

Supplemental Report 2

The Mayor's Charter School Accountability System

The Mayor grants charters to school operators offering them full autonomy in exchange for a high level of accountability. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), the Mayor's Office developed a model accountability system through which the schools and the Mayor's Office establish expectations, monitor progress, report to the public, and make informed decisions about the future of the schools.

Indiana's charter schools law and the state's accountability policies set the broad context within which the Mayor's accountability system falls. These important state requirements include annual fall student ISTEP+ testing and reporting. The Mayor's approach to accountability extends beyond the state's, with the aim of providing additional practical benefits to charter schools, families, and the public. To measure student progress over the course of the year, Mayor-sponsored charter schools annually participate in an additional fall and spring assessment. The Mayor's Office also collects information about the schools' performance through in-depth third-party site visits, surveys of parents and teachers, and reviews of schools' governance and financial performance. These various evaluative pieces create a fundamentally new kind of relationship among public schools, the agencies that oversee them, families, and the larger public.

To achieve this goal, the Mayor's Office designed an accountability system for charter schools based on the following basic principles:

- **Autonomy** – enabling schools to implement their own unique approaches to quality public education;
- **Value** – providing schools with tools and information that help them improve performance;
- **Low burden** – minimizing the amount of time, effort, and expense needed to comply with requirements;
- **Transparency** – providing maximum information to parents, the schools, and the public about school performance and the accountability process; and
- **Responsibility** – ensuring that the Mayor has sufficient information to carry out his responsibilities for overseeing charter schools that are of the highest quality, accessible to all, and in compliance with all applicable laws.

Setting Expectations

The Mayor's Office is committed to implementing a charter school oversight system that is clear from the outset and helpful to all schools in continuously improving. An essential tool for this oversight system, which both the Mayor's Office and the schools use, is the Charter School Performance Framework. This Framework serves two important purposes: (1) to inform the Mayor's Office's ongoing oversight, and (2) to help each school continually assess and improve its performance. The Framework provides a foundation of common evaluation elements for all of the Mayor's charter schools. The content of this Framework serves as a **floor** rather than a ceiling for school performance and continuous improvement. It is expected that each school will

develop and enrich this basic accountability plan with additional measures to assess and demonstrate achievement of its specific mission.

Common Measures: The Charter School Performance Framework

The Charter School Performance Framework is divided into four sections:

- 1. Is the educational program a success?**
- 2. Is the organization effective and well-run?**
- 3. Is the school meeting its operational and access obligations?**
- 4. Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?**

When measuring a given school's performance, the school leadership and the Mayor's Office will examine several sub-questions in relation to each of the four core questions. The four sections (educational performance, organizational viability, operations/access and appropriate conditions for success) and their respective sub-questions will be rated on a four-point scale (*Does Not Meet Standard, Approaching Standard, Meets Standard, and Exceeds Standard*). For a detailed description of the Framework and the full assessment rubric (and sub-questions) for each section, go to

<http://www.indy.gov/eGov/Mayor/Education/Charter/Accountability/2008/Pages/default.aspx>

Measuring a school's academic progress is the most important and complex part of this Framework. The Mayor's Office has attempted to create a set of indicators to capture each school's: (1) ***absolute performance*** (the percentage of students that are "proficient" in a given subject); (2) ***improvement over time*** (the academic growth of individual students over time); and (3) ***comparative performance*** (how well a given school performed relative to other local, state, and national public schools).

In making renewal and revocation decisions, the Mayor's Office will focus first on each school's objectively measurable performance outcomes under the first three questions in the Framework. The fourth question in the Framework will serve to inform the Mayor's Office about whether or not the school is on the right path to meet the outcomes expected under the first three questions. More importantly, well before the renewal decision, school self-assessments and external reviews of school academics, finances, and other reporting requirements organized under this Framework will provide solid data that should inform parents' decisions about sending their children to the charter school and each school's continuous improvement efforts.

Unique Measures: Goals Established by the School

While the Framework is meant to form the foundation of each school's accountability plan, each school identifies additional customized mission-specific goals and objectives by which to measure its performance. An expert in school accountability works with each school to develop goals and measures specific to the school's particular mission and target population. The schools' accountability plans build on the goals and contractual obligations described in each founding group's charter school agreement and are meant to guide each school's progress through its first seven-year charter. The Mayor's Office developed an accountability handbook to assist charter founders build their accountability plans. For more information about the accountability plans, refer to the *Accountability Handbook for Mayor-Sponsored Charter Schools, 4th ed.*, which may be accessed online. (See the box below for more information.)

The accountability plan serves as part of a school improvement process and will help each school to:

- establish a clear set of ambitious, attainable, and measurable goals for the entire school community;
- evaluate school performance within a framework that includes student performance, financial, compliance, and organizational data;
- identify its strengths and weaknesses;
- engage parents in the mission and goals of the school as well as help inform their school selection process; and
- demonstrate public accountability for results by creating a transparent set of objectives and measures.

Gathering the Data

The Mayor's Office collects data in a wide range of ways to accurately measure school performance as outlined in the Framework. While it will rely on an array of reports and statistical information available about schools, the accountability system also includes alternative ways to track a wide range of indicators of school performance. And, although charter schools are free from many restrictions, they still have to comply with basic public school laws and regulations on issues ranging from financial probity to special education, and they must file numerous reports with the state and the Mayor's Office. Consequently, the Mayor's Office devoted significant resources through AECF's support to develop systems that both monitor schools' compliance and help them meet their compliance requirements. The charter schools themselves are ultimately responsible for complying with all applicable laws and regulations.

Prior actions. Each school's charter outlines a series of steps, called "prior actions," that must be completed before a school may provide instruction to students. Prior actions include but are not limited to: fully preparing facilities, including obtaining necessary permits and successfully completing inspections; developing detailed plans for special education, curriculum, transportation, and school safety that comply with all applicable laws; and finalizing budgets, financial plans, and accounting procedures that are in accordance with state rules. To view a list of the prior actions set by the Mayor's Office, refer to the attachments to the charter agreement which may be accessed online. (See the box below for more information.)

Pre-opening checklist and visits. Mayor's Office staff conducts visits with each new school before it opens its doors to students and families for the first time. The purpose of these visits is to determine whether the school is focusing on a wide range of matters, from safety to staffing, that are critical for a new school to address successfully prior to opening. The Mayor's Office provides schools with a detailed checklist prior to the visits, and during each visit the Mayor's Office reviews documentation and other evidence that items on the checklist have been satisfactorily addressed. A sample of the pre-opening checklist may be accessed online. (See the box below for more information.)

Annual testing. Each school must conduct standardized tests of reading and mathematics for every student, every year. To meet state requirements, schools are required to administer ISTEP+ every fall to students in grades 3-10. The Mayor's Office also requires schools to test students in the fall and spring in order to collect comparable, longitudinal data to measure student growth over the course of each school year and from year to year. This consistent year-to-year testing allows the Mayor's Office to assess the "value-added" by each school—the degree to which the school contributes to the learning of its students. This kind of analysis will in turn prove critical in the Mayor's Office's assessment of school progress.

Site visits. An outside group of experts periodically visits each Mayor-sponsored school throughout the seven-year term of the charter. The site visits give reviewers the opportunity to see in person what lies behind the test scores and reports that traditionally form the core of school oversight. Team members talk to the school's board members, students, teachers, administrators, and parents, visit classrooms, and review documents and materials. Reviewers provide oral reports to the schools at the end of their visits and provide written comments citing commendations and areas for improvement. The Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis developed the site visit process, and this process has

Accountability-related documents developed by the Mayor's Office

- Charter School Accountability Handbook
- Charter School Performance Framework
- The "Charter" – Charter School Agreement
- Pre-Opening Visit Checklist
- Expert Site Visit Review Process and Protocol
- Third Year Self Evaluation and Site Visit Protocol
- Fourth Year Charter Review and Fifth Year Follow-Up Protocol
- Surveys of Mayor-Sponsored Charter School Students, Parents, and Staff
- Charter School Governance and Compliance Handbook

These documents are available online at www.indygov.org/Mayor/Charter.

been adapted by researchers at Indiana University. A representative from Indiana University with expertise in school accountability led the site visits of schools in their first, second, third, and fifth years for the Mayor's Office in 2007-08. Experienced educators, evaluation experts, and other site visit team members led the site visits for the four schools in their fourth year of operation. A sample site visit protocol may be accessed online. (See box for more information.)

Surveys. Each spring students, parents, and staff complete surveys that assess their satisfaction with the school's learning climate. Survey items align with the Mayor's Charter School Performance Framework. To maintain objectivity, Indiana University administers the surveys and collects the data for the Mayor's Office. Indiana University developed the survey instrument and analyzed the results for the Mayor's Office. A sample copy of the

student, parent, and teacher surveys may be accessed online. (See box for more information.)

Governance and financial reviews. The Mayor's Office has developed a *Charter School Governance and Compliance Handbook* with guidelines to help determine whether schools are in compliance with their charters and all applicable laws. To help schools maintain and organize all compliance related items, the Mayor's Office works with each charter school prior to opening to create a compliance binder to organize all governance and compliance related documents. In addition, the Mayor's Office conducts monthly leadership, governance, and compliance site visits to each school. These reviews focus on issues related to Board and building-level leadership, reporting requirements, financial management, personnel matters, and school policies. On a quarterly schedule, schools submit financial statements to the Mayor's Office. An independent accounting firm reviews these reports using metrics designed specifically to evaluate the financial condition of Mayor-sponsored charter schools.

Mid-charter review. In the fourth year of each school's seven-year charter, the Mayor's Office prepares a comprehensive review of the school's performance to that point. This review begins in the school's third year with a thorough self-evaluation of the school's performance for the first three years of operation, examining all the areas covered in the Performance Framework and any additional measures of success the school has developed. Then in the fourth year, a site visit team conducts a multi-day on-site review and prepares a public report on the school's performance to date. SchoolWorks, a nationally-recognized educational consulting firm, developed the protocol for the mid-charter review, and in 2007-08, trained a group of local experts to conduct the four reviews and participated as team leaders or site visit members on

three of the four reviews. These teams of independent experts spent two-and-a-half days at each school to collect and analyze data about each school's programs and practices. Each school's fourth year report will be based on an array of data collected by the Mayor's Office that includes the annual site visit reports, parent, staff, and student surveys, financial reviews, and reporting information, as well as each school's performance data in relation to the school's accountability plan.

Using the Data

The Mayor's Office publishes the results of its reviews to inform parents and the greater public about how Mayor-sponsored charter schools are doing. The Mayor's Office will use this crucial information for making high-stakes decisions about these schools' future, and the schools can use the information themselves to enhance their educational programs over time.

Informing the public. The Mayor's Office is committed to making its charter school oversight process as transparent and useful as possible to all parties. The Mayor will continue to produce reports, like this one, that provide information about how each school is performing, including test score analysis, site visit and survey results, and an analysis of how the school is spending its public dollars. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in the school's fourth year will serve to provide a good explanation to public officials and the community about how effectively public dollars are being spent.

Informing the Mayor's Office. The Mayor's Office will continuously use the data collected to ensure that schools are on track to fulfilling the terms of their charters, including meeting the common goals outlined for all schools as well as each school's individual goals. Ultimately, the Mayor's Office will utilize all of the data collected over the first six years of the school's charter term to make charter renewal decisions. Each school must submit a renewal petition that presents the case for why the school should maintain its charter. The Mayor's Office will consider this renewal petition in conjunction with the mid-charter review, the site visit reports, survey results, governance and compliance reviews, academic testing performance, financial audits, and any other relevant information to decide whether to renew a school's charter.

Informing the schools. Schools can utilize the accountability data to improve their academic programs and organizational processes. For example, the site visits generate useful critiques by the expert reviewers about the areas schools should target for improvement as well as the areas in which the schools excel. The reviewers also meet with school leaders at the end of their visits to point out their general observations about how the school is running in every major aspect ranging from student learning and classroom management to staff and financial management. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in each school's fourth year provides the school with a straightforward understanding of what it needs to improve. This review will also give schools and parents of enrolled students adequate notice of any challenges identified and ample opportunity to address them prior to the Mayor's renewal decisions. In addition, the annual surveys are designed to help every school understand how its important constituents – parents, teachers, and students – perceive the school and identify areas that need to be improved.