

Quality Review Report

2008-2009

Future Leaders Institute Charter School

Elementary/Middle School M861

**134, West 122nd Street
New York
NY 10027**

Board Chair: Suzanne Thompson

Dates of review: March 19, 2009

**Lead Reviewer: Jeannemarie Hendershot, Aamir Raza,
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&

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Part 1: The school context

Information about the school

Future Leaders Institute is an elementary-middle school with 310 students from kindergarten through grade 8. The school population comprises 90% Black, 7% Hispanic and 3% White and other students. The student body includes 2% English language learners and 10% special education students. The average attendance rate for the school year 2007-2008 was 94.5%.

Overall Evaluation

Future Leaders Institute has a welcoming and lively atmosphere. Adults and students are respectful and relationships are positive. The current principal, new to the role this academic year, is very conscious of how carefully his leadership must maintain and further develop this culture. Along with his three Directors of Instruction (DOI), a role also new to the school, he has addressed a few minor issues and misunderstandings along the way towards an agreed vision for the school's future. There is now a realistic understanding of the school's current context and realization that some things must change and improve to assure success for all students. From analysis of data, the school has determined improvement priorities. Not all members of staff are aware of these foci, so there is not yet a uniform drive to support the achievement of whole school goals by all constituents. In addition, strategies for school improvement, including teacher professional development, are not all supported by detailed action plans with interim checkpoints, agreed success criteria and set timeframes. This means that the school cannot be certain that they are on the right path to achieving goals before it is too late to change the direction of the journey.

Members of the leadership team possess a range of skills and experience to support the change process. While not all DOIs have extensive whole-school leadership experience, their classroom leadership knowledge and skills are vital to develop teachers' ability to make effective use of data to set appropriate goals for student learning and to plan work that precisely meets students' needs. This is currently inconsistent across the school. Leaders are totally committed to doing whatever is necessary to make a difference to student outcomes. Their expectations of teachers are high and sometimes this is a challenge to individual teachers. These expectations are realistic however, and result in students knowing that they have the capacity to do well when teachers support them effectively. Students speak highly of all the extended curriculum opportunities available to them to make learning more interesting and relevant. At times however, the school makes insufficient use of the good range of assessment information it gathers and analyzes to rethink what is being taught in classrooms and whether it is exactly what students need to learn. This means that some students do not make consistently good progress.

Leaders are honest and reflective of current shortfalls. This is the foundation for future success because their understanding now guides them in doing what is right to maximize the potential of each student.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

- There is a strong recognition of the importance of data and a good range of information is gathered, collated and analyzed with a growing level of consistency and accuracy.
- There are clear systems in place to encourage the effective use of all student data and productive assessment arrangements that provide meaningful information.
- Expectations for student and teacher outcomes are appropriately high, with the result that students have clear aspirations for their futures.
- The school has set priorities for development and improvement, emerging from accurate data analysis, in order to realize the vision for future success.
- The good range of enrichment activities that support student learning add interest to school life, motivating and engaging students.
- The principal, other school leaders and many members of faculty reflect honestly and openly on the school's current context and share a willingness to change and improve to ensure that students learn effectively.

Areas of concern

- Ensure that there are regular opportunities for using data to construct realistic, measureable and timed goals for student learning, and support teachers in carrying out this work effectively.
- Communicate clearly the priority goals for the school's development and improvement, ensuring that all staff understand their role in achieving the school's vision and are committed to doing so.
- Ensure that all staff understand and fulfill their roles in maximizing student progress towards achieving their learning goals.
- Develop all teachers' knowledge and skills in making the most effective use of ongoing student data to plan work that exactly meets students' needs.
- Include interim checkpoints in all improvement plans, including teacher professional development plans, to facilitate regular evaluation of progress towards priority goals against determined success criteria.

Part 3: Main Findings

How well the school meets Office of Charter School's (OCS) evaluation criteria

Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do and to monitor the student's progress over time.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school makes suitable use of a good range of student data. Leaders and most staff recognize that data is vital to support their detailed understanding of students' current levels of achievement. The school regularly collects data from sources such as diagnostic reading assessments, end of unit assessments, ACUITY and State tests. This information is collated and analyzed appropriately, giving school leaders a general overview of student outcomes and revealing major strengths and areas for improvement. Data shows for example, a clear disparity in student outcomes for math and English, especially for students in the middle school. There is also a useful set of information regarding the frequency and mode of behavior referrals. This data analysis guides school leaders' decision-making and directs support for individual teachers. The school presents current data in a clear and uniform way, supporting a top-level understanding of student performance.

The school has good computerized systems for collecting data that supports teachers in their analysis of outcomes. At weekly meetings, DOIs work with colleagues to evaluate assessment outcomes, establishing a growing understanding of student performance and progress. There is good evaluation of the progress made by special education students enabling the rewriting of individual education plans and good intervention planning to meet student needs with growing precision. Such frequent analysis for other subgroups is less regular and leaders admit that they need to 'drill down' further in this work, as they do not consistently analyze interim outcomes for pertinent subgroups. This means that it is not always clear to the school that progress for groups of students is as it should, indicating that they are on track to meet end of grade expectations.

Teachers share data with students in monthly academic update meetings. Students have a growing understanding of what data tells them about their learning and this is a good foundation for greater involvement in setting realistic targets towards achieving long-term goals. How the school regularly informs parents of this information is however inconsistent. This means that some teachers miss a very useful opportunity to involve parents in knowing how well their children are doing on an ongoing basis.

Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student's next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student's learning.

This area of the school's work is underdeveloped with proficient features.

From data analysis, leaders are clear in their prioritization of whole school goals for student outcomes. In some cases, leaders communicate priorities to the wider faculty, who understand the need to focus on essential aspects where there are gaps in achievement. Not all stakeholders are fully aware of these main goals at present, nor do they play an active role in looking at whole school data to establish priority development areas. In addition, although leaders establish long-term goals for all students, a more precise next level of goal setting is not fully established. Students allude to the setting of long-term goals at the start of the academic year, but these are broad and usually aspirational. There is evidence in classrooms that staff have considered and practiced the goal setting process, but limited indication of actual student goals at grade and class levels. As such, the goal setting process does not involve agreement on interim checkpoints within set timeframes against defined success criteria. For this reason, leaders and teachers cannot be sure that students are on track to meet their long-term goals, or are able to use interim data to adjust planning for the next steps in student learning.

In discussion with school leaders and staff, it is clear that expectations for student achievement are suitably high. Students feel that they are 'pushed' to do well, and they say that teachers 'teach us stuff that you should learn in the next grade'. Unfortunately, without detailed and precise goal setting for groups and individual students, it is hard for the school to focus exact attention on driving improvements where they are necessary. The school does not yet work 'smartly enough' to ensure that hard work and concerted effort result in targeted groups of students reaching their goals. Moreover, without a clear picture of exact projections for particular individuals and groups of students, some staff members do not know exactly what they must do to help their students to learn more effectively. Leaders and many teachers recognize this issue and in some classrooms, there are increasing examples of good practice for the school to build on.

It is also clear that students are not yet fully involved in the goal setting process, since sharing data and expectations with them is a new and improving practice. While students have a fair idea of what a long-term goal may look like, especially in reading, they are not often enough involved in thinking about the 'steps in between' that would lead them towards success in this goal. They do not currently have simple short-term targets by which they can assess their own progress towards the long-term goal. Staff clearly understand the power of such 'mini-steps' in additionally encouraging parental involvement and support for learning at home. The school seeks to engage parents at a very active level. Leaders fully accept that sharing interim targets and checkpoint outcomes with parents is a very viable way of eliciting stronger understanding of progress and motivating parents to work with their children at home.

Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students' learning goals.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

There is an extended range of enrichment activities to enthuse and motivate student learning. Students are very proud of successes in sporting and musical events, but recognize that their chance to participate requires concerted efforts with their work and conduct at school. Varied visits to museums, theaters and galleries encourage deeper understanding of many units of study. Students articulately explain why 'hands on' experiences are vital to their learning, giving extremely relevant examples. The school provides opportunities for students to make overnight visits, for example to Yellow Stone

National Park. In this way, the extended curriculum provides support for students' academic, physical, emotional and social development with very positive effect.

The classroom curriculum is not yet as supportive of the full range of student academic needs. While the core curriculum yields good opportunity for assessment, the school does not consistently use this ongoing information to make essential adaptations to curriculum planning and teaching, ensuring that learning is always effective. The school does not yet always ask the essential question, 'Is this what the students need to learn to be successful?' There are suitably high expectations, based on how the school would want students to perform in State tests. These expectations do not always translate into a real desire to do what is essential to move them quickly on from their current levels of achievement, regardless of what the grade level curriculum plans may contain. The result is that some lower achieving students are not supported fully to learn basic skills, while higher achieving students are not challenged enough to make the progress they are capable of. Some teachers currently struggle to make consistently effective use of data to plan learning that is exactly right for groups of students at various achievement levels in one class. Leaders and many teachers are fully aware that learning will only be effective for all students when they use assessment data meaningfully to plan the next steps in learning. Some teachers find this level of accountability a challenge, as it requires the constant need to assess, adapt and implement more personalized learning experiences. This is hard work and a task that some teachers do not fully accept is part of their role in helping students to succeed in meeting their goals.

The school has overcome some challenges as a new style of leadership has emerged. There is now a tangible feeling of determination to change and improve. The students perceive this as a 'serious' new style, but their sentiments are positive. They truly believe that teachers care about them and want them to do well. Distribution of leadership roles has created better communication of what works well and where improvements remain necessary. Leaders are reflective of their practice and flexible in their approach to doing what is right to make a difference to student outcomes. New levels of trust, openness and mutual respect are growing and the school is building on these positive foundations.

Quality Statement 4 - Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school's goals for accelerating student learning.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

Through general walkthroughs, leaders have an accurate understanding of where learning and teaching are effective and where improvements are necessary. They give helpful feedback and support to colleagues, encouraging improvements in practice. There has been recent emphasis on the use of classroom charts to support learning for lower achieving students. It is clear in classrooms that professional development has encouraged good use of charts which are accessible to struggling readers for example. Other whole school training has included Responsive Classroom approaches and general classroom organization. These strategies are yielding some positive outcomes and leaders are carefully monitoring any inconsistencies that affect student learning.

Monday meetings allow staff time to talk about their teaching. Leaders work alongside their colleagues to ensure ongoing development of teaching practices. Where weaknesses exist, leaders provide support proportionate to need. This has included visits to other schools to observe best practice. The school is doing an increasingly good job in accurately providing the right level of training and professional development

in relation to teacher needs. Many new teachers joined the school in the current academic year, so demands on support have been heavy. The creation of the DOI role has enabled focus on new teachers, helping them to settle into the demands of a new job and a new set of students. There remains room for further discussion regarding roles and responsibilities to ensure that all staff members fully understand the lines of support and accountability. These include the management of student behavior and the agreed behavior modes that result in referral to the dean or school leaders.

It is evident that the development of students' academic, personal and social skills are of equal importance to the school. Sporting, recreational and residential partnerships make a very positive contribution to social and personal development. Students recognize the value of this learning to their future lives.

Quality Statement 5 - Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating each student's progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

There is a clear vision for the school's future. Structures and procedures are gradually being introduced to support the realization of this vision. New ways of working are encouraging a concrete strategy for development and improvement. The school is however, less well armed with precise action plans so that everyone knows what they must do, by when and to whom they are accountable. In addition, there are few interim checkpoints for school leaders and faculty to carry out regular evaluations of 'where are we now?' This means that the school cannot be sure that they are on the right path to reach whole school goals or in fact, if they have achieved goals in advance of agreed times, allowing new focus on other priorities. Similarly, while leaders are clear about where teaching needs to improve, they do not set specific goals for teachers with measurable, interim checkpoints so that progress towards improvement is easy to assess.

Nevertheless, there is open dialogue about what needs to be done, based on an honest representation of where the school currently is. Leaders are not fearful of making changes. There are good examples of where assessment data has directed change and redirection. These processes are not yet as formalized as they should be to ensure that developments and improvements are sustainable and continuous. Leaders accept that this is the next stage in their work to ensure that all members of staff are 'on the same page'.

Quality Statement 6 - Monitor Effectiveness: The Charter School Board is proactive and diligent in monitoring its effectiveness and in undertaking its administrative responsibilities.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The Board is responsible for the overall direction and fiscal well-being of the school. As such, the Board has the authority and duty to adopt policies and by-laws that are necessary to meet its statutory responsibilities and produce optimal academic results. Those administrative and daily operational responsibilities need to be delegated to principals, senior management/administrators, and board appointed officers to manage the school within the established policies. The principal /senior administrators, and board appointed officers should then be held accountable for performance.

The FLI board is providing adequate oversight to the school and holding the school leader accountable through ongoing reviews and discussions regarding student outcomes. The board receives information via principal's report and by requesting financial (YTD Expenses, Cash Flow, Budget, Variance Analysis) and other data driven (scores, summaries, internal measures) information as it relates to the programs offered by the school. Prior school year, the school went through some transition when the two Co-Directors left the school to pursue other opportunities in a different state. The school board took this opportunity to conduct strategic modeling and engaged Deloitte and Touche to explore other charter school organizational models besides a Co-Director led school. After receiving the full report from the consultants, the board hired a new principal who, according to the board, has made good efforts in reaching out to the school wide community. Currently, there are weekly meetings between the new principal and the school board. The board identified professional development of the new principal as a priority and has assigned a coach to the principal.

The board plans to conduct an annual evaluation of the principal at the end of the school year.

Quality Statement 7 - Maintain Financial Viability: The Charter School and its Board maintain financial viability and control over the course of the academic year.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

A charter school shall be able to operate with an annual budget that reflects the expected revenue and expenses for the fiscal year. Since the revenue stream for charter schools tends to be based upon the number of students served (per pupil revenue) and the State and Federal grant (Title funding, etc.) funding, a continued and growing negative net balance poses a threat to school's stability and the ability to fulfill its short and long-term financial obligations. In the end, it is worth noting that a school may implement and practice the best internal controls (procurement, check signing, balanced budget, etc.) and could still end up in a difficult financial condition.

The FLI board has been proactive in contracting an audit firm and has produced the school's financial statements in reasonable period. The school maintains necessary financial documents to facilitate decision making at all levels. The unaudited balance sheet as of February '09 casts a solid financial position of the school with liquid assets totaling over \$2.7 million. The school has current liabilities of \$1.2 million and is in a good position to meet its short-term financial obligations. The statement of activities as of February '09 does not pose any particular concerns. The school provided the annual site visit team with a cash flow analysis projecting out until March '09. According to the cash flow projection, the school is expected to finish March '09 with a surplus of over \$1.3 million.

During the visit, the school officials were interviewed on the procurement process and check signing process, and three randomly selected paid invoices were inspected. The school is following its adopted financial policies and has adopted sound internal controls. A right balance of segregation of duties is in place among fiscal and operational staff. Paid invoices had the right purchase order approvals, order and receiving of goods, presence of packing slips and invoices along with proof of payment with proper signatories. The school has tagged its assets for inventory purposes.

Please note that although a school may implement good internal controls (not applicable in this case), it is the ongoing financial information (cash flow, balance sheet, statement of activities, board approved budget), that determines the fiscal health of a school and keeps it solvent in the near future and beyond.

Office of Charter Schools Quality Criteria 2008-2009

School name: Future Leaders Institute Charter School				
Quality Statement 1 – Gather Data: School leaders and faculty consistently gather, generate and analyze information on student learning outcomes and use it to understand what each student knows and can do, and to monitor the student’s progress over time.				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty have...</i>	△	▶	✓	+
1.1 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of each student, classroom, grade level?			X	
1.2 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of special education students?			X	
1.3 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of English language learners?	N/A			
1.4 an objective, constantly updated understanding of the performance and progress of ethnic groups, gender groups and all other categories of interest to the school?		X		
1.5 a measurement of performance and progress based on the school’s own past performance, and among students, classrooms, grades and subject areas?		X		
1.6 training, management systems and structures that support teachers in the use of school data to inform planning and instruction and to track the progress of students?			X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 1			X	
Quality Statement 2 – Plan and Set Goals: School leaders and faculty consistently use data to understand each student’s next learning steps and to set suitably high goals for accelerating each student’s learning.				
<i>To what extent do school leaders and faculty...</i>	△	▶	✓	+
2.1 use collaborative and data-informed processes to set measurable, actionable and differentiated learning goals in core subjects for individual students and groupings of students and develop differentiated plans and timeframes for reaching these goals?		X		
2.2 use collaborative and data-informed processes to develop the school’s Strategic Development Plan?		X		
2.3 ensure that the achievement of learning goals, and the implementation of plans and timeframes for reaching these goals, is the central focus of school leaders, faculty, students and families?		X		
2.4 involve students in developing their learning goals and plans and in taking their next learning steps?		X		
2.5 convey consistently high expectations to students and their parents/carers?			X	
2.6 invite and enable parents/caregivers to provide useful information to teachers and the school about the learning needs and capacities of their children?			X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 2		X		

Quality Statement 3 – Develop Coherent Instructional and Organizational Strategies: The school uses rigorous curricula, teaching and organizational decision making to engage students and faculty in meeting all students’ learning goals.				
<i>To what extent do school leaders...</i>	△	▶	✓	+
3.1 select core curricular approaches that facilitate and provide meaningful interim data and hold teachers accountable for the progress and learning of the students in their charge?		X		
3.2 provide a broad and engaging curriculum to enhance learning both within and outside the school day and hold teachers for making instruction interesting and compelling?			X	
3.3 hold teachers accountable for creating a positive, safe and inclusive learning environment?			X	

3.4 ensure that teachers use school, classroom and student data to plan for and provide differentiated instruction that meets the specific needs of all the students in their charge?		X					
3.5 ensure that there is an environment of mutual trust and respect between all staff and students to support personal and academic development?			X				
3.6 ensure that there are effective and consistently applied procedures to encourage and monitor student attendance and tardiness and report actual attendance data?			X				
Overall score for Quality Statement 3				X			
Quality Statement 4 – Align Capacity Building to Goals: The school aligns its leadership development and structured professional collaboration around meeting the school’s goals for accelerating student learning.							
<i>To what extent do school leaders...</i>				△	▷	✓	+
4.1 use frequent observations of classroom teaching by the principal and other available information to develop a differentiated strategy for improving the quality of each teacher's instruction?			X				
4.2 make professional development decisions strategically, based on data, to help meet the improvement goals of students and teachers?			X				
4.3 provide frequent opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s classroom instruction and to meet together in teams to plan, share effective practices, and evaluate one another’s instruction in an open and reflective professional environment?			X				
4.4 develop effective procedures for the induction and support of teachers who are new to the profession or the school?			X				
4.5 align youth development, guidance/advising, other student support services and partnerships with outside entities around stated academic and personal development goals?			X				
4.6 consistently implement clear procedures that enable the school to run smoothly, encourage effective learning and effectively address discipline-related incidents?			X				
Overall score for Quality Statement 4				X			
Quality Statement 5 – Monitor and Revise: The school has structures for monitoring and evaluating each student’s progress throughout the year and for flexibly adapting plans and practices to meet its goals for accelerating learning.							
<i>To what extent do...</i>				△	▷	✓	+
5.1 the school’s plans for improving student outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?		X					
5.2 the school’s plans for improving teacher outcomes include interim goals that are objectively measurable and have suitable time frames for measuring success and making adjustments?		X					
5.3 teachers and faculty use periodic assessments and other diagnostic tools to measure the effectiveness of plans and interventions for individual and groups of students in key areas?			X				
5.4 teachers and school leaders use the information generated by periodic assessments and other progress measures to revise plans immediately and make strategic decisions to modify practices in order to reach stated goals?			X				
5.5 school leaders and staff use each plan’s interim and final outcomes to drive the next stage of goal setting and improvement planning?		X					
5.6 the principal and school community have a clear vision for the future development of the school and implement procedures and systems to effect change?			X				
Overall score for Quality Statement 5				X			

Quality Statement 6 – Monitor Effectiveness: The Charter School Board is proactive and diligent in monitoring its effectiveness and in undertaking its administrative responsibilities.							
<i>To what extent does the Board.....</i>				△	▷	✓	+
6.1 ensure effective, broad outreach to create a student body that is representative of the school’s Community School District?			X				
6.2 manage any conflict of interest within the governing body and throughout the school?			X				
6.3 hold EMOs, CMOs and school leadership accountable in their positions?			X				
6.4 ensure that teachers are provided with high quality professional development opportunities to further build on their professional expertise?			X				
6.5 respond to parent, staff and student concerns/complaints?			X				
6.6 provide ongoing training for board members so that they are able to fulfill the duties of their positions?			X				

Overall score for Quality Statement 6						X			
Quality Statement 7 – Maintain Financial Viability: The Charter School and its Board maintain financial viability and control over the course of the academic year.									
<i>To what extent do the school and its Board.....</i>						△	➤	✓	+
7.1 ensure that an independent auditor is appointed to undertake an annual financial audit, which is submitted to the OCS along with any other relevant documentation?								X	
7.2 comply with the adoption of an annual budget for the upcoming school year, which is submitted to the OCS for review?								X	
7.3 maintain an accurate balance sheet, statement of activities, year-to-date expense report and statement of cash flow?								X	
7.4 implement procedures that provide adequate internal control measures to detect and prevent financial fraud, such as bank reconciliation, revenue recognition and travel reimbursement?								X	
7.5 align financial decision making to analysis and evaluation of student achievement data?								X	
7.6 focus budget decisions on the priorities for school development and improvement?								X	
Overall score for Quality Statement 7						X			
Quality Review Scoring Key									
△	Underdeveloped	➤	Underdeveloped with Proficient Features		✓	Proficient	+	Well Developed	

DEFINITIONS

“**Analyze**” or “**analysis**” includes, but is not limited to, comparisons of:

- 1 the current and past outcomes of . . . individual students, administrative groupings and sub-groups of students and the school itself in core subjects;
- 2 the outcomes of different classrooms and sub-groups in the same grades and core subjects; and
- 3 the school’s Progress Report and other outcomes to those of peer/other schools

“**Assessment results**” include student outcomes on summative assessments (e.g., state ELA, math, science and social studies tests, NYSESLAT, Regents Exams, and Performance Based Assessment Tasks) and formative assessments aligned to the school’s curriculum (including Periodic, DY0, and teacher-developed Classroom Assessments).

“**Data-informed processes**” include analysis of Progress Report, Quality Review, Learning Environment Survey, Inquiry Team findings, assessment results and attendance data

“**Organizational decisions or strategies**” refer to a school’s use of budget and resources, staffing, planning, scheduling, grade structure, department and teacher teams and other aspects of the school’s structure and organization that can affect student outcomes.

“**Sub-groups of students**” include special education students, English Language Learners, the other NCLB sub-groups, boys, girls, and other groups significant to the school.

Charter School Compliance Checklist			
Does the Board and the school . . .	YES	NO	In process
1. have a documented policy for suspensions and expulsions?	X		
2. maintain up to date and compliant with IDEA Regulations for IEPs?	X		
3. send newsletters and other parent communications home in the predominant languages of the school community?	X		
4. implement a comprehensive special education program that complies with applicable governing laws?	X		
5. implement a comprehensive program for English Language Learners that complies with federal law?	X		
6. publish a schedule of regular board meetings that is easily accessible to the general public?	X		
7. ensure that accurate minutes from Board meetings are maintained and published?	X		
8. ensure that proposed contracts with EMOs and CMOs are submitted punctually to the OCS for review?	X		
9. maintain a functioning parent organization?	X		
10. ensure that parents are informed of the time and location of Board meetings that are open to the public?	X		
	X		