

# **RENEWAL INSPECTION REPORT**

CITY ON A HILL CHARTER SCHOOL  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

October 24-27, 1999

**Please note that immediately following the Inspection Report (on page 31) is a formal response by City on a Hill Charter School to this Inspection Report, which should be read in conjunction with the Report.**

## SETTING

City on a Hill Charter School is housed in the Central YMCA building on Huntington Avenue in Boston. Its location is the hub of many connections to the greater Boston community. It is adjacent to two of its educational partners, Northeastern University and the Huntington Theater. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and the Science Museum, two sites of instruction for City on a Hill students, are easily reached by bus or underground transit. Many other cultural, civic, and financial institutions are nearby. Students come from all over the city to attend City on a Hill, the only charter school in Massachusetts to have graduated a student from high school. Although their school is on Huntington Avenue, their learning environment includes the businesses and community agencies of the city of Boston.

The Huntington YMCA has over 5,500 members. It serves the people of Boston (and the world, since it has a summer travel program for international visitors) with programs ranging from cardio kick-boxing and senior strength training to Families in Transition. Among those who share its resources are the more than 200 students, teachers, and staff of City on a Hill Charter School. COAH is housed on parts of three floors in the west part of the main YMCA building, with clearly separate entrances and access. Classrooms and administrative offices are on one floor, another set of classrooms occupies a second floor. The school has use of the Teen Center for all-school meetings, including Town Meetings, which are held every Monday and Friday. The school uses the library resources of Northeastern University and the gyms, pool, and equipment of the Y.

Students dressed in the limited options of a simple uniform move busily through the narrow hallways at City on a Hill. There are no hats or beepers or cell phones. There *are* the sounds and animated activity that accompany adolescents greeting classmates and friends. A teacher stands with a student engaged in quiet conversation. As classes are about to begin, the hallways empty quickly - students know they must be prompt and ready to work at the start of every class. The ebb and flow of students and hallway discussions are replaced by the sounds of students and teachers learning in the classrooms of City on a Hill Charter School.

## INSPECTION TEAM

### **Fred Wetzel, Lead Inspector**

Dr. Wetzel has been the Director of Academic Services for the New England Regional Office of the College Board since 1984. A major part of his responsibilities include the development of teacher training and curriculum for schools that participate in the Advanced Placement Program in New England. He has received training from Full Circle as a Lead Inspector, served as an Inspector for SchoolWorks, and has assisted the Massachusetts Department of Education's Charter School Office in the development of Accountability Plan training and materials for first-year charter schools in the Commonwealth.

### **Terry Mortimer, Quality Control Monitor and Inspector**

Mr. Mortimer is a registered OFSTED inspector and one of the two founding partners of Full Circle, the fifth largest British inspection company. He has been a primary teacher and principal in England as well as a curriculum and management consultant. Mr. Mortimer has been an equal opportunity administrator and consultant with a particular focus on multiracial and multicultural issues in British education.

### **Dominique Astier, Inspector**

Ms. Astier is the head of the World Language Department at the Brimmer and May School (MA). In her seven years at Brimmer and May, she has taught French and Spanish at both the Middle and Upper School. She has served on the curriculum committee and directed the restructuring of the language program. Ms. Astier has also worked at the Hackley School (NY) and the Wheeler School (RI), and taught introductory and intermediate French at Ohio State University. She is a member of the American Association of Teachers of French and the Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese.

### **Caroline Hunter, Inspector**

Ms. Hunter is the Student Government Advisor at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (MA). In addition, she established a Supplementary Learning Center for at-risk youth and oversaw the program's curriculum development and pupil diagnostic assessments. As Resource Developer/Education Coordinator for the Boston Area Self-Help Education Committee, she organized and implemented a GED program at drug centers. She has also designed courses in science and health careers and has served as a Title I mathematics instructor for students.

### **Ronald Rapp, Inspector**

Mr. Rapp is the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Comprehensive School Reform in Ft. Lauderdale (FL). He also serves as the coordinator for the ATLAS Project in Broward County (FL), a school improvement collaboration of the public schools in Broward County with Harvard, Yale, and Brown universities. In earlier work with New American Schools and the Education Commission of the States, Mr. Rapp gained experience in working with educational

policy leaders to improve the quality of teaching in several urban districts across the country. He has been a middle and high school teacher of English, Spanish, and Social Studies in South Carolina, Colorado, and Ohio.

**Sheldon Stern, Inspector**

Dr. Stern has been the Historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston since 1976. He directs the library's American History Project for High School Students, which introduces students to the uses of historical evidence. He also directs a summer Institute for teachers. He has written a history curriculum for the National Council for History Education and published numerous scholarly articles over a period of thirty years. He has taught history at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the New England History Teachers' Association. He is active as a consultant to a number of governmental and educational organizations.

**Ronald Walker, Inspector**

Mr. Walker is the Associate Director of ATLAS Communities, a New American Schools reform project sponsored by the Education Development Center (MA), where he is a Senior Associate. He has also been an elementary school principal and co-principal of Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (MA). He is the president of his own consulting company, *A Critical Friend for the Principal*, which provides assistance to principals across the Commonwealth and the nation.

**Bella Wong, Inspector**

Ms. Wong is the Assistant Superintendent for the Wellesley Public Schools (MA) where she oversees personnel, technology, libraries, and buildings and grounds. She has been a high school science department head and instructor in earth science, biology, chemistry, and anatomy and physiology. Once a corporate attorney in California, she remains a member of the bar in both Massachusetts and California.

## RENEWAL FINDINGS

### Is the academic program a success?

1. **The process of monitoring academic progress is well developed. There is a need to create a coordinated linkage between this process and the monitoring activity in the area of student advising and support services.**

Academic achievement at City on a Hill is assessed in both academic content and specific core competencies determined by faculty in each subject. A course grade reflects the assessment of both coursework and competencies; students can pass a course only when they have demonstrated mastery of the competencies associated with the course. In addition, the school has administered the Stanford 9 tests of reading and mathematics and the PSAT and SAT since 1996. Tenth grade students take MCAS tests each spring.

The majority of students are two or more years below grade level when they enter COAH, and the school has taken steps to identify which students need additional academic preparation in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. All students are members of a grade-specific Advisory Group that meets each day with a faculty advisor. A new full-time position of Dean of Student Life was created for the current school year. As yet, however, there is no coherent program to use the large quantity of assessment data available to teachers along with information teachers acquire in class and Advisory Group meetings to help students in need of academic support.

**Narrative References: 1 2 3 4 5 6 9 10 11 13 35**

2. **City on a Hill has given much attention to the development of a strong academic curriculum for all students. This is evident in the set of required courses for students in grades 9-11. In order to fulfill the goal of being an academically rigorous school, COAH needs to extend the academic breadth of the senior year as well.**

All students at City on a Hill study a discipline-based curriculum. Teacher-developed competencies are laced throughout the curriculum and complement the content of specific courses. Three years of study are required in all of the five discipline areas. A fourth year is required in English and mathematics. Yet, partially because many students enter COAH below grade-level and take more than three years to complete the required sequence of courses, there are few academic offerings available in the senior year, when college-bound students need a range of challenging classes in order to make the transition to postsecondary expectations. With the exception of an honors Humanities seminar, there are few (and none that appeared to be regularly scheduled) fourth-year courses available in history, science, or Spanish, though students can take college-level courses at Northeastern University.

**Narrative References: 1 2 14 15 16**

3. **The alignment of internal standards (course content and competencies) to external standards is incomplete. Alignment is well articulated in mathematics, English, and science. It is important to continue the process of aligning curriculum, assessment, and external standards.**

The competencies developed by individual departments vary in their approach to defining satisfactory academic achievement. In English (and similarly in Spanish), students are expected to produce increasingly more sophisticated work in prescribed areas. In history, a content examination supplements the skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Competencies in mathematics include problem-solving. Those in science require students to undertake extended scientific projects.

Although some departments are working to align curriculum with COAH standards and external assessments, there is a need to validate internal measures of student achievement with performance on state-wide assessment (MCAS) and other external assessments such as the PSAT and SAT. This would require a school-wide effort to examine how COAH content standards and COAH competencies compare with relevant standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessments provided by agencies and organizations outside the school. At present the responsibility for such work is left to teachers in each department. Some departments show an active interest in the project, whereas others seem less interested.

**Narrative References: 1 2 3 4 5 6 16 17 18 19 20 29 38**

4. **Technology resources within the school are satisfactory overall. Students have access to use technology across the curriculum. However, the use of resources varies across and within academic subjects. This results in unequal exposure and opportunities to use technology among the student population.**

The distribution and use of computers and other technology at City on a Hill is fairly conventional. Each classroom has at least one computer and there are two rooms set up as computer labs. However, some teachers make little or no use of computers and much of the student use of computers seems to be limited to word processing. Students can access the Internet using school accounts to reach a set of research-oriented websites. They do not have e-mail accounts. Adequate VCRs enable videos (some student-made) to be shown. CD-ROMS appear to be used only in science classes. Curriculum materials which are stored on the school's computer network are available to greater or lesser degrees across disciplines. Though there are memos and other instructional material available for specific topics (using the teacher e-mail system, for example) and technology training has been in place for three years, there was no evidence of a comprehensive technology plan with policy statements, specific objectives for training faculty and staff, intended use of current technology, and future directions for incorporating technology into the curriculum.

**Narrative References: 17 22 27 28**

**Is the school a viable organization?**

1. **Teachers and staff are energetic and committed to the goals and mission of City on a Hill. They are resourceful and provide extensive time and support to students in both academic and student development domains.**

That City on a Hill is a teacher-driven school is apparent in the sense of mission shown by its faculty and staff. Teachers and support staff spend as much time as needed to thoroughly answer students' questions. In class, teachers encourage students to expand on a response, to be confident in their explanation, and to be proud of the position they are supporting. Outside class, teachers are available for consultation after school with students and parents. Teachers listen to students in Advisory groups and serve as advocates for them when needed. Teachers in department meetings often discuss how a piece of curriculum can be changed to facilitate learning for an individual student or an assessment can be made more meaningful. One student remarked that people at his internship site knew "all about him", because an involved teacher had spoken with a supervisor before the student arrived on site.

**Narrative References: 9 21 37 42**

2. **There is a learning support network for students who require remedial and specialized assistance. The strengths of the system include personalized attention and small student-to-teacher ratios.**

Learning support at City on a Hill begins during the summer before students enter ninth grade, with an orientation to the academic and cultural expectations of the school. All incoming (ninth grade) students are now required to register for double classes in English and mathematics. During Summer orientation approximately one-third of the new 9<sup>th</sup> grade class was offered an Intensive Language Arts and Math schedule that includes a study skills course and Study Hall in addition to double English and double math classes. Individualized attention continues in Advisory Group, each of which meets with the same teacher for the four years that a student spends at the school.

Class size is small at City on a Hill, an average of 18 students per class. Students are not passed along if they do not achieve academically. As a result of the new Summer Competency Program, summer has become a time for completing competencies not achieved during the prior school year. A Dean of Student Life has been hired to head a Student Support Team, which communicates continuously with faculty and staff.

**Narrative References: 9 10 11 12 13 42**

3. **The advisory system is designed to provide continuous and consistent support, guidance, and motivation for students. Because of turnover of teaching staff over the years, the school needs to develop clear and comprehensive documentation for implementing the guiding principles of the system.**

Though the founding teachers at City on a Hill continue to be affiliated with the school as teachers and administrators (one serves as President of City on a Hill, Inc.), the faculty has grown from the original four to a complement of 21 full-time teachers for the 1999/2000 school year. Seventeen of these teachers are new to the school within the last two years.

The school claims that last year it finally "got right" the combination of coursework and competencies needed for credit. Other matters of articulation, comparing and calibrating teacher evaluation of student work, for example, and fine-tuning the use of competency rubrics across disciplines, have not received as much attention. It is not clear that effective use of time spent in Advisory groups means the same to all faculty. The school has the opportunity to clarify common-ground principles for teaching and assessment and made them available to all faculty and staff who work with students in both formal and informal, academic and non-academic capacities. The principles can then be incorporated into the ongoing advising that teachers provide for students within and outside of classes.

**Narrative References: 9 13 35 39**

4. **City on a Hill has attracted individuals to the Board of Trustees who are knowledgeable about the mission of the school, generally experienced in community development, and enthusiastic about helping COAH develop.**

The founders of City on a Hill have continued to be involved as teachers, principal, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Executive Director of the Teachers' Institute, and President of City on a Hill, Inc. This loyalty and active participation of the people who were responsible for developing the mission and operating practices of City on a Hill is an important factor in the success of the school. During the 1998/1999 year, a board for City on a Hill, Inc. emerged as a result of the division of the school and its 501(c)(3) organization into two entities. City on a Hill, Inc. is responsible for securing outside funds to support the school. Over twenty foundations and charitable organizations are listed as having given funds to COAH through City on a Hill, Inc. in the past year. Twenty-seven people are listed as advisors to the Board of Trustees. These advisors are drawn from a spectrum of organizations engaged in education, public service, and community development in the city of Boston and beyond.

Current Board members reported that the fifteen member board had difficulty in attracting a quorum at meetings scheduled for meetings in 1998-1999 (though every meeting did begin with a quorum present). In part, this may reflect an unspoken expectation that the founding members of COAH would always be there to do what was needed to move the school forward. Several new members have been brought

onto the Board for the current year. These new members have a variety of educational and administrative experience, qualities that are needed as the founders of the school move further from the centers of power in the organization. It is important that the Board move beyond the routine administrative oversight it has accomplished in the past to issues of personnel and long-range planning that must be addressed in the near future.

**Narrative References: 31 32**

**Has the school been faithful to the terms of its charter ?**

1. **City on a Hill aspires to graduate students who are respectful, democratic citizens. There are many effective structures in place that reinforce and support the development of character and citizenship.**

In its Accountability Plan, City on a Hill deliberately identifies a set of non-academic objectives as *Citizenship*. It is clear that developing future citizens of Boston and the United States is a matter of the highest priority at the school. Citizenship is developed in many ways at City on a Hill. Becoming a citizen begins with becoming a fully contributing member of the COAH community. In practice, this means that students are held to a clearly communicated set of behavioral expectations (for example, complete their homework, come to school on time, be prepared to participate in class). Students have a clear understanding of the consequences of not meeting these school-citizen requirements. Issues pertaining to student life at the school are discussed at the school-wide Town Meeting. Competencies that require students to present and defend their work - be they part of the rubric for a Problem of the Week in mathematics or an extended project in science - are intended to instill confidence and prepare students for self-advocacy within and outside of school.

Students are expected to have an academic and experiential understanding of citizenship. A history competency requires students to pass a test given to people wishing to become U.S. citizens. At Town Meeting, every student has an opportunity to discuss political topics selected from historical and contemporary events. Through internships and the City Project, a research-based project in the senior year, students participate in the civic life of the Boston community.

**Narrative References: 7 9 13 21 33 34 41**

2. **The Teachers' Institute marks a significant milestone in extending the work of City on a Hill into the wider educational community. While the Institute will justifiably recognize the needs of experienced teachers and pre-service teacher training, it is also important to fully address the content and pedagogical needs of teachers (and administrators) new to COAH and to the practice of teaching.**

City on a Hill is clear about its being a public school. Being a public school means meeting requirements to administer MCAS tests and, by implication, to align the curriculum to the topics and standards set out in Massachusetts curriculum frameworks.

City on a Hill goes beyond administrative compliance. It takes its place in the greater public school community. Its teachers work with BPS teachers to develop courses. City on a Hill is host to many visitors - college students and veteran educators alike - who explore and participate in the life of the school. Through its fund-raising efforts (now coordinated by City on a Hill, Inc.), it has raised over \$4 million from foundations and private donors to develop model programs for teaching and student development. COAH may become the first school in Massachusetts to be a school-based site for state-approved teacher training.

In addition to making City on a Hill known to the public, it is also important that sufficient time and financial resources be given to working with teachers and other staff who are new to COAH or new to their positions at the school. Observations in classrooms revealed a wide range of pedagogical expertise. Some teachers used a variety of strategies to involve students in the process of learning. Others, however, seemed merely to convey information by unengaging methods.

**Narrative References: 22 23 24 25 36 39 40**

3. **Parent support for City on a Hill is extremely strong. Parents are given the opportunity to play a variety of roles in the school. There is well established communication between school and home. Parents repeatedly refer to the COAH community as an extended family, providing high quality academic preparation in a secure and caring environment.**

Parents who met with inspectors described City on a Hill as a community that nurtures personal growth as well as academic development. They provided many examples of teachers and administrators who extended themselves to support students in academic and personal ways - from meeting with them before and after school to adapting parts of the curriculum to accommodate individual interests or needs. All parents acknowledged the strong academic program. They characterized City on a Hill as a school that cares ... cares enough to have a clear set of academic and behavioral expectations, and cares enough to support students as they work to meet those expectations.

**Narrative References: 21 41 42**

4. **There is a safe and supportive learning environment and ethos at City on a Hill. Students exhibit a strong sense of loyalty and pride in being part of the COAH community.**

City on a Hill students are typical adolescents and young adults in many ways. They talk and laugh and act like students everywhere. Some COAH students are clearly caught up in the joy of learning - others are more cautious in their approach to school. But City on a Hill students are also special. They attend a school that has a limited number of organized athletic teams. They co-exist in a remarkably civil way in a relatively small area. Students cheer for other students when perfect attendance for Advisory Groups is announced at Town Meeting. In meetings with the inspection team, they talked freely about their personal and academic goals.

Representatives of City on a Hill's community partners describe their student interns as proud ambassadors of their school who demonstrate the value of work and civic responsibility that are central to its mission. These students know about the injustices and inequalities in the culture they will enter as adults. Teachers and staff continually face the challenge of balancing a commitment to academic excellence, a critical awareness of social injustice, and a belief that constructive participation can make a positive difference during and after a student's education at City on a Hill.

**Narrative References: 7 8 9 13 21 26 33 34**

5. **The connection with community and business organizations is extensive, deep, and authentic. Partners express an understanding of the school's mission and consider themselves advocates for the school as well as members of the City on a Hill community.**

At a meeting of representatives from some of the many organizations and agencies that provide internships for City on a Hill students, they gave the impression that they were members of the COAH community talking among friends rather than potential employers reporting back on student performance. Many community partners have spoken of talking with teachers about the needs of individual students. Partners have served as jurors for evaluating project-based competencies and have donated financially to City on a Hill, Inc.

The community partners praised City on a Hill students for their work ethic and understanding of the requirements of being an intern. But beyond this, they commended students for learning about the sites in advance of being placed and knowing why they wanted to be interns at a particular site. In turn, partners felt able to pass critical questions and comments back to the school. Not every student is perfectly matched with every internship, but there is sufficient good will and mutual understanding among all concerned to modify or terminate an internship without recrimination, so long as the student's education is well served.

**Narrative References: 30 43 44 45**















students) worked with students in either one or two three-week sessions of group and individualized instruction (actual instructional time was approximately 10 full days across both sessions). Students' work was judged by juries and teachers at the end of each session.

Though the reports documenting student participation were confusing (one report apparently counted a student more than once if s/he had failed more than once competency) it appears that 49 individual students passed 77 competencies by the time the Summer Competency Program was completed, with 91% of participating students achieving "what they came to do."

- 12** There was clear evidence of students (particularly younger students) using basic academic skills to facilitate learning. Ninth grade students were observed taking notes in a systematic manner. Students who spoke to the inspectors commented on the importance of this element of structure in the school environment.
  
- 13** City on a Hill hired a new full-time Dean of Student Life for the 1999-2000 year. Though the responsibilities of the position continue to evolve (the staff person is new to COAH and the position has been in effect only since the beginning of the school year) it is clear that beyond the specific assignments included in the original job description (e.g., organizing student and parent orientation) the emphasis will be on working to help students negotiate life at COAH. Though the school will continue to have clear expectations for student behavior (and clear consequences for violations), the Dean of Student Life intends to focus more on student development and less on matters of discipline. A Student Support Team headed by the Dean of Students maintains continual contact with faculty advisors and the principal as all work with students who are experiencing problems in and out of school.



- scaffold to teach students how to show a discipline-specific competency or complete an end-of-class project.
- 17** The foreign language curriculum at City on a Hill is organized around the graduation requirement that all students must take three years of Spanish (other languages are not offered at COAH). For each course, students are required to demonstrate competency in the grammar appropriate to the year of study, in writing, and in oral proficiency (evaluated through a juried assessment). The curriculum is developed by the faculty and is currently available for each level on the file server. Spanish teachers have chosen not to use specific textbooks. Teachers freely visit each other's classes to observe and discuss COAH's internal standards. There are no connections to national standards (e.g., ACTFL proficiency guidelines and standards). Assignments are word-processed and a Spanish language software program has been available for two years.
  - 18** City on a Hill has a three-year formal science sequence for grades 9 through 11. Study in science begins with earth science in grade 9, followed by biology in grade 10, and biochemistry in grade 11. The curriculum has a strong environmental focus consistent with the school goals of civic understanding and service. Standards are clear and appropriately rigorous across the curriculum at all levels from day-to-day work in individual classes to benchmark competencies to be achieved by the end of each course. The science department has met to discuss aligning the existing curriculum with the Massachusetts frameworks. A senior-level course in Ecology is available, though it is not a full-year course and appears to be taken by relatively few students.
  - 19** Laboratory space for the first two years of science instruction is adequate (though the scheduled amount of time is short and results in an abbreviated lab experience). Two sections of biochemistry students attend labs once a week at the Museum of Science. Laboratory space at the Museum is large and modern, though surprisingly empty (the room used for lab instruction is devoid of instrumentation). Solid cabinets line the walls. There is no visual information (such as a Periodic Table of Elements) on the walls. Partnership with the Museum does provide a significant resource of adult support for the students.
  - 20** Any description of the history curriculum at City on a Hill must take into account the loss of all four members of the history department since the last academic year. Three new teachers with varying amounts of previous teaching experience have taken the place of the four teachers who departed. The presence of new faculty made it difficult to locate curriculum materials from prior years. History teachers observed by the inspection team generally used appropriate materials (particularly the primary source materials) and pedagogy (including the use of concept maps and high-level questioning). However, in one classroom, to complete a project that required the application of historical knowledge, a student produced a paper that focused on politically acceptable narrative but was largely historically inaccurate. The political position was praised, but the historical inaccuracies were neither acknowledged nor corrected. It was also noted that in one course, materials related to social history were sufficient, but materials related to other historical dimensions (e.g., political and economic history) were lacking.















- 44** City on a Hill has internship collaborations with over 80 non-profit and for-profit organizations in greater Boston. Community partners speak of the value of working with highly motivated students and a school that is willing to hear feedback on what is successful and what needs to be improved. They note the importance of students having adults other than parents and teachers in their lives. The interview process that a student goes through to secure an internship was praised for its clear and professional protocol. One site-coordinator spoke of the value of an “optimal mismatch,” the worth of a student’s discovering in high school that an area of possible interest is not satisfactory rather than learning this several years later in college. Students commented on how host-site personnel knew so much about their academic activity and needs at COAH. At a focus group of community partners, several representatives mentioned how the internship at COAH was in a continuous state of improvement, with site-personnel, students, teachers, and administrators all discussing ways to make the program better.
- 45** A capstone activity for students at COAH is the City Project. The project is an extension of internship activity that students have carried out during their first three years. Building on the skills learned in their internships, senior students expand their involvement in the Boston community by designing and carrying out an original community-based social action project. City Project is an integral part of the senior year at COAH, with the first two trimesters of the Senior Seminar given to self-examination of personal goals and future plans, considering future roles as agents of change, and beginning the process of selecting an area of concentration for research. The second trimester culminates with a proposal for research. In the last trimester, students carry out the necessary research and on-site activity needed to address what COAH calls an “authentic civic question.” There are clear rubrics for evaluating the quality of the project. The final results and research paper are presented to a jury for evaluation. A sample of student research presented for inspection, while showing errors in conceptual understanding of the statistics used in the project, nevertheless met the standards used to judge competency for student work.

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January 16, 2000

Mr. Edward Kirby  
Associate Commissioner for Charter Schools  
Massachusetts Department of Education  
One Ashburton Place; 14th Floor  
Boston, MA 02109

Dear Mr. Kirby,

On behalf of the faculty and the Board of Trustees of City On A Hill Charter School, we write to thank the members of the Charter Renewal Inspection Team for their report on their October visit to our school. The Inspectors clearly learned much about our school in a short period of time. We are delighted that the team captured many key features of our school so carefully and clearly--the enthusiasm and dedication of our faculty, our connections to the community, our commitment to civic education, our relationships with parents, and our commitment to reaching beyond our school to have an impact on school reform more widely. We also appreciate your inviting our response to the final report. Below, please find some general comments and several specific responses to individual passages.

**Curriculum Alignment.** We appreciate the team's taking the time to inspect this matter and to focus on it in the report. As the inspectors know, there were no curriculum frameworks when our charter was granted. The team is also aware from our Charter Renewal Application that curriculum alignment is a top priority for our school now that there are frameworks and the MCAS. Twice the report suggests that we are neither serious nor systematic about curricular alignment: under "Renewal Findings: Is the Academic Program A Success?" paragraph #8, the report states, "Some departments show an active interest in the project [of alignment], whereas others seem less interested;" and in Section #38 of the Narrative, it states, "There is no schoolwide alignment (i.e., for all discipline areas) between and among course goals and content, course assessments, grade-level competencies, and outside assessments such as the Stanford 9, MCAS, the PSAT, and SAT." While we recognize we have much more work to do in this area, by school-wide mandate affirmed in our new Accountability Plan, each department is responsible for alignment. We are supporting this work with time and money as follows: (1) each department received \$5,000 for professional development for 1999-00, 50% of which must support work on curriculum alignment; (2) the schedule has been changed to weave student internships throughout the year to enable faculty two half days a month to meet in departments on this matter; (3) our new Accountability Plan explicitly states goals for achievement on standardized tests, and makes alignment a top priority.

**A Safe Urban Public High School.** In the Section "Renewal Findings: Has the school been faithful to the terms of its charter?" the report notes positively that "there is a safe and supportive learning environment and ethos at City on a Hill." The report however omits any mention of the virtual non-existence at City On A Hill of violence, fights, and other distractions that too often characterize urban public high schools in our city and across our nation. We think their absence at City On A Hill is significant and something we work hard to maintain.

**"We shall be as a city upon a hill." --Governor John Winthrop, 1630**

**Senior Curriculum.** We ask that the Department of Education consider the following details of what our seniors have available to them. In addition to the courses mentioned in the report (“Renewal Findings: Is the Academic Program A Success?” paragraph #5), fourteen COAH seniors are currently enrolled in an ecology class. During 1998-99, COAH offered a senior history course and a senior computer science course. Additionally, all City On A Hill seniors are enrolled in a City Project course, a culminating interdisciplinary integration of the academic and civic emphases of our school. The city project that each senior fulfills involves community service and a written report, the latter fulfills the senior writing competency. We think it is significant that our seniors are eligible to enroll at Northeastern while still in high school, an opportunity not available to most urban youth. Our task is to ensure that more of our students take advantage of this partnership, and the unique opportunity it affords. As a small school with a focused mission and few resources, we are always looking for ways we can avoid recreating in-house what our students can access--often more authentically--through a community partnership. The opportunity afforded seniors by Northeastern is only one instance of this general philosophy. The science labs at the Museum of Science for juniors are another critical example.

Later, in section #14 of the Narrative, the report states, “In practice, the need to hold students accountable for the mastery of core knowledge and internal standards has resulted in many students in their fourth year either repeating courses or taking only two senior-level academic courses. Yet this is a time when able college-bound students need continuity and challenge in preparation for postsecondary study.” As most of our students enter high school unprepared to do high school level work, we face the challenge of providing them with courses that both prepare them to meet their competition and catch them up. Students at City On A Hill cannot pass courses for trying hard or for merely showing up. They must demonstrate competency to move on the next level course. For some students this takes longer than the 180 days of a given school year, and so they find themselves still in third year science or history or Spanish in their fourth year. We stand by our commitment to ensure that students demonstrate mastery rather than practice social promotion so they can have more so-called 4th year courses on their transcripts. We expect that our new Summer Competency Program--begun in 1999--will diminish the number of students who find themselves in this situation. In the first summer, 49 students passed 75 competencies, allowing them to be promoted rather than repeat classes. We expect once more students benefit from this Summer Competency Program, that there will be more 4th year students taking a more diverse program in their senior year.

**Town Meeting.** The inspectors saw a Monday morning assembly, not a City On A Hill Town Meeting. The report is therefore inaccurate when it states (Narrative, Section #33), “the Assembly visited by the inspection team, while notable for the efficient manner in which it was conducted (student conversations quieted almost immediately as the meeting was called to order), was a time more for taking attendance and making announcements than for open discussion and debate.” Monday morning meetings are school-wide assemblies that launch the week with a reading, a record of attendance and announcements only. These meetings have never been for debate. Our *Friday* Town Meetings are where we employ the New England Town meeting format. We take pride in our Friday Town Meetings and believe they have afforded students the chance to debate serious issues of our day, and have modeled for them our belief that these are issues they must engage as full citizens of our democracy. Unfortunately the tape inspectors saw did not reflect the best of Town Meeting. No doubt many Town Meetings have too many adult announcements--although this has been streamlined by a process where all announcements must be submitted to the moderator in writing before the meeting--but most are student led debates on student-selected topics where students engage one another for the better part of an hour, on a topic they have prepared for in advance. Topics range from the Kosovo crisis, abortion or cloning, to the school’s open campus lunch policy, the diversity of our faculty or whether Boston should revert to a neighborhood school policy. Finally, when we write in our Charter Renewal Application that “since September, 1995,

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**Board.** City On A Hill’s need to strengthen its board has been noted by the state as recently as its 1997-98 site visit report. We are grateful to the inspection team for meeting with our board members on two occasions during the site visit, for noting our progress on this front and underscoring the importance of vigilance in this area. The report states that “current Board members reported that the fifteen member board had difficulty in attracting a quorum at meetings scheduled for meetings in 1998-1999.” (“Renewal Findings: Is the School a Viable Organization?") While members may not have been as active as they could have been, in five years every board meeting has started with a quorum present at the publicly posted time, and all scheduled votes have been taken.

**Technology.** We are concerned with the report’s findings regarding technology. The report states that “Technology Resources at the school are satisfactory overall ” and that ““the distribution and use of computers and other technology at City on a Hill is fairly conventional. . . . [S]ome teachers make little or no use of the computers and much of the students’ use of computers seems to be limited to word processing.” (“Renewal Findings: Is the Academic Program a Success?") We wonder for what or for whom are our technology resources “satisfactory”? At COAH, we regard technology as a tool with which to achieve educational aims or enhance communication. We use more when the education aim calls for it, less when it does not. For example, in late December, the Junior Spanish class spent three weeks on a project that involved infrared hearing devices, video, text-to-speech, network communication with students, student assistance on-line, electronic dictionary and conjugator. While it is true that “virtually all the teaching observed was direct instruction without the use of computers” and “there is no apparent plan to promote productive and regular use of the labs during each class period.” (Narrative, Section #27), it is not clear why these facts are problematic or noteworthy. Technology, while an important tool in our school, is not a central focus of our mission or program as an end in itself.

Later, the Report, (Narrative, Section #27) states, “Citing recognition by the Massachusetts Department of Education, COAH claims it is one of the most technologically advanced schools in Massachusetts. . . . Actual computer use does not justify the claim that City on a Hill is a technologically advanced school.” The Inspectors have different criteria from the Massachusetts Department of Education in evaluating a school’s technology. The state asks schools to list how many students we have per computer (when last reported, City On A Hill had 2.9 students/computer as compared with the state average of 6.3) and the percentage of classrooms on the internet (COAH has 100% compared to the state average of 65.9). It is for these accomplishments that we have been called technologically advanced. beyond this we have made no claims, and have exceeded our original charter’s modest goal that at City On A Hill students would use technology for learning. Philosophically, we wonder whether the use of technology for its own sake is an objective good against which a school should be measured. Rather, we think it is far more important how a school chooses or does not choose to use technology (or any other educational tool) to advance its educational goals and promote student achievement. For example our Special Education Department has recently begun to use some new software from AutoSkill International Inc. called The Academy of Reading. We think this is significant not because it is technology, but because it has been identified as a tool that has helped other high school students with their reading.

The report notes in the same section that “The computer labs are available throughout the day, but are locked unless a class is using them.” COAH computer labs like all of our classrooms in our shared space in an urban center are locked when not in use. The labs are used when the curriculum calls for it. Additionally, they are available before and after school for students.

Finally, the report suggests that “there was no evidence of a comprehensive technology plan with policy statements, specific objectives for training faculty and staff, intended use of current technology, and future

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Thank you for considering these comments. We appreciate the opportunity to reply with care to such an important report.

Yours sincerely,

Paul S. Hays  
Principal

Sarah Kass  
Co-Founder

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