

North Central Charter Essential School (NCCES), a regional Commonwealth charter school now in its sixth year of operation, was chartered in 2002 to serve a maximum of 400 students in grades 7-12. The school currently enrolls 326 students. The school draws approximately half of its students from Fitchburg, with students enrolling from Leominster (13%), Gardner, Lunenburg, Townsend, Westminster and Winchendon and other communities in central Massachusetts.

The NCCES mission statement states that, “NCCES is a free public school where students are known personally, challenged intellectually, and expected to participate actively in their learning. Guided by our commitment to diversity and inclusiveness, our goal is to send graduates into the world who think for themselves, care about others, and act creatively and responsibly.”

As of the date of the site visit, enrollment information from the school indicated that 81% of the students are white, 11% are Hispanic, 3% are African American, 3% are Asian, and the remaining 2% are unclassified. Twenty percent of the student population receives special education services. Two percent are English language learners. Thirty percent qualify to receive free or reduced lunch.

The school’s charter was renewed with conditions on February 27, 2007. The conditions imposed upon the school’s charter at the time of renewal were as follows:

1. By June 30, 2007, the school shall submit a report on actions taken in response to the recommendations of a consultant, who shall be approved by the Commissioner, hired to complete a review of the school’s leadership structure and to provide assistance in the hiring process for school leadership.
2. By June 30, 2007, North Central Charter Essential School must submit to the Department’s Charter School Office a school improvement plan created through the Department’s process for creation of a District Plan for School Intervention.
3. By June 30, 2007, North Central Charter Essential School must have a five year Accountability Plan approved by the Charter School Office. The Accountability Plan must include annual benchmarks against goals and objectives that align to the school’s plan for improvement as referenced in Condition 1. Benchmarks within the Accountability Plan must include the school making Adequate Yearly Progress in the aggregate and for all statistically significant subgroups on all applicable tests.
4. North Central Charter Essential School must demonstrate that it is an academic success by December of 2008 by providing evidence that the school has met or is making substantial progress toward meeting benchmarks in its 2007-2012 Accountability Plan and has made Adequate Yearly Progress in the aggregate and for all statistically significant subgroups on all applicable tests on the spring 2007 and spring 2008 MCAS test administrations.

The following participants conducted the site visit on October 11, 2007:

- Amy Aaron, Hilltown Cooperative Charter School
- Barry Barnett, MA DOE Charter School Office
- Jennifer Feller, independent educational consultant
- Patricia Karl, Lawrence Family Development Charter School
- Joshua Lavine, MA DOE Charter School Office
- Emily Lichtenstein, MA DOE Charter School Office
- Teri Schrader, Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School

Before the visit, the team reviewed the NCCES 2006-07 Annual Report, the 2007-12 Accountability Plan, the School Improvement Plan 2007-08, Board minutes and materials, and the 2006-07 Summary of Review. On site, the team reviewed curricular information, student performance data, and other information provided by the school. The team conducted observations in approximately 28 classrooms and conducted group and individual interviews. Eleven trustees, four administrators, seven teachers, eight parents, and ten students attended their respective focus group meetings.

The purposes of the visit were:

- to review the progress that the school has made in meeting the conditions imposed at the time of charter renewal,
- to review the progress that the school has made in implementing its Plan for Charter School Improvement,
- to corroborate and augment the information contained in the school's Annual Report, to investigate the school's progress relative to its Accountability Plan goals, and
- to collect information that will eventually help the Commissioner and Board of Education make a renewal recommendation for the school's charter.

The focus of the inquiry is on three central areas: faithfulness to the terms of the school's charter, academic success, and organizational viability.

The team's findings are presented below.

### **Meeting the Conditions of Renewal**

*Finding: NCCES has met the requirements of Condition #1 of its charter renewal.*

Condition #1 requires that by June 30, 2007, NCCES must submit a report to the Charter School Office in response to the recommendations of a consultant hired by the school to review the school's leadership structure and provide assistance in the hiring process for school leadership. In April 2007, the school received approval from the Commissioner and engaged the educational consulting firm, Class Measures, to conduct the review. On June 22, 2007, it submitted to the Charter School Office a report in response to the recommendations. The school's written response includes the recommendations made by the consultant, the school's adoption of those recommendations, and a plan for continued collaboration between the school and the consultant. Details concerning the implementation of the consultant's recommendations are discussed in the Organizational Viability section of this report, on pages 12-13.

*Finding: NCCES has met the requirements of Condition #2 of its charter renewal.*

Condition #2 requires that by June 30, 2007, NCCES would submit a Plan for Charter School Improvement created through the DOE's process for creation of a District Plan for School Intervention. The June 30, 2007 deadline was met for submission of the final draft of the Plan for Charter School Improvement and a draft Accountability Plan. Staff members in the Accountability and Targeted Assistance unit of the Department of Education reviewed the school's Plan in lieu of a state review panel. The school has received the comments of these reviewers and was informed in October that the Plan should be implemented and the school should conduct ongoing evaluation to determine if the Plan is successful and if changes need to be made, in collaboration with the Charter School Office.

*Finding: NCCES has met the requirements of Condition #3 of its charter renewal.*

Condition #3 requires that by June 30, 2007, NCCES must have finalized an Accountability Plan approved by the Charter School Office. The school submitted its draft plan in a timely fashion, received feedback from the Charter School Office, and submitted a final version by June 30, 2007.

*Finding: NCCES has met some, but not all of the requirements of Condition #4 of its charter renewal.*

Condition #4 requires that NCCES make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the aggregate and for all statistically significant subgroups on all spring 2007 and 2008 MCAS test administrations. In 2007, the school did not make AYP in English language arts in the aggregate. The school had two statistically significant subgroups, white and low-income, and did not make AYP in either of these subgroups. The school made AYP in mathematics in the aggregate; however, the subgroup of low-income students did not make AYP because, although this group met their improvement target by showing a gaining of 7.6 in CPI, of the 2002-2006 student cohort group, the low income subgroup (N=6) had a graduation rate of 25%, below the required graduation rate target of 55%.

### **Implementation of the School Improvement Plan**

*Finding: The school is in the beginning stages of implementation of the Plan for Charter School Improvement. The Board has recently created a focused list of priority goals for the year. It will be important for administrators to act on the priority goals identified by the Board as a way to focus its attention.*

The Plan for Charter School Improvement (Plan) calls for the implementation of various initiatives in five different areas: (1) standards-based teaching and learning, (2) informing practice with data, (3) time for teachers and students, (4) instructional leadership and (5) governance. The school reports that they utilized subgroup data in development of the Plan. The Plan includes a School Improvement Plan Table, which is an extensive list of tasks tied to each area, to be accomplished month-by-month during the 2007-08 school year, with a focus on the period of June through September 2007. While it appears that the school is on track to accomplish most of the goals listed in the Plan, many significant items remain to be addressed. Recognizing the need to winnow down the list to a more manageable set of priorities, the Board has recently established a shorter list of 2007-08 School Goals. The academic goals on this list

include aligning all curriculum with state standards, documenting all curriculum, developing common formative assessments for English language arts and math to be administered 4-6 times yearly, and training all faculty in Understanding by Design, using Essential Questions and project based learning. Administrators understand the need to focus on the above-listed tasks, and similarly described the school's immediate priorities as development of curriculum using Understanding by Design principles and the use of meaningful assessment.

*Finding: The school is beginning to use its professional development program to support the initiatives called for by the School Improvement Plan.*

Administrators are working on the development of a professional development program that supports faculty in the implementation of the Plan. Through professional development sessions, teachers appear to have been fully informed about the aspects of the Plan that impact their teaching, even though they do not appear to be familiar with the whole plan. Teachers spoke enthusiastically about this year's professional development program, which they report as being clearly organized and closely related to the goals set by the Plan.

The primary vehicle for offering professional development is through weekly meetings that take place from 12:30-3:30 every Wednesday afternoon. As of the date of the site visit, agendas had been developed for these meetings through December. Each meeting begins with a fifteen-minute period, known as "Tiny Teach," at which a teacher shares an exemplary instructional practice. Teachers are then given training in areas such as test administration, data analysis, Understanding by Design curriculum planning, curriculum mapping, learning to look at student work, and formative assessment development. Time is also set aside for grade level and subject area team meetings.

In addition to the Wednesday afternoon sessions, teachers are also given common planning time during the week, and special education learning specialists participate in weekly meetings with regular education teachers by subject area. The special education staff also meets weekly as a department to discuss student needs and interventions. It is a goal of the administration that teachers use this time to plan collaboratively and conduct peer observations. To this end, the Wednesday afternoon sessions are designed to model the effective elements of a professional learning community, particularly by incorporating the sharing of best practices into the beginning of every session. Future site visitors will look for evidence of an increasing school-wide focus on the development and sharing of effective instructional practices during common planning and professional development time.

*Finding: Curriculum development is a work in progress. Plans are in place to implement a school-wide web-based curriculum mapping program that incorporates Understanding by Design principles.*

A component of the School Improvement Plan is to develop standards-based teaching and learning. Teachers report that while there has always been an expectation that planning should incorporate Understanding by Design (UbD) principles, and that standards from the state curriculum frameworks should form the basis for planning, this model was never systematically or consistently implemented. This year, all teachers were required to submit unit plans for the first six weeks of the school year, however, they were not required to use a particular format, to incorporate UbD principles, or to demonstrate alignment with state standards. Plans are in place

to develop staff capacity to use UbD to create lesson plans that are aligned with state standards and to incorporate Essential Questions, project-based learning strategies, and formative assessment tools. In November, teachers will be trained on UbD during Wednesday professional development sessions. Beginning in late November, teachers will be introduced to the web-based Rubicon Atlas program that the school has chosen to use as its curriculum mapping tool. The school's goal is that by the end of the 2007-08 school year, all unit plans will be thoroughly mapped using this software.

*Finding: The school has made strides in analyzing and using data.*

A component of the School Improvement Plan is to inform practice with data. Administrators and teachers reported that, until this year, the school was not using reliable assessment data to group students and plan instruction. This year, MCAS results were analyzed to determine areas of greatest need, and restructure the program accordingly to offer extended periods for essential skill remediation. An item analysis was performed to reveal areas of deficiency, such as specific math skills (e.g., scientific notation and linear equations) and broader weaknesses (e.g., open response questions).

In addition to analyzing MCAS results, the school has adopted a comprehensive reading assessment program that is used to place students in essential skills classes. Assessments include the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE), the Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency (TOSWRF) and the Test of Word Spelling (TWS-4), all of which are administered twice yearly. Students who receive a low score on these screening tests are also given the Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessment three times a year to monitor their progress. For math, the school relies on Study Island and MCAS results to place students.

The final critical piece of the Plan is to develop formative English language arts and mathematics assessments aligned with state standards, to be administered 4-6 times yearly. This key component is under development, with the goal of implementing this testing program during the current school year.

*Finding: Extended blocks of instructional time to address essential skills (and enrichment) have been implemented, but with a range of effectiveness.*

A component of the Plan is to maximize time for teachers and students. Last year the school piloted a program in its middle school known as High School Prep. Two days a week, first and second periods were extended to two, 90-minute essential skills workshops. This year, this model has been extended to the whole school. All students are organized into skills based groups for targeted English language arts and mathematics instruction according to their most urgent needs, as demonstrated by testing results. The small number of students who are not in need of remediation are offered enrichment options, such as Latin and art/humanities. Groupings are fluid and students are reassessed and regrouped as necessary every six weeks.

Administrators reported that it has been challenging for the teachers, who have been trained to teach middle and high school levels, to address the basic literacy and numeracy skills that many of the students need. To address this concern, teachers are being provided with scripted supplemental materials. Site visitors observed that the quality of instruction delivered during the essential skills blocks was uneven, with teachers ignoring some off task behavior and sometimes

focusing their attention on a small group of engaged students. The tone in some classes was observed to be friendly, casual, and lacking in focus or urgency.

*Finding: The school has developed and is implementing a comprehensive system for teacher supervision and evaluation.*

The central goals contained in the instructional leadership component of the Plan are to develop a performance appraisal system for evaluating teacher performance and a system for supporting new less experienced teachers. Under the direction of the newly appointed Director of Curriculum and Instruction, this year the school has implemented a new teacher evaluation system known as the NCCES Performance Appraisal and Support System Portfolio (PASSPORT). This system requires all teachers to set goals for the year analogous to the goals that students are required to develop. Teachers who have been in the school for three years or less are required to engage in four collaborative peer reviews, a departmental school walk, two observations by their department head, and two formal administrative reviews. A student survey is an additional optional component of the performance review. New teachers also attend a two-day summer orientation, are assigned a mentor, and meet weekly with the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Teachers who have been in the school for four or more years are required to undergo one formal administrative evaluation and a departmental school walk; participation in all other forms of review is optional. The special education coordinator functions as the direct supervisor for the learning specialists who provide in class and pull-out support for students with disabilities. The coordinator regularly observes special education learning specialists developing both quantitative (such as the number of interventions performed) and qualitative data (such as the quality of the techniques observed being employed). Meetings are then held 1-2 times each month so that the coordinator can provide feedback to the individual staff persons regarding her observations.

*Finding: The Board of Trustees is aware of and fulfilling its role in implementation of the Plan for School Improvement.*

The final component of the Plan concerns governance of the school. The Plan commits the board to completing a self-evaluation to set goals and develop plans for training and recruitment based on identified gaps in board expertise, and to maintain oversight of the progress of the executive director and the school towards meeting the goals of the Plan and the school's new accountability plan. Interviews with board members during the site visit confirmed that the board is focused on these commitments.

During the focus group, Board members emphasized their commitment to rigorous review of progress toward meeting the goals of the accountability and school improvement plans. An academic success subcommittee of the board works with the principal and the executive director, meeting regularly to assess academic progress. The full board meets every four weeks and reviews the reports of the academic success committee.

The board also understands the need for ongoing development and training. Because many board members are appointed for one-year terms, frequent training is necessary. Training takes place at every meeting, on topics such as the open meeting law, state ethics requirements, and the

public records law. A retreat was held at the end of September at which new trustees were educated about the Plan and the accountability plan.

The board is also planning to use its oversight of the executive director as a way of monitoring implementation of the Plan. The executive director's contract specifies that her goals, which will flow from the Plan, will be developed by mid-November. The executive committee of the board will evaluate her twice a year, with input from other board members, teachers, and parents.

*Finding: Although conditions were imposed on the school's renewal partly in response to the AYP outcomes for subgroup populations, none of the goals in the Plan specifically address the needs of those students or the programs that exist to support them.*

The school's current special education coordinator was not directly involved in the development of the Plan. The needs of the special education students, and the English language learner students and how to address their needs through the Plan were reported by the school to have been represented by the school's former special education director, who was a key member of the team that developed and wrote the plan. Nevertheless, there are no goals in the Plan that are specifically related to the special education program, or to the needs of the school's English language learner students.

### **Additional Site Visit Protocol Questions**

#### **Faithfulness to the Terms of the Charter**

***Are the school's mission, vision, and educational philosophy clear and understood by the school community?***

*Finding: The Think/Care/Act philosophy is at the heart of the school and permeates day-to-day operations.*

All stakeholders were familiar with and could even recite the school's mission statement. There is a common understanding that the essence of the mission is the school's Think/Care/Act philosophy. All stakeholders made reference to this mission component and gave examples of how it is embodied in the work of the school. The Principal described how she saw this philosophy play out in the process of self-examination and change that occurred last year. Instead of turning inward and rejecting the criticisms leveled at the school, the community listened to the feedback it received and changed course, embracing the school improvement process as a vehicle for self-analysis and improvement. The administrative team described the mission as an anchor that kept the school together when things were tough.

*Finding: Stakeholders found that some aspects of the Essential Schools model have been implemented and that others have not.*

NCCES is an Essential School, and as such, embraces the Ten Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Skills. The site visit team found that some of the Principles are pervasive throughout the school, for example, teachers know each student well and personally. Each student is required to develop his or her own academic and interpersonal learning goals. Students described the school as a democracy, where they are valued for their individuality, listened to, and respected. Students are appointed to serve as ambassadors for the school who

welcome new families into the school. There are three student representatives on the school's Board. Older students are also able to assist in classrooms of younger students.

Other Principles were not found to be in evidence. For example, site visitors did not observe effective implementation of the Principle that instruction should be limited to fewer content areas and skills but that those areas should be taught to mastery. Instead, some lessons seemed scattered and lacking in focus, the walls of some classrooms were filled with a diverse and distracting variety of print materials, and some student work did not reflect mastery of the subject areas.

*Finding: Conflict and disciplinary issues are addressed through structures that are aligned to the school's mission, such as peer mediation and the advisory program.*

Students reported that teachers at the school "are not out to punish you." Instead, as described in the school's most recent Annual Report, the focus is on "establishing, maintaining, and restoring relationships." The school has developed an extensive peer mediation program to handle conflict between students, with more than 40 students certified as peer mediators through the statewide SCORE Mediation Program. Students are grouped into advisories that meet four times each week to explore personal issues and build social skills as well as to set academic goals. This year, Advisories have been restructured to ensure that advisors are well informed about their students' academic and personal issues.

**Has the school met the faithfulness to charter goals set out in its Accountability Plan?**

*Finding: The school is making some progress towards meeting its faithfulness to charter goals have been partially met.*

As noted above, pursuant to Charter Renewal Condition #3, the school submitted and received approval for a new Accountability Plan in June 2007. There are three goals in the school's Accountability Plan that are related to its faithfulness to charter. Each goal includes 3-5 measures, as reported below:

**Goal A: NCCES students are known personally, challenged intellectually and participate actively in their learning.**

*Measure 1: 100% of student have personal learning plans.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, this goal was met.

*Measure 2: 80% of NCCES students and parents agree that the student is well known and thus well academically advised.*

The survey discussed in the 2006-07 Annual Report reported a response rate of 27% for students and 33% for families. This response rate means that, though 83% of those responding agreed with statement, only 22% of all students and 27% of all parents affirmatively agreed. In order to meet this goal by 2012, the school will need to increase its response rate.

*Measure 3: 80% of NCCES students and parents agree that their student is provided with an appropriate level of academic challenge.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 71% of respondents agreed with this statement. However, as stated above, since the response rate to the survey was 27% of students and 33% of families, 19% of all students and 23% of all parents affirmatively agreed with the statement.

*Measure 4: NCCES demonstrates effective Essential School Practices as evidenced by annual reviews by outside critical friends.*

The school plans to start this practice during the 2007-08 school year.

**Goal B: NCCES is a diverse and inclusive community where every member's voice and perspective is valued and respected**

*Measure 1: NCCES policies, procedures, practices, and indicators of success reflect commitment to diversity.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, the school has been engaged in an extensive internal review process of its policies and procedures, and also took part in the DOE's mid-cycle CPR review process. Beyond this, the school did not report and the site visit team did not evaluate this measure.

*Measure 2: Response rate to annual climate survey will increase by 2% per year, resulting in returns of at least 60%.*

In the spring of 2007, 27% of students, 33% of families, and 10% of staff completed the survey, creating a baseline of data for analysis of this goal.

*Measure 3: 80% of NCCES students and parents agree that they feel safe at NCCES.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 96% of respondents agreed with this statement. However, since the response rate to the survey was 27% of students and 33% of families, 26% of all students and 32% of all parents affirmatively agreed with the statement.

*Measure 4: 80% of NCCES students and staff actively participate in a democratic process for school-wide decision making.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 91% of the school community participated in a recent school-wide referendum. Beyond this, the school did not report on and the site visit team did not evaluate this measure.

*Measure 5: The demographic composition of the student body reflects that of the school's sending districts.*

The school has met this measure, in that the school's ethnic/racial composition mirrors that of the surrounding region, according to US 2000 Census Data.

**Goal C: NCCES shares with the outside community replicable models of effective practices.**

*Measure 1: At least 5 staff share some aspect of NCCES practices with other educators.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, NCCES shared best practices at various conferences and with local schools.

*Measure 2: NCCES maintains examples of replicable best practices on its website.*

The school plans to start this practice during the 2007-08 school year.

*Measure 3: NCCES will bring in at least 25 visitors annually to observe the school.*

The school plans to start this practice during the 2007-08 school year.

**Academic Success**

***Does the school's instructional program, as described and implemented in the classroom:***

- 1. address the skills and concepts that students must know and be able to do to meet state standards?***

2. ***articulate school developed or identified internal standards for student performance?***
3. ***establish and implement accommodation plans that address the needs of diverse learners?***

*Finding: Site visitors observed that teachers have created a supportive and positive learning environment.*

Site visitors observed that the environment in the school was relaxed, informal and positive. Teachers were heard to offer encouragement and frequent praise. Instruction appeared to be highly personalized, with teachers demonstrating a deep understanding of their students as people. Students reported that they view teachers as friends, who “go out of their way to help us.” A great deal of extra help is available, including daily after school tutoring.

*Finding: Site visitors observed that the quality of instruction was uneven.*

Some teachers seemed to lack strategies to engage all students in learning. In some classrooms, distracting behavior was ignored, and students were not effectively redirected from off task behavior. In some classes, teachers appeared to be engaged with only a small group of students, while others did not attend to the instruction. The objective of the lesson was very clear in some classrooms, and less so in others. During the site visit, school leaders named the effort to build a consistently high level of academic rigor as a central challenge for the school. Site visitors saw a range in this area: they observed some examples of higher level thinking skills and some very basic rote work. Student work products observed by site visitors appeared to be largely lacking in rigor, raising a question about whether all students are being sufficiently challenged and held to consistently high standards.

*Finding: The school has a two-tiered system through which interventions can be made for regular education students in need of assistance.*

The school has established two groups which are forums for staff concerns about student performance: the grade level team (GLT) and the student support team (SST). Both the GLT and the SST groups are capable of recommending accommodations to be implemented in response to teacher reports of students having difficulty succeeding in the general education classroom. SST meetings are held weekly. SST staffing includes the Principal, the Dean of Students, the special education coordinator, the two school guidance counselors and the school’s registrar. Addition of the school registrar in the group is an innovative way to ensure that the group routinely monitors student attendance issues.

The Dean of Students, who also serves on the SST, is a new position that was created to improve evenness of disciplinary approach and follow-through across the school. The Dean operates both as a chief disciplinarian and as an intervention specialist working with students who have behavior plans the help them achieve their goals, with student groups such as the student ambassadors and the peer mediators, and maintaining frequent contact with the school counselors and nurse. Teachers and administrators both reported that the addition of this position has improved consistency in the understanding and application of discipline and expectations across the school, both for students and for staff.

*Finding: The school offers a variety of ancillary groups and programs to support student learning.*

Some of the ancillary services include the following:

- Students with Asbergers syndrome attend a specialized social skills group once weekly. The group emphasizes social interactions and understanding how others perceive things through the use of role playing, and videotaping and replaying practice encounters.
- All students are assigned an advisor with whom they meet daily. Advisories address such topics as goal-setting or test taking anxiety.
- Students in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades have small group essential skills intensive instruction available in English and Mathematics. Students who are enrolled into these intensive groups receive instruction in that subject twice each day, since the intensive classes operate in addition to their regular classroom period for that subject.
- Regular classrooms sessions are run for behavioral management groups for both boys and girls, addressing issues such as anger management and decision making skills.

*Finding: The special education department has plans for increased staff training, some elements of which have already been implemented.*

Teachers have received training in administration of Woodcock-Johnson assessments, on how to write better IEP goals and objectives, and on Lindamood Bell instructional techniques which help teachers in addressing learning difficulties associated with dyslexia, hyperlexia, and autism. The goal of the trainings is not only the addition of the specified skill sets for the teachers, but also involving teachers more in interpretive and analytical roles within the special education program.

***Are students reaching Proficiency on state standards, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)?***

*Finding: MCAS results for 2007 generally demonstrate a decline in English language arts and a gain in mathematics.*

MCAS results for English language arts and mathematics for the last five years are presented below in Tables I and II. This table includes the Composite Performance Index (CPI), which reflects the distribution of student scores over the four MCAS performance categories. The CPI is a 100-point index that measures the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency.

**Table I: NCECS MCAS ELA Results by Performance Categories, 2003-2007**

<b>ELA</b>	<b>Students Included</b>	<b>% Advanced</b>	<b>% Proficient</b>	<b>% Needs Improv.</b>	<b>% Warning/Failed</b>	<b>CPI</b>
<b>Grade 7</b>						
2003	84	7	58	24	11	83.0
2004	84	0	52	37	11	80.1
2005	74	1	54	38	7	82.1
2006	59	3	41	47	8	75.4

<b>2007</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>69.7</b>
<b>Grade 8</b>						
2006	75	4	59	33	4	85.0
<b>2007</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>86.8</b>
<b>Grade 10</b>						
<b>2004</b>	45	13	44	36	7	85.0
<b>2005</b>	50	6	38	34	22	74.5
<b>2006</b>	59	5	71	17	7	88.6
<b>2007</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>81.6</b>

In 2007, NCCES scores declined in English language arts in grades 7 and 10. In grade 7, the percentage of students reaching proficiency between 2003-2007 declined from 65% to 39%, and the CPI dropped by 13.3 points. In grade 10, the percentage of students reaching proficiency between 2003-2007 declined slightly, from 57% to 53% with a concurrent drop in CPI of 3.4 points. However, the number of students failing the grade 10 ELA exam declined from 7% to 2% over the same time period. In grade 8, the percentage of students reaching proficiency rose from 63% to 69 %, and the CPI rose by 1.8 points.

**Table II: NCECS MCAS Mathematics Results by Performance Categories 2003-2007**

	<b>Students Included</b>	<b>% Advanced</b>	<b>% Proficient</b>	<b>% Needs Improv.</b>	<b>% Warning/Failed</b>	<b>CPI</b>
<b>Grade 7</b>						
2006	60	2	10	43	45	46.7
<b>2007</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>61.4</b>
<b>Grade 8</b>						
2003	70	3	10	40	47	45.7
2004	86	2	20	36	42	54.1
2005	80	3	15	23	60	44.9
2006	72	0	13	38	50	47.9
<b>2007</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>53.2</b>
<b>Grade 10</b>						
2004	45	18	27	36	20	69.4
2005	50	8	42	20	30	70.2
2006	55	31	22	31	16	77.3
<b>2007</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>77.9</b>

Scores in mathematics rose in 2007 at all grade levels tested. While still falling below state performance levels, significant gains were achieved and the school met its own improvement target, with CPI rising by 14.7 points in grade 7, 7.5 points in grade 8, and 8.5 points in grade 10. In grades 7 and 8, the percentage of students achieving proficiency rose by 9% and 6%, respectively, while the percentage of students achieving proficiency in grade 10 remained static, at 53%.

*Finding: NCCES did not make AYP in English language arts in 2007. NCCES made AYP in the aggregate in mathematics, but failed to make AYP for its low-income student subgroup because*

*this group did not meet the statewide graduation rate target.*

AYP determinations are calculated by the state in accordance with the standards of the No Child Left Behind Act. A school that makes AYP is considered “on track” to have all students score in the Proficient or Advanced categories on the MCAS exam.

In English language arts, NCCES did not make AYP in 2007. The CPI for NCCES students in the aggregate declined 3.8 points from the school’s 2006 performance level, and was 6 points below the state performance. The school’s two statistically significant subgroups, low income and white students, also failed to show improvement from 2006, and did not meet state performance targets.

In math, NCCES students made AYP in the aggregate by showing an improvement of 8.5 points in the CPI. The subgroup of white students also made AYP. However, the subgroup of low-income students did not make AYP because, although this group met their improvement target by showing a gaining of 7.6 in CPI, of the 2002-2006 student cohort group, the low income subgroup (N=6) had a graduation rate of 25%, below the required graduation rate target of 55%.

***Have students met the academic performance goals set out in the school’s Accountability Plan?***

*Finding: The school is making some progress towards meeting its academic performance goals. There are four goals in the school’s Accountability Plan that are related to academic success. Each goal includes 2-4 measures, as reported on below:*

**Goal A: NCCES students think for themselves, use their minds well and master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge.**

*Measure 1: 100% of students pass the ELA and math MCAS by graduation.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 100% of graduates have passed the ELA MCAS examination, and all but four students passed the mathematics examination prior to graduation.

*Measure 2: NCCES makes AYP each year.*

As discussed above, NCCES did not make AYP in the aggregate in English language arts, and did make AYP in the aggregate in mathematics, in 2007.

*Measure 3: 90% of students meet the eligibility requirements for promotion at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 100% of students in grade 8 and 97% of students in grade 10 were promoted at the end of the 2006-2007 school year.

*Measure 4: 100% of graduates demonstrate mastery of higher order thinking skills through the completion of the Senior Project.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 100% of NCCES graduates completed the Senior Project in 2006-07.

**Goal B: NCCES curriculum is aligned with standards from the MA curriculum frameworks and is effectively implemented in the classroom.**

*Measure 1: 100% of courses are aligned with state standards, as indicated by curriculum maps.*

As discussed above, the school is in the process of creating curriculum maps, and expects to complete this process by the end of the 2007-08 school year.

*Measure 2: 100% of teachers ensure mastery of state standards in ELA and mathematics as measured by analysis of results of common formative assessments.*

As discussed above, the school is in the process of creating formative assessments, and expects to complete this process by the end of the 2007-08 school year.

**Goal C: NCCES students transition successfully from NCCES to post-secondary education, employment or an organized service program**

*Measure 1: 90% of graduates are accepted to at least one post-secondary educational program*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 92% of NCCES graduates have been accepted into at least one post-secondary program.

*Measure 2: 95% of graduates are enrolled in post-secondary educational programs, employed or participating in an organized service program by the fall following graduation.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, 100% of the class of 2005 and 2006 were enrolled in post-secondary educational programs, employed, or participating in an organized service program by the fall following graduation.

**Goal D: NCCES graduates are well prepared, as determined by data collected by biennial alumni surveys.**

*Measure 1: 90% of alumni continue to be enrolled in post-secondary educational programs, employed or participating in an organized service program as determined by biennial surveys.*

The first alumni survey is scheduled to take place during the 2007-08 school year.

*Measure 2: 90% of alumni agree that they are well prepared for post-secondary educational programs, employed or participating in an organized service program as determined by biennial surveys.*

The first alumni survey is scheduled to take place during the 2007-08 school year.

**Organizational Viability**

***Does the school have an effective leadership and governance structure for carrying out the mission, vision and educational philosophy of the school?***

*Finding: The new administrative team appears to be a well functioning team with clear job descriptions, roles and responsibilities.*

The 2006-07 school year was one of disruption in leadership for the NCCES community. The school's founding principal retired in June of 2006, and shortly after that, the school's founding executive director announced that he would be resigning, effective in June of 2007. The principal hired to replace the founding principal resigned after a few months in the position. Three board members also resigned in the wake of her departure. In response to these events, the Board created two committees, an Executive Functions Committee to assess and make recommendations on the leadership structure, and a Leadership Search Committee, to seek, identify, screen, and recommend candidates for leadership roles. Board members reported that, prior to the work of these committees, "role confusion was a huge problem." The "Dual Committee" (these two committees working together) addressed these problems by developing a new organizational chart and revised job descriptions for administrators.

In April 2007, the school hired a consultant pursuant to Condition 1 of charter renewal (see page 2 of this report) to review the school's leadership structure and provide assistance with the process of hiring new leadership. The consultant reviewed the work of the two committees, found no fundamental concerns with their efforts, and made recommendations that the school has implemented. The school continues to use the services of the consultant on an on-going basis of approximately one half-day per month, primarily to better define the role and responsibilities of the Executive Director.

In the spring of 2007, the Board appointed candidates recommended by the Search Committee to the positions of Executive Director, Principal, and Director of Curriculum and Instruction (DCI). Only the Executive Director is new to the school; the Principal is a founding faculty member of the school who had been the Director of Student Services; the DCI was in her second year at the school and had been a lead math teacher. This new leadership team brings a balance of continuity and change to the school. The team works closely and collaboratively together, but team members also have an understanding of their individual roles and responsibilities.

*Finding: In the wake of last year's work on clarification of leadership roles and responsibilities, the Board also gained increased clarity about its role in governing the school.*

NCCES has an unusual governance structure in that the board of trustees includes both "Appointed" trustees, and also "Faculty," "Family," and "Student" trustees, all of whom are nominated and elected for two-year terms by their respective constituency. Due to this system of electing trustee representatives, and also because of last year's disruptive events, there has been considerable turnover in board members; only two of the current 14 board members were on the board prior to September 2006. Because the board brings different perspectives together, and because membership shifts frequently, clarification of the board's role in governing the school became a challenge and a priority for the school, as is reflected in the school's Plan for Charter School Improvement (see page 6 of this report). Board members stated that as a result of the work on clarification of leadership roles and organizational structure the board now has a clearer understanding of their role. Future site visit teams will look for continued work on board training, and increasing clarity from board members that their role as the body holding the school's charter, and not as an elected, representational body.

*Finding: There has been a clarification of the division of responsibilities between administrators and teachers, freeing teachers to focus on teaching and learning.*

A further result of this year's reorganization and clarification of leadership roles is that teachers are no longer expected to fill administrative functions. Teachers and administrators reported that prior to this school year, teachers were required to spend a great deal of their time on organizational development. Meetings often were spent on logistical issues and much energy went into building the institution. This year, teachers are able to concentrate on improving instructional practice. Staff reported that this year, there is a "dead on focus" on academics, and on building rigor. This shift is evident at staff meetings, which this year are dedicated exclusively to building academic success, with only fifteen minutes of the agenda devoted to "housekeeping" issues.

*Finding: The budget is based on an assumption of 340 students but current enrollment is 326. Improving the enrollment situation by focusing on external communications and marketing is a priority for the Board.*

Recruitment and retention of students continues to be a concern for NCCES. During the 2006-07 school year, the school had a targeted enrollment of 375 students but had enrolled 344 as of October 1, 2006. Forty-four students left during the 2006-07 school year. An additional 44 reported that they would not return to school in the fall of 2007. For the current 2007-08 school year, the school has based its budget on an assumption of 340 students, but as of the date of the site visit, had an enrollment of 326 students.

The board has formed a new communications subcommittee, with the goal of developing a clear message to go out to the community about the benefits of attending this school. It is the board's belief that a coordinated marketing strategy that is focused around a single compelling message will assist in addressing enrollment concerns. With this effort underway, the board is hopeful that it can increase enrollment this year to 340 students, and has also set a goal of 375 for enrollment in 2007-08. The board also recognizes that if these efforts are not successful, a revised budget will have to be developed for the current fiscal year.

***Is the school safe and are the physical facilities adequate?***

*Finding: students feel safe and supported, known and respected.*

Teachers reported that, in the past, student misbehavior was a problem for the school, and created a distraction from a focus on academic rigor. The 2006-07 Annual Report listed three expulsions, two exclusions, and 25 out-of-school suspensions for incidents such as vandalism, destruction of property, theft, possession of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs, and fighting. However, teachers also stated that over time, systems and structures have been implemented that now effectively address discipline issues. Teachers and administrators uniformly cite this as a high priority in the school. Creating an emotionally safe environment is clearly a school-wide focus. Parents consistently mentioned the school's success in creating such an environment as the reason for enrolling their children. As described above (on page 7 of this report), the school has implemented a mission-driven approach to discipline that emphasizes peer mediation and relationship building. In addition, the school employs a full time Dean of Students who works with students who have behavior plans, and helps to create common behavioral expectations throughout the school.

***Is the school operating in a manner consistent with legal and regulatory requirements?***

*Finding: Administrative changes have improved the operational efficiency of the special education program. Assessment and support services available to English language learners continue to be inadequate.*

English Language Learner (ELL) services now include distribution of a home language survey to the families of all students who enroll in the school. For those students who are reported to be potentially limited English proficient, the school administers an approved oral language proficiency assessment, but does not assess written or reading skills, both of which are required. The school is not prepared to offer sheltered English immersion programming for limited English proficient students as required.

Currently, two student enrolled at the school have been identified as limited English proficient. These two students receive pull-out English language support services from a teacher certified in English Language Arts, but not specifically trained in English as a Second language acquisition.

The school reports that it has improved administrative practices in regard to special education program operation, including procedures for inviting parents to meetings, issuing notice letters to parents and performing evaluations on students which are more relevant to the specific needs of the student. They attribute the improvements to being given direct responsibility for scheduling meetings, and improved staff capacity to perform assessments in-house where the students are better known to the assessors.

One second-year staff in the special education department does not possess educational licensure and has not yet taken and passed the required components of MTEL.

***Are school and community members satisfied with the performance of the school?***

*Finding: Those families that are currently enrolled in the school are enthusiastic supports, and believe that the school is uniquely suited to meet the needs of their students.*

Last year, in the wake of the disruptive incidents described above, the school experienced a high attrition rate. Forty-four students left the school during the school year, and approximately 44 (nongraduating) students did not return in the fall of 2007. Administrators explained to the site visit team that those who remain with the school “made a conscious choice to be here.” Indeed, the families who currently attend the school appear to be deeply committed to its success. At the focus group, parents described the school as a small community where their children are known, supported, and nurtured. Students echoed these views, stating that teachers respect their views, go out of their way to help, and work with their particular learning styles to facilitate understanding. Parents are very pleased with the level of communication from the school.

***Has the school met the organizational viability goals set out in its Accountability Plan?***

*Finding: The school is making some progress towards meeting its organizational viability goals. There are three goals in the school’s Accountability Plan that are related to organizational viability. Each goal includes 2-4 measures, as reported on below:*

**Goal A: NCCES Attracts, enrolls, and retains students from its region.**

*Measure 1: NCCES maintains an enrollment level at least equal to 90% of the yearly enrollment target set by the Board of Trustees*

The enrollment of 326 students as of the date of the site visit was 96% of the target of 340 students set by the board for the current school year. However, it should be noted that this year’s enrollment target is 90% of last year’s target of 375 students.

*Measure 2: NCCES maintains a waitlist at least equal to 10% of its population.*

There is currently no waitlist.

**Goal B: NCCES fiscal management reflects sound practices that support fulfillment of its charter’s essential commitments**

*Measure 1: Yearly independent audits with no significant negative findings*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, the audit for 2005-2006 had no significant negative findings.

*Measure 2: actual and proposed annual budgets are balanced.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, the end of year statement for 2006-07 showed a loss of \$67,658, but this was a non-cash loss due to depreciation, reflecting the board's decision to invest in the school. The 2007-08 approved budget is balanced.

*Measure 3: The Board of Trustees approves an annual balanced budget that supports the academic success of the school.*

The site visit team did not assess this measure.

*Measure 4: The Board of Trustees will secure a permanent home for the school*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, in June 2007, the Board formed a Facilities Committee to define the school's needs and identify how to meet those needs.

**Goal C: The NCCES Board of Trustees provides sound and effective governance to support and promote the school's mission**

*Measure 1: The Board and school leader develop annual goals, and 75% of these goals are met annually.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, this practice has been implemented.

*Measure 2: 75% of Board Members agree that the board is meeting its governance responsibilities, as measured by its annual self-assessment.*

According to the 2006-07 Annual Report, the Board's self-assessment tool did not ask this question specifically, but results indicated a rating of 3.14 on a scale of 1 to 5 in response to a question about the board's overall performance.

**Conclusion**

***Is the school becoming the school it promised to be in its charter?***

School leaders described the school as being on the verge of a major transformation. While core foundational faculty members have been retained, there is a significant number of new staff this year. The leadership team is also a blend, with a new Executive Director and a Principal who is new to the position, but who is a founding staff member. Because of the disruptions that took place last year, those staff and families that remain have been described as making a conscious choice to be at the school. All stakeholders – the Board, administration, teachers, and families – appear to have the energy to move forward with the implementation of the Plan for Charter School Improvement and to meet the conditions imposed at renewal. The challenge facing the school this year will be to maintain that energy, and to bring both new and returning staff together toward the common goal of implementing the focused list of priorities described in the Board's 2007-8 School Goals.