

# Renewal Inspection Report

EXCEL ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL  
EAST BOSTON, MA



OCTOBER 15-18, 2007

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
<b>About the renewal process and site visit report</b>	1
<b>How to read this report</b>	1
<b>Renewal inspection team</b>	2
<b>Setting</b>	3
<b>Findings</b>	4
<b>Renewal Question 1: Is the academic program a success?</b>	5
<b>Renewal Question 2: Is the school a viable organization?</b>	15
<b>Renewal Question 3: Is the school faithful to the terms of the charter?</b>	21
<b>Renewal Question 4: If the school's charter is renewed, what are its plans for the next five years?</b>	25
<b>Appendix A: Schedule of the renewal inspection visit</b>	27

## **ABOUT THE RENEWAL PROCESS AND SITE VISIT REPORT**

Beginning in the spring of the third year of its charter (and ending August 1<sup>st</sup> following its fourth year), a school may apply for renewal of its charter for another five-year term. Following guidelines set forth in the *Application for Renewal of a Public School Charter*, an application for renewal should be an articulate, affirmative response, based on clear, credible evidence, to the questions that guide charter school accountability. It must also offer compelling answers to questions about the school's plans for the future. The application should be a sound, well-supported explanation of why the Board of Education should renew a school's charter.

Once this application has met a minimal review of its clarity and coherence, the Department of Education will appoint an evaluation team to conduct a three-to-four-day visit of the school to corroborate and augment the school's application for renewal. This report is the result of one such evaluation.

The renewal site visit process and report provide a detailed and current portrait of a public charter school at the time of its application for renewal. While the renewal site visit report itself is a vital source of information within the renewal process, it is most effective when used in conjunction with the longitudinal school performance data available to the Department of Education. The combination of more general long-term data with the detailed information gathered by the renewal visit constitutes an evidence base rigorous enough to inform decisions about the future of public charter schools responsible for the education of students in the Commonwealth. In keeping with Massachusetts Board of Education's commitment to a public charter school accountability system that is based on robust and diverse performance data, the renewal site visit report does not make recommendations about whether a school should be renewed. It presents a detailed picture of the present state of the school as one of several key sources of information to be considered by the Board of Education in its renewal decision.

## **HOW TO READ THIS REPORT**

The first section of this report describes the school's setting. Included in this section are information on the origin and history of the charter, student demographics, staffing and the school's educational program. This is also an opportunity to include any organizational history, such as changes in the Board and leadership or challenges the school has faced, and its response to those challenges.

The core of the report is the Renewal Inspection Team's findings. Findings are the team's assessment of the school's strengths and areas for improvement that, in their judgment, have the greatest bearing on the school's achievement of its defined goals. Findings are organized under each of the renewal questions: *Is the academic program a success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?* The team's comments on the fourth question, *If the school is renewed, what are its plans for the next five years?*, reflect their judgment of the quality of the school's proposed new goals and their assessment of the school's capacity to fulfill those goals. Each finding is a bolded statement followed by explanatory paragraphs reporting the evidence supporting the team's judgments. Finally, Appendix A illustrates the team's schedule during the renewal visit.

## RENEWAL INSPECTION TEAM

**Anne Lane, Team Leader:** Ms. Lane is a project associate with SchoolWorks. She is experienced as a teacher, early childhood program founder and principal in both Connecticut and Massachusetts.

**Thomas Harvey, Team Member:** Dr. Harvey is a consultant for SchoolWorks and an adjunct faculty member at Endicott College. His career in Maine included positions in teaching, coaching, school counseling and school administration spanning kindergarten through post-graduate levels.

**Linda Moriarty, Team Member:** Ms. Moriarty is a consultant with SchoolWorks. She has been a teacher, curriculum developer and assistant principal in Boston and an elementary principal in Marshfield, Massachusetts.

**Zita Samuels, Team Member:** Ms. Samuels, a consultant with SchoolWorks, is also a professional grant writer and program evaluator. Formerly, she had a long career as a program administrator in the public schools of Somerville, Massachusetts.

**Bill Wolf, Team Member:** Dr. Wolf is a field examiner for the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability. He has experience in teaching and administration in public schools, as well as in colleges and universities, with expertise in research methodologies and organizational leadership.

## SETTING

Excel Academy Charter School opened in September 2003 with 100 students in grade six. The school has grown over the past four years and now serves approximately 200 middle school students in grades five through eight. Excel Academy leases space in a commercial two-story building in East Boston, MA. Renovations have been made to accommodate the school's classrooms. However, there is no gymnasium or cafeteria and limited outdoor space. Students have lunch in their classrooms. The school recruits primarily from East Boston and Chelsea and attracts students from Revere, Winthrop and other Boston neighborhoods. There are currently 30-40 students on the school's waitlist for each grade. Approximately seven percent of the students leave the school each year due to factors such as moving, commuting distance, length of school day, amount of homework and the school's strong discipline policy.

Most students who attend Excel Academy are Hispanic/Latino (69 percent). Eighteen percent are White, nine percent are African-American and four percent are *other*. Seventy-five percent of the students fall into the low-income category. Nine percent receive special education services and five percent are English language learners (ELLs). These students, for the most part, are fully included in the regular curriculum. Their additional instructional support services are provided during non-academic and specialized periods that are part of the school's extended day.

The school's educational program is driven by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, which inform the development of instructional units and lessons of study in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Excel Academy provides students with opportunities to participate in enrichment programs that expose them to sports, fitness, dance, debate, journalism and art, both at the school and off site through partnerships with Alexander Ferdinand-Topf Dance Studio, the Chelsea Boys and Girls Club, Theatre Zone and ZUMIX.

The leadership structure at Excel Academy consists of an executive director, principal, dean of curriculum/instruction and dean of students. To support management, there is a director of resource development, an operations manager and an office manager. There are 14 content teachers and specialists for ELL, SPED, art and physical education. The school has a part-time counselor, a nurse, a director of high school placement and a director of graduate services. The recruitment and hiring of new teachers is conducted by the executive director with input from principal and teachers.

Approximately 82 percent of the teaching staff at Excel Academy currently meets the highly qualified teacher requirements, as outlined by No Child Left Behind. In the past year, staff retention was 67 percent. Currently, there are nine teachers who are in their first year at Excel Academy. Several new teachers were hired because of the addition of the fifth grade.

Excel Academy is governed by a 12-member Board of Trustees, most of whom are from the corporate world. Half have served on the Board since 2003. Board members are elected to three-year renewable staggered terms. The Board is charged with providing governance, fiscal oversight and strategic planning. Board members have all contributed financially to the school and actively engage in fundraising. The Board works with the Executive Director to set policies to guide the direction of the school. Excel Academy is financially solvent and has had positive audits each year since its inception.

## FINDINGS

In preparing this report, the Renewal Inspection Team (the team) spent three-and-a-half days -- October 15 – 18, 2007 – at the Excel Academy Charter School. During that time, the team observed 20 classroom lessons. The team conducted focus group interviews with six members of the Board of Trustees, 25 parents, 17 teachers, 16 students in grades 5-8, as well as the school's leaders including the executive director, principal, dean of students and dean of curriculum and instruction. The team also conducted interviews with the director of high school placement, the director of graduate services, the director of resource development and the school nurse.

The team examined a variety of documents. These included financial statements; test results (MCAS, and TerraNova); the school's Annual Report and Accountability Plan; the Charter Renewal Application; reports of previous site visits; Board agendas and minutes; the school's academic data analysis; demographic and enrollment data; the school's curriculum binders; samples of student work; teacher observation and evaluation instruments; the professional development schedule; the *Overview & Operations Handbook*; the *Employee Policy Manual*; the *Student & Family Handbook*; the *Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment* guide; the *Handbook for Classroom Management, School Culture, and Student Character*; and samples of lesson plans and accompanying feedback. The team also analyzed teacher qualifications and experience, and considered the school's plans for the future, including the proposed new Excel Academy Charter School Accountability Plan.

**RENEWAL QUESTION 1: IS THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM A SUCCESS?**

**1. Excel Academy has consistently achieved or exceeded its goals for student performance on MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System).**

The MCAS results in the following table (see page 5) for students tested at Excel Academy show that the school has achieved its academic measures:

- Ninety percent of students enrolled at Excel Academy for two or more years will pass the MCAS English language arts assessment.
- Seventy-five percent of students enrolled at Excel Academy for two or more years will pass the MCAS mathematics assessment.

**Table 1: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Percentage of Students in each MCAS Performance Category  
Grade 8—ELA and Mathematics**

Year/Subject	n	A	P	NI	W
<b>ELA</b>					
2006*	80	11	83	6	0
State		12	62	19	7
District**		5	49	30	16
2007	68	7	79	12	1
State		12	63	18	6
District		4	51	30	14
<b>Mathematics</b>					
2006	80	21	51	25	3
State		12	28	31	29
District		7	16	29	48
2007	67	46	45	9	0
State		17	28	30	25
District		7	20	31	42
*No eighth grade students prior to 2006					
**Since more 50 percent of Excel’s students come from Boston, this is the district used for comparison.					
N = number of students tested; A = Advanced; P = Proficient; NI = Needs Improvement; W = Warning					

**Grade 8 Results**

Excel Academy had its first eighth grade class in 2006, when 94 percent of these students performed in the Advanced and Proficient categories in the ELA assessment. In 2007, this figure declined to 86 percent, along with a year-to-year increase of six percent in the Needs Improvement category. Despite this decline, the school exceeded its goal of 90 percent passing in ELA after two years of enrollment at the school. The school’s results exceeded those of the state in nearly all Proficiency categories for ELA in 2006 and 2007 for grade 8. In all instances, Excel Academy had greater percentages of students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for ELA than the comparison district – Boston. It should be noted that the school considers that all students who are not in the Warning category as having passed the test.

In mathematics, there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of eighth grade students who were Advanced and Proficient from 2006 to 2007 – from 72 percent in 2006 to 91 percent in 2007. Also, 100 percent of students passed, exceeding the goal of 90 percent passing after two years at the school. The school’s grade 8 results exceeded those of the state in nearly all Proficiency categories for mathematics in 2006 and 2007 and the school ranked fourth among 461 districts statewide in this assessment. In all instances, Excel Academy exceeded the comparison district, Boston, with greater percentages of students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for mathematics.

**Table 2: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Percentage of Students in each MCAS Performance Category  
Grade 7—ELA and Mathematics**

Year/Subject	n	A	P	NI	W
<b>ELA</b>					
2005*	89	5	59	30	7
State		10	56	27	7
District**		4	40	40	17
2006	77	10	61	29	0
State		10	55	26	9
District		4	39	36	20
2007	50	16	70	10	4
State		9	60	23	8
District		3	46	33	18
<b>Mathematics</b>					
2006	77	13	34	45	8
State		12	28	33	28
District		6	16	33	45
2007	49	14	43	33	10
State		15	31	30	24
District		6	20	30	44
*No seventh grade students prior to 2005. Grade 7 not tested in mathematics in 2005.					
**Since more than 50 percent of Excel’s students come from Boston, this is the district used for comparison.					
N = number of students tested; A = Advanced; P = Proficient; NI = Needs Improvement; W = Warning					

### Grade 7 Results

In 2005, 64 percent of grade 7 students performed in the Advanced and Proficient categories on the ELA MCAS assessment, with 94 percent passing. By 2007, these figures improved, with 86 percent Advanced and Proficient and 96 percent passing. The school’s grade 7 results exceeded those of the state for ELA in 2007. In all instances, Excel Academy had greater percentages of students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for ELA than the comparison district – Boston.

Numbers of seventh grade students who were Advanced and Proficient in mathematics increased from 47 percent in 2006 to 57 percent in 2007. During both years, 90 percent or more students passed. In 2006 and 2007, the school outperformed the state in nearly all categories on the mathematics MCAS for grade 7. In 2006 and 2007, Excel Academy exceeded the comparison

district, Boston, with greater percentages of students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for mathematics.

**Table 3: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Percentage of Students in each MCAS Performance Category  
Grade 6—ELA and Mathematics**

Year/Subject	n	A	P	NI	W
<b>ELA</b>					
2007*	52	8	71	19	2
State		9	58	25	7
District**		4	35	42	20
<b>Mathematics</b>					
2004	92	11	33	40	16
State		17	25	32	25
District		6	12	29	54
2005	81	2	23	40	35
State		17	29	30	23
District		8	15	28	49
2006*					
2007	52	37	38	19	6
State		20	32	28	20
District		9	20	31	41
*No sixth grade students in 2006. No sixth grade ELA MCAS results prior to 2007.					
**Since more than 50 percent of Excel's students come from Boston, this is the district used for comparison.					
N = number of students tested; A = Advanced; P = Proficient; NI = Needs Improvement; W = Warning					

### Grade 6 Results

Excel Academy had no ELA for grade 6 results prior to 2007. However, in 2007, 79 percent of students performed in the Advanced and Proficient categories in the ELA assessment. This was the first year these students were at the school. Results for this group showed more students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and fewer students in the Needs Improvement and Warning categories than statewide. In 2007, Excel Academy exceeded the comparison district, Boston, with greater percentages of students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for grade 6 ELA.

During the school's first two years, substantial numbers of sixth grade students were in the Needs Improvement and Warning categories (56 and 75 percent) in mathematics; the results were below those of the state. There was a dramatic increase in the numbers of sixth grade students who were Advanced and Proficient in 2007, when 75 percent attained these categories. The school did attain its goal of over 90 percent passing, even though these students had only been at the school for one year. The school's grade 6 mathematics results for 2007 exceeded those of the state. In nearly all instances, Excel Academy exceeded the comparison district, Boston, with higher percentages of grade 6 students in the Advanced and Proficient categories and lower percentages of students in Needs Improvement and Warning for mathematics.

**2. With the exception of mathematics in 2005, the Excel Academy Charter School has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) every year for which results are available.**

Excel Academy Charter School made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for English language arts in the aggregate and for all subgroups in 2005, 2006 and 2007. For 2007, the school's ELA performance rating was *very high* and the improvement rating is *on target*.

The school made AYP in mathematics in 2004. In 2005, however, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for subgroups (low income and Hispanic). The school did make AYP in mathematics in both 2006 and 2007, both in the aggregate and for all subgroups. The school's performance rating for mathematics in 2007 is *high* and the improvement rating is *above target*.

**3. Subgroup comparisons for 2007 show that subgroups at Excel Academy Charter School outperformed the state for all subgroups large enough to be disaggregated on the MCAS.**

The data on Tables 4-9 show that in 2007, 100 percent of students in subgroups at Excel Academy made AYP and scored at Composite Performance Indices (CPI) that exceeded those of the state in grades 6-8 for ELA and mathematics. The significant AYP subgroups for disaggregation at Excel Academy are comprised of low-income and Hispanic/Latino students.

**Table 4: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 8 – English Language Arts**

Grade 8 - ELA AYP Group	Excel Academy							State					
	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Low-income	48	100	6	77	15	2	94.3	99	3	51	32	13	79.4
Hispanic/Latino	36	100	8	78	11	3	95.1	99	3	45	35	17	75.2
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
White	23	100	4	87	9	0	96.7	100	15	68	14	4	93.1
Male	35	100	3	83	11	3	94.3	100	8	63	21	8	87.3
Female	33	100	12	76	12	0	97.0	100	17	63	15	4	91.9
Title I	68	100	7	79	12	1	95.6	99	3	51	32	13	79.4
Non low income	20	100	10	85	5	0	98.8	100	16	68	12	3	93.9

**Table 5: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 8 – Mathematics**

Grade 8 - Math AYP Group	Excel Academy							State					
	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Low-income	47	100	49	38	13	0	95.7	99	5	16	33	45	52.9
Hispanic/Latino	36	100	53	36	11	0	95.8	99	4	14	30	52	49.0
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
White	22	100	41	55	5	0	98.9	100	20	32	30	18	75.6
Male	34	100	38	50	12	0	96.3	100	17	27	29	26	69.6
Female	33	100	55	39	6	0	97.7	100	17	29	31	24	70.7
Title I	67	100	46	45	9	0	97.0	99	5	17	33	45	52.8
Non low income	20	100	40	60	0	0	100.0	100	22	33	29	16	77.5

**Table 6: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 7 – English Language Arts**

Grade 7 - ELA	Excel Academy							State					
	AYP Group	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W
LEP/FLEP	12	100	8	58	17	17	81.3	100	1	28	39	32	61.3
Low-income	41	100	17	68	10	5	92.7	100	2	44	37	16	75.0
Hispanic/Latino	37	100	16	68	11	5	91.9	100	2	4-	37	21	71.5
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Male	25	100	20	60	16	4	91.0	100	6	58	27	10	84.1
Female	25	100	12	80	4	4	95.0	100	13	62	19	5	89.9
Title I	50	100	16	70	10	4	93.0	100	2	45	37	16	75.0

**Table 7: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 7 – Mathematics**

Grade 7 - Math	Excel Academy							State					
	AYP Group	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W
LEP/FLEP	12	100	17	25	42	17	72.9	99	4	13	26	56	45.8
Low-income	40	100	15	43	30	13	81.3	99	4	18	33	45	52.9
Hispanic/Latino	37	100	14	41	35	11	81.1	99	3	16	31	50	49.9
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Male	25	100	12	52	24	12	83.0	100	15	30	29	26	69.9
Female	24	100	17	33	42	8	81.3	100	14	32	32	23	71.0
Title I	49	100	14	43	33	10	82.1	100	4	17	34	45	52.3

**Table 8: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 6 – English Language Arts**

Grade 6 - ELA	Excel Academy							State					
	AYP Group	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W
Low-income	41	100	5	71	22	2	92.7	100	2	40	42	16	74.1
Hispanic/Latino	36	100	3	75	19	3	93.1	99	2	36	42	20	70.3
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Male	30	100	7	63	27	3	90.8	100	6	56	29	9	83.9
Female	22	100	9	82	9	0	97.7	100	13	60	22	5	89.0
Title I	52	100	8	71	19	2	93.8	100	3	41	41	15	74.4
	11	100	18	73	9	0	97.7	100	12	66	18	4	91.9

**Table 9: Excel Academy Charter School MCAS 2006-07  
Comparison of Subgroup Performance with State  
Grade 6 – Mathematics**

Grade 6 - Math AYP Group	Excel Academy							State					
	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Low-income	41	100	37	39	17	7	87.8	100	7	22	33	38	59.0
Hispanic/Latino	36	100	42	33	19	6	87.5	100	6	19	32	44	55.1
Other Subgroups	#	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI	%AYP	A	P	NI	W	CPI
Male	30	100	37	37	20	7	86.7	100	21	31	27	20	75.3
Female	22	100	36	41	18	5	89.9	100	20	33	28	19	75.7
Title I	52	100	37	38	19	6	88.0	100	8	22	33	37	59.3
	11	100	36	36	27	0	88.6	100	26	37	25	11	82.9

**4. TerraNova scores indicate that Excel Academy students demonstrate overall improved achievement in mathematics, reading and language while at the school.**

At the start of each school year, the school gathers baseline data on each new student through administration of the TerraNova standardized assessment. All students, regardless of grade level or number of years at Excel Academy, take the TerraNova again at the conclusion of each school year. The TerraNova allows the school to assess Excel Academy students' progress as related to their national peers.

TerraNova results are shown for the school's first graduating class (2006) in Table 10 below. While the students in the group made tangible gains from Fall 2003 until Spring 2006, there was one year – Spring 2004 – when they made considerable gains in all areas and then dropped back when they were tested again in Spring 2005. Although these students were performing at an Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) above 70 in mathematics, they were not far above the mean NCE of 50 in reading and language – a possible cause for concern in terms of future performance in competitive high schools.

**Table 10: Excel Academy Charter School  
TerraNova Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) Scores  
Approximate Cohort Group Class of 2006**

	Reading	Language	Mathematics
Fall 2003	44.4	42.0	52.0
Spring 2004	58.6	58.3	76.3
Spring 2005	44.4	51.6	60.6
Spring 2006	53.6	57.4	71.4
Change	9.2	15.4	19.4

TerraNova results are shown for the school's second graduating class (2007) in Table 11 below. This group made steady year-to-year NCE gains in all areas, although there was a decline in reading from Spring 2005 to Spring 2006. Similar to the class of 2006, this group's strongest gains were in mathematics, in which they far outperform the national mean of 50 NCE.

**Table 11: Excel Academy Charter School  
TerraNova Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) Scores  
Approximate Cohort Group Class of 2007**

	Reading	Language	Mathematics
Fall 2004	44.1	41.7	50.0
Spring 2005	47.7	50.5	50.7
Spring 2006	46.0	54.5	65.1
Spring 2007	54.0	58.6	74.2
Change	+9.9	+16.9	+24.2

The classes of 2008 and 2009 both began in September 2006 and have only one year of TerraNova scores. However, both groups showed improvement in mean NCEs in all areas from Fall 2006 to Spring 2007, as shown in Tables 12 and 13. Once again, the area with the greatest NCE gain is mathematics.

**Table 12: Excel Academy Charter School  
TerraNova Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) Scores  
Class of 2008**

	Reading	Language	Mathematics
Fall 2006	46.8	53.2	48.0
Spring 2007	51.8	56.3	71.4
Change	+5.0	+3.1	+23.4

**Table 13: Excel Academy Charter School  
TerraNova Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) Scores  
Class of 2009**

	Reading	Language	Mathematics
Fall 2006	48.8	43.6	59.1
Spring 2007	55.4	53.1	69.0
Change	+6.6	+9.5	+9.9

##### **5. There is a powerful alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment at Excel Academy.**

The school's curriculum evolves from the standards of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is also informed by other sources, including formal and informal assessments. The development of curriculum, with coherent grade-by-grade and across-grade articulation, is an annual and iterative system. Also, there is widespread awareness among the staff about the planning process that includes attention to Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure that higher-order skills are addressed. Teachers devote two weeks each summer to planning the year's curriculum and setting goals. There is an internal pre-assessment for each instructional unit, as well as

a summative assessment to help identify student content and skill deficits and mastery of material taught. Curriculum revisions are based on what works and how students perform. For example, after raw MCAS data were received at the school last August, teachers reported that they made changes in the writing curriculum. The dean of curriculum and instruction (DCI) reiterated the way in which curriculum is developed and refined via a deep, coherent and thoughtful process. She reviews teachers' lesson plans weekly, matches them to the scope and sequence for the curriculum and, using a specific form, provides them with feedback.

Teachers do not use a specific textbook series for instruction. Instead, they pull from a variety of text materials and sources, including the Internet, as well as create their own materials that will be applicable to teaching the standards. Textbooks are used to some extent in eighth grade as part of an effort to scaffold instruction and routines to prepare these students for high school.

As teachers told the team during one interview, there is *freedom with supervision*. For each grade and subject, there is a binder for the standards, as well as multiple binders for units of instruction and lesson plans, including supporting materials. One teacher reported that when she wanted to use a particular novel in her classes, she had 50 copies within five days, demonstrating the school's support for teachers' freedom to modify curriculum within the school's structured system. Binders contain standards, scope and sequence documents and a syllabus for each class, with weekly and daily lesson plans and instructional resources (e.g., literature selections, practice activities, rubrics).

Currently, Excel Academy and several other successful charter schools are participating for the third year in the Massachusetts Public School Performance Project (MPSP), which has developed a test battery aligned with standards tested on MCAS that are administered to students every six weeks. These interim assessments are used in a systematic fashion – along with student work, including classroom tests and quizzes to modify instruction, reteach as needed and provide extra tutoring. The test items are aligned with the school's scope and sequence and pacing guides. In particular, the MPSP assessments in mathematics and reading are reported by staff to be most valuable in providing regular feedback to teachers and school leaders on students' progress toward meeting MCAS goals and standards. MPSP analyzes the data reports and has test results back to the school within 48 hours. At Excel Academy, the test is given on Tuesday. Results are back by Thursday. Teachers meet by departments to analyze the results at their Friday meetings, at which they develop diagnostic recommendations for students and are ready to implement any instructional changes on Monday. MPSP results offer both macro (how well the school is doing on teaching the standards), as well as micro (how well individual students are learning) analyses. The information is also used to target content and skills-driven tutoring after school. Further, through MPSP, participating schools have been able to compare data across schools and share best practices for helping to address achievement gaps at professional development sessions.

Student grades are issued quarterly and, as well, there is a mid-quarter progress report. Students are graded according to a formula that consists of 80% skill, content and scholarly habits; and 20% homework.

**Excel Academy has consistent and effective systems for lesson design, delivery of instruction and classroom management that result in high levels of student engagement and attainment.**

The team – using the school’s criteria for lesson planning, lesson delivery and development, and classroom management and school culture as an observation tool – visited 20 classrooms. For most of the criteria, teachers and students met the school’s expectations in 90 percent or more of instances. These included having clear objectives, the Do Now related to the lesson, checking for understanding, efficient transitions, high student engagement and use of Excel Academy procedures for classroom management. In addition, students universally met the school’s PREP criteria (prepared, respectful, engaged and professional) – the student management system – for their demeanor. In general, the team felt that the level of content was highly appropriate, with use of challenging vocabulary, and sometimes above typical grade-level content. There were perfect transitions as teachers, not students, moved from room to room, minimizing the downtime that occurs when students change classes.

The expectations for teaching are demanding and rigorous. Teachers are required to work with the school’s templates for curriculum, units and daily lesson plans, which are all aligned with each other and with the standards. There is a consistent lesson configuration that includes the standard, objective, *do now* activity, practice and homework. All teachers used the overhead projector for lesson delivery. Lessons were primarily teacher-directed, with question and answer the primary mode. Student practice activities were timed; they were told how many minutes they had to complete an assignment. Although the process that teachers followed was consistent from class to class, *how* they did it varied considerably. The team noted that teachers were creative and passionate in their teaching.

Students were seen to be comfortable asking questions. Teachers were observed to respond to students who had questions by asking, “Do you have a curious or confusing question?” Confusing questions were handled immediately. Curious questions, depending on time, might be delayed. Teachers used chants, songs and mnemonics to support student learning of basic skills. In a science class, for example, there was a memory aid for the five tests needed to identify a mineral. In a mathematics lesson, whole class practice in multiplication was accompanied by a chant with hand gestures that reinforced student learning and helped make the lesson lively. In reading, students enjoyed a rap chant with hand movements for the characteristics of tall tales. Prior to observing classes, the team asked the executive director what to expect and he listed high student engagement, note-taking, tracking (e.g., following speakers – teachers and students – with their eyes), high standards of behavior and active participation. He said that the team would see direct instruction, as well as guided and independent practice, with teachers and students enjoying what they are doing. Indeed, all of these features were observed by the team.

The one area that the Team noted as not implemented in the classroom observations was addressing the criterion related to students with special needs, e.g., *Teacher addresses special academic needs as appropriate. Knowledge of student IEPs is evident.* This criterion was met in only one observation out of the 20 conducted by the team. The school provides direct services to special education students and English language learners (ELLs) during non-academic and specialized periods that are part of the school’s extended day. For the most part, these students are fully included in their grade-level content classes and teachers are made aware of the accommodations they may require. However, in the classes observed by the team during the course of the visit, all students were seen to be working on the same materials, at the same pace, with no evident in-class support, either by support staff or classroom teachers, for those with

special needs or ELLs. Although the ESL and learning support teachers indicated that they review classroom lesson plans and do discuss students and suggest accommodations (including adjustment of materials), it was not evident during the visit that these accommodations are implemented or monitored in classrooms. This was the one area that the team felt might require further reflection and consideration on the part of the school.

## RENEWAL QUESTION 2: IS THE SCHOOL A VIABLE ORGANIZATION?

### 1. With thoughtful consideration, leadership has created highly efficient systems for communication, planning and decision-making, expectations for staff and student behavior and, ultimately, attainment of the school's mission.

The leadership structure at Excel Academy consists of an executive director (ED), principal, dean of curriculum and instruction (DCI) and dean of students. To support management, there are a director of resource development, an operations manager and an office manager.

When asked to what he attributed the success of Excel Academy, the ED replied that the school is *systems-driven*. Although the school community has internalized the global expectations (e.g., college and high expectations for all, high standards for behavior, and the standards-based curriculum that drives content and the development of skills), it is the systems that have been developed that guide all aspects of the school's functions. There are core manuals that guide the schools efforts: *Overview & Operations Handbook*; the *Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment* guide; the *Handbook for Classroom Management, School Culture, and Student Character*; and the *Student & Family Handbook*.

These manuals are thorough to the last detail. Within the PREP behavior management structure referenced above, for example, there is an extensive list in the *Handbook for Classroom Management, School Culture, and Student Character* of the ways that students may earn demerits that will decrease their PREP report scores for each category. To illustrate, students might receive PREP demerits under the category *professional* for the following:

- Unprofessional in hall (loitering, walking slowly, unprofessional with pass
- Displaying poor posture
- Eating during class
- Unprofessional communication
- Not following school or class procedure
- Misusing personal or school resources
- Making excuses
- Lack of organization
- Other unprepared

In the *Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment* guide, there is a section for teachers under Best Practices in the Classroom that lists the ways they may deliberately foster professionalism in students to elicit the desired behaviors. Nothing is left to chance. Also in this guide are procedures for writing goals, creating a scope and sequence, creating a unit sequence calendar and a course description, as well as drafting weekly and daily plans, and then creating corresponding assessments. The *Student & Family Handbook* thoroughly details the expectations for parents and children.

Although decisions at Excel Academy are ultimately made by leadership, one member of the staff called the school a *top-down bottom-up place*, referring to the fact that the school's leaders seek staff input before making final determinations, and indicated that *people's voices are heard*. Staff has input in responding to the Excel Academy *all email* or when opinions are sought at

faculty meetings. One of the school's catch phrases is *weigh in to buy in*. One recent decision in which teachers' voices were heard related to the structure of the professional development conducted on Friday afternoons. From interviews and the school's documents, it was abundantly clear to the team that leadership has established a system in which there is a pervasive understanding, articulation and execution of roles and responsibilities.

## **2. Rigorous hiring practices, sound professional development and effective supervision and evaluation practices have created a professional learning culture at Excel Academy.**

The executive director, who one staff member called a *master at hiring*, is largely responsible for recruitment of new staff. He receives more than 2,000 hard copy and email resumes for fewer than ten open positions each year. About 25 percent of applicants are interviewed by telephone and, of this group, about 50 are invited to submit a written application, which includes a lengthy essay question. This group is culled and a number are invited to teach a demonstration lesson and have an onsite interview, during which the ED gives candidates a clear picture of the level of work and high expectations that the school has of its teachers. The ED told the team that the school looks for the following strengths from potential teachers:

- Aligned beliefs
- Commanding presence
- Understanding of subject matter
- Compatibility with their instructional teams
- Willingness to work very hard

In the past, the school has had the kind of retention issues that are typical of a young and talented faculty – teachers move geographically, go on to graduate school, start families, etc. In response, the Board recently decided to increase salaries to make them more competitive with other public schools. From last to this year, 67 percent of teachers returned. Currently, 82 percent of the teaching staff is considered highly qualified according to NCLB requirements for a Title I school. One of the three not currently highly qualified is on a waiver from the Massachusetts Department of Education; the other two (mathematics teachers) will be taking the math MTEL (Massachusetts Test for Educational Licensure) shortly.

The school has an extensive process for informal observations and formal evaluations and feedback. At the time of the visit (six weeks into the school year), one teacher reported that he has been observed several times by the DCI and that both the principal and ED had been in his class and provided oral feedback. In some instances, feedback is also provided via email. Another teacher has had two visits by the DCI, during which a running log has been kept. This entails use of an observation tool that is designed to collect data on various teaching practices, including questioning rigor, teacher feedback to students on their responses, student engagement and student accommodation to the school culture. Thus, the DCI provides teachers the support they need for thoughtful focus on a continuous process of instructional refinement. There are two summative evaluation observations with write-ups each year – one scheduled and one not scheduled. Also, as part of the teacher supervision process, the principal videotapes teachers conducting a lesson. The video is used for later feedback and discussion.

The development of a professional learning culture begins once teachers are hired. They report for a one-week orientation prior to the opening of school. During this time, new teachers are thoroughly trained in the contents of the *Overview & Operations* manual, which includes the school's mission and history, a sample schedule and expectations for classrooms (including signs for rules, PREP, scholarly habits, a noise level meter and paraphernalia from the homeroom teacher's college). There is an extensive description of daily procedures – morning and afternoon homeroom, homework folders, DEAR (drop everything and read), the community circle, breaks, recess, lunch, focus/tutoring and after-school activities – homework club, detention, academic support centers, enrichment, extracurricular activities and Saturday academy. Teachers' responsibilities outside the classroom (i.e., communicating with families, writing student recommendations, planning and facilitating field trips and performing as a staff member and advisor) are clearly delineated.

Following this week of acculturation for new teachers, there is a two-week preparation and planning period for all faculty. During this time, teachers review the handbook of procedures for *Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment*, revise and update curriculum and review the school's operating procedures. Assessment results that are available (such as raw data from MCAS) are analyzed and tied to standards. During the two weeks, teachers are expected to produce/refine a vertically-aligned content-area curriculum and work on methodologies to develop the scholarly skills required for college. In 2007, for example, the English department focused on writing methodology; ELL/SPED staff developed lessons on note-taking methodology; and, social studies/science teachers concentrated on research report methodology. Teachers were also expected to have a long-term plan for the year that included a Big Goal and also six-week goals. An example of a Big Goal might be *by the end of the year, 80 percent of my students will score Proficient or Advanced on the math MCAS*. A Big Goal seen posted in a classroom was *100% of students will pass the final*.

Professional development occurs at the school every Friday afternoon. The new DCI has instituted an *inquiry group* model in which teachers meet in subgroups to discuss a teaching situation with which one teacher would like assistance. The groups work out a solution and the particular teacher executes the lesson the following week while being videotaped. Teachers may observe the video on the school's shared drive and colleagues discuss the lesson at the next Friday inquiry group session. This model (sometimes called *critical friends*) has widespread approval among the staff. The Friday meetings may also consist of common planning time among teams – either horizontal (within grades) or vertical (across grades) – to plan and align curriculum. Some meetings require interdisciplinary planning. For example, the same paragraph structure is being used in science for writing lab reports as in English, as well as by the dean of students, who requires the same format when students write apologies for unacceptable behavior.

During the school year, there are four full days of professional development. Recent topics have included sheltered English, special education (IEPs, legal implications, restraints) and videos showing instructional strategies. Teachers may also visit other schools, attend the Charter School Conferences where teachers share best practices, as well as other professional conferences, upon request. These are funded by the school and classroom coverage is provided.

### **3. The Board of Trustees at Excel Academy is highly committed to the school and effectively executes its role as the school's governing body through establishment of sustainable policies and procedures.**

The school's highly committed 12-member Board of Trustees is composed of individuals who are skilled in finance, law, consulting, banking and education. Half are part of the school's founding team and, over the years, others have been recruited for professional expertise or personal connections. The Board sees itself as responsible for *holding the charter* and making decisions relative to governance, finance and strategic planning. The Board works closely with the ED but is not involved with the day-to-day operation of the school unless there is a specific area in which the school might need support. During the second year, for example, when there were difficulties with expectations for student behavior – They were not uniformly and rigorously enforced. – the Board stepped in and created a school culture task force that resulted in changes to the leadership team. A new principal was hired. By the end of the 2004-05 academic year, the school had turned the corner. The Board Chair wrote in the annual report that it was *clear that a culture of achievement was present in every classroom and at every school event.*

The Board conducts a mid-year and annual performance review of the executive director, based on attainment of overall organizational and individual objectives that are set annually. The Board also considers input from a staff survey, interviews and an examination of MCAS results. Board members interviewed by the team are fully aware of the school's mission and are committed to providing resources and expertise to assist the school in solving problems. They attribute the school's success to strong leadership, ingrained commitment to the mission on the part of all stakeholders, the culture of high expectations, the strict and stringent student management code and extraordinarily hard work on the part of staff and leadership.

As part of the Board's governance role – and because of members' expertise in finance – it is deeply involved in the budget process, which begins in March and concludes in June with a final vote. The Board sets fundraising goals to fill in the dollar gap between what the state provides and what the school needs. Members are extensively involved in fundraising and all have made personal donations to the school. Board agendas/minutes for the 2006-07 school year showed that the members addressed issues, such as development; finance and budgeting; hiring and retention; strategic planning; and, the charter renewal application. In addition, the Board received updates from the school on student recruitment, the code of conduct, high school placement and the annual report.

The Board has several committees and task forces. Board task forces include: school culture, strategic planning and Board recruitment. The committees include: governance, finance, development and real estate. This latter committee, along with the school's leadership, believes that, although the school has funds for a new facility, the right fit for the school has not yet been found. The Board and leadership have considered increasing the number of students at the school but determined, instead, to add a fifth grade rather than increase the number of students. At this time, the Board believes that prior to expansion, it wants to ensure that the mission is achieved – that not only will students go on to competitive high schools, but to college, as well. The school's first graduating class completed Excel Academy's program in 2006. It will be 2010, according to the Board, before the success of the school in achieving its mission can truly be

determined. This is one reason the Board approved the position of the director of graduate services – to provide support for the school’s graduates on the path to college.

**4. There is a climate and culture of excellence at Excel Academy that sustains high levels of academic, social and personal growth of staff and students.**

Decisions and practices that impact the mission are made with thoughtful consideration at Excel Academy. Students laugh, smile, want to learn and realize why it’s important. Both students and parents reported that the school is a safe place. Students help each other. Members of the team observed some older students tutoring younger students during the school’s Focus Period.

The following features of the school, too many to describe in great detail, all contribute to a climate and culture that not only fosters high academic expectations, but contributes to social-emotional well-being in the school community:

- The directors of high school placement and graduate services support the mission by working with students prior to high school and following them once they leave Excel Academy to ensure that they are working productively toward college.
- Classrooms are named for the college attended by homeroom teachers, e.g., Bowdoin, Montserrat. Hallways and classroom bulletin boards reinforce the school’s emphases on students’ future high schools and colleges.
- Students receive support with completing their applications to high schools.
- The school has an advisor system in which each staff member works closely with approximately eight students to ensure their personal and academic well-being.
- Community service activities are scaffolded. In grades 5 and 6, for example, they are scheduled by the school; the first projects are scheduled for Alewife Reservation and Drumlin Farm. In grades 7 and 8, students are expected to seek out and execute community service activities on their own.
- Teachers are accessible to parents and students by telephone. Teachers also call students’ homes frequently.
- The extensive PREP behavior management system expects that teachers will model the behavior that is expected of students.
- Finger snapping and applause to provide agreement and support among students during classes and community circle.
- Students report that questioning and *respectful disagreement* is welcomed and encouraged.
- Staff reports that positive relationships and trust among staff and leadership enable the functioning of the school’s systems. As one of the school’s leaders noted: “Systems are working because they are relationship based.”

Parents are expected to sign the *Excel Academy School-Student-Family Accountability Contract*, which contains expectations for students and families. In the meeting with parents, they confirmed that they had signed the contract that states that parents are expected to ensure that students are in school on time, in uniform and prepared, and sign their homework and weekly PREP report. The parents interviewed were all pleased with their children’s experiences at Excel Academy, particularly in comparison to their previous attendance at local public and parochial schools. They valued the extensive and ongoing communication with teachers, the opportunities

their children have to get a good education and the safe school climate. One parent proudly reported that her first child, who completed Excel Academy last year, has a 90 percent scholarship to a selective private boarding school. Highlights from the 2006-07 family survey indicated that 97 percent of respondents said they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the overall program at Excel Academy, as well as with academic standards and expectations of students. For parents who are primarily Spanish speaking, the school translates key documents, (such as the *Student & Family Handbook*) and notices (such as the permission letters for community service day activities).

Enrichment takes place every Friday afternoon from noon to 1:30 PM and includes activities for all students who have maintained a PREP report score of 70 or more for the week. These activities are taught either by Excel Academy faculty or external instructors and many take place off school grounds. Classes include: swimming, music, writing, drama, sports, sailing, photography, gardening and dance. Students who have not attained the requisite PREP score attend Friday extension during which, depending on the reasons for this assignment, they may reflect on their behavior or work on incomplete homework or missed classwork if they had been absent.

The school’s PREP approach is the core of Excel’s high expectations for student behavior. Students affirm the PREP values in their weekly grade-level community circle and they are reiterated in classes and on posters throughout the building. Students start each week with 70 PREP points that may, based on their self management, be increased or diminished. A PREP report goes home to parents weekly. In addition to enrichment, students may be awarded prizes or privileges based on their PREP scores. Conversely, they may have consequences such as demerits, detention, Friday extension or, for more serious infractions, in-class suspension, out-of-school suspension or expulsion. After-school Homework Club is required for all students who have incomplete or missed homework.

The character education program is carried out on Friday mornings via homeroom discussions with advisors present. One part of the curriculum for this program is the Kohlberg Tool Kit that helps students explore six levels for decision making through discussions of relevant problems that affect their lives. This year, there is also a schoolwide theme of integrity that is implemented with a different focus each month. The integrity theme during the renewal visit was *academic honesty* and teachers were provided with an instructional toolkit with related activities.

There are a number of supports and services for struggling students. At the Saturday Academy, students are provided with an intensive math-tutoring program (six four-week sessions) staffed mostly by volunteers from Deloitte and Touche. Core subject teachers provide weekly academic tutoring during afternoon Focus Periods for students with specific weaknesses in content areas. An after-school academic support center is provided for students who, based on progress reports or report card grades, need help with academic skills. Under the direction of the DCI, the school is planning to implement a remedial program called *Language!*, which will be an after school effort to provide tutoring and individualized instruction for students who need extensive support with language development.

### **RENEWAL QUESTION 3: IS THE SCHOOL FAITHFUL TO THE TERMS OF THE CHARTER?**

#### **1. The mission of Excel Academy drives all aspects of the school's operation and is thoroughly understood and systematically communicated to all stakeholders.**

Excel Academy's mission is: *"To prepare students to succeed in high school and college, apply their learning to solve relevant problems, and engage productively in our communities."*

The goal of preparing Excel Academy students for college was voiced by the school's leaders, the Board of Trustees, staff, parents, and the pupils themselves. All aspects of academic and student management programming at the school are geared to the mission of preparing students for success in selective academic high schools and, ultimately, college. The emphasis on high school and college preparation is pervasive throughout the school. Homerooms are named for teachers' alma maters and students, beginning in fifth grade, go on field trips to high schools throughout their years at the school. The academic program focuses on the mastery of the state standards. Assessments are used to improve instruction and target individual student needs. Students are provided with many supports, including tutoring and enrichment to ensure academic achievement, as well as the development of work habits that foster development of study skills. All students are provided needed support and encouragement to plan for future high school and, ultimately, college enrollment. It was evident in interviews with students that the school's focus on college preparation appears to instill in them a belief in the value and importance of education and the expectation that they will attend college.

Among the most visible ways the school is adhering to its mission is through the roles of the directors of high school placement and graduate services who have been at the school for two and three years, respectively. The former works with students to get to know them and learn about their interests and abilities. She arranges visits to high schools and takes students to the Independent Schools Fair. She sees each eighth grade class weekly and meets with eighth grade families. Last year, the school was turned into a "high school" for a week to create a mock experience for students to help them understand what high school will be like and help them prepare for the transition. The school provides students and families with a *High School Placement Program* manual which describes public/private high school options, provides schedules of visits and deadlines, includes interview protocols and application samples and, in general, is a comprehensive document that involves students and families meaningfully in the high school selection process.

The director of graduate services works with students who have gone on to high school. Her goal is to stay in contact with students via telephone, email and through visits to them at their high schools. In an interview, her appraisal of the first graduating class (2006) is that 20 percent are doing well; 55 percent are "okay" and the remaining 25 percent are struggling. No data are available yet for the class of 2007. One of her tasks is to collect data to enable Excel Academy to be more strategic in helping students be successful in high school and, ultimately, in college.

The school has set and attained the following measures for determination of the faithfulness to the mission:

- a. *Over 30 percent of students who attend Excel Academy Charter School for three consecutive years will be accepted to high schools in which over 80 percent of graduates matriculate in college.*

The school exceeded this goal. Seventy-five percent of students in Excel Academy's first graduating class (2006) were accepted at schools in which more than 80 percent of graduates matriculate to college. In the second graduating class (2007), 65 percent of students who attended Excel Academy for three consecutive years were accepted at high schools and programs in which more than 80 percent of graduates matriculate to college. Some of the schools that 2007 graduates are attending include Boston College High, Boston Latin Academy, Brimmer and May, Commonwealth School, Rivers and St. John's Prep. Excel Academy students also received more than \$775,000 in financial aid to attend the private and parochial high schools to which they were accepted.

- b. *In a survey given to parents of 8th grade students who have attended Excel Academy for three consecutive years, 80 percent will "agree" or "strongly agree" with the following type of statement: "Excel Academy Charter School prepared my child for success in high school."*

In 2006, 100 percent of parents of Excel Academy's eighth grade students responded that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the following survey statement: "Excel Academy prepared my child to succeed in high school." In 2007 this figure was 95 percent.

## **2. The school has met and exceeded all but one of its measures for attainment of its English language arts and mathematics goals.**

The first two academic program goals in the school's 2003-2008 Accountability Plan were:

- a. *Students at Excel Academy Charter School will become proficient readers and writers of the English language.*
- b. *Students at Excel Academy Charter School will demonstrate proficiency in the understanding and application of mathematical computation and problem solving.*

The first measure of academic improvement for these goals was that 90 percent of students enrolled at Excel Academy for two or more years would pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) English language arts assessment and 75 percent would pass in mathematics. These measures were met and exceeded for the seventh and eighth grade classes in both ELA and mathematics in 2006 and 2007. (No other groups were enrolled at the school for two or more years.)

The second measure of academic improvement was that a greater percentage of Excel Academy students enrolled in the school for two years or more will achieve proficiency (*Proficient* or *Advanced*) on the MCAS ELA and mathematics assessments than the averages of their peers from their home districts and state. Once again, Excel Academy students met and exceeded their measure and consistently outperformed their peers from Boston and across the state.

The third measure of academic improvement was that each cohort of Excel Academy Charter School students would improve its reading, language and mathematics skills by an average of three Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) per year over its three years in the program, as measured by the TerraNova standardized assessment. The class of 2006 met its goals in language and mathematics by improving by an average of 4.7 and 6.4 NCEs, respectively. It fell slightly short in reading by improving an average 2.4 NCEs over three years. The class of 2007 met its goals in all three areas with average NCE gains of 3.3 in reading, 5.6 in language, and 8.1 in mathematics.

### **3. The school has met all of its organizational viability goals.**

In Excel Academy's Accountability Plan (2003-2008), the school met the following goals for organizational viability:

- a. *Excel Academy Charter School will practice sound decision-making and fiscal management, sufficient to ensure strong student achievement and the responsible stewardship of public monies.*

To demonstrate attainment of this goal, Excel Academy's cash reserve has increased each year and the school now has a reserve of more than one million dollars. Excel Academy has received unqualified audits, with no significant findings each fiscal year and ended each year with a surplus, which is earmarked for a new facility. The school has cultivated relationships with a number of foundations and donors that have provided funding through the years. These include Amelia Peabody Foundation, Charles Hayden Foundation, Barr Foundation, Bain Capital Children's Charity, Moses Kimball Fund and Schrafft Charitable Trust.

- b. *Excel Academy Charter School will ensure strong and consistent daily attendance by all students.*

The school's measure of average daily student attendance is at or above 95 percent over the course of each school year. This figure has been exceeded every year, with the exception of the 2004-05 school year, when it was 93.5 percent. For the past school year (2006-07), the average daily attendance rate was an exemplary 97.2 percent.

- c. *Excel Academy Charter School will demonstrate its continued effectiveness in earning community approval and support sufficient to ensure the school's long-term viability and effectiveness.*

To demonstrate attainment of this goal, the first measure captures the responses in an annual survey given to all Excel Academy Charter School parents. The goal stated that 80 percent will be "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the overall program at Excel Academy. Over the past four years, the average rating on this dimension was 98.25 percent, exceeding the measure.

The second measure involves the school demonstrating its effective service to the community by filling 90 percent of available seats by September 30th of each year. Over the past four years, the average rating on this dimension is 98.5 percent, exceeding the measure.

**4. The Annual Report, Renewal Application and conversations with leadership demonstrate that Excel Academy has been actively engaged in dissemination of its best practices.**

According to the renewal application, Excel Academy's dissemination activities *revolve around collaborative opportunities that allow for relationship building*. Examples of dissemination practices include the following:

- Dissemination through school visit program  
Through this program, other schools bring their entire instructional staffs to Excel Academy to observe a typical school day, during which they visit classes, meet with teachers and administrators and learn about Excel Academy's systems and procedures. In the past two years, visitors have come from charter schools in Massachusetts, as well as Ohio and Pennsylvania.
- Dissemination to local public schools  
School leaders from Excel Academy and the Umana Barnes Middle School (East Boston's public middle school) have exchanged visits and begun what the school hopes will be a long-term relationship. In addition, Excel Academy participates with the East Boston Youth Workers Task Force that includes representation from East Boston High School and Umana Barnes, as well as other community organizations to focus on reducing the dropout rate in East Boston.
- Dissemination of documents  
Excel Academy has shared key documents, such as the *Student-Family Handbook*, *Classroom Management and Discipline Manual*, and *Operations Manual* with other schools and educators.
- Dissemination to new school leaders  
The school served as a training site for participants in the Building Excellent Schools fellowship program for new school leaders.
- Dissemination to individual visitors  
Excel Academy reports that it has hosted more than 500 individuals during the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years. Visitors have included leaders from other charter schools – local and national.
- Partnerships  
The school has developed partnerships with organizations to offer on-site residencies. These include the Building Excellent Schools fellowship program, the KIPP fellowship program, and the New Leaders for New Schools fellowship program.

It is noteworthy that the school has attained recognition as a *National Charter School of the Year*, one of only 53 of the nation's 3,940 charter schools so honored.

#### **QUESTION 4: IF THE SCHOOL'S CHARTER IS RENEWED, WHAT ARE ITS PLANS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?**

**1. The decision to continue to pursue existing goals that reflect Excel Academy's high expectations was made with thoughtful deliberation on the part of Trustees, administration and faculty.**

Academic goals and measures in ELA and mathematics on the standardized MCAS and TerraNova tests are similar to those contained in the previous accountability plan, and have largely been attained. In previous instances in which enrollment at the school for two years was part of the MCAS mathematics and ELA measures, the yardstick is now three years. In addition, there are slightly modified attainment measures and goals for science and social studies/history. The school's goals and measures for organizational viability are identical in the new accountability plan to those in the previous plan. Under faithfulness to the charter, in terms of preparation for college, there is one measure that has been significantly increased. The new language is:

*Over 70 percent of students who attend Excel Academy Charter School for three consecutive years will be accepted to high schools in which over 80 percent of graduates matriculate into college.*

Previously the acceptance goal was 30 percent.

A further goal – *Students at Excel Academy will demonstrate the qualities of engaged citizenship* – will now have the following measure, which did not exist in the previous accountability plan:

*100 percent of Excel Academy graduates will complete the number of community service hours required for promotion.*

The school has implemented a community service program to support attainment of the goal.

When asked why the school's key accountability goals for the next charter remained nearly identical to the previous ones, school leaders and Trustees reported that, after much thought and deliberation, they felt that not all the data are in on attainment of goals for the first classes. Although significant percentages of students are attending selective high schools, they have not yet attained the mission of attending college. Members of the Board felt that the school needs to continue to refine its core program. One used the expression, "We need to stick to the knitting."

Over the next several years, the Trustees have plans in progress to embark on a detailed strategic plan, including fundraising (in collaboration with the school's development director) by increasing grants, corporate and private donations and fundraisers. The Board and leaders are also searching for new facilities and are concerned about improving teacher retention and refining professional development, as well as encouraging more distributed leadership to ensure that, if current leaders leave, there will be adequate succession to sustain the mission of the school.

**2. The school's responsiveness to previous challenges, as well as its present strengths, confirms its capacity to achieve its goals over the next five years.**

An analysis of previous history – revealing strong leadership on the part of the executive director and principal and a competent teaching staff, as well as the support of a strong and committed Board of Trustees that provides support, guidance and supervision – lends confidence that the school has the capacity to achieve its goals for the next five years.

The school has demonstrated its ability to respond to needs for change by overcoming difficulties with student management and attainment (when it did not make AYP in mathematics) during its second year by refining its code of conduct, adding a dean of students and moving from a project-based learning approach to one that is more teacher-centered and focused on identifying and remediating gaps in student learning. The school's fiscal surplus has demonstrated its financial stability and will enable leadership to pursue the move to a new facility when the time and place are right.

The dean of curriculum and instruction, who is providing strong oversight of instruction and ensuring fidelity to the curriculum, will continue the focus on high levels of student achievement. The school's curriculum binders, which undergo continuous refinement, demonstrate the alignment of curriculum with the Frameworks and provide both new and continuing staff with a record of what has been accomplished and what students continue to need to learn.

Overall, however, it is the school's thoughtful and intentional attention to detail and the creation of systems for the daily and continuing operation and management of the school – the ongoing development and refinement of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; classroom management, school culture and student character; processes for teacher hiring, retention and professional development; and, the commitment to achieving the mission not only for current students but also for graduates – that confirms its capacity to move forward over the next five years.

**APPENDIX A: SCHEDULE OF THE RENEWAL INSPECTION VISIT****Excel Academy Charter School****Renewal Inspection Schedule****Visit Dates: October 15-18, 2007****Team Schedule  
Monday, October 15, 2007**

	<b>Team Member A</b>	<b>Team Member B</b>	<b>Team Member C</b>	<b>Team Member D</b>
<b>7:30-8:00</b> Before school, transition, morning activities	Team arrival in school and breakfast			
<b>8:00 – 8:30</b> Morning activities, Period 1 begins at 8:20	School Tour			
<b>8:30-9:10</b> Period 1	Orientation to the five-year renewal process (Charter School Leader and Principal; members of the leadership team are optional)			
<b>9:10 – 10:00</b> Period 2	Initial team deliberation session			
<b>10:00 – 10:15</b> AM Break				
<b>10:15 – 11:05</b> Period 3				
<b>11:05 – 11:55</b> DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) & Lunch	Working lunch			
<b>11:55 – 12:45</b> Period 4	Document review			
<b>12:45 – 1:35</b> Period 5				
<b>1:35 – 1:50</b> PM Break				
<b>1:50 – 2:40</b> Period 6	Team meets with Executive Director and Principal (2:00 – 3:30)			
<b>2:40 – 2:55</b> PM Homeroom				
<b>3:00 – 3:40</b> Focus & Tutoring	Team deliberation (3:30 – 5:30)			
<b>3:40 – 5:00</b> Homework Club, Detention, Academic Support (All students dismissed by 5 pm)				
<b>5:30</b>	Team departure/dinner			

**Tuesday, October 16, 2007**

	<b>Team Member A</b>	<b>Team Member B</b>	<b>Team Member C</b>	<b>Team Member D</b>
<b>7:30 – 8:30</b> Before school, transition, morning activities	Meeting with Excel Academy’s Board of Trustees Room 33			
<b>8:30 – 9:10</b> Period 1	Team Session			
<b>9:10 – 10:00</b> Period 2	Meeting with Teacher Focus Group A (English Dept., Art & Fitness) Room 33		Observe Grade 7 Science Room 24	Observe Grade 5 Science Room 5
<b>10:00 – 10:15</b> AM Break	Team Break (10-10:30 AM)			
<b>10:15 – 11:05</b> Period 3	Curriculum, Instruction & School Culture Meeting w/ Executive Director; Principal; Dean of Students and Dean of Curriculum & Instruction (10:30-11:55 AM) Room 33		Observe Grade 8 Social Studies Room 30	Observe Grade 6 Social Studies Room 9
<b>11:05 – 11:55</b> DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) & Lunch			Meeting with Student Focus Group A Room 26	
<b>11:55 – 12:45</b> Period 4	Working Lunch (11:55 AM – 12:45 PM)			
<b>12:45 – 1:35</b> Period 5	Observe Grade 5 Math Room 6	Document Review	Observe Grade 6 Math Room 9	Observe Grade 8 Art Room 30
<b>1:35 – 1:50</b> PM Break				
<b>1:50 – 2:40</b> Period 6	Team Session (1:50-2:55 PM)			
<b>2:40 – 2:55</b> PM Homeroom				
<b>3:00 – 3:15</b> Focus & Tutoring	Observe Focus/Tutoring Groups Float	Observe Focus/Tutoring Groups Float	Observe Focus/Tutoring Groups Float	Observe Focus/Tutoring Groups Float
<b>3:15-5:00</b> Homework Club, Detention, Academic Support (All students dismissed by 5 pm)	Team Moderation Session			

*Additional Meetings:*

- Director of Resource Development: 9:10 a.m. (Rm 10)
- Nurse: 10:20 (Room 8)
- Director of High School Placement & Director of Graduate Services: 12:10 (Room 10)

**Wednesday, October 17, 2007**

	<b>Team Member A</b>	<b>Team Member B</b>	<b>Team Member C</b>	<b>Team Member D</b>
<b>7:30 – 8:20</b> Before school, transition, morning activities	Team arrival, Note sorting			
<b>8:20 – 9:10</b> Period 1	Meeting with Teacher Focus Group B (Science & Social Studies Teachers) Room 33		Meeting with Excel Academy Families (8:20-9:50 AM) Community Circle Space	
<b>9:10 – 10:00</b> Period 2	Financial Management & Human Resources Meeting w/ Executive Director and Principal Room 33			
<b>10:00 – 10:15</b> AM Break	Team Session (10:00 - 10:30 AM)			
<b>10:15 – 11:05</b> Period 3	Student Services Meeting w/Principal; Learning Specialist (2); and ELL Program Manager Rom 22		Meeting with Teacher Focus Group C (Math Teachers) (10:30-11:20)	
<b>11:05 – 11:55</b> DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) & Lunch	Meeting with Student Focus Group B Room 23		Document Review	Document Review
<b>11:55 – 12:45</b> Period 4	Working Lunch (11:55 AM – 1:35 PM)			
<b>12:45 – 1:35</b> Period 5				
<b>1:35 – 1:50</b> PM Break				
<b>1:50 – 2:40</b> Period 6	Observe Grade 7 ELA Room 24	Observe Grade 8 Fitness Room 30	Observe Grade 8 ELA Room 26	Observe Instr. Support Grade 6 Room 22
<b>2:40 – 3:00</b> PM Homeroom and Transition	Team Check In (2:40-3:00 PM)			
<b>3:00-3:40</b> Focus & Tutoring	Observe Focus & Tutoring Groups/Float			
<b>3:40-6:00</b> Homework Club, Detention, Academic Support (All students dismissed by 5 pm)	Team Moderation			

**Thursday, October 18, 2007**

	<b>Team Member A</b>	<b>Team Member B</b>	<b>Team Member C</b>	<b>Team Member D</b>
<b>7:30 – 8:20</b> Before school, transition, morning activities	Team arrival & Note sorting			
<b>8:20 – 9:10</b> Period 1	Observe Grade 5 ELA Room 6	Observe Grade 6 ELA Room 9	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)
<b>9:10 – 10:00</b> Period 2	Document Review		Observe Grade 7 Math Room 23	Observe Grade 8 Math Room 30
<b>10:00 – 10:15</b> AM Break	Team Session (10:00 - 10:30 AM)			
<b>10:15 – 11:05</b> Period 3	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)	Classroom Observations **Open** (See daily schedule.)
<b>11:05 – 11:30</b> DEAR (Drop Everything & Read)	Team Moderation Session			
<b>11:30 – 1:00</b>	Team lunch, debrief			
<b>1:00 – 1:30</b>	Team check-in with ED & Principal			
<b>1:30</b>	Team Departure			

