

Renewal Inspection Report

ACADEMY OF STRATEGIC LEARNING
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL
AMESBURY, MASSACHUSETTS



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

November 14-17, 2005

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About the renewal process and site visit report

Beginning in the spring of the third year of its charter (and ending August 1st 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 3-4 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 in robust and diverse performance data, the renewal site visit report does not make recommendations about whether or not 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

Lisa Bryant

Coordinator and Examiner

Lisa Bryant has been an educator for over forty years . Most recently she served as Executive Director of the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School. She was a K-8 and middle school principal at the Bartlett School in Lowell and a middle school principal in Watertown. In Lowell she was a special education supervisor and a bilingual (Spanish) school psychologist. She has taught in private and public schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels. She has served on the adjunct faculty of Regis College and currently is teaching a graduate course for Salem State College. As an active educator she was co-chair of the Principal's Center at Harvard and was a board member of the New England Coalition of Educational Leaders. She has a degree in History from Boston University and a Master's degree in Education from the University of Massachusetts.

William J. Contreras

Associate Examiner

Dr. Contreras has many years of experience as an administrator in public education. Most recently, Dr. Contreras was the Superintendent of Schools for the Athol-Royalston Regional Schools. Additionally, Dr. Contreras served as Superintendent of Schools for both the Avon and Hatfield Public Schools, Assistant Superintendent of Schools for the Gill-Montague Regional School, as well as a principal and teacher in the Taunton Public Schools. Dr. Contreras is a Massachusetts certified Superintendent of Schools. Dr. Contreras earned a Bachelor of Arts from Bridgewater State College, a Master of Education from Bridgewater State College, and Doctorate in Education from Boston University.

Eva Mitchell

Coordinator and Examiner

Eva has fifteen years of experience in urban education. She was a founding member of a Boston public pilot school and her administrative roles have included Assistant Principal and Director of Student Support. Eva has taught in Boston at the elementary, middle, and high school levels as a school social studies teacher, and as a lead teacher in an alternative school for students with behavioral disabilities. Eva has also worked on public school construction compliance teams, having led city-community urban development processes for a decade. For educational and community development organizations, she has served as a program developer, grant writer, and board chairman. Eva received her B.A. from Harvard University, and received her teacher certification through Harvard's UTEP program. She received her Master's in Education from Boston University under a Martin Luther King Fellowship, and her doctoral studies have focused on effective schooling in urban environments.

W.C. Wolf Jr., Ph.D.**Associate Field Examiner**

Bill Wolf has served students from Kindergarten to graduate school levels. He has taught children in grades K-6 in 4 states, as well as college-level students at Ohio State University, Harvard University, Smith College, and UMass, Amherst. He specializes in research and evaluation methods, leadership and administration, and curriculum and instruction. These themes predominate his extensive publications list. Formerly, he was Research Coordinator of the U.S. Office of Education's Cooperative Research Program, a program administrator at UMass, Amherst and an elementary administrator in two states. Currently, he continues to offer courses on a part-time basis for UMass, Amherst; serves as a substitute teacher for the Amherst Public Schools, and provides varied evaluation services.

SETTING

The Academy of Strategic Learning (ASL), a small Horace Mann Charter School, operated as part of the Amesbury Public Schools, is located in Amesbury, Massachusetts. The school was founded to serve at-risk students from grades seven through twelve from Amesbury and from the surrounding communities. ASL opened its doors in 2001 and is currently at its capacity of 50 students. The mission of the Academy of Strategic Learning is to “exhibit unconditional commitment to every child, ensuring that all students experience success through the development of attitudes and skills necessary for life-long learning.” The school states that it “will provide the highest quality staff, meaningful learning experiences, and a vitally involved community. Our goals include achievement as well as mastery of the skills needed to become workers, parents, and citizens in a democratic society.”

The Academy of Strategic Learning recruits students primarily from Amesbury with a few students from Haverhill, Salisbury, Newburyport, Merrimac, and Haverhill. The student body at ASL is 74 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 9 percent African American, and 5 percent Asian. Many of the students are referred to the school by the Special Education department of the local district which accounts for the high rate of students with Individual Education Plans, 44 percent. Thirty-four percent of the student body are low income. The school reports that many students come from troubled homes and many are court involved. All of the students at the school had difficulty functioning successfully in a traditional school environment. The school provides a warm, supportive environment for students to help them connect to the school environment which encourages them to stay in school until high school graduation. Parents are encouraged to communicate with staff members, and to visit the school. The school has no formal parent organizations.

The school currently employs four academic teachers, three who are new to the school this year and one who is in her second year. The school provides a student support staff which includes a behavior specialist, an adjustment counselor, and a 60 percent teacher (.6 FTE) outreach coordinator who

work closely with the academic staff to fulfill the school's primary focus of "nurturing the individual" and providing for academic success. Also on staff are a 60 percent special education teacher(.6 FTE), one special education tutor, a teaching assistant, and a part-time nurse. Currently two of the academy teachers are on a waiver and two have achieved professional status. The students are grouped for English and Social Studies in three, two-grade configurations: seven-eight, nine-ten, and eleven-twelve with the expectation that the curriculum in these two subjects will be delivered in two-year cycles.

The curriculum of the school provides basic academic subjects, a project period for middle school students who do not have job placements, career awareness, internships, monitored work opportunities, and an advisory period which addresses the students' social development. The school demonstrates its goal to provide academic success for students by providing after school tutoring for students who require extra time to achieve mastery. The minimum passing grade is a B. Students are given time to re-learn information and re-submit assignments until a passing grade is achieved.

ASL has a nine member board of trustees. The board is composed of representatives from community agencies, retired educators, a parent, staff from the school district, and a CPA. The administrative structure at ASL includes an interim director, a behavior specialist, an adjustment counselor, a part-time bookkeeper, and a receptionist. In addition, the Academy receives services from personnel in the Amesbury school district: the director of special education, director of guidance, and the assistant superintendent for business.

An independent certified public accounting firm conducts annual audits, and the school has received an unqualified judgment each time. The school also received a positive Coordinated Program Review by the Massachusetts Department of Education.

A spirit of continuity was evident in the school despite the administrative changes that were occurring during the inspection visit. At the time of the inspection the new director who had been appointed in August was on administrative leave. Neither the students nor the staff were informed as to his status at the school. At the time of the inspection visit, a final determination had not been officially announced by the board of directors. An interim director was in place. She had served on the board of directors and knew the school well. She serves in the Amesbury schools as the director of health education and ad freshmen advisor at the high school. Despite the administrative change, the school provides a welcoming environment for parents.

FINDINGS

RENEWAL QUESTION 1: IS THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM A SUCCESS?

FINDING 1: The focus of the Academy of Strategic Learning is primarily on the students' social emotional growth, drop-out prevention and preparing students to become workers rather than on academic achievement.

The mission of the Academy of Strategic Learning defines the culture of the school as observed by the inspection team. In structuring the school to meet the needs of students who were not successful in a traditional school environment, the school offers a welcoming, nurturing environment where students are supported in their academics. All stakeholders viewed the school's ability to offer students a small, personalized environment as critical to their continuing their education. While the delivery of the academic program is important to the staff, much of the focus is, of necessity, on the social/emotional development of the students.

MCAS Results

The renewal inspection reviewed the scores attained by Academy of Strategic Learning students on the MCAS tests from 2002-2005. In reporting on the performance, acknowledgment should be made of the low numbers of student who take the test in each of the reported years which reflects the small numbers of enrolled students in the school. For this reason, comparisons with the sending districts and the state are not meaningful. The scores of an individual student may impact disproportionately on the school's MCAS results.

Because of the small number of students, the Department of Education has made no determination of Adequate Yearly Progress in the reported years. For this same reason MCAS test scores were not assessed by sub-population.

- The school's MCAS test results show considerable year-to-year variations with no discernible improvement trends. Results will be reported in percents as well as numbers of students because the measures in the school's accountability plan refer to percents.
- In Grade 7, all of the students passed the ELA test in 2005. One student attained scores in the 'Proficient' category and two students scored in the 'Needs Improvement' designation. There were no students in the 'Warning' category. As is stated in section three of this report, the ASL met its accountability plan goals for its grade seven students in 2005.

**Table 1. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State**

**Grade 7 MCAS ELA Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	3	0	0	67	33
	State	79,208	8	57	28	7
2004	ASL	2	0	0	50	50
	State	77,386	9	59	25	7
2005	ASL	3	0	33	67	
	State	76,717	10	56	27	7
<i>Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school's MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.</i>						

○ Students performed best in the tenth grade ELA test over the three year period between 2003 and 2005. In 2003, two students out of eight scored in the ‘Proficient’ category and no student failed. In both 2004 and 2005 one student scored in the ‘Proficient’ category and three students failed each of these years. Sixty percent of students who took the Grade 10 MCAS test failed in 2004 and 50 percent failed in 2005. As is reported in section three of this report, the ASL failed to meet its goals for MCAS test performance of its students.

**Table 2. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State**

**Grade 10 MCAS ELA Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	8	0	25	75	0
	State	69,418	20	42	28	12
2004	ASL	6	0	20	20	60
	State	69,808	19	43	27	11
2005	ASL	6	0	17	33	50
	State	72,036	23	42	25	10
<i>Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school's MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.</i>						

○ The Grade 8 mathematics scores with the number of students in the ‘Warning’ category

emphasize the need for a plan to address the deficiencies in the curriculum and to analyze the areas of strengths and weaknesses of the students in mathematics. The Academy did not meet its accountability plan goal in this area.

**Table 3. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State
Grade 8 MCAS Math Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	4	0	0	0	100
	State	78,477	12	25	30	33
2004	ASL	7	0	0	29	71
	State	78,893	13	26	32	29
2005	ASL	13	0	0	15	85
	State	77,026	13	26	30	31

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school's MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.

○ The Grade 10 mathematics scores were generally static throughout the three-year period. The 2003 scores were slightly better with 2, 25 percent, of the students scoring in the proficient category. In order to fulfill the requirement of passing the MCAS test to graduate, 50 percent of the Grade 10 students must retake the ELA test and two students, 33 percent, must re-take the mathematics test. The academy did not meet its accountability plan goal for the tenth grade students.

**Table 4. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State
Grade 10 MCAS Math Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	8	0	25	38	28
	State	70,071	24	27	28	21
2004	ASL	6	0	0	50	50
	State	70,293	29	28	28	15
2005	ASL	6	0	17	50	33
	State	72,141	35	27	24	15

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school's MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.

○ As a result of an analysis of MCAS data that took place after the 2002-2003 school year, the school worked with a consultant to formulate a curriculum guide for English Language Arts based on the state curriculum frameworks. The purpose of the guide was to assess individual student mastery of skills that were presented sequentially. The guide thus served to address individual student needs. The guide was used in the years under review by some of the staff to monitor students' progress and to insure alignment of the English Language Arts curriculum to the frameworks. Consistent use of this tool was not in evidence, nor was it established that the guide followed student progress from year to year.

Other Assessments

○ Academy students participate in the Amesbury district writing assessment. The Academy fell below its stated goal that 80 percent of the ninth grade students would perform between 10 and 20 on the district writing assessment. The school reports that 50 percent of the students fell in this range. There was no evidence that the results were used to inform instruction.

○ The Wechsler Individual Achievement Test was administered to all students as part of the entrance procedure. This is referred to as baseline data in the renewal application. Results are placed in the students' folders; however, there is no evidence indicating that these results were referred to during the students' years at the school.

○ The Academy of Strategic Learning has not established additional external assessments to measure the academic progress of its students. Additionally, no school wide criteria or rubrics were in place to assess if students achieved mastery. Internal assessments were teacher created with grades based on conduct, effort, and completion of assigned work. Some teachers adapted curriculum to meet individual student needs, and in some cases teachers assigned work to push students to the next skill level.

○ To meet the needs of the particular student population that the Academy serves, the portfolio and the individual learning plan were put in place to monitor individual student progress. Individual Learning Plans were implemented prior to the 2005-2006 school year. Students were required to set goals for themselves. These were often general goals which were unaccompanied by implementation strategies. The staff revisited the plans with the students during the school year during advisor time. However, there was no general agreement among staff or students as to how often the goals were reviewed. The new director eliminated the use of these Individual Plans at the beginning of this school year. During the student interview students indicated they did not find the tool useful.

Portfolios which were established to collect student work from year-to-year were not available for assessment by the team. One staff member stated they may have been discarded inadvertently.

FINDING 2: The internship program has been successfully implemented at the school and serves as a way for students to demonstrate their ability to successfully function in the workplace, in line with the mission of the school.

The internship program has been provided since the inception of the school. Each year the school has successfully communicated to students that workplace experience is an integral part of other school day. The program is monitored by the outreach coordinator. The coordinator posts job openings, updated weekly, in a prominent place the school. Students are responsible for securing their own positions. This is a graded part of the school day. Last year 98 percent of the students participated in the program. Students who do not have jobs must stay in school two extra hours for three days each week to develop a school-to-career workbook.

Students who are not ready to function socially or emotionally in the work place are given work in the middle school. Each student is required to have a work based learning plan through which they choose three competencies to be checked by the work place supervisor and monitored by the outreach coordinator. Some middle school students have internships instead of jobs. The internships serve as a way to help student gain skills, experience, and confidence in the workplace and to monitor students' ability to function appropriately in the work setting. One student is serving an internship in the mayor's office and her first task was to write a press release about her placement. As chair of the school committee the mayor attended the interview session of school leaders and cited the successful placement of the Academy student in his office.

FINDING 3: The school used the Amesbury curriculum which was aligned to the state frameworks as a reference; however, the curriculum was not comprehensive in that it did not contain benchmarks, time lines, and assessments.

In the summer of 2003, the staff and administration met to develop a list of benchmarks based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks to record individual student progress in English.

The guides were used as a reference tool by some teachers and were used as a basis for individual teachers to develop their own curriculum. There was no evidence that these guides were used by all teachers consistently, that they were carried over from year to year to inform teachers about students' academic progress, or to take into account individual student skills levels in the two year looping configuration. This multi-grade arrangement necessitated a two year English and Social Studies curriculum; however, there was no evidence of this. No mathematics curriculum has been developed since its absence was cited by the site visit of 2003-04. Some teachers made an effort to plan curriculum topics around issues that are relevant to the students. In some subjects areas there was no carryover of curriculum from year to year due to high staff turnover. Some teachers and students said that books and materials were in short supply. Teachers who were lacking books were

encouraged by the former director (appointed in 2005) to contact their peers in the district and borrow excess books.

During the 2004-2005 school year, students in the middle school were assigned a project period in the afternoon. They worked on long-term projects which encompassed research and the use of English and planning skills. This year because of the lack of sufficient staffing, the project period presents students with discrete hands-on tasks which are completed on a daily basis.

FINDING 4: The quality of instruction varied considerably throughout the school.

The team observed some classes which were well planned and reflected effective instructional practice, while others reflected poor pedagogy and classroom management skills. Much instruction was teacher led and it was followed by assignments that were to be completed either individually or in small groups. Absent was the consistent use of effective teaching techniques such as the use of classroom routines, posted rules, and aims and objectives, cues, asking higher order questions, checking for understanding, and activating prior knowledge. Variability in subject area knowledge was apparent in the teacher observations. The team observed varying levels of student engagement in the classroom.

Some teachers differentiated instruction by allowing the students to choose novels from a list of books, thus addressing the range of skill levels within the two-year grade configuration. In other observed lessons all students were given the same assignment with the result that for some students the work was repetitious and for some it was new work. In ELA classes students were expected to complete writing assignments on a regular basis. Four computers were available for student use, and students made use of them as they received their assignments. In general, academic rigor was lacking and expectations were low and unclear.

Information about individual students was available to new teachers, but, as was stated by a staff member, organizational and classroom management topics necessarily surfaced at staff meetings to the exclusion of academic discussions because of the nature of the student population and of the number of new staff. The new director had increased staff faculty meetings to twice weekly.

To meet the needs of students with IEPs, the part-time special education teacher works with the academic teachers to support the students academically. In addition, a tutor has been assigned to work with one student; however, she provided assistance to other students wherever possible. A teacher assistant was also available to support classroom instruction.

FINDING 5: The Academy of Strategic Learning has set up structures to provide for the social development of its students and to provide for a safe and positive environment.

To meet the needs of its students and to enable the mission, the school has established an advisor program which meets daily and allows for students to develop caring relationships with teachers. The advisor program was put in place two years ago to provide students with a more personal atmosphere than was available in their previous schools. Small groups of students meet daily with a staff member. The program furthers the aim of the school to provide a supportive atmosphere for its students. The structure allows for students to make connections with teachers and to engage in activities that help them think about their goals and the future. There is no curriculum in place for this class.

Teachers reported that a variety of topics relevant to the students are brought up in the class to help students make decisions. Students periodically engage in reflective writing during this time. The renewal application refers to a social development curriculum, but there was no evidence of the existence of this document. Previous to this year, students worked on setting their goals through the Individualized Learning Plans during advisor time. This time was also used to discuss topical issues and to refer to events that affect the students. A teacher reported that she assessed the social growth of her advisees based upon reading their reflective writing. The team observed students in the advisor class working on Thanksgiving decorations with a theme related to the holiday.

The new behavior system implemented throughout the school provided some consistency in the way that teachers monitor student behavior and it also is a system that helps students take ownership of their behavior. Teachers reported that the new system along with the installation of walls early in the school year has resulted in fewer students referrals to the behavior specialist. Teachers use praise and encouragement, but the praise was more of a general comment than a comment aimed specifically to a behavior. In the renewal application, the school referred to the use of Glasser's Choice and Reality Therapy Model. Some teachers were observed using aspects of this model when dealing with disruptive students. The behavior specialist also referred to using the model. Some teachers give three warnings before sending the student to the behavior specialist. But this system was not universally or consistently applied. The team observed a number of disruptive behaviors which interfered with the academic program.

The position of adjustment counselor was extended to full-time this year to increase the capability of the school to handle difficult behaviors in-house. The behavior specialist and the adjustment counselor work closely with the head of school to deal with chronically disruptive students. Students who are sent to time-out are required to make up the time after school. Parent conferences are scheduled when a student is given multiple time-outs. The behavior specialist reported that the bar has been raised this year for behavioral expectations. He credits the newly appointed director who

was supportive of the teachers which resulted in improved student behavior and increased parental support.

RENEWAL QUESTION 2: IS THE SCHOOL A VIABLE ORGANIZATION?

FINDING 1: The school continues to demonstrate substantial support from the leadership of the district, staff, parents, and its community partners. However, survey results demonstrate that there are varying degrees of satisfaction with the school.

District Leadership

As a Horace Mann charter school, The Academy of Strategic Learning was organized to serve at-risk students primarily from the Amesbury district. The school was seen as a success by the leadership of Amesbury school district. During focus group interviews, the superintendent and district administrators stated that the school has been successful in keeping students in school through graduation. There were many testimonies that the students would have dropped out of school if it weren't for the supportive, small environment of the Academy. The flexibility possible in the small school environment has met the needs of a number of students who were not successful in the district schools. The leadership of the district recognizes the financial benefits in maintaining the school which offers personalized programs for students who might otherwise require placement in private school settings.

The school has had two graduating classes totaling fifteen students and school leaders stated that this academic success helped the school turn the corner in how its perception by all stakeholders. The graduation ceremony attended by political and community leaders served to demonstrate that the school had the capacity to realize the goal of having students stay in school until they achieved a high school diploma.

Some personnel is shared with the school district. These include the director of special education, and the director of guidance. The middle and high school administration are supportive of the school's mission. The superintendent of the district has taken an active interest in the school since he assumed the position in 2004. He has attended all meetings of the board of trustees. The director of special education of the district works closely with the school to chair and write the IEPs for the students who qualify. The director of guidance facilitates communication between the middle school and the high school. The assistant superintendent for business is knowledgeable about the financial operations of the school and handles transfer of monies that occur three times a year from the district to the school. The school district provides a tutor outside of the Academy budget to work with one of the students with an educational plan that requires a one on one tutor.

School Staff

Of the four academic teachers, three are new this year and the fourth is in her second year. The poor retention rate of teachers was partially attributed to late budget decisions by the school district and the uncertainty of the Academy staffing as a result. Two academic teachers are considered to have professional status. The science teacher and English/Social Studies teachers are serving under a waiver.

The behavior specialist has been at the school since the first year. He originally was an academic teacher. Using some of Glasser's Reality/Choice principles, he has been successful with a number of students to help them take responsibility for their behavior and to improve over time. His four years of experience with the school reflects his belief in the mission of the school and in the ability of the students to succeed. The teachers reported that they feel supported in the area of discipline. They stated that they were highly supportive of the new policies that the new director put in place in the brief period he was at the school. Student behavior has improved and there have been "minimal" suspensions to date this year. Some teachers stated that they were hoping the director would return as head of school.

During focus groups and interviews, teachers stated that they help each other. They work well together and give each other suggestions for ways to work effectively with individual students. They state the mission of the school is to keep students in school and help them advance both socially and academically. Some of the teachers were using the curriculum guides to insure that the frameworks were covered in the curriculum, but this was not consistently done.

The teachers also stressed the importance to the current students of the precedent setting graduations of the last two years. Some students have become more serious about academic work because they see graduation as a possibility. As reported by a staff member, the graduation "has caused a shift in the way that students view the school...The school has become more academically oriented."

The teachers feel supported by the district in that they have been invited to participate in all professional development opportunities and are encouraged to interact with their subject and grade level peers to secure books and for other curriculum support.

Parents

Parents who attended the focus group interview appreciated the small size of the school and the supportive staff which accommodates the needs of their children. A number of them strongly emphasized that their children were not successful in other school environments and would have dropped out of school if it were not for the Academy. They feel welcome at the school at any time and stated that staff are available for conferences and informal meetings upon request. Parents said the new point system for behavior was an effective way that the school communicates with parents

about the behavioral progress of their child. There is no formal parent group, and parents expressed the wish that such a group be formed in the school.

Community Partners

The team interviewed members from the social service community in Amesbury. The school shares in the relationship that the Amesbury district has built with one agency that provides “wrap around services to the town’s school age children and their families.” This agency provides advocacy for parents and frequently sends a representative to attend IEP meetings to assist with test interpretation. Another agency provides individual counseling for students and is responsive to referrals from the school. The Amesbury PTA supported a fundraiser for the school. The president expressed the willingness of the community to assist the school in its fundraising projects.

Students

In a focus group, seven students talked about the support they receive from their teachers. Of particular importance to all of the students was the small group environment and the caring relationships they have built with their teachers. A number of students said they would not be in school if it weren’t for ASL. They stated that they miss the new director who had not been in the school for two weeks. They liked the fact that the school “gave you a chance to make up work.” They stated that each teacher has a different system for grading. The older students said they thought the new point system did not motivate them. They felt they could function successfully without rewards, but they said it seemed to work for the younger students. A few of the students proudly spoke about their academic progress at the school and the opportunities the internship program has given them , making a positive impact on their future career choices.

FINDING 2: The school has experienced stable leadership for four years from inception through the 2004-2005 school year, but the current uncertainty of leadership comes at a time when school structures are still evolving.

At the time of the review an interim director was named to replace a director who served in the position for two months. The school leadership in the district is committed to providing for effective leadership for the school. The school leadership is supportive of the interim director who serves in the school district as director of health education and has served on the board of trustees in the past. At the time of the visit of the Inspection team the board of trustees was planning to announce that the newly hired director would not be returning and was in the initial stages of a search process for a permanent director.

The former director was evaluated yearly by the board of trustees. Evaluations were based partly on the surveys which were administered to all stakeholders and on goals set by the director. Faculty

evaluations were in place for the 2003-2004 school year with accompanying observations. Observations were also completed for the past school year but no summative evaluations were completed for any staff member. Observations and evaluations were not informative or instructive, but were descriptive in nature.

In response to staff request for internal professional development opportunities, the former director held summer workshops during the years under review. Teachers were trained in the Glasser Reality /Choice Therapy Model and worked with a consultant to develop curriculum guides. The school engaged in a two-year project with three charter schools with similar populations and all staff attended a mini-conference on effective programs for at-risk students; however, turnover has reduced the long-term effectiveness of professional development.

FINDING 3: The Academy of Strategic Learning has an involved board of trustees, and has established a foundation for the purpose of fund-raising.

The board of trustees meets once a month during the school year. Since the last school year, the district superintendent has attended board meetings. In response to the recommendation in the 2003-04 site visit report, the board has looked for a more diverse membership. The new chairman is a member of the business community with an accounting background. During the focus group interview, members stated that they continue to look of additional members to increase the diversity of the board. Minutes indicate that the board discusses appropriate school issues and receive a monthly update from the director. Financial matters are handled appropriately through discussions with the school district.

Two retreats have been conducted over the past two years to provide for board development and to clarify roles and responsibilities of board members. The board has established committees which are called upon when needed: nominating, policy, evaluation, facilities, finance, public relations, fund-raising/grants, and school and district relations.

A member of the Board stated that the mission of the school is to keep students in school and “have the kids feel good about themselves.” They said that the students primarily need to feel a connection with the school which results from interaction with a nurturing, caring staff in a supportive environment.

The board used a survey tool to evaluate the school program with separate surveys for parents, students, staff, board, and district leadership. The survey were collected, tabulated, and made available to the inspection team. The surveys were used as part of the evaluation of the former director and were also use to inform the board of the needs of the school. The board was supportive of the placement of walls to separate the classrooms and supported extending the position of the adjustment counselor to full-time.

The attendance of the district school superintendent at the board meeting provides for a on-going exchange of information and provides for a way to manage relationship building between the board and the district. Last year the board crafted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOA) to delineate financial issues between the board and the district. The document specifies that the Amesbury school district will not have access to Academy grant funds which puts the school in a better position to be awarded grants. The MOA also address provisions of the lunch program, and special education services.

FINDING 4: The Academy of Strategic Learning has a well developed budget management system with clear lines of district and school responsibility areas and checks and balances.

The school depends on the district to determine the monies that will be allotted to fund its yearly budget. The school's financial records are audited each year and there have been no exceptions. Each year the school district determines the amount of funding for the Academy. Personnel costs are administered through the district with the remaining funds distributed to the school in three payments. After personnel costs are accounted for the district assistant superintendent for business sends funds to the Academy in three installments. These monies are for books and supplies. The school director and bookkeeper have established an accounting and record keeping system for the school. The bookkeeper is responsible for providing updates to the director regarding the school's financial status. The school director reports monthly to the board of trustees on the status of these funds.

Last year lengthy budget discussions resulted in uncertainty about the amount of funds available for the school; however with strong support from members of the board and the district leadership, the school's budget was approved. It was not clear if some turnover was the result of the late timing of final budget decisions near the end of the summer. New teachers were hired late in the summer when typically there are fewer qualified candidates for positions. The school district provides district payroll, food services, special education services, guidance services, health services, and technology maintenance for the school. Some teachers reported that books and supplies are not sufficient to meet the needs of the students.

- While there is limited tracking of individual students in the English courses, there is no system in place for tracking overall student growth in any of the academic subjects or linking student performance to program effectiveness.

The school has information on an individual student basis which amounts to basic reporting of grades on standard reporting forms recorded from year to year on their cumulative folders. For new teachers this does not provide sufficient student data to inform instruction and curriculum. Given the high turnover of staff, the school faces a substantial task in providing consistency across the curriculum.

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

FINDING 1: The Accountability Plan does not address key critical issues of the school's mission to improve attendance and drop-out rates.

The mission of the school is stated as follows:

The Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will exhibit unconditional commitment to every child, ensuring that all students exhibit success through the development of attitudes and skills necessary for life long learning. We will provide the highest quality staff, meaningful learning experiences, and a vitally involved community. Our goals include achievement as well as mastery of the skills needed to become workers, parents, and citizens in democratic society.

The accountability plan was formulated in 2002. This plan has not been approved by the Department of Education. While the plan addresses some aspects of the mission, it does not address the rigor of the academic program nor relevant aspects of the program such as attendance or students dropping out of school. During the years under review the attendance rate was in the range of 77 percent. Ten to twelve students drop out each year from the high school. Because the school serves an at-risk population, students leaving school before graduation might be expected, but the school does not have a goal directed to this issue.

FINDING 2: The school failed to meet or to provide adequate evidence to demonstrate its progress in meeting many of the measures of the Accountability Plan goals.

ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN

1. Academic Program Objectives

Goal 1: All students at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will become proficient in the use of the English language.

The school did not meet its goal for all ASL students to become proficient in ELA.

Measure 1: Eighty percent of students enrolled at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School for two or more years will show an increase in incidence of achieving mastery level in the area of ELA.

The renewal application showed that:

- The school reported for students enrolled for 3 years, although the measure stated 2 years. Thus, it is not possible to report on the achievement of students who were in the school for two years. However, ASL fell short of their measure for students enrolled in the school for three years; 43 percent of the students enrolled for 3 years increased their scores on the ELA test.

In addition:

- The measure contained no quantifiable benchmark. The measure was satisfied with any increase, but no specific increase of 5 percent or 10 percent, for example, is stated.
- The measure doesn't specify the definitions of "mastery."

Measure 2: *Seventy-five percent of students enrolled at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School for two or more years will perform in the 'Needs Improvement' or above level on the 10th grade MCAS test.*

- The renewal application did not report cohort performance on this measure.
- The team was unable to obtain cohort MCAS test performance.

Measure 3: *Seventy-five percent of students enrolled at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will perform in the 'Needs Improvement' category or above on the 7th grade reading MCAS reading test.*

- ASL met this measure.
- From 2003-05 when the Grade 7 MCAS exam was administered, ASL enrolled only 2-3 students per year. MCAS data from the Department of Education indicates that the percentage of the students performing at NI or above went from 66 percent to 75 percent to 100 percent.

Measure 4: *Eighty percent of students enrolled at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School, in grade 9, will perform in the 10 – 20 range on the district writing assessment.*

- ASL did not meet this measure.
- The renewal application stated that the school did not meet its goal; only 50 percent of the students achieved proficiency.

Goal 2: *All students at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will achieve competency in the area of understanding and application of mathematical computation and problem solving.*

Measure 1: *Seventy-five percent of students enrolled at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will perform in the 'Needs Improvement' or above on the 8th grade MCAS mathematics test.*

- In 2003, no student achieved at the level of NI or above.
- In 2004, 29 percent achieved at the NI level and 15 percent achieved NI in 2004.
- No students achieved at the proficient level or above from 2003-2005.

**Table 3. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State
Grade 8 MCAS Math Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	4	0	0	0	100
	State	78,477	12	25	30	33
2004	ASL	7	0	0	29	71
	State	78,893	13	26	32	29
2005	ASL	13	0	0	15	85
	State	77,026	13	26	30	31

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school’s MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.

Measure 2: *Seventy-five percent of students at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will meet or exceed exit grade level district curriculum standards. This internal portfolio assessment is based on a rubric system that divides achievement into three categories: Exemplary (4), Proficient (3), and Minimum (2).*

- The school provided no data on this measure and the school could not locate its portfolios. This measure is not clearly linked to the goal.

Measure 3: *Seventy-five percent of the students at the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School for two or more years will perform in the “needs improvement or above” on the 10th grade MCAS test.*

- No cohort data was provided to measure the school’s performance.

**Table 4. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
in Comparison to the State
Grade 10 MCAS Math Results
2003-2005**

Year		<i>N</i>	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing
2003	ASL	8	0	25	38	28
	State	70,071	24	27	28	21
2004	ASL	6	0	0	50	50
	State	70,293	29	28	28	15
2005	ASL	6	0	17	50	33
	State	72,141	35	27	24	15

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS Data and ASL reports of the school's MCAS results. Performance level percentages are not publicly available from DOE if student group is less than 10.

2. Organizational Viability

Goal 1: The Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will maintain strong organizational viability by demonstrating district, parent, and community support.

Measure 1: Using a school survey distributed to district representation (school committee, administration, etc.), eighty five percent of those surveyed will comment in the above average range for school performance, communication and success with students.

- The survey population was expanded to include guidance counselors and psychologists. The measure was met in one area which asked the respondents to indicate their satisfaction that the students experience success at the Academy versus their previous school experience.
- It was not met in the area of communication and school performance. The measure was not met in a number of statements in the survey related to the measure and are reported separately below.
- There were marked differences between the ratings respondents gave to statements relating to appropriateness of the Academy program and meeting the needs of the students as compared to student success at the academy and the academic program. Some inconsistencies were also apparent.

**Table 5. Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School
School Survey Results
2005**

Indicator	Percent of satisfaction
Feel that students experience success at the Academy vs. previous school experience	85 percent
Meeting needs of students	71 percent
Improvement needed communicating with school director	70 percent
Have seen positive academic improvements in the program	28 percent.
Feel comfortable approaching a administration and staff with concerns at the Academy	57 percent
Feel that students are making adequate yearly progress at the school	42 percent
Understands its students needs and sets reasonable and attainable goals	42 percent
<i>Data Source: ASL 2004-2005 Annual Report</i>	

Measure 2: Using a school culture survey distributed to staff of the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School, eighty percent of the staff will report positively in regards to staff development opportunities, board and director communication and overall effectiveness of the program.

The results of this measure were mixed. The school met the measure in the area of staff development and in understanding the needs of the student and setting attainable goals. Other areas that relate to the measure are reported below. In some cases the results reported in the application do not match the survey results as given to the Inspection team by a board member.

Indicator	Percent of agreement with statement
Provided with adequate professional development opportunities	90 percent
Satisfied that the Academy understands the needs of its students and sets reasonable goals	80 percent
The curriculum of the Academy is meeting the needs of the students	80 percent
Feel supported by the director	60 percent
Satisfied that the Academy is effective in meeting the needs of the students	60 percent
The Academy needs improvement	90 percent
<i>Data Source: ASL 2004-2005 Annual Report</i>	

Measure 3: At the Academy, ninety percent of the class will graduate from high school.

- o 100 percent of the eligible seniors graduated and all passed the MCAS.

Measure 4: Using a school culture survey, distributed to parents of students attending the Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School, eighty-five percent will respond above average in regards to academic programming, staff selection, communication, and student progress.

○ The measure was met in one category; 80 percent of the parents felt "completely satisfied" that their child was supported by Academy staff. The school reported parent responses on individual questions in three categories: as follows:

Indicator	Completely Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither
Feel welcome at the Academy	70 percent	30 percent	
Academy understands students' needs and sets reasonable goals	40 percent	50 percent	10 percent
Satisfied that the Academy is effective in meeting the needs of the students	40 percent	50 percent	10 percent
Feel comfortable approaching administration and staff with concerns	100 percent		
Child has experience success in the Academy vs. previous school experiences	100 percent		
Are satisfied with home/school communications	90 percent		10 percent
<i>Data Source: ASL 2004-2005 Annual Report</i>			

Goal 2: The Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School will maintain strong organizational viability by demonstrating sound fiscal procedures and responsible decision-making.

Measure 1: Yearly financial statements indicate that the Academy is fiscally sound and has adequate financial resources.

Yearly financial statements indicate that the academy is fiscally sound. Yearly allotments to the school are decided by the school committee of the Amesbury district and are based on per pupil expenditures. As a Horace Mann school, the Academy depends on the fiscal health of the school district where it resides. The school expends all its allotted funds each year. A 501.C3 foundation has been established for the purpose of fund raising and to hold grant funds. The goal of the foundation is to raise additional funds for the school to supplement the budget. Staffing is adequate, but books and supplies are not sufficient to meet the needs of the students.

Measure 2: Annual approved budget for each school year show appropriations that ensure effective school programming aligned with school's charter.

The annual budget has provided for appropriate school staffing. This year the adjustment counselor position was increased to full time to meet the needs of the students. A full time behavior specialist and a sixty percent out-reach counselor are in place provided for student services to fulfill the mission of the school.

Measure 3: *Audited financial statements demonstrate that the school is responsible and fiscally sound with available resources.*

- An annual external audit is performed each school year. There are no exceptions.

3. Alignment with Charter

Goal 1: *Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School students will demonstrate growth in work place competencies.*

Measure 1: *During the academic year, ninety-five percent of all Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School students will participate in work-related experiences through internships, work-study and job-shadowing. Participation is documented by completion of the Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan, weekly time sheets, and/ or weekly visits to sites by Outreach Coordinator.*

This measure was partially met. In two different places in the renewal application (the text and the chart) the measure was stated alternately as 75 percent and 95 percent.

The school reports the following outcomes

- 100 percent of students in Grades 7, 8, and 12 met the measures.
- In grades 9,10, and 11, between 71 percent and 78 percent of the students met the measure.

Measure 2: *Ninety-five percent of students participate in the completion and evaluation of the MA Work-Based Learning Plan with the provider and Outreach Coordinator.*

No evidence was available to measure this goal.

Measure 3: *Seventy-five percent of students participate in question/answer sessions with community business members on a quarterly basis.*

No evidence was available to measure this goal.

Goal 2: Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School students will take responsibility for their own academic and social growth.

Measure 1: All students complete an Individualized Learning Plan in collaboration with the students' teachers and parents twice a year. Ninety percent of the students will successfully accomplish the ILP goals by the end of the school year.

A member of the staff stated that all students completed an Individualized Learning Plan. No evidence was presented to ascertain the number of students who successfully accomplished their goals.

Measure 2: Eighty-five percent of the time, students will choose to talk through problems using reality therapy in order to succeed in the program and for life beyond school.

No evidence was available to measure this goal.

Measure 3: All high school seniors will complete an independent project, which they will present to a committee of business and parent volunteers.

All of the students completed the project but no student presented it to a committee of business and parent volunteers.

FINDING 2: The Academy has disseminated many aspects of its program for at-risk youth to a charter school audience and the Amesbury school district.

From 2003-2005, ASL collaborated with three other charter schools in the state that serve a similar population. The former director and a staff member presented a workshop, "Project Based Learning," at an at-risk conference involving the four schools. In the 2004-05 school year, the Academy received a grant from the Department of Education to continue collaboration with the schools and the Project For School Innovation.(PSI) to define the unique attributes of Horace Mann Charter Schools. PSI will deliver a publication outlining these characteristics. The former director participated in a roundtable discussion with various school leaders, university professors, and heads of youth serving community organizations in the state to discuss ways to curb the dropout rate. The school has made attempts to reach out to the local school district by offering a series of six workshops to the district on the topic of Reality Therapy . Students produced a half hour video, *Amesbury America*, which was distributed throughout the town.

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

FINDING 1: At this time the school is experiencing instability in its leadership and high staff turnover.

A new Accountability Plan needs to be formulated to address the rigor of the academic program. The board of trustees and the school leadership of the Amesbury school district are committed to supporting the mission of the school and to putting a new school leader in place who will develop systems and structures that provide for increased student success. The site is adequate to serve the students with the school at its capacity for 50 students.

APPENDIX A: SCHEDULE OF THE VISIT

The Renewal inspection team conducted a two-day visit to the Academy of Strategic Learning from November 14 -17, 2005. During the inspection visit, team members observed 11 classes, interviewed six students, five parents, eight board members, three community partners and the school leadership team composed of the interim director, the behavior specialist and the adjustment counselor. Members of the inspection team also interviewed the leadership of the Amesbury schools including the superintendent, assistant superintendent for business, the assistant principals of the high school and the middle school, and the directors of guidance and special education.

The renewal Inspection Team also examined a variety of documents. These included test results (MCAS), the school's annual reports, the charter renewal application, reports of previous site visits, the board manual, and board minutes, financial statements, demographic and enrollment data, the school's curriculum guides, samples of student work, and administrator evaluation instruments. The team also analyzed teacher qualifications and experience.

The full site schedule used by the team is on the next page.

Academy of Strategic Learning **Renewal Inspection Schedule**

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

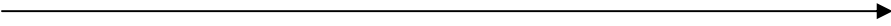
Day 1

Inspector 1

Inspector 2

Inspector 3

7:30 AM Team Meeting			→
8:30 AM Orientation with School's Personnel			→
8:45 AM Interview with Principal Brad Ford Donna Georges			→
9:30 AM Observations 1 - 3	Grade 9/10 English Carol Grotsky	Grade 11/12 Math James Mulligan	Grades 9/10 Reading David McCarthy
11:00 AM Observations 4 - 6	Grades 7/8 History Kristin Bair	Grade 12 Science Robert Silverman	Showcase Project Charles Wright
12:00 Noon Observation 7	Advisor/Advisee Melissa Tananian	Student Focus Group	→
12:45 PM Lunch			→
1:45 PM Teacher Focus Group			→
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ David McCarthy ▪ Carol Grotsky ▪ Alicia Marescalchi ▪ Jackie Elfiki 			→
2:30 PM District Personnel			→
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Superintendent, Dr. Charles Chaurette ▪ Mayor David Hildt ▪ Patricia Reblin, Special Education ▪ Les Murray, High School Principal ▪ Stephen O'Connor, Assistant Middle School Principal ▪ Mary Beth Exner, High School Guidance 			→
4:00 PM Parent Forum Group			



Academy of Strategic Learning
Renewal Inspection Schedule

Wednesday, November 16, 2005

Day 2

Inspector 1 Inspector 2 Inspector 3

7:30 AM Board of Trustees

8:30 AM Observations	Grades 7/8 Language Arts Kristin Bair	Grade 10 Language Arts Carol Grotsky	Grade 12 School-to-Career Bethany Noseworthy
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9:15 AM Leadership Team
(Members TBA)

10:00 AM Teacher Focus Groups

11:00 AM Community Partnership
Pettengill House
Health Education Services
Others: TBA

12:00 Noon Lunch

1:15 PM Interview: Business & Finance

2:30 PM On-site Documentation

3:30 PM Corporate Work/Interiors

5:00 PM Close