

Renewal Inspection Report

LOWELL MIDDLESEX ACADEMY
CHARTER SCHOOL
LOWELL, MA



October 19-20, 2004

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	<i>i</i>
About the Renewal Process and Site Visit Report	1
Renewal Inspection Team	3
Setting	5
Findings	7
Renewal Question 1: Is the Academic Program a Success?	7
Renewal Question 2: Is the School a Viable Organization?	18
Renewal Question 3: Is the School Faithful to the Terms of its charter?	23
Renewal Question 4: If the School’s Charter is Renewed, What are its Plans for the Next Five Years?	27
APPENDIX A: Schedule of the Renewal Inspection Visit	31

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) was chartered as a Commonwealth charter school in 1995 with the mission of enabling its students, an at-risk population of former high school dropouts, to achieve academic, social, and career success. The Commonwealth renewed the school's charter in 1999, and the school is currently operating under an Accountability Plan implemented in 2002. LMACS recently submitted an Application for Renewal of its charter for a second five-year term as well as a proposed Accountability Plan.

Approximately 108 students are enrolled in LMACS, which is a non-graded, college preparatory high school spanning the ninth through twelfth grades. The students enrolled in LMACS are former high school dropouts or students who had been at serious risk of dropping out. LMACS reports that its students often come from troubled homes, have substance abuse problems, are court involved, are single parents, and/or have been generally ill served by traditional school environments. Those that successfully complete the program receive a high school diploma, thus fulfilling the school's vision as a "place of second chances."

LMACS is governed by an 18-member Board of Trustees, seven of whom are employed by MCC. LMACS has for many years contracted with MCC for management services, including the services of the school's Executive Director, Assistant Director, and Administrative Assistant; for financial services, including accounting, procurement, and payroll services; and for use of MCC facilities. A new Executive Director hired by MCC has recently assumed responsibility for managing LMACS. LMACS staff consist of seven full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, three other educational staff, and an office assistant.

LMACS moved in 1999 from its former location at Middlesex Community College to its current location on the second floor of the historic Pollard Building across the street from the college. Because the school's lease has not been renewed, the school's ability to remain in its current location in the coming years is uncertain.

The Renewal Inspection Team (Team) spent two days on site at the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) on October 19 and 20, 2004. The Team also obtained and reviewed LMACS data and documents prior to the renewal site visit, on site, and after the site visit.

Renewal Question 1: Is the Academic Program a Success?

MCAS Results

The Renewal Inspection Team (the Team) examined the scores attained by LMACS students on the MCAS exams for the period of 2000 to 2004. These scores were compared to the MCAS scores attained by students in the Lowell school district, which is the "comparison district" that provides most of the students that attend the school, and to the MCAS scores attained by Massachusetts high school students statewide.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

In considering the performance of LMACS students on the MCAS exams, it should be recognized that the numbers of students taking the MCAS exams have been low, although all eligible LMACS students have taken the exams each year. In 2000, 53 students took the exams. Since 2001, however, as few as 14 students and no more than 23 students have taken the MCAS exams each year. Because the numbers of LMACS students taking the exams each year have been so low, the scores of a very few students may have had a disproportionate impact on the school's MCAS results.

The following analysis uses the Lowell school district as the comparison district because more than half of the students who attend LMACS reside in Lowell. However, LMACS is much smaller than the Lowell school district: an average of 25 LMACS students took the MCAS exams during each of the past five years, whereas an average of 798 students in the Lowell school district took the exams during the same period. Moreover, LMACS' entire student body consists of at-risk students who had previously dropped out of school or were at serious risk of dropping out, whereas Lowell High School has a more diverse population of students.

Because of the small number of students taking the MCAS exams each year, subpopulation analyses could not be performed. The Department of Education determined that LMACS made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2003, but made no determination in 2004 because of the small number of students (14) who took the exam.

1. The school's MCAS results show considerable year-to-year variations with no clear improvement trend.
2. Each year since 2000, the percentage of LMACS students who received passing scores on the MCAS exam in English Language Arts has exceeded the comparable percentages of students from the Lowell school district and statewide. However, the percentage of LMACS students scoring Proficient or better on the English Language Arts exam has trailed the comparable percentage of students statewide in 2003 and 2004. Moreover, the scores of Lowell and statewide students on the English Language Arts exam have shown a clearer improvement trend than the scores of LMACS students.
3. The percentage of LMACS students passing the MCAS exam in Mathematics exceeded the comparable percentages of students from the Lowell school district and statewide in 2000 and 2003 only. The percentage of LMACS students scoring Proficient or better has trailed the comparable percentages of Lowell students and statewide students every year. Moreover, the Lowell results and the statewide results have shown a clear improvement trend, whereas the LMACS results have been inconsistent.
4. LMACS has met two of the five MCAS-related performance objectives contained in its current Accountability Plan. All LMACS students have passed the MCAS exams upon graduation, but the students' MCAS scores have not met the year-to-year improvement objectives set forth in the Accountability Plan.

Other Assessments

5. LMACS has met two of the three performance objectives pertaining to the ACCUPLACER tests contained in the school's current Accountability Plan. LMACS reports that the Reading Comprehension and Algebra scores attained by all of its graduates on the ACCUPLACER tests are sufficient to place them in college-level courses at Middlesex Community College. However, although the average scores of LMACS students on the ACCUPLACER tests have increased during the course of each academic year, the students have not demonstrated the desired 40 percent gain in their ACCUPLACER test scores during the course of each school year.
6. LMACS reports that the number of LMACS students who failed at least one course decreased by 18 percent during the course of the 2003-2004 school year. This 18 percent decrease did not meet the performance objective contained in the school's current Accountability Plan.
7. For the past five years, LMACS has met the performance objective contained in the school's current Accountability Plan regarding the ability of its graduates to write a coherent, five-paragraph essay and to demonstrate mastery of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
8. LMACS faculty employ a variety of internal techniques for measuring student performance.

Curriculum and Classroom Observations

9. The LMACS curriculum is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is consistently applied in the classroom. Overall, the academic program in place at LMACS supports the school's mission by providing the students with a flexible, supportive learning environment that promotes high expectations for student achievement. LMACS teachers employ effective classroom techniques that enable them to provide individualized instruction, maintain discipline, and garner the respect and cooperation of the students.

Renewal Question 2: Is the School a Viable Organization?

1. The school's audited financial statements show that LMACS is in stable financial condition.
2. The school's ability to remain in the current location is uncertain. The Board of Trustees has not been fully informed of the situation.
3. LMACS governance, management, and operations are closely related to Middlesex Community College. While this close relationship brings some benefits to the school, it also hinders strong, effective governance of LMACS by an independent board of trustees.
4. The Board has actively engaged in problem-solving for LMACS but has not participated in some matters that deserve the Board's attention.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

5. LMACS maintains high learner expectations and provides a safe, supportive environment for students.

**Renewal Question 3:
Is the School Faithful to the Terms of its Charter?**

1. Consistent with its mission, LMACS has implemented measures aimed at improving students' academic performance and encouraging and assessing students' progress toward their social and career goals.
2. LMACS has succeeded in meeting some of its academic performance objectives and has made reasonable progress toward others, although student test scores have not shown the clear improvement trend hoped for by the school.
3. LMACS has not succeeded in its goals to steadily reduce drop-out rates and steadily increase student attendance rates.
4. LMACS teacher evaluations and professional development planning need improvement.
5. LMACS has disseminated information about its best practices in multiple venues.

**Renewal Question 4:
If the School's Charter is Renewed,
What are its Plans for the Next Five Years?**

1. The Accountability Plan proposed by LMACS reflects adjustments to its current Accountability Plan. Although some of the proposed performance objectives are less challenging than those currently in use, they appear realistic for the at-risk student population served by LMACS. The proposed Accountability Plan also contains some unclear performance objectives and lacks clear or effective measures for some performance objectives.
2. LMACS has demonstrated a strong commitment to serving its high-risk students and willingness to address problems as they arise. However, the Board of Trustees has not demonstrated that it can fulfill its governance responsibilities independently and effectively. The Board's ability to meet its governance and management challenges will be critical to the school's long-term viability and success in achieving its objectives.

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.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

RENEWAL INSPECTION TEAM

F. Daniel Ahern, Jr., is President of Clarus Group, a consulting firm dedicated to helping governments and nonprofit organizations meet high standards of performance and integrity. Prior to co-founding Clarus Group, he served for ten years as the First Assistant Inspector General for Management in the Massachusetts Office of the Inspector General. He has also been a performance auditor for the Virginia General Assembly, an independent consultant to state agencies in Massachusetts and Virginia, and an adjunct professor teaching graduate courses in public administration and nonprofit management at Northeastern University and Clark University.

Pamela Bloomfield, Vice President of Clarus Group, previously worked for the Massachusetts Office of the Inspector General where she served in several positions, including ten years as Deputy Inspector General for Management. She has also worked as the Assistant Director of Finance and Administration for an Oregon county; a management consultant assisting federal, state, and local government agencies; and a course assistant teaching written and oral communications at the Harvard Business School.

Peter Davies, *team supervisor and report editor*, is a former British School Inspector who has worked in school and district accountability for more than ten years in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and the Middle East. He was formerly an administrator with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris and a visiting professor to the Oxford University Department of Educational Studies. He is currently on the adjunct faculty of Northeastern University. He has worked within school and social services departments and was principal of one of the largest inner-urban comprehensive schools in London.

Dr. Wayne LaGue, *coordinator of on-site inspection* has been an educator for 35 years and recently retired as Superintendent of Schools in Wareham. In addition to having served as a school superintendent in both urban and rural communities, he has taught in Massachusetts public schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels and has served as director of curriculum and instruction. He holds a doctorate in educational leadership from Boston University and an advanced graduate degree in the philosophy of curriculum from Oxford University.

Douglas Renick is an independent consultant who works with school districts to develop strategic plans. He has recently been a change coach in the Boston Public Schools, working with principals and teachers to implement and sustain improvements that increased student performance. Prior to establishing his consulting practice, he managed Harvard University's Center for Training and Organization Development for many years.

Patricia Williams recently retired after serving as Principal of Londonderry High School in Londonderry New Hampshire for eight years. She has been an assistant principal at two high schools in Fairfax County, Virginia; an English specialist in Fairfax County, Virginia; and the English Language Arts Coordinator for the State of Maryland. Her graduate work has been in English, secondary reading, and school administration.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

Dan Ahern and Pamela Bloomfield are principals of Clarus Group working under contract to Class Measures Ltd for the purpose of this contract.

Peter Davies, Wayne LaGue, and Douglas Renick are members of Class Measures Ltd.

Patricia Williams is an independent contractor working for the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability.

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SETTING

Lowell, the fourth-largest city in Massachusetts, is located 25 miles to the north of Boston on the Merrimack River, at the intersection of three major state highways. Its population of more than 105,000 has increased over the past two decades, fueled by a dramatic influx of immigrants from Cambodia and other Southeast Asia nations. The revitalization of the city center during the same period has attracted new businesses as well as residential development in downtown Lowell, where the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) is located. The city is home to Middlesex Community College (MCC) and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

In 1989, MCC founded Lowell Middlesex Academy, the predecessor organization to LMACS. As part of a voluntary school desegregation plan, the Lowell School Department had contracted with MCC to provide an alternative program for high school students who were at risk of dropping out of school. Lowell Middlesex Academy functioned as an after-school dropout prevention program until the mid-nineteen nineties, when MCC submitted a proposal to the Commonwealth to transform the after-school program into a charter school. LMACS was chartered as a Commonwealth charter school in 1995 with the mission of enabling its students, an at-risk population of former high school dropouts, to achieve academic, social, and career success. The Commonwealth renewed the school's charter in 1999, and the school is currently operating under an Accountability Plan implemented in 2002. LMACS recently submitted an Application for Renewal of its charter for a second five-year term as well as a proposed Accountability Plan.

Approximately 108 students are enrolled in LMACS, which is a non-graded, college preparatory high school spanning the ninth through twelfth grades. The students enrolled in LMACS are former high school dropouts or students who had been at serious risk of dropping out. LMACS reports that its students often come from troubled homes, have substance abuse problems, are court involved, are single parents, and/or have been generally ill served by traditional school environments. Those that successfully complete the program receive a high school diploma, thus fulfilling the school's vision as a "place of second chances."

The school draws close to 80 percent of its students from the city of Lowell; another 12 percent of LMACS students live in Dracut, and the remaining eight percent are drawn from Billerica, Chelmsford, Tewksbury, and Tyngsborough. Based on DOE enrollment data for 2003-2004, 58.3 percent of LMACS students are White, 20.4 percent are Asian, and 19.4 are Hispanic. These data also show that 61.1 percent of LMACS students are low-income, and 32.4 percent are students for whom English is not their first language. The school's current students do not require significant English language services; when such services are needed, LMACS student receive them through a self-paced program at MCC. LMACS has seven special education students who comprise 6.5 percent of the student population.

LMACS has reported a decline in student applications beginning in the 2003-2004 academic year, and this decline has been mirrored by decreases in the number of students on the school's waiting list. The school's Application for Renewal indicates that the Board of Trustees has formed a subcommittee to analyze the reasons for the decreased applications and to develop

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

strategies to address the problem; the Application for Renewal also describes several outreach activities initiated by the school in June and July of 2004.

LMACS is governed by an 18-member Board of Trustees, seven of whom are employed by MCC. MCC employees serving on the LMACS Board include the MCC President, who serves as President of the LMACS Board of Trustees; the Vice President for Administration and Finance of MCC, who serves as LMACS Board Treasurer; and a Dean at MCC who serves as the Board's Clerk. LMACS has for many years contracted with MCC for management services, including the services of the school's Executive Director, Assistant Director, and Administrative Assistant; for financial services, including accounting, procurement, and payroll services; and for use of MCC facilities. A new Executive Director hired by MCC has recently assumed responsibility for managing LMACS. LMACS staff consist of seven full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, three other educational staff, and an office assistant.

LMACS moved in 1999 from its former location at Middlesex Community College to its current location on the second floor of the historic Pollard Building across the street from the college. Because the school's lease has not been renewed, the school's ability to remain in its current location in the coming years is uncertain.

LMACS is a member of the Middle College High School National Consortium. The New England Association of Schools & Colleges (NEASC) Commission on Public Secondary Schools recently voted to continue the school's accreditation and commended the school for the quality of its Five-Year Progress Report.

FINDINGS

The Renewal Inspection Team (Team) spent two days on site at the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) on October 19 and 20, 2004. The Team conducted separate focus group interviews with the Board of Trustees (nine of 18 members), ten teachers and staff, 17 students, three graduates, and seven parents and three advocates for homeless adolescents. The Team observed all seven full-time teachers, several more than once, during classroom instruction. The Team also interviewed administrators and financial officials of Middlesex Community College (MCC), which provides management and fiscal services to LMACS under contracts with the school.

The Team obtained and reviewed LMACS data and documents prior to the renewal site visit, on site, and after the site visit. The documents reviewed included five years of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) data; the school's current Accountability Plan; the school's Application for Renewal, including the proposed Accountability Plan; annual reports; Board of Trustees by-laws; Board of Trustees minutes from meetings held between September 12, 2001 and September 27, 2004; annual spending plans; audited financial statements for the three years ending June 30, 2001 through June 30, 2003; written policies and procedures; handbooks and other information provided to staff, students, and parents; curriculum guides; NEASC evaluations; staff evaluations and professional development plans; information on teacher qualifications and experience; student work, including five-year success plans; grade reports; lease information; job descriptions for administrators; the school's contracts with MCC; previous site visit reports; and the previous renewal inspection report prepared in 1999.

RENEWAL QUESTION 1: IS THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM A SUCCESS?

MCAS RESULTS

The Renewal Inspection Team (the Team) examined the scores attained by LMACS students on the MCAS exams for the period of 2000 to 2004. These scores were compared to the MCAS scores attained by students in the Lowell school district, which is the "comparison district" that provides most of the students that attend the school, and to the MCAS scores attained by Massachusetts high school students statewide.

In considering the performance of LMACS students on the MCAS exams, it should be recognized that the numbers of students taking the MCAS exams have been low, although all eligible LMACS students have taken the exams each year. In 2000, 53 students took the exams. Since 2001, however, as few as 14 students and no more than 23 students have taken the MCAS exams each year. Because the numbers of LMACS students taking the exams each year have been so low, the scores of a very few students may have had a disproportionate impact on the school's MCAS results.

The following analysis uses the Lowell school district as the comparison district because more than half of the students who attend LMACS reside in Lowell. However, LMACS is much smaller than the Lowell school district: an average of 25 LMACS students took the MCAS

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

exams during each of the past five years, whereas an average of 798 students in the Lowell school district took the exams during the same period. Moreover, LMACS' entire student body consists of at-risk students who had previously dropped out of school or were at serious risk of dropping out, whereas Lowell High School has a more diverse population of students.

Because of the small number of students taking the MCAS exams each year, subpopulation analyses could not be performed. The Department of Education determined that LMACS made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2003, but made no determination in 2004 because of the small number of students (14) who took the exam.

1. The school's MCAS results show considerable year-to-year variations with no clear improvement trend.

MCAS scores achieved by LMACS students have varied considerably from year to year between 2000 and 2004, with no clear trend over the five-year period. Table 1 shows the students' five-year scores on the MCAS English Language Arts exam. As the table shows, students' performance improved until 2002 and then declined in 2003 and 2004. Overall, the school's Proficiency Index for English Language Arts increased slightly from 2003 to 2004.

**Table 1. Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Grade 10 MCAS English Language Arts Results
2000 - 2004**

Year	N	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing	Proficiency Index
2000	53	6	45	45	4	N/A
2001	16	0	50	50	0	
2002	22	9	50	41	0	
2003	23	0	43	48	9	78.3
2004	14	7	36	50	7	78.6

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

Table 2 shows the school's five-year results on the MCAS Mathematics exam. These scores show no clear trend; student achievement was lowest in 2002, the middle of the period. The school's Proficiency Index for Mathematics decreased from 2003 to 2004.

**Table 2. Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Grade 10 MCAS Mathematics Results
2000 - 2004**

Year	N	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing	Proficiency Index
2000	53	4	17	40	40	N/A
2001	16	6	13	56	25	
2002	22	0	0	36	64	
2003	23	13	17	61	9	72.8
2004	14	7	21	43	29	60.7

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

2. Each year since 2000, the percentage of LMACS students who received passing scores on the MCAS exam in English Language Arts has exceeded the comparable percentages of students from the Lowell school district and statewide. However, the percentage of LMACS students scoring Proficient or better on the English Language Arts exam has trailed the comparable percentage of students statewide in 2003 and 2004. Moreover, the scores of Lowell and statewide students on the English Language Arts exam have shown a clearer improvement trend than the scores of LMACS students.

Table 3 presents a comparison of the percentage of students in each category (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Warning/Failing) for the MCAS exam in English Language Arts each year from 2000 through 2004. (A separate column shows the percentage of students in Lowell and statewide who failed due to absence; all eligible LMACS students took the exam each year.) Table 3 also shows the Proficiency Index scores for the school, Lowell, and the statewide results. The school's Proficiency Index is higher than that of the Lowell school district and lower than the statewide figure for both 2003 and 2004. It also shows the least improvement of the three between the two years.

**Table 3. Comparison of LMACS, State, and District
Grade 10 MCAS English Language Arts Results
2000 - 2004**

Year	N	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing	Absent	Proficiency Index				
2000	LMACS	53	6	45	45	4	N/A				
	Lowell	685	2	20	33	42		4			
	State	61,401	7	29	30	31		3			
2001	LMACS	16	0	50	50	0		N/A			
	Lowell	701	8	28	37	26			1		
	State	64,177	15	35	31	17			1		
2002	LMACS	22	9	50	41	0			N/A		
	Lowell	793	10	34	31	24				1	
	State	66,184	19	40	27	13				1	
2003	LMACS	23	0	43	48	9				78.3	
	Lowell	890	8	35	35	22				0	69.4
	State	69,301	20	41	28	11				1	80.7
2004	LMACS	14	7	36	50	7	78.6				
	Lowell	775	8	35	39	14	5			70.7	
	State	69,347	19	44	27	9	1			82.8	

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

Table 4 consolidates the data to compare the percentages of students at LMACS, the Lowell school district, and statewide who passed the English Language Arts exam by attaining a score of Needs Improvement or better each year as well as the percentages of students who scored Proficient or better on the same exam each year. This table shows that a higher percentage of LMACS students passed the exam than the comparable percentages of Lowell students and statewide students, although the latter two groups have shown marked improvement trends. LMACS began the five-year period with a higher percentage of students scoring Proficient or better than either the Lowell school district or the statewide results. However, the Lowell school

district has matched the school’s performance in this category during the last two years, and the statewide results have exceeded the school’s performance during the same period. The statewide results show the clearest improvement trend over the five-year period.

**TABLE 4. Comparison of LMACS, State, and District
Grade 10 MCAS English Language Arts Results
Percent Needs Improvement or Better and
Percent Proficient or Better
2000 – 2004**

Year	Needs Improvement or Better			Proficient or Better		
	LMACS	Lowell	State	LMACS	Lowell	State
2000	96	55	66	51	22	36
2001	100	73	81	50	36	50
2002	100	75	86	59	44	59
2003	91	78	89	43	43	61
2004	93	82	90	43	43	63

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

- The percentage of LMACS students passing the MCAS exam in Mathematics exceeded the comparable percentages of students from the Lowell school district and statewide in 2000 and 2003 only. The percentage of LMACS students scoring Proficient or better has trailed the comparable percentages of Lowell students and statewide students every year. Moreover, the Lowell results and the statewide results have shown a clear improvement trend, whereas the LMACS results have been inconsistent.**

Table 5 presents another comparison of the percentage of students in each category (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Warning/Failing) for the Mathematics exam each year from 2000 through 2004. (A separate column shows the percentage of students in Lowell and statewide who failed due to absence; all eligible LMACS students took the exam each year.) Table 5 also shows the Proficiency Index scores for LMACS, the Lowell school district, and the statewide results. The school’s Proficiency Index was higher than that of the Lowell school district in 2003 but lower in 2004. The Proficiency Index figures for Lowell and the statewide results showed improvement over the two years, whereas the school’s Proficiency Index declined over the same period.

**Table 5. Comparison of LMACS, State, and District
Grade 10 MCAS Mathematics Results
2000 - 2004**

Year		N	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning/ Failing	Absent	Proficiency Index	
2000	LMA	53	4	17	40	40		N/A	
	Lowell	714	7	17	23	51	3		
	State	62,398	15	18	22	42	3		
2001	LMA	16	6	13	56	25			
	Lowell	733	11	21	35	31	2		
	State	65,350	18	27	30	24	1		
2002	LMA	22	0	0	36	64			
	Lowell	821	11	17	33	38	1		
	State	67,343	20	24	31	25	1		
2003	LMA	23	13	17	61	9			72.8
	Lowell	939	12	22	30	36	0		59.1
	State	69,981	24	27	28	20	1		73.2
2004	LMA	14	7	21	43	29		60.7	
	Lowell	781	18	21	34	23	4	64.6	
	State	69,839	29	28	28	14	1	78.0	

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

Table 6 consolidates the data to compare the percentages of students at LMACS, the Lowell school district, and statewide who passed the Mathematics exam by attaining a score of Needs Improvement or better each year as well as the percentages of students who scored Proficient or better on the same exam each year. This table shows that LMACS students performed better than Lowell students in terms of the percentage passing the Mathematics exam in 2000, 2001, and 2003, but Lowell students performed better in 2002 and 2004. The percentage of LMACS students scoring Proficient or better has trailed the Lowell and statewide results every year since 2000. The improvement trends on the Mathematics exam in Lowell and statewide have not been reflected in the erratic year-to-year results for LMACS students.

**Table 6. Comparison of LMACS, State, and District
Grade 10 MCAS Mathematics Results
Percent Needs Improvement or Better and
Percent Proficient or Better
2000 – 2004**

Year	Needs Improvement or Better			Proficient or Better		
	LMACS	Lowell	State	LMACS	Lowell	State
2000	61	47	55	21	24	33
2001	75	67	75	19	32	45
2002	36	61	75	0	28	44
2003	91	64	79	30	34	51
2004	71	73	85	28	39	57

Data Source: Department of Education MCAS data

4. LMACS has met two of the five MCAS-related performance objectives contained in its current Accountability Plan. All LMACS students have passed the MCAS exams upon graduation, but the students' MCAS scores have not met the year-to-year improvement objectives set forth in the Accountability Plan.

The school's Accountability Plan contains five MCAS-related performance objectives. The first two MCAS-related objectives, which are listed under Performance Goal 1, are as follows:

- "Upon graduation, all students will have passed the MCAS tests of mathematics."
- "Upon graduation, all students will have passed the MCAS tests of English and Language Arts."

Since 2003, the Department of Education has required students to attain a passing score (Needs Improvement or better) on the MCAS exams as a condition of graduation. In the past five years, all LMACS graduates have received passing scores on the English Language Arts exam. All but one LMACS graduate has received a passing score on the Mathematics exam; that one student passed after a successful appeal. Thus, LMACS has met the above-listed performance objectives.

LMACS has not met its other MCAS-related performance objectives, which are listed under Performance Goal 2 in the LMACS Accountability Plan:

- "As compared to the previous academic years, a higher percentage of students will score in the needs improvement category on the MCAS tests of math and English and Language Arts."

The percentage of students scoring in the Needs Improvement category on the English Language Arts exam has fluctuated from a high of 50 percent in 2001 and 2004 to a low of 41 percent in 2002. There has not been consistent improvement in the percentage of LMACS students attaining a score of Needs Improvement or better. Similarly, the percentage of students scoring in the Needs Improvement category on the Mathematics exam has fluctuated; between 2003 and 2004, this percentage dropped 18 percentage points. The percentage of LMACS students attaining a score of Needs Improvement or better dropped 20 points during the same period.

- "As compared to the previous academic years, a higher percentage of students will score in the proficient category on the MCAS tests of math and English and Language Arts."

The percentage of LMACS students scoring in the Proficient category on the English Language Arts exam has declined from a high of 50 percent in 2001 and 2003. In 2004, it is currently at its lowest point of 36 percent. The percentage of students attaining a score of Proficient or better has also declined.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

- “As compared to the previous academic years, a higher percentage of students will score in the advanced category on the MCAS tests of math and English and Language Arts.”

The percentage of LMACS students scoring in the Proficient category on the Mathematics exam has declined and then improved over the five-year period. Since 2002, at which point no LMACS students scored in the Proficient category, there has been a steady improvement in this area with 21 percent scoring in the Proficient category in 2004. Students scoring Proficient or better rose from a low of 0 percent in 2002 to 30 percent in 2003 and declined slightly to 28 percent in 2004.

The MCAS-related performance objectives listed above can be problematic as indicators of academic progress. For example, on the English Language Arts exam, the percentage of LMACS students scoring in the Needs Improvement category rose from 41 percent to 48 percent between 2002 and 2003, thereby meeting the school’s performance objective of increasing the percentage of students scoring in the Needs Improvement category for that exam in that year. However, that percentage increase resulted from an overall decline in the scores attained by LMACS students on the English Language Arts exam: in 2002, 50 percent of LMACS students scored at the Proficient level and nine percent at the Advanced Level, whereas in 2003 only 43 percent tested at the Proficient level and no students tested at the Advanced level.

OTHER ASSESSMENTS

LMACS uses the College Entrance Examination Board’s ACCUPLACER tests to assess incoming students and to assess students’ progress each year. ACCUPLACER is also used by Middlesex Community College to assess incoming students’ readiness for college reading and placement in college-level algebra courses.

- 5. LMACS has met two of the three performance objectives pertaining to the ACCUPLACER tests contained in the school’s current Accountability Plan. LMACS reports that the Reading Comprehension and Algebra scores attained by all of its graduates on the ACCUPLACER tests are sufficient to place them in college-level courses at Middlesex Community College. However, although the average scores of LMACS students on the ACCUPLACER tests have increased during the course of each academic year, the students have not demonstrated the desired 40 percent gain in their ACCUPLACER test scores during the course of each school year.**

The LMACS Accountability Plan contains three performance objectives pertaining to the ACCUPLACER tests. The first two objectives, which are listed under Performance Goal 1, are as follows:

- “Upon graduation, all students will read at the level sufficient to be accepted at Middlesex Community College as measured by the ACCUPLACER test.”
- “Upon graduation, all students will score at college-level Algebra on the ACCUPLACER test and complete the Algebra II at the charter school.”

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

LMACS reports that it has met these performance objectives pertaining to the ACCUPLACER test scores of its graduates. Indeed, LMACS has provided data indicating that each year since 2001, the average ACCUPLACER test scores of LMACS graduates have significantly exceeded the reading comprehension and algebra scores required by MCC for placement in college-level courses. These data are summarized in Table 7.

**Table 7. Average ACCUPLACER Test Scores
Of Graduates
2001–2004**

Year of Graduation	Reading Comprehension (Required 68)	Algebra (Required 55)
2001	82	73
2002	80	72
2003	81	68
2004	81	79

Data Source: LMACS Renewal Application

LMACS reports that it has not required all of its graduates to complete Algebra II, as anticipated in the second performance objective listed above. The LMACS Application for Renewal provides the following explanation:

In addition to scoring a minimum of 55 on the ACCUPLACER, LMACS students are required to successfully complete the Algebra curriculum up to the Algebra II level in order to be considered for graduation. Students who, due to special circumstances such as a special education designation, are unable to work at a pace sufficient to allow the completion of Algebra II are required to demonstrate “strong and consistent” math effort for every semester. This policy also applies to the large number of students who enter LMACS with math ability so low that they would be unable to complete Algebra II in the time allotted.

The third performance objectives in the LMACS accountability plan pertaining to the ACCUPLACER tests, listed under Performance Goal 2, is as follows:

- “During the course of the school year, students, on average, will demonstrate a 40% gain in their scores on the ACCUPLACER tests of reading comprehension and mathematics as compared to their entrance scores in the fall term.”

Performance data related to this performance objective for four academic years were provided by LMACS in the Application for Renewal. These data are presented in Table 8, which compares the average ACCUPLACER test scores achieved by new students to LMACS when they entered the school each September with the average scores of the students taking ACCUPLACER tests at the end of the same academic year. The data clearly show that the average scores of LMACS students on the ACCUPLACER tests of reading comprehension and mathematics improved over the course of each academic year. However, with four exceptions (Arithmetic in the 2003-2004 academic year and Algebra in every year except the 2001-2002 school year), the average test

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

score increases of LMACS students from the beginning to the end of each academic year did not attain the 40 percent objective established in the school’s Accountability Plan.

**Table 8. Average ACCUPLACER Test Scores
at the Beginning and End of School Years
2000–2001 Through 2003-2004
for New Students to LMACS**

Reading Comprehension				
	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
September Score	71	57	52	58
End of Year Score	79	67	63	66
Increase	8	10	11	8
Percent Change	11	18	21	14

Arithmetic				
	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
September Score	63	43	46	41
End of Year Score	76	57	63	67
Increase	13	14	17	26
Percent Change	21	33	37	63

Algebra				
	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
September Score	42	17	16	11
End of Year Score	65	21	42	44
Increase	23	4	26	33
Percent Change	55	24	163	300

Data Source: LMACS Renewal Application
Note: Some percentages changed due to recalculation.

Although the performance objective cited above appears to require measurement of the changes in ACCUPLACER test scores for all LMACS students each year, the ACCUPLACER test score information provided by LMACS pertained only to new students entering the school each year. The Team requested and obtained from the school ACCUPLACER test score data pertaining to all LMACS students for two school years. Those data, presented in Table 9, also show that the average ACCUPLACER test scores for all LMACS students increased from the beginning to the end of each year. Although the 37 percent increase in the average algebra scores over the 2002-2003 academic year approached the 40 percent performance objective stated in the Accountability Plan, none of the yearly score increases met the performance objective.

**Table 9. Average ACCUPLACER Test Scores
at the Beginning and End of School Years
for All Students
2002–2003 through 2003-2004**

	Reading Comprehension		Arithmetic		Algebra	
	2002-03	2003-04	2002-03	2003-04	2002-03	2003-04
September Score	65	58	61	58	43	49
End of Year Score	68	63	67	70	59	58
Increase	3	5	6	12	16	9
Percent Change	5	9	10	21	37	18
<i>Source: Analysis of LMACS data</i>						

6. LMACS reports that the number of LMACS students who failed at least one course decreased by 18 percent during the course of the 2003-2004 school year. This 18 percent decrease did not meet the performance objective contained in the school’s current Accountability Plan.

The school’s current Accountability Plan contains the following performance objective, listed under Performance Goal 2, pertaining to student course failures:

- “During the course of the school year, the school will decrease the number of students who fail at least one course by 40% as compared to the rate in the fall term.”

In its Application for Renewal, LMACS provided data related to this objective only for the 2003–2004 school year. These data are shown in Table 10. According to LMACS, three of the 20 students who failed one or more courses in the fall of 2003 withdrew during the winter of 2003. Of the remaining 17 students, three did not fail any courses during the winter and spring terms, a reduction of 18 percent over the academic year.

**Table 10. Number of Students Who Failed
One or More Courses During the
2003 – 2004 School Year**

Semester	Number of Students
Fall 2003	20
Winter 2003	14 (3 withdrew)
Spring 2004	14
<i>Source: LMACS Renewal Application</i>	

7. For the past five years, LMACS has met the performance objective contained in the school’s current Accountability Plan regarding the ability of its graduates to write a coherent, five-paragraph essay and to demonstrate mastery of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

The school's Accountability Plan contains the following performance objective, listed under Performance Goal 1:

- “At the time of graduation, all students will be able to write a coherent five-paragraph essay using a clear thesis, supporting evidence, three paragraphs, and a strong conclusion, and they will demonstrate mastery of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.”

As discussed in the previous Finding 3, all students who have graduated from LMACS received passing scores on the MCAS English Language Arts exam. By passing the long essay component of this exam, the students graduating from LMACS achieved the performance objective stated above. Moreover, the Team found that students participating in the focus group conducted during the Team's renewal site visit were well versed in the requirements for a five-paragraph essay and that students are required to write essays throughout the LMACS curriculum.

8. LMACS faculty employ a variety of internal techniques for measuring student performance.

Through focus groups with faculty and students and through classroom observations, the Team determined that LMACS faculty members have been trained in the development of rubrics and are using them to measure student performance. In addition, the Team observed that LMACS faculty use the more typical student assessment methods of tests, quizzes, observations of activities, homework reviews, and “Do Now” activities. Students reported to the Team that they like knowing what is expected of them.

The school recently developed, at the request of New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), a set of learner expectations and outcomes with a rubric to assess the degree of attainment of the outcomes. These expectations and outcomes are consistent with the focus of the LMACS mission statement on the academic, social and career success of LMACS students. Thus, the use of this school-wide rubric will enable the school to evaluate the degree to which it is accomplishing its mission.

At the end of each semester, students receive a grade report for each class. Each grade report is accompanied by a cover letter that summarizes the student's performance in all classes. This packet of information is mailed to the student's parents or guardian. LMACS administrators state that sometimes parents or guardians do not receive the grade reports because the mailing address is inaccurate. In addition, the student's advisor contacts parents or guardians at least once every other week to discuss the student's performance.

CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

9. The LMACS curriculum is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is consistently applied in the classroom. Overall, the academic program in place at LMACS supports the school's mission by providing the students with a flexible, supportive learning environment that promotes high expectations for student

achievement. LMACS teachers employ effective classroom techniques that enable them to provide individualized instruction, maintain discipline, and garner the respect and cooperation of the students.

The LMACS faculty members have created curricula in collaboration with the Project for School Innovation. These curricula are aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and provide a scope and sequence for the following courses: Nonviolent Conflict Resolution, Senior Civics Curriculum Overview, English Language Arts Curriculum Overview, History Curriculum, Self-Paced Math Curriculum, and Senior Seminar. LMACS curriculum guidelines show clear expectations and high performance standards. Some courses are self-paced, and LMACS students receive individualized instruction in all courses.

The Team observed the use of Blackboard Configuration in every classroom. Students followed the routine, creating a consistent and orderly beginning to classes. Students were observed helping one another in the spirit of a learning community. Classrooms were flexibly organized to allow students to come and go while maintaining students' focus on class content. Seating arrangements were flexible and did not start from a lecture arrangement. The Team observed a wide variety of instructional modalities in use across classrooms and within classrooms. In the math classrooms, there was clear evidence of differentiation in instruction. The faculty used non-coercive techniques of behavior control, and no behavior problems were observed. Teachers and students exhibited cooperative and respectful interactions.

RENEWAL QUESTION 2: IS THE SCHOOL A VIABLE ORGANIZATION?

1. The school's audited financial statements show that LMACS is in stable financial condition.

The school's audited financial statements for the 2001, 2002, and 2003 fiscal years show that the school has consistently maintained a positive fund balance. At the end of 2003, the school's net assets totaled \$303,177. Expenditures did exceed revenues by \$66,044 in 2001 and by \$46,478 in 2003; in each case, the school's net asset balance covered the difference. Among the issues that could affect the school's future financial viability are its ability to continue to attract students to LMACS and its need to secure an appropriate facility in the near future (discussed below).

2. The school's ability to remain in the current location is uncertain. The Board of Trustees has not been fully informed of the situation.

LMACS has until recently occupied its current facility under a lease executed in 1998. In response to the Team's request for a copy of the lease and any future facility plans, the school provided the Team with a copy of the third amendment to the lease dated October 23, 2001. The amended lease showed that the original lease term had expired on June 30, 2004. The amended lease allowed LMACS to exercise an option to extend the term of the lease for an additional five years, through July 1, 2009, by providing written notice to the lessor not less than 60 days prior to June 30, 2004.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

Minutes from meetings of the Board of Trustees held prior to June 2004 contain no references to the facility lease. According to the Board meeting minutes for June 14, 2001, the Board unanimously approved a Board Action Request regarding “LMACS Lease Renewal” at that meeting. The minutes and copies of materials distributed at the meeting do not indicate what the Board discussed regarding the lease, nor do they specify the request that was approved by the Board’s vote.

The LMACS Executive Director told the Team that the school is currently a tenant at will in the space. During the focus group interview with Board members, the Team asked Board members about the status of the facility lease. The Board members responded that the building is currently for sale, that LMACS is currently a tenant at will, that Board members are seeking a new location for the school, and that they did not believe that the school had had an option to renew its lease of the current facility.

Subsequent to the Board interview, the Board’s Treasurer provided the Team with a copy of a letter to the lessor dated March 16, 2004, sent by certified mail, in which the Treasurer informed the lessor that LMACS was exercising its option to extend the lease. He told the Team that a lease renewal has not been signed, that he did not believe it would be wise to require the landlord to enter a new lease on a building that might be sold, that he had expressed to the lessor his willingness to be flexible, and that he has been investigating other facility options for LMACS.

3. LMACS governance, management, and operations are closely related to Middlesex Community College. While this close relationship brings some benefits to the school, it also hinders strong, effective governance of LMACS by an independent board of trustees.

Lowell Middlesex Academy, the predecessor organization to LMACS, was founded and operated by Middlesex Community College (MCC) under an agreement with the City of Lowell. Since LMACS was chartered in 1995, the school has continued to rely on MCC to support its governance, management, and operations. The school’s close ties with MCC offer many benefits to the school. For example, LMACS students and staff have access to the college campus, classes, and other resources; LMACS uses the ACCUPLACER program through MCC to place students and assess their academic growth; LMACS receives academic support and professional development for staff from MCC; and LMACS contracts with MCC for both management services and administrative support, including fiscal and human resources services.

However, the close ties between LMACS and MCC also raise governance concerns, discussed below.

Board membership and officers. Seven of 18 members of the Board of Trustees are MCC employees. The school’s by-laws provide for three officers: a President, Treasurer, and Clerk. Under the by-laws, the President of the Board is President of MCC. The Treasurer and Clerk are elected. During the period under review, MCC’s Vice President of Administration and Finance has held the Treasurer’s position and an MCC dean has held the Clerk’s position. The Team’s review of the minutes of all Board meetings held between September 2001 and September 2004

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

indicates that at ten of the 13 meetings, MCC employees serving on the LMACS Board accounted for more than 50 percent of the total Board members present at the meeting.

LMACS contracts with MCC. The school has two contracts with MCC: one for management services and the other for facilities use and fiscal services. ARTICLE XII of the school's by-laws states that MCC will act as the fiscal agent for the school and will process financial documents according to MCC's internal control guidelines. The statement of work for the school's management services contract with MCC states:

MCC shall provide to LMACS an Administration and Operations Team. These services shall include management, oversight, supervision and administration of LMACS' regular business activities as well as the preparation and filing of required local, state and federal reports. The personnel shall include the Executive Director, the Assistant Director, and the Administrative Assistant.

The maximum obligation for this contract during the term of July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004 was \$197,499. According to the Board Treasurer, all of the fees paid by the school to MCC under this contract pay for the salaries and benefits of the Executive Director, the Assistant Director, and the Administrative Assistant of LMACS.

The statement of work for the facilities use and fiscal services contract states:

Students enrolled in LMACS and LMACS faculty/staff shall have access, subject to schedule, to all MCC facilities including laboratories, cafeteria, library, parking, etc. MCC shall serve as the fiscal agent and shall provide all the necessary financial services required as well as human resources services.

The maximum obligation for this contract during the term of July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004 was \$57,250. According to the Board Treasurer, \$5,000 of this amount is paid for the school's access to MCC facilities; the remainder is paid for the financial and human resources services that MCC provides to the school.

Although both contracts contain a section headed "PAYMENT TERMS AND CONDITIONS," the contracts contain no payment terms specifying when payments are required to be made, who can authorized the payments, or how MCC's contract performance is to be measured. Payments on this contract, like all of the schools fiscal affairs, are processed by MCC under its internal control system.

On June 14, 2004, the Board voted to renew both contracts with MCC. In each of the prior three years for which the Team reviewed Board minutes, the Board voted to renew the two MCC contracts at their September meetings, more than two months after the new contract terms had begun.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

ARTICLE VII, Section 8 of the school's by-laws states, in part:

A trustee is who is a member, stockholder, trustee, director, officer or employee of any firm, corporation or association with which the LMACS contemplates contracting or transacting business shall disclose his or her relationship or interest to the other trustees acting upon or in reference to such contract or transaction. No trustee so interested shall vote on such contract or transaction

Although the Board minutes indicate that the Board President and Treasurer abstained from voting on the annual renewals of the LMACS contracts with MCC, minutes of meetings in which the contracts were renewed over the past three years indicate that five other MCC employees who are or were Board members voted to renew the two contracts with MCC.

Management Staff. As noted in the foregoing discussion of the school's contracts with MCC, the school's Executive Director, Assistant Director, and the Administrative Assistant are all MCC employees. The Executive Director told the Team that when she was hired, the LMACS Board of Trustees did not interview her and that her appointment was confirmed by the MCC's Board of Trustees, not the LMACS Board of Trustees. The school's by-laws require the President to appoint all management staff; the by-laws also give the President responsibility for appointing and supervising the school's Executive Director. However, the school's current Accountability Plan contains the following performance objective, listed under Performance Goal 5:

“The Board will evaluate and direct the work of the Executive Director. The Executive Director will evaluate the Assistant Director.”

The Team learned that the Clerk of the Board, an MCC employee, evaluates the Executive Director. The lack of clarity regarding the Executive Director's reporting relationship is compounded by the conflict between the school's by-laws and its Accountability Plan.

Financial Audits. The Board receives and approves financial audits each year but has no role in the selection and management of its auditor. ARTICLE V, Section 1 of the school's by-laws states that the MCC President “[a]uthorizes and oversees the disbursement and administration of funds under the approved operating budget and arranges an annual external accounting audit of all LMACS accounts.” The same firm that audits MCC's financial statements conducts the school's audits. According to the Treasurer, the firm was selected as MCC's auditor in 1996 and has audited both MCC and LMACS since then.

The reports on the school's audited financial statements for the years ending on June 30, 2002 and June 30, 2003 disclosed certain related-party transactions between the school and MCC. However, the amounts disclosed did not reflect the entire amount paid by LMACS under its two contracts with MCC. Instead, they included only the amount of the school's management fee paid directly for salaries of the three management personnel exclusive of the costs of benefits and salary amounts offset by grants and contracts.

4. The Board has actively engaged in problem-solving for LMACS but has not participated in some matters that deserve the Board's attention.

Board members are actively engaged in problem-solving for the school. The Board regularly receives reports on academic matters; when significant issues arise, Board members help define the problems and identify possible solutions. Recent examples include the Board's work to address the problems of declining student applications, poor MCAS Mathematics exam scores, student drop-out rates, and insufficient student attendance.

The Board meets only four times per year. The Department of Education's 2002–2003 Site Visit Report noted that the Board had not engaged in formal strategic planning: "While Board members reported that they have discussed the strategic priorities for the school informally, they have not engaged in formal strategic planning, as their focus has been on academic and financial oversight and problem solving." The Team's site visit and review of Board meeting minutes confirmed that the Board has not engaged in strategic planning for the school and has not participated in some matters deserving of the Board's attention. Examples of matters in which the Board did not participate include the following:

- The Board did not confirm or approve the appointment of the school's new Executive Director. As discussed above, the Executive Director is an MCC employee working under a contract between the school and MCC.
- The Board did not approve either the school's 2004 Application for Renewal or the July 2004 Accountability Plan submitted to the Department of Education. Board members told the Team that they received copies of both documents in preparation for the Team's renewal site visit.

5. LMACS maintains high learner expectations and provides a safe, supportive environment for students.

LMACS is a safe place for students and staff. LMACS staff report that there have been no fights in the school. The Team observed that the facility was clean (students and staff are primarily responsible for cleaning) and well lit, that students and teachers were respectful toward each other, and that students were engaged and helpful to each other in the classrooms.

The school works to maintain its supportive culture and has been successful at doing so, despite the fact that 10 of the school's 14 staff members have been at the school for two or years or less. The school accomplishes this consistency of culture by working over the summer to prepare new teachers to work in the school. Departing teachers and the Assistant Director spend time orienting and preparing new teachers.

Teachers are focused on helping students succeed in a variety of ways by teaching effectively to high academic standards as well as by providing students with emotional support when needed. The Team observed that high expectations for student achievement and behavior are maintained throughout the building.

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

- 1. Consistent with its mission, LMACS has implemented measures aimed at improving students' academic performance and encouraging and assessing students' progress toward their social and career goals.**

The school's mission statement is as follows:

The mission of the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School is to enable all its students to achieve academic, social, and career success. This supportive school community identifies, encourages, and develops interests and abilities while acknowledging and respecting each student's personal and cultural identity.

LMACS enables its students to achieve academically through its self-paced Mathematics program geared to move students through Pre-Algebra, Algebra I and Algebra II. Individual Student Success Plans for Mathematics reviewed by the Team were very individualized. In English Language Arts, students produce five-paragraph essays across the curriculum. In English classes, students read critically challenging literary texts.

The school's administrators and guidance counselors promote social achievement by enforcing school attendance expectations through direct contact with students and through repeated phone calls to the homes of absent students. Two teacher meetings per week are devoted to consideration of the cases of individual at-risk students. Staff communicate high academic and behavioral expectations to students in frequent staff-student interactions.

Prior to graduation, LMACS students are required to take a Senior Seminar course that prepares students for higher education and a Senior Civics course that prepares students to be contributing citizens. Upon completion of both courses, each student prepares a detailed, personal Five-Year Plan. All students are also required to complete a federal financial aid form, to visit MCC, and to complete an internship with an area business. These activities are also consistent with the following performance objectives listed under Performance Goal 3 of the school's current Accountability Plan:

- "Each graduating senior will file a financial aid form with the United States Department of Education."
- "Each student will complete a detailed five-year plan for life after high school, including goals and objectives for work and for continuing their education."

- 2. LMACS has succeeded in meeting some of its academic performance objectives and has made reasonable progress toward others, although student test scores have not shown the clear improvement trend hoped for by the school.**

As discussed in the previous findings regarding Question 1, the school's current Accountability Plan contains specific performance objectives focusing on the academic performance of LMACS

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

students. For the most part, the school has met its performance objectives pertaining to the standardized test scores and knowledge of students graduating from LMACS. (As discussed in finding 5 under Question 1, the school has not adhered to the requirement contained in its Accountability Plan that all students complete Algebra II at LMACS before graduation.) However, the school has encountered more difficulty meeting its ambitious performance improvement objectives. While students' average ACCUPLACER test scores have increased over the course of each school year, the average gains have generally fallen short of the increases called for by the school's performance objectives. In addition, the school's MCAS scores show no clear improvement trends from year to year, as called for by the school's performance objectives.

LMACS actively seek ways to address student performance issues. For example, to improve student achievement on the MCAS Mathematics exam, LMACS hired an additional math teacher and plans to place additional staff support in classes with multiple levels of math instruction. Students are taught through self-paced materials designed especially for LMACS.

In addition to setting academic performance objectives, LMACS has established four learner expectations for academic improvement. Upon graduating, LMACS expects all students to be able to:

- Read critically and analytically
- Communicate effectively in writing and orally to a variety of audiences
- Problem solve in a variety of circumstances
- Use technology as a tool to gather, analyze and present information

Students at LMACS do read critically and analytically, as stated in the curriculum guides and as observed in their English classes. Across the curriculum, students gain additional reading opportunities through reading excerpted pages from other sources. Also, as previously discussed, students receive instruction in writing a five-paragraph essay, and they practice this skill throughout the curriculum. These learner expectations are reinforced by the requirement that students pass MCAS exams in Mathematics and English Language Arts. LMACS has also used technology as a tool to facilitate learning: in 2003, the school established its own computer lab for use by students; prior to that time, students had access to the MCC computer lab.

3. LMACS has not succeeded in its goals to steadily reduce drop-out rates and steadily increase student attendance rates.

Two performance objectives contained in the school's current Accountability Plan require the school to decrease drop-out rates and increase attendance rates by three to five percent each academic year. As shown in Table 11, the school has not accomplished these improvements.

**Table 11. LMACS Attendance and Withdrawal Rates
1999 - 2004**

School Year	Attendance Rate (%)	Withdrawal Rate (%)
1999 - 2000	87	26
2000 - 2001	86	36
2001 - 2002	87	27
2002 - 2003	88	32
2003 - 2004	85	32

Source: LMACS Renewal Application

As a school devoted to the education of students who had previously dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out, LMACS is working with a challenging population. In its Application for Renewal, LMACS cited a number of measures that have been instituted to try to motivate and encourage students to attend school consistently, such as “Success Thursday” ceremonies, lunch celebrations, and other incentives for good attendance. Three years ago, LMACS instituted a policy requiring students to maintain a minimum attendance rate in order to pass each class, along with an appeal process. LMACS also reports that a system of “buy backs” has recently been implemented to enable students to make up absences with perfect attendance the following week. LMACS also calls the homes of absent students each morning. According to LMACS, the issue of student attendance is regularly discussed at staff meetings and with students’ parents.

LMACS attributes the difficulties encountered in reducing the drop-out rate to the turmoil and stress in each LMACS student’s life. The LMACS staff and Board of Trustees have been working to find solutions to these problems. Their efforts have included exchanging information with other charter schools in the state that serve similar student populations.

4. LMACS teacher evaluations and professional development planning need improvement.

The school’s current Accountability Plan contains the following performance objectives, listed under Performance Goal 3, pertaining to the teacher growth in classroom teaching:

- “Instructors will demonstrate the use of a wide variety of instructional strategies and alternative assessments, as noted by administration observation, in order to engage students in learning.”
- “Instructors will participate in in-school and out-of-school professional development workshops.”
- “Instructors will develop a professional development plan that outlines goals and objectives for each academic year and how they will reach those goals.”

LMACS has met the first two of these objectives. The Team observed teachers using a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and assessments. School staff have numerous professional

development opportunities, including participating in MCC workshops; working with the Project for School Innovation, which helped develop the LMACS curriculum guides; participating in conferences with other alternative charter high schools in which best practices and common problems are discussed; and professional development activities initiated by individual teachers.

LMACS staff have presented workshops on their use of the Blackboard Configuration model, and these presentations have enabled them to share ideas and to critique each other's work. Faculty report that they meet for two lunch periods each week to focus on students who need support and share suggestions for how to handle problems. In addition, the LMACS faculty meets every Friday afternoon for two hours with an open agenda. On a recent Friday, for example, the meeting focused on supporting the school's special education students.

However, LMACS has not instituted an effective professional development planning process, as required by the third performance objective listed above. The Team's review of a sample of the school's teacher evaluation forms found no individual recommendations to improve teacher performance. In addition, the Team's review of teachers' professional development plans showed that the forms did not list individual teacher goals against which a teacher's professional development can be measured.

5. LMACS has disseminated information about its best practices in multiple venues.

LMACS has actively participated in disseminating information about best practices at the school and learning from the experiences of others. Among its activities in this regard are the following:

- LMACS received a \$15,000 dissemination grant from the Massachusetts Charter School Association. Under the grant, the former Assistant Director published a paper entitled "A Place of Second Chances: Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School" which is available online at www.masscharterschools.org
- LMACS has worked with the Project for School Innovation (PSI), contributing to its newsletters, participating in conferences. PSI published a book entitled *Supporting At-Risk Students* about strategies used at LMACS.
- LMACS hosted a conference for the four state charter schools that serve at-risk student populations.
- LMACS participates in the Middle College High School National Consortium activities, attending annual conferences, hosting a National Social History Conference at LMACS, and publishing in the Consortium's newsletter.
- LMACS teachers and administrators have attended and presented at conferences of the National Dropout Prevention Network Conference.
- LMACS has provided training in its self-paced math program to other local charter schools.

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

- 1. The Accountability Plan proposed by LMACS reflects adjustments to its current Accountability Plan. Although some of the proposed performance objectives are less challenging than those currently in use, they appear realistic for the at-risk student population served by LMACS. The proposed Accountability Plan also contains some unclear performance objectives and lacks clear or effective measures for some performance objectives.**

The Accountability Plan proposed by LMACS presents a mission statement and a description of the population served by the school which, taken together, provide a clear understanding of the school's purpose. The proposed Accountability Plan then lists each of the first three questions by which charter schools are judged in the renewal process (Is the school an academic success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?), followed by a series of bulleted goals. In all but one instance, the objective is followed by a measurable or assessable performance objective.

Academic success. The school has proposed six goals and performance objectives pertaining to academic success.

- The first goal states that the school will increase the percentage of students who score in Advanced and Proficient categories of the MCAS tests of English Language Arts and Mathematics "with a permanent goal of 100% by 2014." It is followed by a performance objective requiring that LMACS earn DOE's designation as making Adequate Yearly Progress. A potential problem with this performance objective is that DOE determinations may not be made for the school: in 2004 DOE did not make an AYP determination for LMACS because of the small number of students who took the tests.
- The proposed Accountability Plan contains two goals and performance objectives concerning first-year student improvement in reading and math skills. (The school's current Accountability Plan includes a goal and performance objectives concerning improvements by all students, but the school reported only on the progress of its first-year students in its Application for Renewal.) With respect to students' reading comprehension skills, the performance objective is a ten percent gain in first-year students' reading comprehension ACCUPLACER scores, a significantly lower percentage than the 40 percent objective in the school's current Accountability Plan. With respect to students' math skills, the performance objective stated in the proposed Accountability Plan is a 40 percent increase in first-year students' elementary algebra ACCUPLACER scores, the same percentage as that stated in the current Plan. The proposed Accountability Plan does not include a performance objective relating to students' arithmetic ACCUPLACER scores.

Viable organization. The school's proposed Accountability Plan contains four goals and three performance objectives concerning LMACS' organizational viability.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

- The first goal calls for LMACS to have a withdrawal rate comparable to the average for urban districts with high-risk student populations similar to the school's population. The proposed Accountability Plan states the following performance objective: "Comparison data to be gleaned from Massachusetts Department of Education documents and other nationally recognized reports." This would replace the performance objective stated in the current Accountability Plan of decreasing the student drop-out rate by three to five percent per year. The proposed change is realistic, but the proposed performance objective needs to be developed to be more specific.
- The proposed Accountability Plan lists a single goal regarding school governance and management: "Each year the Auditor of the Commonwealth will find that Lowell Management Academy Charter School complies with the audit requirements promulgated by OSA and DOA." The Team's findings regarding school governance and management suggest that it would be appropriate and advisable for LMACS to set goals and objectives aimed at addressing the need for improvements in these areas.

Faithfulness to charter. The proposed Accountability Plan lists four goals and objectives concerning the school's faithfulness to its charter.

- The first goal is to receive positive site visit reports from the Department of Education. The bulleted statement that follows, to the effect that LMACS has developed a comprehensive, school-wide rubric to assess the school's effectiveness, is not directly and prospectively related to the goal of receiving positive site visit reports.
- Another goal in this section appears to be misstated: it states that LMACS "will request and receive positive feedback from parents." It is likely that the school does not intend to request only positive feedback from parents and that the school is equally interested in receiving parent feedback expressing concerns and providing constructive criticism.

2. LMACS has demonstrated a strong commitment to serving its high-risk students and willingness to address problems as they arise. However, the Board of Trustees has not demonstrated that it can fulfill its governance responsibilities independently and effectively. The Board's ability to meet its governance and management challenges will be critical to the school's long-term viability and success in achieving its objectives.

The LMACS faculty, staff and Board of Trustees have shown that they are willing and able to acknowledge and tackle challenges. They have addressed the problem of low student math scores on the MCAS exams and have made progress in this area, although there is more work to be done. They have also tackled the problem of the school's declining applications, high drop-out rate, and low attendance rate; although their strategies have met with limited success, the school is clearly committed to solving these problems.

During the renewal site visit, the school's stakeholders expressed the belief that LMACS is accomplishing its mission of giving students a second chance. Parents told moving stories of their children's transformations. Teachers told stories of adapting and adjusting their

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

instructional methods in order to reach their students. If one way doesn't work, they try another way. If that way doesn't work, they discuss the situation with other teachers and then try something else. Students attested to the effectiveness of the strong emotional support they receive from their teachers and the challenging work they perform in the classroom. LMACS graduates took time off from their jobs in order to share their career successes and express their enthusiasm about LMACS.

However, this renewal inspection has raised concerns about the ability of the Board of Trustees to govern the school independently and effectively and about the school's dependence on MCC for its management staff and systems.

In a recent letter dated September 9, 2004, the Department of Education advised LMACS that numerous changes to the school's by-laws are necessary to comply with the charter school law and to ensure the school's stability and effective governance. These required changes include new provisions detailing the duties and powers of the Board of Trustees, requiring the entire Board to appoint the Executive Director, requiring that the Board meet at least nine times per year, and ensuring that the Board complies with the requirements of the Open Meeting Law.

The by-law revision process will present an opportunity for the Board to conduct a rigorous examination of its operations and its relationship with MCC. The Board's ability to address and resolve these governance and management challenges will be critical to the school's success as an independent public school providing unique educational opportunities to at-risk high-school students in the coming years.

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
Renewal Inspection Report

APPENDIX A: SCHEDULE OF THE RENEWAL INSPECTION VISIT

	Tuesday, October 19, 2004	Wednesday, October 20, 2004
7:30-8:00	Team Meeting	Team Meeting
8:00-8:30	Interview Executive Director & Assistant Director (LaGue, Renick, Williams)	
8:30-8:45	Orientation with staff (LaGue, Renick, Williams)	Focus group interview with faculty (LaGue, Renick, Williams)
8:45-9:15	Interview Executive Director & Assistant Director (LaGue, Renick, Williams)	
9:15-10:20	Observation 1: Hamel (Renick) Observation 2: Anderson (LaGue) Observation 3: Chadwick (Williams)	Focus group interview with students Interview with internship coordinator (LaGue, Renick, Williams)
10:50-11:55	Observation 4: Hureau (Renick) Business and Finance interview (LaGue, Ahern)	Observation 6: Phelps (Renick) Observation 7&8: Brock & Becker (LaGue) Observation 9: Chadwick & Anderson (Williams)
12:00-12:45	Board of Trustees focus group interview & lunch	Lunch with faculty and administrators (LaGue, Renick, Williams)
12:45-1:45	(Ahern, LaGue, Renick, Williams)	Parent focus group interview (LaGue, Renick, Williams)
1:45-3:00	On-site document review and/or interview	Observation 10: Hureau (Renick) Observation 11: Lanier (LaGue) Observation 12: Lanier (Williams)
3:00-4:00	Observation 5: Brock (Williams)	On-site document review and/or interview
4:00-4:30	Interview Executive Director & Assistant Director (LaGue, Renick, Williams)	Meeting with staff (LaGue, Renick, Williams)
4:30-5:30		Interview Executive Director & Assistant Director (LaGue, Renick, Williams)