



Charter School Annual Site Visit Report
Charter Schools Office
2010-2011

ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP CHARTER SCHOOL
ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

MAY 2011

Part 1: Executive Summary

School Overview and History:

Academic Leadership Charter School is an elementary school serving approximately 212 students from grade kindergarten through grade 2 in the 2010-2011 school year.¹ The school opened in 2009 with grades kindergarten through 1. It has plans to grow to serve students in kindergarten through grade five.² It is currently housed in a DOE facility in District 7.³

The school population comprises 39.3% Black, 49.0% Hispanic, 0.5% White, and 0.5% Asian students. 83% of students are designated as Title I, compared to 87.9% of the district.⁴ The student body includes 13.6% English language learners, compared to 19.1% of the district, and 13.1% special education students, compared to 20.7% for the district⁵.

The school is in its second year and has not yet earned a Progress Report grade or state/federal accountability designation.⁶ The average attendance rate for the school year 2009 - 2010 was 91%⁷.

Annual Review Process Overview:

The NYC DOE Charter Schools Office (CSO) conducts an annual site visit of New York City Department of Education authorized charter schools in order to assess three primary questions: is the school an academic success; is the school a viable organization; and is the school in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. The visits are conducted by representatives of the New York City Department of Education Charter Schools Office and last the duration of one school day. The annual site visit begins with a meeting with the principal and school leadership team. Subsequently, the reviewers visit classrooms and hold brief meetings with available administrators, teachers, and students. 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.

This particular review included additional interviews with school leaders and the Board Chair to consider operational oversight in more detail in response to media coverage of the school's lottery and the school's own internal investigation of school operational concerns.

The following experts participated in the review of this school on May 12, 2011:

- Richard Larios, Senior Director, NYC DOE CSO
- Jessica Fredston-Hermann, Analyst, NYC DOE CSO
- Gabrielle Mosquera, Director of Oversight, NYC DOE CSO

Larios and Mosquera returned to school on May 20th and Larios, Mosquera, Fredston-Hermann, and Scott Torres (Director of Operations) on June 28th. The day before the last noted visit, June 27th, Larios interviewed Board Chair Nick McNickle by phone.

Probation:

As a result of the review, the NYC DOE, as the charter authorizer for the Academic Leadership Charter School, has put the school on probation effective July 18, 2011 through the end of August

¹ NYC DOE ATS system

² NYC DOE ATS system and charter agreement

³ NYC DOE Location Code Generating System database

⁴ Demographic Data drawn from NYC DOE ATS System

⁵ NYC DOE ATS system; data pulled June 30, 2011.

⁶ New York State Education Department - www.nysed.gov

⁷ NYC DOE School Progress Report

2012. The conditions that will need to be redressed beginning immediately are listed among the Areas of Improvement included in this report.

Part 2: Findings

Areas of Strength

- The school offers its students a safe, orderly, print-rich learning environment. The school culture is strong and positive, and teachers maintain high academic expectations for all.
 - On the day of the visit students were observed to be well-behaved, courteous, and appropriately responsive to adult direction in classrooms and during transitions.
 - The school reports very few in or out of school suspensions (two last year; none this year as of May 12) and no expulsions in its two years of operation.
 - Observed interactions between staff and students were respectful, open, and caring during the day of the visit.
 - School leadership and teacher interviews indicated that there is a consistent view that student management is owned at the classroom level.
 - The 2009-2010 NYC DOE School Survey results gave the school high marks for academic expectations; teachers repeatedly referenced rigor and high expectations in their interviews as a requirement that was made clear to them in employment interviews and reinforced in professional discussions between staff and administration and among staff.
 - The school's staffing model ensures the presence of two, and sometimes three, adults in a classroom, providing students with significant adult supervision in a familiar and consistent environment.
 - School staff and members of the leadership frequently used the words "family" and "community" to describe the culture of the school when describing parents, colleagues, or the relationship between staff and administration.

- The school provides a strong and consistent academic program for its primary grade students, one that strives for rigor and that evidences differentiation of instruction, a blend of instructional approaches, routine use of assessment data, and effective planning practices.
 - According to leadership and teacher interviews, lesson plans are completed six weeks in advance with assessment and culminating projects identified.
 - On the day of the visit, observed lessons were organized, focused, and purposeful.
 - All observed classrooms showed some evidence of differentiation of instruction by group within a class, with groups varying in size, instructional approach, and content.
 - Leadership and staff reported that data from various assessments are used to target lesson goals for classes and groups within classes. DRA, TerraNova, and teacher-created six-week assessments are administered and analyzed by administration, teacher-leaders and teachers in staff meetings and one-on-one with the Executive Director/Principal.
 - On the day of the visit the review teams saw examples of the school's focus on literacy, higher-level questioning strategies, checks for understanding, and links to previous lesson.
 - In most observed classrooms on the day of the visit students were observed to be on task and often enthusiastically engaged in their learning.

- Teacher have created units for science and social studies, reportedly aligned with the New York State Core Curriculum, to ensure a rich curriculum and diversified learning experience (including hands-on science projects and inquiry-based social studies units).
- Parents are supportive of the school's academic mission and goals and are actively engaged in support of the school.
 - Teacher interviews reported strong parent support (“Parents really push their kids.” And: “Parents work hand-in-hand with teachers.” “They phone, email, text..”).
 - Parent attendance at two formal parent-teacher conferences was reported to be very high, close to 100%.
 - Parent Association is reported to have 25 active core members, though no formal officers.
 - Helped by convenient scheduling of Board of Trustee meetings (coinciding with other parent-friendly events), parent attendance at Board meetings is very high (120 or more parents).
 - Some ALCS parents participated in Charter School Advocacy Day in Albany.
 - Staff reports that various parent events engage parents in the school community, including school shows, parent appreciation week events, and open houses for incoming parents.
 - Teachers reported that parents supported completion of homework packets over the summer and prior to holidays and testing periods.
 - 82% of parents, well above city average of 49%, completed the 2009-2010 NYC DOE School Survey and gave the school very high marks for Academic Expectations (8.7), Communication (8.4), Engagement (8.4) and Safety & Respect (8.4).
- The school provides a strong professional environment for teachers with evidence of both formal and informal collaboration and involvement in decision-making.
 - School leadership team, which includes two teacher-leaders, meets daily.
 - School is committed to a “grow your own” leadership development approach and has identified two teachers for additional leadership responsibilities and development.
 - School has weekly one-hour staff meetings at 4:30 for PD, problem-solving, reviewing six-week assessment data, etc.
 - A two-week long summer training for teachers (with sessions led by returning teachers) is held prior to school start, focusing on expectations, lesson planning and delivery, assessment, and other related topics.
 - School has developed a career ladder that provides growth opportunities for instructional staff; interviewed teachers provided supportive testimony to their advancement within this system. Several current teachers began at the schools as Teacher Associates; other current TAs expect to take on full-time classroom responsibility next fall.
 - During interviews teachers gave credit to colleagues for informal collaboration as well as to the school for more formal collaboration opportunities (e.g. staff meetings), citing examples of colleagues staying late, working together over lunch, providing feedback to each other, and planning together.
 - Supervision and evaluation is provided by Executive Director/Principal and with additional classroom observation support provided by Victory

consultant Michelle Haynes. In teacher interviews, both were described as supportive, frank, and willing to help with strategies and techniques and a timeline for implementing them.

- The school administers a range of assessments and uses data to group students and drive instruction.
 - The TerraNova, DRA, and the school's Six Week Assessments are administered in addition to unit assessments and informal assessments and checks for understanding.
 - Data is formally reviewed during the two weeks of summer training, at staff meetings at the end of each assessment period, and with one-on-ones between teachers and Executive Director/Principal.

What the school needs to improve: this section is divided into three parts, one that identifies areas of growth where we recommend that the school continues to focus on improvement; a second part that identifies the areas that the school needs to remedy within the period of probation; and a third section that outlines required elements for a Corrective Action Plan.

Areas of Growth

- Continue to focus on increasing the quality and consistency of instruction through targeted professional development and ongoing monitoring of instruction.
 - Observed differentiation was typically done via grouping within classrooms; school should continue its work to increase sophistication of differentiation through questioning and to further individualize instruction through individually targeted skills and activities.
 - Very little use of technology was observed during classroom visits. School should consider investigating ways in which the increased use of technology could aid its academic goals and school mission.
 - School should continue its efforts to engage students in “owning” their learning by encouraging students to set their own academic goals and self-monitor their progress.
- The school should continue to focus on developing parent and community engagement at the school.
 - The Parent Association should formalize its leadership roles and make formal Parent Association officer engagement with school leadership and Board.
- School should continue to work on ways to support teachers in improving instruction and professional growth.
 - In teacher interviews teachers consistently praised feedback they received from the Executive Director, from the school's educational consultant Michelle Haynes, and from each other. However, teacher responses on the 2009-10 NYC DOE School Survey indicated some dissatisfaction with principal support (33% said they only felt supported by the principal “to a small extent,” for example, and 40% of teachers “disagreed” that school leaders encourage open communication about school issues). School felt that these numbers would improve on the next report and teacher interviews supported this view but actual results should be analyzed to determine to what degree, if any, feedback and support is an issue.

- The school is encouraged to establish more consistent and consistently implemented processes for formal teacher observation and evaluation. In interviews during the visit, teachers did not describe a consistent approach to formal evaluation and the staff handbook is vague (“the school will attempt to conduct a formal review of each staff member”) on what the staff can expect.
- As the school expands, it should continue to work to ensure that its culture is sustainable and the school leadership has the capacity to grow successfully.
 - The school is small but expanding each year. In leadership interviews and teacher interviews, questions of sustainability over time and overall capacity arose (inability to find a permanent principal as the charter indicates for year two, for example, and the average experience level of teaching staff being below their original expectation). The Board and school leadership needs to incorporate strategies for sustainability and capacity building in its planning process.
 - The overall feel of the school learning environment on the day of the visit was positive and teachers spoke highly of peer collaboration; however, there are limited structured opportunities for professional collaboration (common planning time, for example) and peer support. As the school grows, school leadership should consider ways that the school can integrate structural supports for professional collaboration.
- The school should continue to refine its outreach strategies for recruitment of ELL/SPED students and document its efforts for ongoing monitoring of effectiveness in reaching comparable percentages with its CSD.
 - The school’s student population currently includes 13.6% ELL students, which is lower than the district average of 19.1% and a current population of SPED students (13.1%) which is lower than the district average (20.7%).⁸

Areas of Violation of Charter Law or Charter Agreement

- Procedures and implementation of the lottery must be corrected to be compliant with charter law and school policy with a rigorous implemented set of procedures to ensure integrity of implementation.
 - 2011 lottery took place without a substantial number of applications included.
 - 2011 waiting lists were built without additional post-lottery applications included.
 - Lottery took place over two days without evidence that the second day was adequately supervised.
 - Designated impartial observer on first night of lottery was a member of the school’s Parent Association.
 - Sibling preference was not effectively managed (some siblings were not included in lottery and some students were identified as siblings without effective verification of sibling status).
 - Multiple copies of waiting list were created with inconsistent information included on them.

⁸ NYC DOE ATS system; data pulled on June 30, 2011

- Operational practices have been deficient, violating charter law and charter terms regarding oversight, record-keeping, and implementing policies and expectations in a responsible manner.
 - Operational staff positions (business manager, operations manager, and other office staff) have a high degree of turnover over two years of operations, with minimally six people, not including temporary hires, holding various titled positions. The Director of Operations position identified in the charter is currently not staffed and has been delegated to a variety of individuals and titled positions.
 - Job descriptions and responsibilities are not stable.
 - Internal oversight of operational procedures has been inadequately provided.
 - Recruitment, interviewing, hiring, supervision, and evaluation procedures for operational staff are informal and, to date, unsuccessful in building a competent, stable staff.
 - Procedures for conducting classroom visits for interested families and participating in post-registration placement testing were not consistently carried out, resulting in the possibility that some children received informal assessment prior to registration.

- School is under a Department of Labor investigation for practices related to temporary instructional employees.
 - School hires prospective teachers to work as consultants for terms that vary from a couple of days to up to two weeks. In one instance this extended for approximately 35 days of temporary employment.

- Board oversight of school overall performance and operations must become more rigorous and proactive in execution of responsibilities.
 - Standing committees of the board for finance and education are not firmly established or consistently meeting to provide oversight in areas of operations and performance.
 - Board is responsive to information and requests presented by school founders (Executive Director/Principal and spouse, both non-voting Board members) but not sufficiently pro-active in monitoring events and issues at the school.
 - Board profile is strong on educational expertise but lacks other areas of expertise/experience important to a charter school (finance, operations, legal, real estate, etc.)
 - Board had not submitted to the DOE's Charter Schools Office official notice of the resignation of one board member or submitted for approval the 2010 addition of two new board members.

Corrective Action Plan Requirements:

Please see the attached Notice of Probation for more information about the terms of the probation.

1. Revise ALCS's lottery procedures, processes, and monitoring plan to ensure fair, compliant, and timely execution of its lottery for 2012 and beyond. Changes must address all instances of failure in implementation that occurred in 2011 and identified above.

2. Board takes immediate action to activate standing committees with oversight responsibilities for finance and operations and for education, including oversight for supervision and evaluation of Executive Director.
3. Board conducts an analysis of its capacity for providing oversight and develops a plan for improving that capacity, which may include a strategy for board expansion and/or a program for board training.
4. Board revises its meeting schedule to include 12 monthly meetings a year.
5. Board, directly or by subcommittee, ensures that the school creates/revises a job description for a school Director of Operations, as per its charter application, and hires a qualified director. The school should also review its operational reporting structure to ensure clear accountability and effective oversight occurs.
6. School Executive Director should continue to lead efforts of current operational staff to revise School Operations Manual to codify, revising where necessary and creating where necessary, policies and procedures for student recruitment, registration procedures, student, staff, and compliance record keeping, payroll and accounts payable procedures, check-writing approval processes that ensure expenditures are adequately reviewed and authorized, school visitor protocols, and any other operational procedures that require attention based on the ongoing school and CSO review of school operations. Completed draft of revised manual will be reviewed by the Board and the CSO prior to a Board approval vote.
7. School Executive Director, working with the Board, should revise staff handbook to clarify/create job performance expectations, protocols, and rubrics for supervision and evaluation for all staff positions, operational and instructional, to ensure consistency of performance monitoring. Revised handbook will be reviewed by the Board and CSO prior to a Board approval vote.
8. School will continue to cooperate with the Department of Labor and to comply with all recommendations that result from the Department of Labor investigation of its hiring practices, as well with any other agency audits currently being conducted.
9. The Board will submit its Board of Trustees meeting agendas and all information packets for each meeting to the CSO each month.

Part 3: Framing Questions

FRAMING QUESTIONS:

Throughout the Renewal Process and the life of each school's charter, the NYCDOE Charter Schools Office uses the following framing questions to monitor Charter School success:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
2. Has the School Been a Viable Organization?
3. Has the School Been in Compliance with All Applicable Laws and Regulations?

Annual Site Visit Rubric:

1. Has the School Been an Academic Success?
 - Academic Goals and Mission
 - School components and curriculum align together and holistically support the mission
 - School has high academic expectations and employs strategies for the full range of students served by the school, including those at risk and those with special needs
 - Curriculum and Instruction
 - The educational plan is flexible and is adjusted to meet the performance levels and learning needs of all enrolled students
 - School implements programming to address the needs of students with disabilities and ELLs
 - Teachers demonstrate the use of differentiated instructional techniques to support the varying ways by which students learn
 - School has implemented programming for students who need remediation or acceleration
 - School Culture
 - The culture is strong, intentional, supportive and sustainable and promotes student learning
 - The school motivates all students and respects the diversity of learners and cultures in the community
 - School offers programs, activities or support services beyond academics to address students' social and emotional needs
 - School calendar and day are set to provide extra supports to ensure that students are able to meet and exceed academic goals
 - Schedule for communication to parents/students is timely and allows for due process, includes strategies to prepare students for transitions and strategies for those students who are not on schedule, presents a clear and fair system that complies with students' due process rights
 - Structures that foster the development of authentic, sustained, caring, respectful relationships among all stakeholders within school
 - Behavioral expectations and social supports that reflect the school's mission and comply with all applicable laws and regulations
 - Assessment
 - Establishes a culture of continuous improvement and accountability for student learning
 - Develops assessments that shape and inform instruction on an ongoing basis and develop data that's used to gauge student, teacher and school progress through formative and summative assessment
 - Student learning measured with multiple forms of assessments/metrics
 - Develops educational goals and performance metrics that are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reflect the Mission and Time-Specific
 - Develops assessments that are appropriately aligned with curriculum, instruction, and adopted standards

- Provides evidence of how data will influence instruction, professional development and curricular adjustments
- Parent Engagement
 - Parent engagement strategies that integrate and mobilize parents within the school community as conduits for student success
 - Capacity to communicate effectively with parents and families
 - Parent engagement strategies that integrate and mobilize parents within the school community as conduits for student success

- 2. Is the School a Viable Organization
 - Governance Structures and Organizational Design
 - School has articulated appropriate roles, responsibilities, and decision-making structure for school community members (including Board of Trustees and school leadership)
 - An accountability structure that provides effective oversight of the educational program and fiscal components of the school is in place and utilized
 - Board regularly reviews a data dashboard of student achievement and fiscal management that forms the basis for Board discussions and decisions
 - Board has diverse skill set that lends itself to strong educational / operational oversight
 - Board has an articulated process for ongoing policy development, Board member development and self-evaluation
 - Organizational charts are aligned with mission; roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
 - Board has developed essential strategic partnerships with organizations that support the mission of the school
 - Community Support
 - School Leadership demonstrated responsiveness to the unique needs and interests of the community to be served
 - School has established a presence in the community and has buy in from community members

- 3. Is the School in Compliance with Applicable Laws and Regulations
 - Special Populations
 - Well-defined plan and sufficient capacity to service the learning needs of Special Education students, English Language Learners
 - School adequately addresses the academic and non academic needs of students in need of remediation, students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and gifted students
 - There is a coherent plan for meeting the non-academic needs of students with disabilities, students with interrupted formal education, and other populations
 - School employs a process to identify students at risk of not meeting expectations and creates intervention plans and follow up
 - School demonstrates a comprehensive recruitment, enrollment and retention approach that is sensitive to the diverse needs of students
 - School admission policy and lottery preferences serve to create a student body that reflects community demographics and give a preference to community school district residents
 - Safety and Security
 - School is well maintained
 - Transitions and student gatherings are orderly and well supervised
 - Expectations for student behavior are well known and are enforced fairly
 - School is current with all safety recruitments and drills.
 - AED machines are in operation and school staff is trained in CPR