

# **Renewal Site Visit Report**

North Star Academy Charter School  
Springfield, Massachusetts

## **About the renewal process and site visit report**

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

Once this application has met a minimal review of its clarity and coherence, the Department of Education will appoint an evaluation team to conduct a 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 presents the Renewal Site Visit Team's findings. Findings are the school's strengths and areas for improvement that, the visiting team's judgment, have the greatest bearing on the school's answer to the four renewal questions: *Is the school an academic success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter? If the school is renewed, what are its plans for the next five years?* Each finding is a bolded statement followed by an explanatory paragraph. At the bottom of each finding are references to paragraphs in the full narrative report where the reader can find more information on the topic in question.

The second section is a full narrative report that describes the school in a more comprehensive way than the findings section. All of the information in the findings is presented again in the full narrative report plus additional information.

## **North Star Academy Charter School**

### **Setting**

The North Star Academy Charter School was created to prepare all students for success at the college level and in the career of their choice. The school grew out of the Learning Tree, an established program for high school dropouts, and has served many students who have not been academically successful in other settings.

The school's design calls for intensive support of students through an advisory system, individualized learning plans, and a competency-based promotion system that allows each student to progress at an appropriate pace. The high school experience at North Star is designed to culminate in a capstone year in which students complete independent studies, create a post-graduation plan and complete a capstone project.

The school is governed by a Board of community members. An Executive Director is responsible for all operations. The school also has a Principal who is responsible for the academic program. There are ten core faculty members.

The school is located in newly renovated space on one floor in a local church in Springfield. Springfield, a modern city of 150,000, has been the commercial hub of the Pioneer Valley (so named for the early 17<sup>th</sup> c. English settlement of the Connecticut River watershed) since William Pynchon established his family trading post there in 1636. It flourished during the Civil War as the Union's major armory and made the transition to a more commercial and service-oriented economy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Springfield's largest employers today are medical and insurance corporations, and it boasts the Basketball Hall of Fame and a quartet of adjoining museums known as the Springfield Quadrangle.

Its citizens today experience mixed prosperity with a per capita income only two-thirds of the state average and a poverty rate, 20%, roughly double that of the state. Its high school dropout rate of 7.1% is also nearly double that of the entire Commonwealth.

## **Renewal Site Visit Team**

### **Ledyard McFadden, Team Leader**

Mr. McFadden is the President of SchoolWorks. He was the Director of Operations for City on a Hill Charter School. Prior to his work at City on a Hill, he was a founder and teacher of the Bridge School, a school-within-a-school at Chelsea High School in Massachusetts. Mr. McFadden has taught English as a second language at Chelsea High School and at both an elementary and high school in Costa Rica.

### **Finlay McQuade, Team Member**

Dr. McQuade is a self-employed consultant with broad experience in several types of schools, including public schools, independent schools, charter schools, international schools, and American schools abroad. Among his institutional clients are the College Board and the Modern Red Schoolhouse, a national school improvement project originated by the Hudson Institute and funded by New American Schools. He is a senior curriculum and assessment consultant for the Modern Red Schoolhouse. He works with a consortium of charter schools in Colorado under the auspices of the Walton Family Foundation, and is the co-author, with David Champagne, of Allyn and Bacon's How to Make a Better School.

### **Roxie Coicou, Team Member**

Ms. Coicou is an administrator on assignment to the Superintendent's Office in the Cambridge Public Schools. She has worked as a high school science and math teacher in the Boston Public Schools, helping to design programs for bilingual, special education and regular education classrooms. She has served as Assistant Principal and Acting Principal at the Fletcher Elementary School in Cambridge.

### **Aretha Miller, Team Member**

Ms. Miller is a Program Manager at the Center for Youth Development and Education in Boston. She began her career as a special education teacher at the McKinley Schools. At the Egleston Community High School in Boston, Ms. Miller taught humanities and served as special education liaison.

### **Doris Perry, Team Member**

Ms. Perry is a site developer of ATLAS Communities, a New American School Design. She is responsible for assisting twenty ATLAS school sites in the Detroit Public Schools. At Northern High School in Detroit, Ms. Perry was the Special Education Department Head before becoming a Coordinator of the Kellogg Youth Initiative Partnership. She has also served as Assistant Principal at two Detroit high schools.

### **Terry Mortimer, Monitor**

Terry Mortimer is a partner in Full Circle, a leading British inspection company. As a registered British School Inspector, Mr. Mortimer has led visits to hundreds of schools in the United Kingdom.

## Renewal Findings

### I. IS THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM A SUCCESS?

- 1. For a subset of 8 students, individual student results on the Test of Achievement and Proficiency indicate some improvement in their grade level equivalency scores over a three-year period.**

The renewal site visit team reviewed all available test data to determine any significant patterns of growth in individual student scores over a three-year period. Longitudinal data for individual students are available from the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP). TAP is a standardized, norm-referenced test produced by the Riverside Publishing Company. Core batteries on the test include reading, written expression, and mathematics. The test is designed to measure attainment of skills and knowledge important to a student's success across the high school curriculum. The site visit team was able to establish three years of valid test data for only eight students. Over that three-year period, the grade level equivalency scores of these students improved, respectively, 6.5, 5.4, 4.3, 2.7, 2.6, 2.3, 1.3 and 1.0 level(s). While it is not possible to infer the success of the entire program from mixed academic growth for only eight individuals, these results are noted here due to fact that the team could not identify any other objective source of data about students' academic growth over time. Because the school's testing records are not complete, a more in-depth analysis of growth over time was not possible.

**For more information see paragraphs 1-7 in the full narrative report.**

- 2. Available standardized test data produced from MCAS, STAR, and the Test of Achievement and Proficiency indicate that a significant number of students have performed below grade level over the life of the charter.**

This finding addresses the absolute attainment of students or what students know and are able to do at the time of a given assessment. This finding is based on data from three standardized measures: the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System administered to tenth grade students in 1998 and 1999; STAR, which is a computer-based measure of literacy and mathematics administered on site by North Star Academy, and the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP). The most extensive data are available from the TAP. North Star Academy reports administering the TAP in both the fall and spring of each year of the charter.

MCAS scores for both years tested show North Star students scoring significantly below state averages and the averages of Springfield, the district in which the school is located. STAR testing administered the fall of 2000 also indicates

below grade level attainment. The STAR reports average grade level equivalencies in reading for students entering ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades at 1.2 to 2.0 grade levels below students' actual placements. In mathematics, the STAR reports grade level equivalencies at 3.5 to 4.3 years below students' actual placements. TAP scores were reviewed for ten distinct cohorts of students. Each cohort represents a snapshot of average student performance at a particular grade level in a particular year of the charter. On this measure as well, average grade level equivalencies for all cohorts are below expected grade level equivalency.

In considering the absolute attainment of North Star students, it is important to note that part of the school's twofold mission is to attract students who have not been academically successful in other settings. Consistent with this mission, TAP scores for incoming freshman indicate that they enter the school significantly below grade level. However, the low absolute attainment of North Star students across the grade levels is an important factor confounding the school's ability to prepare all students for college in accordance with the second part of its twofold mission.

**For more information see paragraphs 1-7 in the full narrative report.**

**3. Individual student results on the TAP for graduates of the North Star Academy indicate that many students have graduated with below grade level proficiency.**

During the life of its first charter, North Star's accountability plan has called for 70% of graduates to test at national norms. A review of graduate's scores on the TAP indicates that in 1998, only 40% tested at grade level, in 1999 63%, and in 2000 33%. Five graduates were not tested in 2000. These results are also inconsistent with the school's stated philosophy of academic advancement. The 1998, 1999, and 2000 annual reports state, "Students progress from one grade level to the next based on proficiency, not 'seat time.' The goal is to guarantee that each graduate of the North Star Academy possess the skills needed to be successful first in college and later in her or his chosen career."

**For more information see paragraphs 1-7 in the full narrative report.**

**4. Samples of student work indicate that academic performance is below the expectations of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.**

The renewal site visit team reviewed samples of student portfolios, graded tests and graduating students' capstone projects. With the exception of some mathematics and science work, student work demonstrates recall of content knowledge but limited application of the skills described in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Writing samples in humanities classes generally reproduce factual information and express personal opinion. There are few examples of student attempts to apply historical thinking or engage in literary

analysis. Writing samples also lack the expected use of genres, styles, word choice, paragraph development and essay development expected at the high school level. In the sciences, examples of student work demonstrate content knowledge of the "Domains of Science" as described in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks but do not show sufficient use of scientific inquiry. **For more information see paragraphs 8-10 and 39-56 in the full narrative report.**

**5. A review of the school's core curriculum document, course syllabi and lesson plans indicates that the school has begun to align its curriculum with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.**

Both course syllabi and lesson plans make reference to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The Frameworks are most evident in course syllabi, less evident in lesson planning, and least evident in actual classroom practice. Content strands more than skill strands can be observed in lesson planning and actual classroom practice.

**For more information see paragraphs 13-18 in the full narrative report.**

**6. Interviews with faculty, the review of graded student work, and the review of curriculum documents indicate that there are not clear proficiency benchmarks that inform promotion from one grade level to the next.**

The *North Star Academy Charter School Curriculum 2000-2001* lists "projected outcomes" in each subject area at each grade level. These academic goals are not sufficiently detailed to explain what students are expected to know and be able to do at each grade level. In mathematics, the level of detail of North Star's academic goals is similar to that of the general headings in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. An example performance standard listed within North Star's algebra one class state that students should "understand and apply the concepts of variable, expression and equation." The Massachusetts Frameworks make a similar statement within its 9-10 grade standards but then follows it up with a subset of more detailed performance statements. No parallel level of detail exists in the North Star curriculum document. The same lack of detail exists in the other core subject areas. The school's academic leaders agree that the school written performance standards are still under development.

Some very specific performance standards, which are drawn directly from the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, are embedded in the school's course syllabi. However, these standards exist in isolation since they are not directly tied to the school's central curriculum document. They are also necessarily incomplete in that the school has only produced syllabi for the first quarter of this school year.

Interview data corroborates the lack of clarity in the school written performance standards. All teachers were interviewed, and none were able to articulate what performance benchmarks are in place to inform promotion from one grade level to the next beyond stating that students must pass a course to move on.

**For more information see paragraphs 13-18 in the full narrative report.**

- 7. The introduction of a curriculum scope and sequence, syllabi for courses, and required lesson planning is a positive step in the development of a standards-based curriculum that would fulfill both the school's intended design and the requirements of the State.**

In the last year, the school has made progress in instituting policies addressing proper documentation and monitoring of its curriculum. There is now a curriculum scope and sequence document, and teachers have begun to submit quarterly syllabi for courses as well as weekly lesson plans. Conventions for the format of syllabi and lesson plans are also in place. Significant work remains to build upon these first steps, but they establish a foundation for a curriculum that can be evaluated and improved over time.

**For more information see paragraphs 33,34, and 39-56 in the full narrative report.**

- 8. Interviews with administrators, faculty, and students and the review of documents indicate that the Individual Learning Plan (ILP), a key aspect of the school's curriculum design, does not exist in any functional sense and does not inform classroom practice. The absence of the ILP limits the learning opportunities of a student body with a very wide range of academic needs.**

All four of the school's annual reports describe the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a key feature of the school's design. The purpose of the ILP is to individualize instruction based on "each student's individual learning style, assessment results and long term plans." "The ILP is meant to reflect the student's personal needs and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the advisor, the parents, the school, and, most importantly, the student."

The preponderance of evidence collected by the team indicates that the ILP does not exist in any practical sense. In leadership interviews, the school's administration stated that the ILP is under development and not presently being used across the school. In faculty interviews, none of the teachers was aware of functioning ILPs for their students. In student focus groups across the school, no students were able to describe their own ILPs or how an ILP might affect their education. The team was not able to find any significant number of ILP documents that would suggest that the process is widely used.

It is important to note that some activity around the ILP process has taken place in the past and continues to take place. The team reviewed sample ILPs from past years. The school's Principal indicated that the past format of ILPs did not serve the school well and was dropped. At present, the Principal is developing a new ILP format and was able to provide the team with one prototype ILP. The structure of the prototype ILP is discussed in the body of this report.

**For more information see paragraphs 19, 20 and 23-28 in the full narrative report.**

**9. The advisory period is not functioning as described in the school's annual reports and application for renewal.**

The school's annual reports and application for renewal describe advisory as a "group of students who stay together for the advisory period and internships during each academic year. The advisory group allows students to work on their portfolios while developing into a team, thus building life and job skills." Within the advisory structure, a "teacher serves as both guide and academic support for the student, preparing an educational plan based on each student's individual goals. By monitoring the student's academic progress and attendance, the advisor is the student's advocate, providing them with a positive student/parent/school relationship and helping the student advance successfully to graduation."

The advisory period occupies the first thirty minutes of the school day. The renewal site visit team observed eight advisory periods over a three-day period. No scheduled activities or clear routines designed to meet the intended purpose of the advisory period were observed. The time was essentially a waiting period before academic classes began at 8:30. The advisors are not presently engaged in a formal and clear process to prepare "an educational plan based on each student's individual goals," nor are advisors involved in the ongoing development of the ILP process. Some surveying of students' career goals is taking place, but it is not clear how this will tie into any individual education planning. Although not part of a formal advisory system, there are examples of strong relationships between students and their teachers. Both current students and graduates report that North Star teachers often act as coaches, encouraging students to attend school and engage in their work.

**For more information see paragraphs 19-21 in the full narrative report.**

**10. In the core subject areas, most teachers demonstrate strong subject area knowledge.**

In interviews and classroom observations teachers generally demonstrate a good grasp of the content they are assigned to teach. In the core subject areas, all of the teachers with one exception have either a bachelor's or master's degree in the subject they are teaching or have more than three years teaching experience in their subject area. This solid base of content knowledge is a key asset for the school as it develops a curriculum in accordance with the school's design and the requirements of the State.

**For more information see paragraphs 57-63 in the full narrative report.**

**11. Parents and students view the small class size as a strength of the school.**

All of the 25 classes observed had less than fifteen students, many less than ten. When asked what they perceive to be a strength of the school, parents and students consistently identify small classes as an attractive aspect of the school. They feel that the intimate setting provides a high degree of safety and personal attention.

**For more information see paragraphs 62, 88, 89 in the full narrative report.**

**12. Examples of differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of students were found in only three of twenty-five classroom observations.**

Based upon individual student standardized test data and examples of student work, there is an extremely wide range of academic preparedness among North Star students. For example, STAR testing of this year's ninth grade shows a grade level equivalency range of 2.4 to 12.9 in reading and 3 to 12 in mathematics. TAP scores for individual students corroborate this claim. Given such variations in academic readiness within each grade level, there is a need for individualized instruction as called for in the school's design. However, the vast majority of instruction observed was teacher-directed with a single activity provided for all students in the room and the teacher placed at the center of that activity to guide students through a common set of tasks. Depending solely on this instructional approach means that only those students with a level of academic preparedness on par with the teacher's lesson are benefiting fully from instruction. Others are either lacking challenge or unable to engage in the lesson due to a lack of prerequisite skills or knowledge. The development of more differentiated instruction is hampered in part by the lack of ILPs that would define for teachers the specific needs of their students and thereby illuminate what classroom modifications would serve each student.

**For more information see paragraphs 57-63 in the full narrative report.**

- 13. A review of student work, student interviews and classroom observations reveals that in many assignments across the curriculum, students are allowed to select topics of study in order to create a sense of relevance to students' personal interests and experiences. Too often, introductory study of immediate relevance to the students is not systematically extended to the acquisition of a more comprehensive body of knowledge as described in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.**

Given that, as part of its mission, North Star serves a student population that has not been academically successful in other settings, making work relevant and engaging for students is of particular concern. Teachers are attempting this through allowing students to work on topics of interest. For instance, a review of graduation projects called "capstones" and writing samples in students' folders reveal that a large number of assignments focus on popular culture and African American studies. While making work relevant to students is a good teaching practice, it needs to be coupled with follow-up studies that cover a broader range of topics than the students' initial choices. These wider studies should parallel State requirements. At present, there is a lack of follow-up studies across the curriculum that builds upon activities designed to gain student's initial interest in learning.

**For more information see paragraphs 39-56, 60, 67 in the full narrative report.**

- 14. There are assessment procedures in place that could serve as the framework for an effective internal assessment system. These procedures include pre and post testing on a quarterly basis, weekly assessments, midterm and final exams on a quarterly basis, portfolios of student work, and capstone projects in the graduating year.**

North Star has assembled a number of good assessment practices. If regularly implemented as part of a larger curriculum and instructional program, these practices should provide an ample stream of data about individual student performance. The school has taken a positive step towards an individualized program by putting them in place. Building upon the existence of these assessment practices requires linking them to clear performance standards and creating a process in which student performance drives instructional choices and curriculum development.

**For more information see paragraphs 64-71 in the full narrative report.**

**15. The school has not made effective and systematic use of external or internal assessment data to inform instructional practice or curriculum development.**

In the school's intended design, each student's school-based and standardized assessment results are meant to inform his or her Individual Learning Plan and ultimately his or her experience in the classroom. The school's reported assessment practices are more than ample to generate the quantity of information necessary to devise meaningful ILPs. Standardized testing takes place twice a year, and there are a number of ongoing assessments at the course level. However, very little of this information appears to have been put to use. The renewal site visit team was not provided with any analysis of trends in individual student performance and had to conduct that analysis itself from the raw data available. In interviews, the faculty and administration did not discuss how assessment drives their instructional and curricular choices. Some analysis of student results is available in the school's annual reports, and one board member provided the team with an example of test analysis done by the Board's Curriculum Committee. The school is also intending to use STAR testing data as a basis for developing ILPs in the near future. Nonetheless, there presently is not evidence that these examples are part of a greater systemic use of student performance data that is widely understood and adhered to by the school as a whole.

**For more information see paragraphs 64-71 in the full narrative report.**

**16. In the absence of clear benchmarks for proficiency, individual teachers make isolated determinations of what constitutes acceptable student performance at a particular grade level. These individual determinations range from subjective criteria that have some relation to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks to subjective criteria intended to reward student effort more than define what students should know and be able to do at a particular grade level.**

The school's design calls for students' academic progress and promotion to be determined by clear proficiency benchmarks. As discussed in Finding 7, there presently are no clearly defined benchmarks that inform internal grading or promotion decisions. Therefore, what constitutes successful student achievement in each course at each grade level depends upon the expectations of each teacher. Interviews with faculty reveal significant variations between the expectations of one teacher and the next. One teacher viewed the school's assessment strategies as expressed in the school curriculum document to be optional and has created other forms of assessment. This teacher also reports assigning grades based on each student's personal best so that an "A" for one student does not represent the same caliber of academic work as an "A" for another student. Other teachers also report grading based on each student's abilities. In the elective courses, teachers are not consistently using the schools assessment practices of pre and post testing,

weekly assessments, midterms and finals. Grading in these classes is based primarily on attendance, class participation and behavior. In math and sciences, assessment practices more closely adhere to the expectations of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The lack of clear and common expectations undermines the school's ability to prepare students for college level work because promotion without common expectations cannot guarantee all graduates will be ready for college.

**For more information see paragraphs 64-71 in the full narrative report.**

## **II. IS THE SCHOOL A VIABLE ORGANIZATION?**

- 17. There is an absence of a common vision. Interviews with faculty, parents, students, administrators and board members reveal that individuals across the organization have different views of the school's central purpose. These range from a vision of a school that provides a minimum level of academic proficiency to students who have not done well in other settings to a vision of a school that prepares this same population for college level work.**

The school's annual reports describe a central mission of preparing students for success in college and subsequent success in the work force, and the school has expressed consistently its intention to serve students who have not done well in other academic settings. The school's application for renewal reiterates its commitment to both the mission and the population served by the school. While this reasonable vision is clear and consistent in the school's documentation, members of the school community do not share a common understanding of it. The vision as expressed by Board members is fairly consistent with documentation. The school's Executive Director believes that the purpose of the school should shift towards preparing students for a broader set of work opportunities after graduation and that a reasonable academic goal would be for all students to attain a minimum level of academic proficiency with a subset of students preparing for college. Teachers have mixed opinions about the school's central purpose, with some articulating the goal of college preparation and others hoping to bring all students to a level of basic proficiency. Many of the students interviewed expressed their intentions of attending college. Parents interviewed see college preparation as part of the school's mission. The lack of a clear and common vision, particularly one shared by the Board, administration and faculty, makes it difficult to create a consistent set of academic expectations for students and programming designed to bring students to the desired level of performance.

**For more information see paragraphs 72-77 in the full narrative report.**

**18. The school presently lacks the academic leadership necessary to fill its promising structures for curriculum and assessment with actual performance standards aligned with curriculum and delivered through appropriate instruction.**

As discussed in Findings 8 and 15, the school has adopted as policy a number of good practices in curriculum and assessment. These practices are at varying stages of implementation and are not yet part of a coherent educational program. For instance, it is not yet clear what relationship is meant to exist between the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, the school's central curriculum document and course syllabi. In some cases, syllabi appear to be based primarily on the curriculum document and in other cases appear to be based primarily on the State's frameworks. In the case of assessment practices, the large number of assessments that are called for by school policy are not yet based on a clear set of proficiency benchmarks. Therefore, the assessments are not producing a useful picture of student progress. At present the school's leadership is not communicating a vision and plan to progress from the present collection of good practices to a coherent educational program that meets the charter's goals. This is most clearly evidenced by the faculty's lack of awareness of fundamental aspects of the school's design, such as the Individual Learning Plan, competency based promotion and college preparation for all students. Limited professional development activities and classroom observations are also indicators that the school lacks strategic academic planning.

**For more information see paragraphs 72-77 in the full narrative report.**

**19. While some professional development takes place, there is a lack of a coordinated professional development program based on student, staff and institutional needs.**

Faculty interviews reveal a lack of coordinated professional development opportunities. What professional development is taking place is driven by personal choice more than systemic needs. For example, one new teacher is being mentored by a veteran staff member while others are not. In past years, several teachers have attended professional development opportunities offered by the Springfield Public Schools. Other teachers have sought out their own professional development with the support of the school. However, none of the teachers report having clearly defined and written professional development plans. Some new teachers are not aware that they can seek out their own professional development opportunities. Four of the ten teachers could not describe any past or planned professional development activities. The lack of a coordinated professional development system limits the school's ability to address areas for improvement in classroom instruction and assessment as well as curriculum development.

**For more information see paragraphs 78,79 in the full narrative report.**

- 20. If they remain constant, observed attendance levels of approximately 60 students per day could result in a huge budgetary shortfall in comparison to projected revenues.**

The school's original projected enrollment was submitted in the spring of 2000. At that time, the enrollment for the 2000-2001 school was predicted to be 176 students. The school has since been forced to move to a new site due to a fire in March of 2000. The new site can hold up to 145 students. The downward budgetary adjustments necessitated by the new site are reflected in the school's projected budget as reported in the 1999-2000 annual report. However, attendance taken independently by the renewal site visit established a three-day pattern of approximately sixty students in attendance per day. The school's Principal stated that this attendance level was typical for the school year up to the dates of the renewal visit. If this level of attendance remains the same, then the school's actual budget will be less than half of estimated levels. (Attendance and related topics are further discussed in Findings 22, 24 and 25.)

**For more information see paragraphs 81-85 in the full narrative report.**

- 21. The introduction of software to manage student information is a promising step toward better record keeping.**

The school is beginning to use Administrator Plus and QuickGrade, two network based computer programs that will allow student records to be inputted by staff across the school and kept within a central server with appropriate security. These programs hold promise for addressing the school's need for better record keeping.

**For more information see paragraphs 84-85 in the full narrative report.**

- 22. There is a significant discrepancy between the information provided in state mandated reporting and the evidence of program development presently available through interviews, observations and document review.**

All of the school's annual reports describe a program that bases promotion on achievement of clear proficiency benchmarks. Students are helped to achieve these benchmarks through an individualized program. Some of the key features of the program include an advisory system, individual learning plans, and instruction aimed at meeting individual student needs. As discussed in Findings 3, 7, 9, 10, 13 14, and 17, these essential aspects of the program are not yet in place. Annual reports do not adequately discuss these deficiencies and the school's ongoing efforts to correct them. The school's application for renewal shows some improvement in accurate reporting as the document openly discusses issues that have faced the school over the life of the charter. However, the application for renewal also states that many of the accountability plan goals have

been achieved without providing any substantiating evidence of these claims. Though requested by the renewal site visit team, no evidence in support of these claims was provided for review during the renewal site visit.

**For more information see paragraphs 19-56, 86,87 in the full narrative report.**

**23. The school's official enrollment and attendance records are inconsistent with on site observations.**

Three independent head counts conducted by the renewal site visit team over three days show that attendance during the site visit ranged from 54 to 60 students. The school's Principal corroborates that this has been typical of attendance this year. The school's official attendance record as stored in Administrator Plus, a software program, shows 178 students enrolled in the school and at most 12 students absent on any given day of the first 23 days of school. Therefore, the official attendance shows a minimum of 166 students attending in the first 23 days. This indicates some 100 students more than the attendance trend observed by the renewal site visit team and corroborated by the school's Principal. Furthermore, an attendance level of no less than 166 students would be legally impossible since the official occupancy allows for only 145 students to be in the building at any given time.

**For more information see paragraphs 81, 84, 85 in the full narrative report.**

**24. The attendance policy is not sufficiently rigorous or understood to meet the needs of a school that has chronic attendance issues.**

Interviews with administrators, teachers, students and parents reveal that there is not a common understanding of the school's policy towards attendance. The school's Principal reports that initial attendance for the day is taken at the beginning of the day and that she then calls students who are not present. Attendance for every class is then collected at the end of the day. Attendance data is given to the school's Registrar for entry into the school's administrative software. The school's Principal reports not being sure what happens with the attendance data once submitted to the Registrar. The Registrar reports that attendance data is entered in the software and that after five absences a letter is sent to the student's home. However, no letters had been sent as of the date of the site visit because the computer system had not been fully operational and no temporary attendance process existed. The Registrar did not know of any policy on attendance beyond sending a letter after five absences. There is no follow up communication between the Principal and the Registrar to discuss ongoing attendance trends. It is not clear how the Principal systematically keeps track of students who are chronically absent without having a formal reporting arrangement with the Registrar. It is also unclear how the Registrar can keep accurate records if he is uninformed of attendance policies. According to parents and students, course credit can be lost after a number of absences. As noted in Finding 24, the present enrollment and attendance records are significantly

different than the trend witnessed by the visiting team and are not consistent with legal occupancy in the building.

**For more information see paragraphs 84 in the full narrative report.**

**25. The Board has not created a system of accountability that would allow it to effectively monitor the progress of the school towards its stated goals.**

The Board has made a conscious effort to remove itself from the daily operations of the school and to fulfill a policy and oversight role in the organization. At present there is insufficient formal reporting to the Board to fulfill the school's oversight needs. Board members report that the Executive Director provides a verbal report on the status of the school at each board meeting. However there are no specific points to be covered on a regular basis. No written records of board meetings were available for the team's review to establish the nature of the oral reports. Board members were not able to articulate a clear process for gathering and analyzing data regarding the school's progress towards its accountability plan goals or to provide evidence to corroborate the claims made in the application for renewal about achieving a number of the accountability plan goals. The Board has established a written job description for the school's Executive Director but has not put in place a formal process for reviewing his performance.

**For more information see paragraphs 72-77, 86, 87 in the full narrative report.**

**26. The nine parents that were interviewed are very supportive of the school.**

Parents praise the school's intimate setting and personalized attention. They feel that the school seeks out their children's interests and builds upon them. Calls from the school to home are not unusual, and these add to their sense that the school is vigilant of each child's needs. They appreciate the fact that many of the administration and faculty have long-term ties to Springfield and understand the issues and opportunities facing the city's youth. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the school, and many are reported to volunteer when called upon.

**For more information see paragraphs 22, 88, 89, 90, in the full narrative report.**

### **III. HAS THE SCHOOL BEEN FAITHFUL TO THE TERMS OF ITS CHARTER?**

*Please note that the findings in this section address the school's progress against its own goals as described in the school's accountability plan and other official documentation. Many of these goals may have to do with academic success and organizational viability. Therefore, some of the findings about faithfulness to the charter refer to findings in the previous sections on academic success and viability in order to avoid redundancy*

- 27. A review of test scores for North Star graduates indicates that less than 70% of them reach grade level equivalency on an external measure as required in the school's accountability plan.**

As discussed in Finding 3, the academic performance of graduates does not match the school's written expectations. Variance from this goal is of particular importance because the school holds as its central mission the preparation of all students for success in college. The school's application for renewal reaffirms this mission. This mission is meant to be fulfilled through a program that requires demonstration of academic proficiency and not attendance. Standardized testing has been one of the school's measures of academic proficiency. It is not clear how the school can make claims about graduates' preparedness for college without adhering to self-imposed measures.

**For more information see paragraphs 91, 92 in the full narrative report.**

- 28. The school's design calls for a proficiency based promotion policy. However, there are no clear and widely understood proficiency benchmarks for promotion from one grade level to the next.**

As discussed in Finding 7, there are not clear standards informing promotion of students. A lack of clear proficiency benchmarks hampers the school's ability to meet its central goal of preparing all students for college. It is not clear how the school can measure students' progress towards college readiness without internal standards that lead towards the academic expectations of college.

**For more information see paragraphs 13-18, 64-71 in the full narrative report.**

**29.**

**Significant aspects of the school's design are not yet fully operational, including Individual Learning Plans, advisory and a proficiency based promotion system.**

As discussed in Findings 7, 9, and 10, what has been reported in each of the school's annual reports as key foundations of the North Star program were not found in evidence by the renewal site visit team. While there is evidence of work in each of the school's design aspects, much of the work is at an early stage and does not constitute a functional set of services for students that provides the individualized instruction within a proficiency based college preparatory program described by the school's annual reports.

**For more information see paragraphs 19-32, 91, 92 in the full narrative report.**

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

**30. The school's proposed accountability plan for a renewed charter does not specifically address critical areas for improvement.**

The new accountability plan does not specifically build upon the promising work to implement the original school design discussed in Findings 6, 8 and 15. The goals within the plan do not directly address the needs for standards development, implementing individual learning plans, or increasing the differentiation of instruction. Since the application for renewal reiterates the school's commitment to its original mission, it is not clear how the proposed accountability plan will be a meaningful assessment tool in measuring progress towards making the school's mission a reality in a second charter term.

# Full Narrative Report

## IS THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM A SUCCESS?

### Attainment and Improvement

1. Before discussing students' results, it is important to characterize the evidence of student attainment and improvement that was available to the renewal site visit team. The school's application for renewal states that standardized testing was not well implemented during its first four years of operation and that there has not been a system to track levels of student attainment. These organizational weaknesses were exacerbated by a fire in March of 2000. The fire displaced the school, and its new facility was ready for full occupancy only a few days before the renewal site visit. The school reports that many records are still in storage. Despite admittedly poor testing practices and record keeping and the fire, the renewal site visit team was able to find sufficient evidence to make statements about student attainment and improvement. The most significant data are from the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) because the school administered the test in each year of its charter. To make the most of available data, the site visit team chose to examine grade level equivalencies because grade level equivalency scores were the only scores available for the 1999-2000 school year. Using another measure, such as scaled scores, would have eliminated this year from an analysis of student improvement over time. Grade level equivalencies indicate how a student's test performance compares with that of other students nationally. For example, a student that scores 9.0 is a typical ninth grader at the beginning of the school year. The reader should be aware that grade level equivalency scores are not considered the best measurement of academic growth over time and that the renewal site visit team cannot make any comment about the significant amount of test data that was missing.
2. Available test data include two years of tenth grade scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) from 1998 and 1999, scores from ninth, tenth and eleventh grades on the STAR test administered in the fall of 2000, and TAP scores at all grade levels from all four years of the school's charter. The MCAS is a state mandated test that is linked to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The test is designed to measure to what extent a student has acquired the skills and knowledge held important for academic success by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Batteries in the test include English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology. Thirty students took the test in 1998 and sixteen in 1999. In both years, North Star students scored significantly below state averages and the averages of Springfield, the district in which the school is located. Please see Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**MCAS 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Results 1998 and 1999**

North Star Academy Charter School=NSCS    Statewide=State    Springfield Public Schools=SPS

		Percentage of students at each performance level							
		Advanced		Proficient		Needs Imp		Failing	
		1998	1999	1998	1999	1998	1999	1998	1999
English Language Arts	NSCS	0	0	3	0	27	0	70	100
	State	5	4	33	30	34	34	28	32
	SPS	1	0	10	12	29	28	60	60
Math	NSCS	0	0	0	0	10	0	90	100
	State	7	9	17	15	24	23	52	53
	SPS	1	1	4	4	12	12	83	82
Science/ Technology	NSCS	0	0	0	0	20	0	80	100
	State	1	3	21	21	42	39	36	37
	SPS	0	0	6	7	26	25	68	68

- The STAR test is a computer-based standardized test that schools can administer independently. The STAR measures reading and math in two brief tests, each lasting about twenty minutes. The test provides national norms for comparing students to national averages, individual student profiles with suggested strategies for instruction and a number of other scores. There are STAR scores available for nineteen students from the fall of 2000. These include scores for eighteen freshmen, one sophomore and two juniors. These scores indicate that North Star students have a very broad range of academic preparedness and that a substantial number of students are scoring significantly below grade level. Of the sixteen freshmen tested, the grade level equivalency scores range from 3 to 12 in math and from 2.4 to 12.9 in English. The median grade level equivalency in math was 6.25 and 8.1 in English. (The median score means that half of the students scored below and half above this point.) These scores are presented in Table 2 and Table 3. It is important to note that the STAR scores represent only a small sample of students at North Star. However, when viewed in conjunction with other test data, they support the finding that students' absolute attainment, as measured by grade level equivalency, is significantly below average. They concur with individual scores from the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), which also show a wide range of academic preparedness among North Star students.

**Table 2**  
**Mathematics STAR Testing, Fall of 2000**

Assigned Grade	No of students	Grade Level Equivalency			National % Ranking		
		Mean	Median	Range	Mean	Median	Range
9 <sup>th</sup>	16	6	6.25	3-12	22%	21.5%	1-71%
10 <sup>th</sup>	1	5.1	NA	NA	9%	NA	NA
11 <sup>th</sup>	2	5.1	NA	3.9-7	22%	NA	3-22

**Table 3**  
**Language Arts STAR Testing, Fall of 2000**

Assigned Grade	No of students	Grade Level Equivalency			National % Ranking		
		Mean	Median	Range	Mean	Median	Range
9 <sup>th</sup>	18	7.7	8.1	2.4-12.9	35%	39.5%	1-92%
10 <sup>th</sup>	1	6.7	NA	NA	22%	NA	NA
11 <sup>th</sup>	2	56.4	NA	3.2-9.6	13%	NA	2-43%

4. The TAP is a standardized, norm-referenced test produced by the Riverside Publishing Company. Core batteries on the test include reading, written expression, and mathematics. The test is designed to measure attainment of skills and knowledge important to a student's success across the high school curriculum. The school's original testing regiment called for the test to be given each fall and spring to provide a picture of both individual and average student growth over time. Beyond the record keeping issues discussed in Paragraph 1, there are other significant reasons to approach the available TAP scores with caution. First, the school, as stated in its application for renewal, has experienced significant student turnover. In fact, the renewal site visit team was able to establish three years of testing data for only eight students. This means that the eleven available sets of TAP scores are from eleven significantly different sets of students. At best, these cohort results, or group results, represent eleven performance snapshots of eleven different groups of students. Secondly, there is a significant discrepancy between the number of students tested in the 1999-2000 academic year and the number of reportedly enrolled students. There are test scores for only 37 students in the 1999-2000 school year, but the school's annual report lists an average daily attendance of 85 students. Third, the average size of the cohorts tested is seventeen, and five of the eleven cohorts consist of ten or fewer students. With these significant caveats in mind, there are still approximately 200 TAP scores across the four years of the charter that, when coupled with MCAS and STAR data, suggest certain patterns of absolute student attainment.
  
5. In the case of every cohort tested, average grade level equivalency scores on the core of the TAP, math and language skills, were at least a year and a half below expectations. In the case of ninth graders, for whom there is the most substantial set of data, average grade level equivalency scores placed them at the fifth or sixth grade level after a year at North Star.

**Table 4**  
**(Blank spaces indicate no available data.)**

<b>TAP 9th Grade</b>	<b>Spring 1997</b>				<b>Spring 1998</b>				<b>Spring 1999</b>				<b>Spring 2000</b>			
	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>
Vocabulary	32	7.4	3.8	23	37	6.4	3.2	15	28	5.9	2.7	11	14			
Reading (Adv. Skills)	35	6.1	3.3	19	36	4.8	2.5	12	28	4.5	2.3	10	15			
<b>READING TOTAL</b>	31	6.7	3.3	20	36	5.6	2.7	11	28	5.2	2.4	9	14			
Written Expression (Adv. Skills)	35	6.7	3.9	31	33	6.1	3.6	27	27	4.3	2.6	13	15			
<b>WRITTEN EXPRESSION TOTAL</b>	35	6.7	3.6	25	33	6.2	3.3	19	27	4.7	2.2	9	15			
	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>
Math Concept/Probs Adv. Skills	31	5.6	2.8	16	34	5.7	3.1	18	28	5.1	2.8	12	15			
<b>MATH CONCEPT/PROBS TOTAL</b>	31	6	2.8	14	34	6.1	2.9	15	28	5.6	2.6	10	15			
<b>CORE TOTAL</b>	26	6.5	3.2	18	31	5.8	2.6	12	27	5.2	2	7	14			
	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>
Social Studies	36	5.8	3	19	31	4.7	2.4	11	28	4.5	2.1	9	15			
Science	35	5.8	3	18	32	4.2	2.1	8	27	4.8	2.4	10	15			
Information Processing	36	7	3.7	28	31	5.5	2.7	15	28	4.5	2.1	8	15			
<b>COMPOSITE</b>	26	6.2	3	18	28	5.2	2.2	9	28	4.8	1.8	5	14			
Math Computation	36	6.2	3.9	15	35	5.4	2.3	10	27	5.3	2.3	9	15			

**N = Number of students tested, GE = Grade level equivalency, NS = National Stanine, NPR = National Percentile Ranking**

**Table 5**  
**(Blank spaces indicate no available data.)**

TAP 10th Grade	Spring 1997				Spring 1998				Spring 1999				Spring 2000			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Vocabulary					22	8.4	3.9	27					7			
Reading (Adv. Skills)					22	7.6	3.8	26					7			
<b>READING TOTAL</b>					22	8	3.7	25					7			
Written Expression (Adv. Skills)					22	8.6	4.3	39					7			
<b>WRITTEN EXPRESSION TOTAL</b>					22	8.4	4.1	32					7			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Math Concept/Probs Adv. Skills					22	7.8	3.9	31					7			
<b>MATH CONCEPT/PROBS TOTAL</b>					22	7.6	3.5	24					7			
<b>CORE TOTAL</b>					22	8	3.6	26					7			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Social Studies					21	6.3	3.2	20					7			
Science					20	6.1	3	17					6			
Information Processing					20	5.8	2.8	15					6			
<b>COMPOSITE</b>					19	7	3.1	19					5			
Math Computation					22	6.7	3	17					6			

**N = Number of students tested, GE = Grade level equivalency, NS = National Stanine, NPR = National Percentile Ranking**

**Table 6**  
**(Blank spaces indicate no available data.)**

TAP 11th Grade	Spring 1997				Spring 1998				Spring 1999				Spring 2000			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Vocabulary									22	7.9	3.4	18	7			
Reading (Adv. Skills)									22	7.9	3.5	23	7			
<b>READING TOTAL</b>									22	7.8	3.4	20	7			
Written Expression (Adv. Skills)									22	6.2	3.4	22	7			
<b>WRITTEN EXPRESSION TOTAL</b>									22	7	3.2	20	7			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Math Concept/Probs Adv. Skills									22	10	4.5	42	6			
<b>MATH CONCEPT/PROBS TOTAL</b>									22	10.1	4.4	40	6			
<b>CORE TOTAL</b>									22	8.3	3.5	24	6			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Social Studies									22	6.3	3	18	7			
Science									22	7	3.3	20	7			
Information Processing									22	6.4	3	17	8			
<b>COMPOSITE</b>									22	7.3	3.2	18	5			
Math Computation									22	7.7	3.4	22	8			

**N = Number of students tested, GE = Grade level equivalency, NS = National Stanine, NPR = National Percentile Ranking**

**Table 7**  
**(Blank spaces indicate no available data.)**

TAP 12th Grade	Spring 1997				Spring 1998				Spring 1999				Spring 2000			
	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR	N	GE	NS	NPR
Vocabulary					5	12.1	4.8	47	10	9.9	4.3	29	9			
Reading (Adv. Skills)					5	10	4.4	36	8	9.5	4.1	32	9			
<b>READING TOTAL</b>					5	11.1	4.6	41	8	9.5	4.1	30	9			
Written Expression (Adv. Skills)					5	13.3	5.4	57	10	12.3	4.8	50	9			
<b>WRITTEN EXPRESSION TOTAL</b>					5	12.1	4.8	48	10	12.3	4.6	42	9			
	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>
Math Concept/Probs Adv. Skills					5	9	3.8	32	11	13.3	5.5	59	9			
<b>MATH CONCEPT/PROBS TOTAL</b>					5	9.3	3.8	31	11	13.1	5.5	59	9			
<b>CORE TOTAL</b>					5	10.9	4.4	40	8	11.2	4.8	42	9			
	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>NPR</b>
Social Studies					5	7.8	3.4	25	11	7.6	3.4	23	9			
Science					5	8.8	4.2	30	11	8.9	4	31	9			
Information Processing					5	9.1	4.2	32	11	8.4	3.8	27	9			
<b>COMPOSITE</b>					5	9.7	4	33	8	9.3	3.9	31	9			
Math Computation					5	10.2	4.4	37	11	8.3	3.7	24	9			

**N = Number of students tested, GE = Grade level equivalency, NS = National Stanine, NPR = National Percentile Ranking**

6. The renewal site visit team also reviewed individual scores on the TAP when possible. Like the STAR data, these results show that while average performance is below expectations, there is a huge range of academic preparedness among North Star students. At one end of the continuum, students have significant literacy and numeracy deficits. At the other end, students appear ready for advanced work. As discussed in paragraphs 19 to 20, the school's theoretical design is well suited to serve such a range of needs through an individualized program that requires demonstration of proficiency for students to move from one grade level to the next.
7. However appropriate the school's design, individual TAP scores are one source of evidence that the school has not adhered to key aspects of its design in actual practice. Consistent with a design based on performance and not time spent in school, the North Star accountability plan calls for 70% of students to graduate performing at national norms and for all of its graduates to be prepared for college without need for remedial courses. A review of TAP scores for the school's 26 graduates indicates that the 70% goal was not met in any year. In 1998, only 40% tested at grade level, in 1999 63%, and in 2000 33%. Approximately 30% of graduates scored below the ninth grade proficiency level in the year they graduated. Approximately 20% of graduates appear not to have been tested during their final year. These results are inconsistent with the school's stated design and goals.
8. Examples of internal assessments were reviewed by the renewal site visit team, including pre-tests and post-tests, writing samples, and examples of graduates' capstone projects. For the purpose of determining student attainment, samples of student work were compared with grade level expectations in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The level of academic mastery demonstrated by student work samples corroborates standardized testing, which places the majority of North Star students at below grade level equivalency. In the use of the written word, students have not mastered the expected technical skills, nor do their writing samples demonstrate a mastery of the analytical skills specific to the academic disciplines. Writing samples on literary and historical topics generally recall information and present the author's opinion of the topic. For example, a senior essay begins by stating, " This essay is going to tell you how I feel [about the assigned topic]." The vast majority of capstone essays, which are described as culminating academic work, use the first person and focus on the author's opinion about the factual recount that makes up the bulk of the essay. While this level of work may be appropriate given an individual student's academic history, it is more representative of the expectations held for pre-high school work.
9. Answers to short questions on pre-tests and midterms and worksheets often do not use complete sentences. Although the student's responses may be correct, in most cases there is no development of ideas or elaboration of knowledge. There are

- significant issues with student's factual knowledge of historical events. One senior essay states that the founding documents of the United States written in the 1770's were intended to eliminate slavery. Another geographically places colonial unrest in England.
10. Given that standardized testing places the average entering ninth grader at a sixth grade equivalency, it is not unexpected to see student work below State expectations for high school. The issue arises when these examples of student work are held up against the school's design of a proficiency-based program that graduates students only when prepared for post secondary work. Many of the work samples described above were given high grades, indicating that the school's grading practices are not in line with its stated mission and do not provide an honest picture to students of what is required for true college preparation.
  11. The site visit team did not review the school's internal student grading records, as these were not available.
  12. In terms of promoting personal development, the school receives high marks from students and parents. Current students and graduates report that the school has helped them mature and develop direction. Close relationships with and personal support from North Star teachers is cited by graduates as the key motivation for them to remain in high school. Graduates' portfolios contain post-graduation plans that outline the student's key strengths, areas of interest, and plans for post secondary education. Parents concur that the small setting has helped their children mature.

## Academic Standards and Goals

13. The school's overall academic goal is to prepare students for college and subsequent success in their career choices. Its academic standards inform instruction for a student body that enters the school with an average grade level equivalency of sixth grade and with many individual students scoring significantly above or below that average. Thus, the school's standards are providing the blue print for a curriculum that must bring average performance up six grade levels and, at the same time, provide individualized instruction appropriate to the broad range of North Star students' academic preparedness. The school has made some recent progress in developing a set of academic standards with this mission in mind, but the present set of academic standards is not adequately detailed nor widely enough understood to inform the curriculum, instruction, or assessment.
14. This year, teachers are required to submit course syllabi and lesson plans. Many of the syllabi and lesson plans contain references to standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. This required documentation is increasing the faculty's awareness of academic standards and the process for

developing curriculum based on standards. The school is working with an outside consultant to build upon this promising practice.

15. At present, there is some confusion about what standards should be used for planning. Many syllabi make reference directly to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. However, the school has a central curriculum document that defines "projected outcomes" for each course and grade level. Based on teacher interviews, there is not a clear understanding among faculty members about how this central curriculum document should be used in conjunction with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
16. The central curriculum document is loosely aligned with the State frameworks at the high school level but lacks sufficient detail to meet the needs of the school. In mathematics, the level of detail of North Star's academic goals is similar to that of the general headings in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. An example performance standard listed within North Star's algebra one course states that students should "understand and apply the concepts of variable, expression and equation." The Massachusetts Frameworks make a similar statement within its 9-10 grade standards but then follows it up with a subset of more detailed performance statements. No parallel level of detail exists in the North Star curriculum document. In the language arts section, the North Star curriculum document simply references the state frameworks as its objectives.
17. This level of detail does not establish an effective bridge between State requirements and local needs. The school's curriculum document does not help teachers apply the State frameworks to the school's mission of college preparation for a student body that on the whole performs significantly below grade level expectations and, on an individual student basis, requires instructional programs ranging from basic literacy to post secondary work. While the school's curriculum document is loosely aligned with the Massachusetts expectations for high school work, there are not benchmarks to address more fundamental academic skills and knowledge that standardized testing shows to be challenging for many North Star students. The standards are not prioritized or sequenced in any way that would address the need of North Star students to move from average sixth grade performance levels to college performance levels in less than average time. In short, the school's curriculum document lays out a course of study without clear and purposeful consideration of its core mission and its students' specific needs.
18. Though the introduction of written syllabi has heightened the faculty's awareness of standards, in their interviews none of the teachers were able to articulate specific benchmarks of proficiency that determine promotion from one grade level to the next. In fact, a number of teachers report deciding grades based on a student's individual best rather than against benchmarks aligned with the school's college preparatory mission. The school's rubric for grading capstone projects states a similar approach to grading: "It is important to remember that at the North

Star Academy, students are assessed against their own personal best so each [capstone] should be looked at in the context of that student's own abilities and strengths." On the other hand, the school's graduation and promotion policy as stated in annual reports describes a proficiency based system in which students are measured against rigorous and common benchmarks and not their personal best: "Students at the North Star Academy Charter School complete three levels of academic preparation as they progress toward graduation...In order to progress from one level to the next, and to graduate, students must demonstrate proficiency in the skills for each core subject area." Under the heading of "Academic Advancement, annual reports also state, "Students progress from one grade level to the next based on proficiency, not 'seat time.' The goal is to guarantee that each graduate of the North Star Academy possess the skills needed to be successful first in college and later in her or his chosen career." These discrepancies indicate that the school as a whole does not share a common vision of what level of academic rigor is expected across the curriculum and how that rigor is to be expressed in assessment practices.

## **Curriculum**

19. The school's curriculum, as described in its annual reports, serves students with a broad range of academic preparedness by individualizing instruction and basing academic advancement on demonstrated proficiency. These two key features of the school's design are meant to ensure that all students are appropriately challenged during their time at North Star and that all graduates are ready for college level work. The school's 1999-2000 annual report describes its key features in the following way:

*(Quoted from the 1999-2000 Annual report)*

### **School Features**

The North Star Academy follows a unique approach to secondary education. Our students work together in groups, learning cooperative behavior and building life and job skills. They also work with individual advisors to plan their educational progress and goals. Each student learns skills that will benefit him or her in college, their communities and future employment. Through these programs, North Star students learn to become contributing members of society, as well as life-long learners.

### **Advisory Groups:**

Advisory groups are a consistent group of students who stay together for advisory period and internships during each academic year. The same educator, ensuring steady progress, supports each group. The advisory groups allow students to work on their portfolios while developing into a team, thus building life and job skills.

### **Advisor:**

The teacher serves as both a guide and academic support for the student, preparing an educational plan based on each student's individual goals. By monitoring the student's  
*(Quoted from the 1999-2000 Annual report) continued*

academic progress and attendance, the advisor is the student's advocate, providing them with a positive student/parent/school relationship and helping the student advance successfully to graduation.

**Individualized Learning Plans (ILP):**

At the North Star Academy Charter School, we believe the student's success in school is the number one priority. By developing an Individualized Learning Plan based on each student's individual learning style, assessment results and long-term plans, we believe this success is assured. The ILP is meant to reflect the student's personal needs and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the advisor, the parents, the school and, most importantly, the student.

**Academic Advancement**

At North Star Academy, students progress through four grades based on their demonstrated acquisition of appropriate skills and knowledge. Students progress from one grade level to the next based on proficiency, not "seat time." The goal is to guarantee that each graduate of North Star Academy possess the skills needed to be successful first in college and later in her or his chosen career. Students may progress into the next academic level at the start of any academic quarter after demonstrating proficiency for their current academic level. Staff uses traditional assessment measures, i.e. grades on quizzes, midterms, and finals, as well as evaluation of inclusive and showcase portfolios in assessing proficiency.

**Capstone Program**

The Capstone Program is the heart of the final year of the NSA academic program. The goal of the program is to allow students to take an active role in their learning process. The program focuses on (1) creating a post graduation plan, (2) independent study, which reinforces career choices, and, (3) research for the Capstone Project.

**Capstone Project:**

A requirement of graduation at North Star Academy is a final presentation. The Capstone Project teaches students skills that will benefit them in college and the working world. Students learn to write, research and develop their project proposal, resulting in a final presentation before a knowledgeable panel of faculty members, a mentor, and community jurors.

**Portfolio Assessment:**

North Star students will develop a quarterly portfolio from the time they enter the North Star Academy through their graduation. This portfolio will provide a richness of detailed information that cannot be measured with traditional ratings scales, reflecting the student's life and times and providing a method for assessing students' best work. This portfolio may also be used in the future for obtaining work and/or college admission.

20. While the school's design is coherent and aimed at providing educational services appropriate for the school's targeted population, the actual implementation of the school's design has been problematic. Many of the key features of the design are

not in place and many others are not serving their intended purposes. Issues with implementation are keeping the school from its primary mission. The following paragraphs describe the level of implementation of the key features of the North Star program as observed by the renewal site visit team.

21. **Advisory Groups:** Advisory groups meet for a half hour at the beginning of every school day. In all of the eight advisory periods visited by the renewal team, students arrived throughout the thirty-minute period. Some teachers encouraged students to address their homework during this time. However, none of the observed advisory period included planned activities that supported academic classes or worked towards the team environment or life and job skills that are meant to be addressed during advisory. Students spent the vast majority of the period engaged in conversation or individual endeavors.
22. **Advisors:** Students and parents praise the strong relationships that develop between teachers and students. Though these relationships are not always between advisor and advisee, the spirit of the advisor concept is met for a number of students. Graduates report that the individual attention they received from teachers helped them stay in school.
23. **Individualized Learning Plan (ILP):** At present ILPs are not a functional part of the school's curriculum. In interviews with all teaching staff, none reported having ILPs for their students. One new teacher was not aware of what an ILP was or what role it might play at North Star Academy. Another believed that ILPs were only to be consulted if a student was having trouble in a class. Focus group interviews with students from across the grade levels revealed that students are not aware of Individualized Learning Plans, even those in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade who have attended the school for some time.
24. ILPs have existed in the past. The school provided samples of ILPs from the 1999-2000 school year. The majority of information recorded in the ILPs is basic information on the student, including a summary of an admission's interview, test scores, a summary of "present level skills," a "learning preferences inventory". This information presented in these sections is vague. For example the "summary of present level skills" generally contains only a few descriptive phrases like "good reader," or "good math student."
25. Past ILPs also contain individual student goals for academic development and post-secondary work. These are also vague, consisting of short statements like "develop good testing skills," and "become a doctor." There are no timelines or benchmarks attached to the goals. Although these ILP documents have existed in the past, the broad lack of knowledge of the plans among faculty and students indicate that they have not been living documents that inform classroom practice. The school's Principal states that the past ILPs did not work well and that the school is developing a new ILP format at this time.

26. The school provided a prototype of the new ILP for the renewal site visit team's review. The fifty-page document is a good source of information about a student, including personal information, standardized test scores, other assessments, and course syllabi for all classes. All of this information creates a useful profile of a student but does not in and of itself constitute an Individualized Learning Plan that adapts instruction to the student's needs.
27. In the section titled "Student Instructional Profile," the prototype ILP does refer subject area teachers to particular testing data that may be helpful in understanding a student's unique needs. This section also provides a checklist of "instructional approaches," such as "visual aids, portfolio, role-playing, and various computer CD's" that are recommended for the student. However, there is no substantial plan specific to the student that would make his or her instruction any different from the standard syllabi inserted in the plan. There are no clear and specific personal goals for individual progress. While the prototype ILP brings together pertinent information, it does not serve as a blueprint for an individualized learning experience for the student.
28. At present, the prototype ILPs are being designed without significant input from the faculty. The Principal and the staff member responsible for STAR testing work alone on the ILP design. Without a process that involves teachers in looking together at student data and collaboratively designing a practical and coordinated plan across the curriculum, it is not clear how the ILP can effectively lead to individualized learning.
29. **Academic Advancement:** As discussed in Paragraphs 13 to 18, there has been progress in creating a standards-based curriculum, but there presently are not sufficiently clear or broadly enough understood academic criteria to inform student promotion from one grade level to the next. Issues with assessment practices, discussed in paragraphs 64 to 71, also hamper the school's stated plan to promote students based on proficiency and not "seat time." The practice of grading students based upon their individual ability and level of academic preparedness instead of upon their performance against common standards ultimately means that a diploma from North Star does not represent a common level of achievement.
30. **Capstone Program and Project:** The Capstone Program has given graduates a strong sense of personal achievement. Both present students and graduates perceive the capstone year as an important culminating event in their high school education. The renewal site visit team interviewed five graduates and reviewed four of their capstone projects. Their capstone portfolios all contained their post-graduate plan and the independent study as called for by the Capstone Program. Two of the graduates stated that they completed their capstone projects in just a few weeks instead of the long-term process described in the school's literature. However, another graduate described her year-long process of investigating child

development. As discussed in paragraphs 8 and 9, the writing samples in the Capstone portfolios did not meet twelfth grade level expectations. However, the grading rubrics used by peers to evaluate the capstone projects showed unanimously high marks for all work. These facts indicate that the structures and processes for the Capstone Project are in place but they are not yet informed by clear and common expectations that align with the school's college preparatory mission.

31. **Portfolio Assessment:** Across the curriculum, student work is being collected in portfolios. The Capstone Program also creates a portfolio for each student. Some teachers, particularly in Language Arts, have developed rubrics for grading work. At this time, portfolios are essentially folders of student work because the school's academic benchmarks are not sufficiently developed to inform an assessment system for all portfolios.
32. In summary, the school has developed some of the structures necessary to support the program design described in its literature, but these structures are still precursors to a truly individualized program. (The curriculum as it presently exists in each subject area is described in paragraphs 39 to 56.)
33. While its curricular deficiencies are significant, this year the school has made good progress in documenting its curriculum. There is a central curriculum document titled "North Star Academy Charter School Curriculum 2000." Syllabi are prepared by each teacher for each course. Syllabi are done quarter by quarter, and so far, only the syllabi for the first quarter of this school year are complete. The format is the same for all syllabi in every subject. Most include: course title, course description, course requirements, course materials, frameworks/performance objectives, skill development, assessment methods and expectations. Alignment between the school's central curriculum document and course syllabi is mixed. Many syllabi are referenced directly to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and not to the school's curriculum document. Teachers also prepare lesson plans each week and submit them to the Principal each Friday. All contain information under the titles of: Lesson Topic, Lesson Goal, Lesson Development, Skill Development, Assignments, Assessment, and Materials Needed.
34. The establishment of required syllabi and lesson plans lends stability to the program by beginning to codify what the school teaches in a way that can be communicated to new teachers, parents, students, other stakeholders in the school and those responsible for its monitoring. A recorded curriculum also opens the possibility of monitoring the program's effectiveness and making changes to programming based on data.
35. Across all subject areas the curriculum is loosely aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. That alignment is generally focused more on topics than on skills. The alignment weakens as one moves from syllabi to lesson plans

- to actual classroom practice. From one grade level to the next, the curriculum provides a fairly well articulated sequence of studies.
36. The instructional materials are adequate. However, some textbooks were not available at the time of the site visit.
  37. As discussed in paragraphs 23 to 28, the absence of a functioning ILP is a serious deficiency since it represents the school's main strategy for providing an equal opportunity to learn to all students. The school is also failing to provide a special education program able to identify potential student needs. The site visit team was not able to find evidence of a clear referral process for screening students potentially in need of special education services. When asked about testing students, the Principal indicated that she would have to discuss testing with the Executive Director to determine available funding. The lack of clarity around identifying and providing services in the area of special needs is inconsistent with the school's commitment to individualized instruction and Federal and State mandates. Of the five special education students presently enrolled, none have Individual Education Plans. In agreement with parents, these students have been placed in smaller groupings.
  38. The following paragraphs provide a more detailed description of curriculum in each subject area.
  39. Social studies courses offered at North Star Academy are: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade World History, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade US History, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade US History, and 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Civics and Government. The curriculum in its current form consists of a North Star Academy framework developed loosely from the Massachusetts curriculum framework. It is much more general than the state framework. The core topics of the NSA framework are recognizable, but modified slightly and captured in the most general terms. For example:  
 From North Star Academy Framework (10<sup>th</sup> grade)  
     *Expansion, Reform, and Economic Growth (1800-1861)*  
     *The Civil War and Reconstruction*  
 From Massachusetts "Core" Topics  
     *Expansion, Reform, and Economic Growth (1800-1861)*  
     *Evolution of the Supreme Court: John Marshall, Marbury v. Madison*  
     *Industrialization in New England: invention and enterprise*  
     *The Northern economic system: land, agriculture, slavery, trade... "*  
 The Massachusetts Frameworks goes further to provide "commonly taught subtopics." For example:  
     *Louisiana Purchase: explorations of Lewis and Clark, Sacajewea; major features of mid-continent geography, Mississippi to Rocky Mountains*  
     *War of 1812 (Francis Scott Key and the "Star Spangled Banner," the USS Constitution, "Old Ironsides," Washington burns, Dolley Madison.)*

*Important inventions (Eli Whitney and cotton gin, Robert Fulton's steamboat, clipper ships, Morse code and telegraph, sewing machine) and some important enterprises (canals, railroads, the mills and Lowell, Mississippi travel and trade, pony express, China trade, "King Cotton.")*

While a high school curriculum might well include many of these sub-topics, no comparable detail appears in the North Star framework.

40. Social Studies teachers at North Star Academy make selections of topics for their own classes, with an emphasis on events and themes in African American history. While some selection is appropriate, recognizing that depth is needed for understanding (that "less is more"), the North Star Social Studies curriculum is too selective. Students learn selected information but do not get "the big picture," the overview needed for understanding the complexity of history and, realistically, the knowledge base needed for achievement of the Massachusetts standards.

41. Besides some very general topics, Social Studies in the "North Star Academy Charter School Curriculum 2000-2001" also includes "Instructional Strategies" and "Assessments." These are very confusing titles considering the mixture of items that appear beneath them, they do recognize some of the intellectual skills of historical thinking that are captured more completely and rigorously in the Massachusetts frameworks. For example:

From North Star Framework

*Compare and contrast the role of religion in development of civilization (Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism . . .)*

From Massachusetts Framework

*Compose a research paper, using conflicting primary sources, and explain the degree to which they are able, or unable, to establish which is the more credible source.*

*Choose among the following: a) a Christian and a Muslim account of an episode in the Crusades; b) a Calvinist and a Catholic view of the causes of the Reformation; c) a Royalist and a Puritan view of the beheading of Charles I, 1649; d) a French and a German memoir on the outbreak of either World War.*

42. Social Studies teachers say that the "instructional strategies" and "assessments" in the school's curriculum are optional and both teachers feel free to choose their own strategies and activities. For example, one teacher has extracted the history of Christianity from "early civilizations" as a focus for the first quarter of the year. Another has chosen the expansion of railroads as the focus for economic and technological development in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and assessment will be small group presentations on the "economic, social, and political implications of the railroads." These selections do not provide an adequate breadth of study for the time allotted if the course will meet the expectations of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

43. Syllabi in Social Studies vary in quality. The best contain objectives that are keyed to the Massachusetts frameworks. While each of these objectives could be a step toward achievement of the standards in the Massachusetts framework, there is no process of curriculum development that helps ensure a coherent sequence of objectives leading step-by-step to achievement of the Massachusetts standards. As of now, the objectives contained in the syllabi, while worthy, seem arbitrary and isolated. While the syllabi are sufficient to help students, parents, and colleagues in the school to know what will happen in the various courses, those syllabi collected for this first quarter do not constitute a coherent and curriculum in social studies. They lack elements of design and sufficient detail to produce the desired alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
44. The quality of lesson plans varies. Some contain specific goals and related assessments. Some contain plans for the development of the lessons. Others are brief, general, and vague. For example, from one lesson plan:  
**Lesson Goal:** To answer ten questions for the weekly quiz  
**Lesson Development:** Practice test taking, learning material and preparing for oral reports  
**Skill Development:** Students will learn reading comprehension and writing skills  
 While they describe events that might take place in a lesson, classroom observations suggest that somewhat less is accomplished in each lesson than teachers had hoped, the lesson plans do not capture the alignment of standards, subject matter, teaching strategies, especially those strategies appropriate for diverse student needs, and assessment.
45. Mathematics courses offered at North Star consist of pre-algebra, algebra I, algebra II, and geometry. The curriculum is based on the South -Western Publishers' an Integrated Approach series and has been aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. There is a possibility to expand to pre-calculus if students reach that level. However, this year a course called "Problem Solving Strategies / Mathematical Applications" is being offered "to develop understanding of computational skills with basic techniques of algebra and has been loosely aligned to the Massachusetts Curriculum frameworks for adult basic education learners. The goal of the course as stated by the instructor is to get the senior class students to a level that will enable them to be able to pass an algebra II or pre-calculus class. Once a week, students meet for an extended period of time in a math/science interdisciplinary class to work on a group project. Students are to work on a project that connects math and science to other subjects and the world.
46. Students are given a series of tests in mathematics and based on their scores are placed in the appropriate level course. Students then are expected to progress through pre-algebra, algebra I, algebra II, geometry and pre-calculus. Although there is geometry strand running throughout North Star's math course, students

- taking the MCAS in tenth grade are not sufficiently exposed to geometry before taking the MCAS. In fact, in the present order, students who might have to retake the MCAS in the eleventh grade will not have taken a full course in geometry.
47. Weekly mathematics quizzes are given to monitor students' performance. However, there was little evidence to show that assessments are used to improve instruction, enhance learning, or encourage students to self-reflect or self-correct. In classes observed, students worked independently, only seeking advice from the teacher.
  48. Students' mathematics scores on standardized tests and the MCAS are below levels. The results of last year's MCAS show 100% of the students failed the test. A MCAS prep class has instituted this year to address the problem. However, teachers have not clearly defined how they intent to help students improve in needed areas. There was no evidence to show that test results are being used to develop strategies for teaching this course.
  49. In Language Arts, the curriculum is being aligned with the standards that are outlined in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. This is evident in course syllabi turned into the Principal at the beginning of the quarter. Both Language Arts teachers indicated that they have developed most of the curriculum with some assistance from an outside consultant in the area of alignment with state requirements.
  50. The learning standards that are outlined in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks are clearly reflected in Language Arts syllabi, but are not equally well incorporated into the lesson plans. Although the daily lesson plans have a "Skills Development" section, the skills that are listed there are very general, such as simply noting the need to work on reading, writing, and verbal skills. It is not clear how progress towards such broad goals can either assure good alignment with state requirements or provide clear internal targets for gauging student progress over time.
  51. The samples of students' work in Language Arts that were reviewed failed to show any real academic rigor. Students were more likely to be graded on content than any clear set of benchmarks. According to one Language Arts teacher, students were graded on their individual performance level.
  52. The science curriculum follows the Massachusetts frameworks in planning. However, while the frameworks are followed, the translation into the school's curriculum is weak. The school's central curriculum document is not a helpful tool in planning and terms such as "outcomes" and "objectives" are confused. Classroom teachers plan together to deliver the science curriculum, and are now in the process of developing syllabi (quarterly) based on the curriculum document. However, as the planning moves further away from the frameworks, the quality of planning becomes weaker. The curriculum is rooted in the

- frameworks but is not related to individual student needs, as there are no individual learning plans in place to identify their needs.
53. The work carried out by the science staff and math staff in technology for the twelfth grade is of a good quality. They make good links in all three subjects to real situations and create projects that capture the student's imagination, for example, designing and making a rocket that must travel a specified distance.
  54. North Star offers several courses outside the core curriculum. These include Life Skills, Health, Business Technology, Current Events, and Career Education. (Classes in the last two courses were not observed.) Performance measures are not stated for each course. While there is an awareness of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, the course objectives are not aligned with applicable portions of the frameworks. Electives teachers use sources such as the Internet, library, and their own knowledge to develop course content and activities.
  55. The electives teachers had little knowledge of the ILP. The teachers believed the ILP was developed by Guidance and used as a resource for students that presented some unusual challenge. There was also confusion as to the use of STAR testing, and portfolios.
  56. Interviews with electives teachers suggest that the curriculum is intended to be project-based and performance-based. Business Tech teachers plan lessons based on curriculum meetings held with subject area teachers. While there is no definite structure to this process one teacher felt that she had conversations two to three times a week to address what students are working on in other classes.

## **Teaching**

57. The new policy requiring written syllabi and lesson plans is a positive step in improving planning for daily activities. However, planning is not presently based in a systematic review of student performance data nor is it grounded in Individual Learning Plans. Invariably, planning calls for whole group activities. Some consideration is given to individual student needs through placement testing in mathematics and through evaluations in Language Arts, but there is no individual planning beyond some grouping of students with common needs.
58. Basic lesson structure and pacing are also issues in planning. Though lesson plans may list objectives, these are generally not made clear to students at the beginning of classes. Lessons generally do not have clear beginnings, middles, and ends that would help students understand what is taught and gain a sense of what they have learned by the lesson's closing.
59. The methods used are not making good use of small class size. Almost all lessons employ a teacher-directed approach and address only one level of student

preparedness. For example, in Language Arts, the vast majority of instructional time was spent in lecture and recording notes. As a result, students do not necessarily play an active role in constructing their knowledge of the subject area. In science, neither teacher used any other method of teaching than the whole class approach. Given that North Star students perform over a huge range of grade level equivalency, whole group instruction of this nature can only reach a small band of students in each class. Individualization and differentiation of instruction are incorrectly viewed by the school as one-on-one instruction outside of the regular classroom. When asked about individualizing instruction, teachers referred to the "academic enhancement" period and "tutoring."

60. Classroom-based assessment does not provide sufficient information to ensure a good understanding of student comprehension. The teacher-directed style has few breaks for checking comprehension. Many students are never called upon, and there is no clear way to know how these students are doing at any given point in a lesson. What checking for understanding does take place is generally a call for voluntary responses, thus ensuring that only those who are grasping the lesson are heard from on a regular basis.
61. Classroom management is mixed. There are not clear boundaries for students and much class time is lost in allowing students to continually test teachers' tolerance for distractions and, in some cases, disrespectful behavior. A lot of time is spent giving students-especially those who are deliberately disruptive-redirections. This takes away from the learning process for most students.
62. Relationships between students and teachers are also mixed with some examples of strong relationships that have had a very positive effect on student's lives. Parents and students report that the school's small size and the efforts of teachers to reach out to students make the school an attractive educational option. One graduate attributed the encouragement and support of teachers the most important factor in her remaining in school despite significant personal challenges. Parents report that some teachers call students' homes frequently to address issues and needs as they arise. Parents interviewed also report that the Principal calls frequently to keep them informed of their children's progress.
63. With a few exceptions, teachers have a strong base in their content areas. In interviews, they are able to discuss their subject areas, and in classes their presentations of material are generally accurate. This is a key strength of the school, but its potential cannot be fully realized until teachers have a greater repertoire of teaching methodologies that would allow them to present information and engage students at multiple levels.

## Assessment

64. The school has made good progress in creating assessment procedures that could lead to a solid base of information about student performance. There are pre-tests and post-tests for each quarter in each subject area. These are meant to identify what students know at the beginning of a unit and how much they have learned at its closing. Weekly assessments are meant to track student progress within each unit. Portfolios are presently collections of student work without many clear rubrics based on clear standards. However, this collection of student work is a good first step towards a portfolio system solidly based in standards.
65. Electives are the exception to this promising set of practices. Elective courses do not consistently use pre-post tests, mid terms, or weekly quizzes. No evidence of tests or quizzes is included in student folders. Grading for Health, Business Tech, and Current Events is based primarily on attendance, class participation and behavior as indicated in the course syllabus.
66. In the best examples of internal assessment practices, there were rubrics attached to student work. For example, in Language Arts, both teachers use rubrics to grade writing. However, they use different rubrics, each designed separately. Capstone folders include rubrics for grading capstone portfolios and final presentations.
67. A troubling pattern in internal assessment is the practice of grading students against their own level of academic preparedness rather than against absolute performance standards. For example, the rubric for the capstone project directs graders to take into account an individual student's abilities when giving marks. The rubric states, " It is important to note that at the North Star Academy, students are assessed against their own personal best so each project should also be looked at in the context of that student's own abilities and strengths." This statement is in clear conflict with the school's mission to prepare all students for college. This practice is confirmed by teacher interviews and review of student work. Teachers confirm giving grades based on how well they judge an individual has done and not on absolute standards. Samples of student work of considerably different quality are given the same grade.
68. The introduction of the STAR test, a computer based assessment that the school can administer on a regular basis and receive instant results, brings a greater level of objectivity and consistency to internal assessment practices. However, STAR testing on a wide basis is not yet in place due to a fire last year that halted the program's initial implementation. This fall the school intends to test all students and use the results to inform Individualized Learning Plans.
69. In addition to MCAS testing at the tenth grade level, North Star administers the Test for Achievement and Proficiency (TAP). TAP is a standardized, norm-

- referenced test produced by the Riverside Publishing Company. Core batteries on the test include reading, written expression, and mathematics. The test is design to measure attainment of skills and knowledge important to a student's success across the high school curriculum. North Star reports administering the test to all grade levels in both the fall and spring of every year. Records of these tests are very poor, due in part to a fire in the spring of 2000.
70. The sum total of internal and external assessment practices planned by the school are more than sufficient to produce useful profiles of individual student progress over time. However, the lack of clear standards to inform internal assessments and the poor records of external measurements render the assessment program weak and uninformative.
71. The school's use of data is poor. The visiting team did not find evidence of processes to use assessment data to inform curriculum development and instructional practice. There are a few examples of TAP analyses in annual reports, but the school did not present any analysis for the visiting team. It is not clear how teachers use pre-tests, post-tests, weekly assessments, and portfolios to determine improvements to the curriculum. Even if such a process were in place, it is questionable how valuable it would be given that grades are not being given against a common set of standards. The absence of the ILP also makes it difficult to put assessment data to good use.

## **IS THE SCHOOL A VIABLE ORGANIZATION?**

### **Leadership**

72. Leadership at North Star Academy has made progress in fulfilling its role but is not yet effectively enabling the school's stated mission. The vision of the school as a college preparatory program that seeks to educate students that may not have been successful in other settings is generally voiced by all Board members and remains constant in the school's annual reporting and application for renewal. However, the school's Executive Director voices a shifting mission that describes the school as providing students with many options, college being only one of them. When asked about appropriate academic goals for graduates, the Director stated that bringing all students to a minimum level of academic proficiency with a subset of students preparing for college would be a realistic goal. Reaching ninth grade proficiency was cited by the Executive Director as a reasonable minimum proficiency goal. Whether the Director's ideas for the school's future direction or the school's stated vision is correct is not in question. Rather, the inconsistency between the Director's vision for the school and the Board's vision indicate that the organization as a whole is not clear about its central purpose.
73. There is evidence that the Board and the Executive Director discuss the purpose of the school and its possible shift away from the original charter. A June 1999 report by the Executive Director outlines for the Board proposed changes to the

- program in order to ensure more individualized instruction and instruction appropriate for the level of academic preparedness of North Star students. These proposed changes included introducing team teaching and creating two academic divisions to replace the four grade levels. While these recommendations have not been instituted, the document is one instance of good communication about the school's central vision among its leadership. However, it is not part of a greater pattern of communication designed to shape a common vision for the school.
74. Among faculty and students, understanding of the school's mission reflects the variations between the Board and Executive Director. Some teachers view the school's mission as college preparation while others see the school as keeping students who would otherwise be out of school engaged in some educational program. It is clear that these mixed understandings of purpose influence such practices as grading students based on their individual academic readiness instead of upon a set of college preparatory standards.
  75. At the board level, progress has been made in reconstituting the Board with qualified members who have strong ties to the community. As a group, the Board now has the business and educational expertise to oversee the school's program. Board members include public and private administrators, post secondary educators and public school educators. While this new configuration of leadership at the board level is strong, the Board is not providing the school with appropriate oversight. The Board President has consciously moved away from the day-to-day involvement in the school that typified Board management in the school's first three years. This change is intended to give the school's Executive Director the authority to implement the school's mission. While this course of action is reasonable, it has not been coupled with a clear set of procedures for ensuring that the Board stays informed of the school's progress and holds the Executive Director accountable for that progress. For instance, the Board could not produce minutes from recent meetings, and there is no formal reporting structure with set topics to be brought to the Board's attention on a regular basis. The Executive Director does provide the Board with an informal update of the school's progress at each meeting but the content of these reports is not set. Of serious concern is the fact that the Board could not discuss the basis for the application for renewals claim that many of the school's accountability plan goals have been reached. Proof of these claims was requested from administration and the Board but was not made available to the Renewal Site Visit Team.
  76. While a written job description for the Executive Director does exist, the Director is not being formally evaluated. The job description is sound, listing many of the key areas of need noted in this report.
  77. There is not evidence of the type of educational leadership necessary to fill the school's promising procedures for curriculum and assessment with meaningful substance. As discussed above, there are no clear academic standards, but no school leader is working to establish these with faculty. Significant work is being

done by an outside consultant in this area, but the consultant is not responsible for evaluation of staff nor present frequently enough to work with all staff. The need for differentiated instruction is not being addressed by the school's leadership through teacher evaluation and professional development. The school's Principal states that she is not able, due to other demands to visit classrooms regularly. Finally, the school's Principal is not involving faculty in the development of ILPs. Without faculty input and involvement in ILPs, it is not clear how the school can begin to develop the expertise necessary to truly individualize instruction.

### **Human Resources**

78. Faculty interviews reveal that new staff members have received inconsistent orientation to the program and that no staff is receiving sufficient oversight and professional development. One new teacher is being mentored while another has had no discussion concerning professional development. No written professional development plans were in place during the visit. In the past, some teachers have taken professional development offerings made available for new teachers by the Springfield Public Schools. Four of the ten teachers could not describe any past or planned professional development activities. While teachers can request professional development, no professional development system exists at the school that addresses school-wide issues. The exception to this is the school's work with one consultant on the development of the curriculum. Though not all teaching staff had been a part of this work, it clearly is affecting teaching around the school in a positive way.
79. While a written job description for the Executive Director does exist, the Director is not being formally evaluated. The job description is sound, listing many of the key areas of need noted in this report, however, the President of the Board reports that a formal evaluation has not been completed.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

80. As noted above, the Board has made progress in moving away from a tradition of micro-management and management by crisis. However, it is still mastering how to provide oversight while remaining at arm's length. The Executive Director does not appear to understand his charge of implementing the school's mission as stated by the school's documentation and the Board. Instead, the Director is in favor of moving the school in a new direction that, however reasonable, is not in alignment with the school's stated mission. In this environment, faculty members have determined their own goals that reflect the mixed message they receive from the school's leadership. While the school's professional staff and Board are hard working and interested in the school's success, the lack of a clear and commonly held mission hampers their ability to achieve organizational success.

## **Financial**

81. The school's financial solvency is unclear due to inconsistencies between official enrollment and attendance records, legal occupancy limits and attendance patterns observed by the visiting team. Budget projects made in the school's annual report for 1999-2000 include the downward enrollment adjustment necessitated by the legal limits of the new school site. However official enrollment records as provided by the school registrar still show 178 students enrolled and a minimum of 166 students in attendance for the first 23 days of school. However, 166 students exceeds the legal occupancy of the building and is inconsistent with the Principal and Executive Director's observations of attendance. The Site Visit Team conducted independent attendance counts on each day of its visits by walking throughout the building at three separate times on three separate days. This walk-through required only five minutes, and the team is confident in the accuracy of its counts. The team's three counts showed 54 to 60 students in attendance on a daily basis. Given that the official records show more students in attendance than legally allowed, it is not clear that anyone can say how many students have attended school this year or in what frequency. If the observed attendance of 54 to 60 students is indicative of actual ongoing attendance, the school could be facing a massive shortfall in revenue of 60%. The school did not present any plan to deal with this contingency.

## **Planning and Decision Making**

82. The school has not made good use of internal and external data to improve its performance. Student assessment data is not actively reviewed by the school as a whole to inform the development of an individualized program to prepare all students for college. Fiscal issues, such as the potential shortfall in revenues, is not addressed in any widely understood plan. In the areas of administrative and faculty performance, insufficient data is being collected to provide insight into areas for improvement.
83. In 1998, the school did develop a strategic plan to address shortcomings noted in a Department of Education site visit. This plan assigns responsibility for addressing issues and a time line in which to do so. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the issues cited are the same as those observed by the Renewal Site Visit Team. The most essential of these are no clear academic expectations, lack of oversight of staff, lack of professional development, lack of data on student performance, and lack of clarity about the school's central mission.

## **Process Management**

84. Basic day-to-day managerial tasks are not being accomplished. Most important of these are the taking of accurate attendance and the maintenance of accurate enrollment records. The Principal is responsible for getting attendance records to the Registrar but is not clear what happens to those records once the Registrar has them. The Registrar is not clear about attendance policies beyond sending a letter to the home after five absences. (At the time of the visit, letters were not going out due to delays in setting up the full computer program for attendance.) The Principal provided attendance records to the team for the first day of its visit, but these lists were not in the proper format for entry into the computer system. It is not clear how these key administrators can work together to promote higher student attendance in such an unclear operating environment.
85. The introduction of Administrator Plus and Grade Quick, both software programs, is a positive step towards better record keeping. However, the school is still responsible for accurate records while these systems are being put in place.

## **Program Evaluation**

86. The school's accountability plan lays out academic and non-academic objectives for students and organizational objectives for the school. These goals have remained unchanged during the life of the charter. The school's objectives are well aligned with its stated mission. The indicators for each objective are generally reasonable and measurable. For instance, one indicator of reaching college preparedness is 100% demonstration of essential skills defined in each level of each core subject area.
87. The school has had difficulty in collecting and reporting against its objectives. For instance, poor record keeping and a lack of analysis of assessment data make reporting against student academic objectives difficult. Poor record keeping of student attendance and transcripts makes reporting against attendance and participation goals difficult. Nonetheless, the school's application for renewal claims that many objectives have been met without presenting or referencing proof thereof. Of the thirty-five indicators for the eight accountability plan objectives, the application for renewal claims that nineteen indicators have been met. However, the school could not produce a description of the assessment process or the results upon which these claims are made.

## **Partnership**

88. Parents interviewed are very supportive of the school and praise the alternative it provides for their children. The small environment meets their desire for a safe and intimate setting in which students do not feel lost or at risk. Parents interviewed report more communication from the school than they received from past schools and that the school's administration and faculty are accessible and often proactive in communicating with families.
89. The newly constituted Board is evidence that the school has formed strong alliances in the community that strengthen its ability to provide services to students. For example, after the fire that struck the school last year, the school was able to find a temporary space and continue classes within a few days. The present school site was obtained through community connections.

## **School Climate**

90. Though there are behavior issues, the school is generally safe and orderly. Students appear relaxed with teachers and some students form very meaningful relationships with teachers that support their learning and personal development. At the same time, the school environment lacks a sense of high expectations for learning and effort. Student work is too often accepted regardless of its actual quality. There is a sense that each student is responsible for the level of his or her work and that the school is not responsible for setting a high bar. For example, the capstone project is not rigorously monitored and students may pass it even though they do not exert themselves throughout the year as envisioned by the capstone program.

## **IS THE SCHOOL FAITHFUL TO THE TERMS OF ITS CHARTER?**

91. The intent of the school's Board of Trustees remains consistent with the original mission and design of the school. North Star's mission is laudable and ambitious. It holds the high expectation of college readiness for all students and particularly for students who have not been academically successful in other settings. The school's intended design is appropriate to fulfill this mission. It describes the kind of individualized program with promotion by demonstrated proficiency well suited to the needs of its students. In theory, the North Star charter is a bold endeavor aimed clearly at students of Massachusetts in great need of educational alternatives.
92. Actual implementation of the school's program has fallen significantly short of the design. As discussed in this report, the program today is not individualized or based on common academic expectations that are consistent with college preparation. The original vision of the school is not widely shared outside of the Board of Trustees. In fact, key leadership in the school is not fully committed to the vision, nor is there a process in place to reshape the vision into something that could be supported by all stakeholders in the school. Progress towards the school's goals has not been properly recorded. It is not possible to know how many students have come to North Star who were previously not in school or were very likely to leave education before completing high school. It is not possible to establish a clear picture of academic growth of individual students over time, with the exception of progress made by eight individuals.

## **IF THE SCHOOL IS RENEWED, WHAT ARE ITS PLANS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?**

93. The school's proposed accountability plan for a renewed charter is essentially the same as its existing plan. This does not recognize the actual status of the program's implementation to date. Given that key components of the original program are not yet in place, the plan is woefully inadequate to address the school's critical needs. It does not set goals for implementing the ILP, set clear academic standards, develop meaningful accountability for administrators and staff, ensure better attendance, or address the financial issues caused by low attendance. Also lacking are clear assignments of responsibility for ensuring these critical issues are addressed in the next charter period.