



**Department of
Education**

Dennis M. Walcott, Chancellor

**Charter School Annual Site Visit Report
Charter Schools Office
2011-2012**

DEMOCRACY PREP HARLEM CHARTER SCHOOL

ANNUAL SITE VISIT REPORT

APRIL 2012

Part 1: Executive Summary

School Overview and History:

Democracy Prep Harlem Charter School (DPH) is a middle school serving approximately **218** students in grades 6-7 in the 2011-2012 school year¹. This is the school's second year of operation. It has plans to grow to serve students grades 6 through 8.² It is currently housed in DOE space in District 5. There are two other schools (one district school and one charter school) within MS 481.

There were 1,319 students on the waitlist after the Spring 2011 lottery.³ The student body includes 84.5% Free and Reduced Lunch students, compared to 78.41% in the district; 18.3% students with disabilities, compared to 16.71% in the district; and 6.8% English language learners (ELL), compared to 10.91% in the district.⁴ The average attendance rate for the school year 2011-2012 was 96.8%.⁵

The school scored Above Average on the Academic Expectations, Communication, and Safety & Respect sections of the NYC DOE School Survey in 2011-2012; the school scored Average on the Engagement section. For each section, DPH scored higher than citywide averages for all middle schools. Seventy percent of the school's parents, 96% of the school's students, and 100% of the school's teachers responded to the survey.⁶

Democracy Prep Harlem Charter School is part of the Democracy Prep Public Schools network, a charter management organization. The CMO provides an overarching Superintendent, back office support, institutional goals aligned to network goals; student assessment data gathering, and school policies (e.g. HR) among other support services. DPH, working with and through the network, manages student information via ATS, orders supplies, and compiles its quarterly financial reports (in conjunction with the DPH's Board of Trustees Finance Committee). The fee structure is based on an initial 15% of public non-competitive revenues with an annual reduction of ½%.

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 3, 2012:

- Sonia C. Park, NYC DOE CSO, Senior Director
- Etzer Botes, NYC DOE CSO, Director of Oversight

¹ NYC DOE ATS system, Democracy Prep Harlem Charter School self reported School Evaluation Visit Data Collection Form (2/29/2012)

² Charter agreement

³ Self-reported by school on Annual Site Visit Data Collection Form dated 2/29/2012

⁴ NYC DOE ATS system as of 4/3/2012

⁵ School Evaluation Visit Data Collection Form (2/29/2012)

⁶ NYC DOE School Survey – <http://schools.nyc.gov/survey>

Part 2: Findings

Areas of Strength:

- DPH has enacted measures in order to be in full compliance with the 2010 amended Charter School Act. Targeted populations for enrollment and retention, specifically for students receiving Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) and students with disabilities (SWD) are higher than the school's community school district, CSD 5.
 - The school has a FRL population of 84.5% FRL⁷, higher than CSD 5's FRL rate of 78.41%⁸.
 - DPH has a SWD population of 18.3%⁹, higher than CSD 5's SWD rate of 16.71%¹⁰.
- Democracy Prep Harlem (DPH) has established a culture that is mission-driven and embedded throughout the school, both among DPH leadership and across the staff. The school benefits from high levels of engagement, trust, and buy-in from all stakeholders.
 - On the day of the visit, the school was safe, well maintained and orderly with a firm enforcement of discipline that has student and teacher support.
 - School leadership is self-reflective with a strong sense of accountability and respect.
 - The school's common areas and the classrooms we visited were print-rich with many examples of student work, educational posters, and bulletin boards.
 - Teachers interviewed described feeling supported in their work as evidenced by frequent opportunities to be observed and receive feedback. Consistent approaches to language and systems between staff and students were observed in classrooms and during hallway transitions.
 - For example, "Track (insert name)," thumbs up thumbs down, and count downs, were seen used in most classes.
- The professional environment among teachers and school leadership at DPH was observed to be collegial, collaborative, and communicative.
 - Interviewed teachers reported strong leadership involvement. It was stated that the Principal frequently observes, evaluates and provides feedback to teachers through both informal and formal evaluations.
 - The Principal reported that he videotapes lessons in order to provide direct feedback to teachers on their classroom instructional practices.
 - DPH has promoted staff from within, providing a path for teachers to take on additional responsibilities and leadership roles as the school continues to grow.
- DPH teachers displayed strong instructional control while conducting lessons.
 - Students followed teacher directions and no significant behavioral problems were observed.
 - In observed classes most students were engaged in the lesson and could clearly articulate the objective of the lesson and what they were learning.
 - Teachers were seen to vary which students they called on/questioned, often targeting disengaged students.
- The DPH curriculum puts emphasis on frequent writing practice and instruction as well as data-driven differentiation of instruction.
 - The school has a multi-layered approach to collecting data using mock assessments, Fountas and Pinnell, exit tickets, etc.
 - Data gained from assessments is used by the school to support differentiation and to identify needs for additional services.

⁷ NYC DOE ATS system, April 2012

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

- Data is made available to teachers to support them in creating differentiated groups for instruction in the classroom and identifying support needed for students with behavioral issues.
- Operational Strength
 - Operational support for DPH is provided by the network. The school-based operations coordinator and the Principal reported a clear and supportive relationship with the network as evidenced by professional development provided by the network for administrative office personnel.
 - School systems for attendance, hallway transitions, food service, etc. appear to be consistently utilized throughout the school and experience few disruptions.
 - The school is taking a proactive approach to planning for future facilities needs in light of expanding to serve grade 8.

Area of Growth:

- DPH is encouraged to continue to enact corrective measures in order to be in full compliance with the 2010 amended Charter School Act specifically regarding the school's targeted English Language Learners (ELL) population.
 - The school should document outreach to ELL students in order to be comparable to CSD 5. DPH's population includes 6.8%¹¹ ELLs, which is lower than CSD 5's 10.91%¹².
- DPH is encouraged to continue to focus on ways to sustain and strengthen its culture as the school continues to grow.
 - In several observed classes, the level of energy and enthusiasm displayed by staff and students was inconsistent.
 - The school is encouraged to continue improving its practices around discipline and promoting positive student behavior.
- DPH should continue to focus on ways to refine its definition of rigorous work and emphasize developing student ownership of learning.
 - Several lessons observed lacked checks for comprehension before students proceeded to independent work or the next lesson. The school should consider incorporating strategies that can be consistently used by teachers to verify student understanding before transitions to other activities or instruction.
- DPH leadership should continue to work with its teaching staff in developing additional opportunities for teacher collaboration.
 - Some teachers expressed the need for greater common planning time and structured opportunities to collaborate with content-level colleagues.
 - Some of the interviewed teachers emphasized the need for opportunities to observe teachers teaching the same content and expressed the desire for flexible scheduling alternatives to allow for expanded observation opportunities.
 - Some of the teachers interviewed expressed interest in expanded professional development opportunities (e.g. curriculum, skills building, etc.).
 - The school may consider diversifying the classroom experience with more peer-to-peer dialogue, student collaboration, and/or experiential learning.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

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 established in school charter
- Meet student progress goals established in school charter
- 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
- Parent association meeting agendas and minutes
- Participation at parent-teacher conferences, school advocacy events, participation in academic goal related programs
- Stakeholder (board, parents, staff, students, etc.) interviews

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
- Offer defined opportunities for remediation and acceleration
- Have effective strategies and quality instructional programs for addressing students with special needs and ELLs
- Have defined strategies that they can measure and monitor for closing the achievement gap
- 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
- Use a defined process for evaluating curricular tasks, programs and resources for effectiveness and fit with school mission and goals
- Have school calendars and day schedules that provide the time necessary to deliver on the school's mission and academic 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
- Special Education/ELL progress monitoring documentation
- Interim assessment results
- Student and teacher portfolios
- Data findings; adjusted lesson plans
- Self-assessment documentation
- Professional development plans and resources
- School calendar and daily schedules
- DOE School Surveys and internal school satisfaction surveys
- Instructional leader and staff interviews

1d. Learning Environment

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

- Have a strong academic culture that creates high academic and behavioral expectations in a way that motivates students to consistently give their best efforts
- 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 plan with formal or informal structures or programs in place that provide students opportunities to develop as individuals and citizens (for example: a character education, citizenship, or community involvement or service program)

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

- School mission and articulated values
- School calendar and class schedules
- Student management plan (code of conduct, school values, discipline policy, positive incentive system, etc.)
- Student attendance and retention rates
- Student discipline data (referral, suspension, expulsion)
- DOE School Survey student results
- DOE School Survey parent and teacher safety and respect results
- Parent complaint/concern information
- Internal 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:

- Have a clearly articulated governance structure, compliant with its charter and all applicable laws and regulations, with clear lines of accountability for the Board, school leadership and all staff
- Have a capable Board of Trustees with appropriate officers, committees, and a purposeful 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, and is fully compliant with its Board approved by-laws (number of meetings, quorum, posting of calendar, agenda and minutes)
- Have a defined process for Board reflection on effectiveness, assessing developing needs, and plan for professional growth
- 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 and, if and when necessary, makes timely

- adjustments to that structure with proper notice to and approval by its authorizer
- If applicable, school relationship with a charter management organization is identified in charter and supported by a management agreement that spells out services, responsibilities, accountability reporting, performance expectations, and fees
- Have timely and appropriate access to legal counsel
- Implements a process for recruiting, hiring, compensating, monitoring, and evaluating the effectiveness of the school's staff that is clearly defined in staff handbook
- Have instructional leadership staffing and support structures that holds staff accountable for student learning outcomes and provide regular feedback on instruction to teachers, including both formal and informal observations

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

- School charter
- Board by-laws, roster, trustee resumes, calendar of meetings, meeting agenda and minutes
- Annual conflict of interest forms
- Board resources for evaluating school leadership and staff, including rubric/performance metrics
- Board resources for self-reflection and professional growth
- Board development plan
- Board interviews
- Staff roster, job descriptions, staff handbook, operations manual
- School calendar
- Professional development plan for leadership staff
- School leadership and staff interviews

2b. School Climate and Community Engagement

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

- Create and maintain a healthy professional school climate that is collaborative, student centered, and aligned with school mission and values
- Implement flexible, data-driven approach to professional development for all staff
- Encourage professional conversations about effective performance and quality instruction among staff, through, for example, such means as regular and periodic teaming (grade level teams, data days, etc.) and peer observations
- Have systems in place to evaluate professional development effectiveness and provide ongoing support for school-wide and individual initiatives
- Employ an effective means of measuring and monitoring core constituency satisfaction (parent, staff, and, when age appropriate, student), including, but not limited to, the DOE School Survey
- Have effective home-school communication practices and engagement strategies to ensure meaningful parent involvement in the learning of their children
- Engage parents actively in the life of the school, including advocacy, community engagement, and feedback on school policies and initiatives
- Develop strong community-based partnerships who support and advocate for the school
- Have a clear procedure for parents and staff to express concerns to school leadership and the Board, as appropriate, including a clearly articulated escalation path to authorizer

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
- Internal satisfaction surveys
- Staff handbook
- Student retention and wait list data
- Staff retention data
- School Professional Development Plan and staff feedback on professional development events
- Resources for evaluations and observations, scheduled opportunities for professional collaboration, staff feedback on professional development events
- Leadership, staff, parent, student interviews
- Student and staff attendance rates
- Parent/Student Handbook
- Parent attendance at parent-teacher conferences
- Parent association meeting calendar and minutes
- Community partnerships and sponsored programs
- Parent and community feedback via public hearings, renewal calls to parents, etc.
- Community outreach documents (newsletters, announcements, invitations, etc.)

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 student enrollment and retention targets
- Maintain annual budgets that meet all short- and long-term financial responsibilities with available revenues
- Provide rigorous oversight of financial and operational responsibilities, as school leadership and Board levels, in a manner that keeps the school's mission and academic goals central to short- and long-term decision-making
- Have clearly established policies and procedures for overall fiscal and operational health of the school (onboarding of all new staff, record-keeping, processing requests of HR services, application and enrollment calls, visitors, volunteers, etc.)
- Maintain effective internal controls of finances to ensure integrity of financial management and a proactive approach to mitigating risk
- Receive consistently clean financial audits
- If applicable, have strong, accountable partnerships with management organizations and other partners and significant vendors to support delivery of charter school design and academic program
- Ensure a safe, clean and appropriately resourced educational facility with all appropriate services specified in charter and mandated by appropriate law and regulations
- Have appropriate insurance coverage

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
- Financial leader(s) job description, resume and accountability documents
- Financial and operational organizational chart
- Financial audits
- Contracts or Memos of Understanding (MOUs) for significant partnerships and vendor relationships
- Operational policies and procedures, including training resources
- Staff turnover and retention records
- Secure storage areas for student and staff records
- Policies/protocols for maintaining secure records
- Required facility documents (lease, certificate of occupancy, fire and safety inspections, etc.)
- School safety plan
- Appropriate insurance documents

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, if appropriate, 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 up-to-date charter is available on request 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
- Annual Site Visit reports
- Board meetings, agendas and minutes
- Leadership, Board, staff and community interviews
- Public hearings (renewal or material revision hearings)

3b. Applicable Federal and State Law

Schools in substantial compliance with federal and state law:

- Meet all legal requirements for Title I and IDEA regulations and reporting
- Meet or exceed enrollment and retention targets for FRL, ELL and Special Education students to those of their district of location¹³ or are making documented good faith efforts to reach comparable percentages for enrollment and retention
- Implement 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
- Conduct an independently verified fair and open lottery and manage with integrity enrollment

¹³ School-specific targets for enrollment and retention are to come from NY State Education Department

- process and annual waiting lists
- Employ 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
- Family/Student handbook
- Student discipline records
- Parent complaint/grievance records
- Lottery policy, resources, and records; enrollment procedures and records
- Demographic data (school, district, and other as appropriate)
- 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 CSAS's requirements for reporting changes in board membership and securing approval for new board members.
- Informed NYC DOE CSAS, and where required, received CSAS 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 with Board, staff, parents, students or others, as appropriate

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:

- Renewal application narrative, including performance results and analyses of the current charter term
- Renewal application revised charter submission, including mission, program description, governance, organization, budget, etc. for new term
- Charter (replication) Application
- 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:

- Renewal application narrative, including performance results and analyses of the current charter term
- Renewal application revised charter submission, including mission, program description, governance, organization, budget, etc. for new term
- 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:

- Renewal application narrative, including performance results and analyses of the current charter term
- Renewal application revised charter submission, including mission, program description, governance, organization, budget, etc. for new term
- Leadership and board interviews
- Contracts or Memos of Understanding (MOUs) with partners or important vendors