development support to associate teachers so that they are used as effectively as possible in each classroom.
 - The school is encouraged to provide additional support and training for paraprofessionals as well as clear expectations for expected classroom support models. This may include reaching out to partner agencies that supply paraprofessionals to ensure alignment around job roles and responsibilities.
 - Interviewed teachers reported that data collection and usage was not as robust in grades K-2 as in grades 3-5. The school is encouraged to ensure ample assessments are being used to collect data at the K-2 level.
 - School leaders reported several challenges with the SABIS curriculum (i.e., not enough exposure to nonfiction texts) that they are working to address. The school is encouraged to continue to put supplemental structures in place to support the SABIS curriculum model.
 - The school is encouraged to explore additional strategies to improve student achievement and progress. One of the school's charter goals is to achieve a 'B' on the Student Progress section of the NYC DOE Progress Report. In 2010-2011, the school received a 'C' on the Student Progress section and thus did not meet this goal.

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 where 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