

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: December 9, 2015
Subject: Charter Schools – Report on Probation for Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter School and Recommendation to Revoke Charter

With considerable regret, I recommend that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) take action pursuant to 603 CMR 1.12(3)¹ and (4)² to revoke the charter for Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter School (DCACS), effective June 30, 2016. I am presenting the information to the Board this month for initial review, anticipating further discussion and a vote at the Board meeting on January 26, 2016. My recommendation is based on the school's lackluster academic success and its failure to meet the condition—to demonstrate significant and sustained academic improvement—that the Board imposed in 2014 when it placed the school on probation. DCACS is in its seventh year of operation, and I expect the school to be delivering a robust program of study. Unfortunately, this is far from the case.

DCACS has never demonstrated consistent academic success, as indicated by data for absolute student performance and for student growth. Student performance on the MCAS has been persistently low and has shown minimal improvement since the school's charter renewal and placement on probation in 2014. The school has not met its gap-narrowing targets during the past four testing cycles (2012-2015) in mathematics or in English language arts and has fallen substantially below its targets in science for the past two years. The school's growth data further indicates a lack of academic success with no consistent growth in both English language arts and mathematics over the past three years. Over the course of the school's history, in all three tested subjects, with a few exceptions, DCACS has been the lowest performing charter school in Boston. Additionally, the school's attrition rates have been among the highest of all public schools—district and charter—in Boston, and the school has never been fully enrolled.

¹ The Board may suspend or revoke a charter for cause including, but not limited to: (a) lack of evidence of academic success; (b) failure to comply substantially with the terms of the charter, with any of the applicable provisions of M.G.L. c. 71, § 89, or with any other applicable law or regulation; ... or (h) failure to fulfill any conditions imposed by the Board in connection with the grant or renewal of a charter. 603 CMR 1.12(3)

² Notification: Before the Board revokes a charter, it shall notify the charter school in writing that the Board intends to revoke the charter. A vote of intent to revoke or a vote to not renew a charter shall operate as a notice of the action and does not operate as an order to show cause... Except in the case of an immediate suspension, the Board shall send the notice 60 days before the revocation takes effect. 603 CMR 1.12(4)

Massachusetts charter schools are held to a high standard of academic performance and must demonstrate the right to operate or face closure. As the sole charter school authorizer in Massachusetts, the Board may revoke a charter for cause, including, but not limited to: a lack of academic success and a failure to fulfill conditions imposed by the Board. The Board has consistently upheld this high academic standard, and Massachusetts is known nationally for its rigorous charter school authorizing practices and decisions.

Since the inception of charter schools in Massachusetts, the Board has voted to revoke, non-renew, or accept the voluntary surrender of the charters of twelve charter schools for performance-related reasons. In a majority of these instances, failure to demonstrate academic success was a key factor in the closure decision. As shown below, while DCACS has met many of the conditions imposed as a part of probation, the school has failed to meet the condition tied to academic performance and failed to demonstrate significant and sustained academic improvement as required. As noted in the [Charter School Performance Criteria](#)³, improvement in student achievement for all student groups is of paramount importance when considering a charter school's record.

At the December 15 Board meeting, the Board will have an initial discussion of my recommendation to revoke the school's charter. Representatives of the school have the opportunity to speak to the Board during the public comment portion of that meeting. The Board will vote on my recommendation at its meeting on January 26, 2016, and the school will be given a formal opportunity to present at the January meeting, prior to the Board's vote. If the Board votes its intent to revoke the school's charter in accordance with 603 CMR 1.12(4), the school will have 15 days to request an administrative hearing pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, § 13, and 801 CMR 1.00: Standard Adjudicatory Rules of Practice and Procedure, if it chooses to do so.⁴ In addition, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) will work with the school and the families of the students to ensure that information is provided regarding enrollment options at other schools for the students for the next school year.

³ <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/acct.html?section=criteria>

⁴ Upon receiving a notice of intent to revoke a charter, notice of non-renewal, or notice of suspension where the health, safety, or education of the school's students is at immediate risk, the school shall have the rights provided in M.G.L. c. 30A, § 13, and 801 CMR 1.00: Standard Adjudicatory Rules of Practice and Procedure. Where hearings are provided by statutes, all requests for hearings shall be in writing, addressed to the Board, and must be received within 15 days of receipt by the charter school of notice. At such hearing, the school shall bear the burden of proof and present its case first. 603 CMR 1.12(5)

Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter School			
Type of Charter (Commonwealth or Horace Mann)	Commonwealth	Location	Dorchester
Regional or Non-Regional	Non-Regional	Districts in Region (if applicable)	N/A
Year Opened	2009	Year(s) Renewed (if applicable)	2014
Maximum Enrollment	238	Enrollment as of Oct. 1, 2015	203 ⁵
Chartered Grade Span	4-8	Current Grade Span	4-8
Students on Waitlist	437 ⁶	Current Age of School	7 years old
Mission Statement			
Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter School will be a rigorous middle and high school whose mission is to prepare for college those students who exhibit the primary indicators that portend poor achievement and eventually dropping out of school – chronic absenteeism, consistent disciplinary issues, and unsatisfactory academic performance. DCACS students will pursue an intellectual and ethical education in a learning community, combining high expectations with personalized academic and non-academic support systems. DCACS success will be measured by students’ high school and college graduation rates, as well as their ability to consistently think and act, using ethical foundations.			

Report on Probation

In February 2014, the Board granted the DCACS’s request to amend the grade span in its charter from grades 4-12 to its existing grades 4-8; renewed the school’s charter; and placed the school on probation, directing DCACS to meet nine conditions by September 2015. The school’s progress in meeting the conditions is outlined below.

Condition 1: Beginning in March 2014 and until further notice, DCACS must submit to the DESE at charterschools@doe.mass.edu, board meeting agendas, materials, and minutes prior to each board meeting at the same time that these items are sent to the school's board members. Additionally, if board materials do not already include this information, the school must also submit monthly financial statements.

Status: Ongoing

DCACS has submitted board packages beginning in March 2014 on a monthly basis. In October 2014, the school also began submitting information for board committees in the monthly package.

⁵ As of October 1, 2015, the school’s student population was 73% African-American, 26% Hispanic, 1% White; 29% English language learners and 27.5% students with disabilities. Enrollment by grade is presented in the table below:

Grade	4	5	6	7	8	Total
# of students	44	43	38	34	44	203

⁶ This is updated data as of October 1, 2015, though the school has indicated that these numbers continue to change as they notify students on the waitlist of available spaces in an effort to fill vacant seats.

Condition 2: By June 30, 2014, DCACS must submit a comprehensive evaluation of the school's mathematics and English language arts programs, including how such programs meet the needs of special education students and English language learners, conducted by an external consultant(s). Such consultant(s) must be acceptable to and approved in advance by the Department.

Status: Met

On June 30, 2014, DCACS submitted an evaluation of its mathematics and English language arts program conducted by an external consultant, Class Measures. The Department had approved the selection of Class Measures. Administrators and board members reported that the evaluation report was used to create an action plan required by Condition 3. Additionally, the school contracted with Class Measures to conduct two follow-up reviews of the school's program in November 2014 and February 2015. These reviews assessed the quality and consistency of instruction.

Condition 3: By July 31, 2014, DCACS must submit an action plan to the Department for approval. Such action plan must specify strategies to improve mathematics and English language arts performance, including the performance of special education students and English language learners. The action plan must address implementation of a proven curriculum and instruction program for mathematics and English language arts. The action plan must set clear and specific implementation benchmarks, with a clear timetable and deadlines for completion of key tasks, to allow the school's board of trustees and the Department to monitor implementation.

Status: Met

On July 31, 2014, DCACS submitted an action plan to the Department. The Department reviewed and provided feedback on the plan. The school submitted the final action plan to the Department on October 7, 2014. Throughout the 2014-15 school year, the school's headmaster has reported on the school's progress on the action plan to the academic excellence committee of the school's board of trustees. Board minutes document that the full board has received general updates regarding the action plan.

Condition 4: By July 31, 2014, DCACS must implement all key elements of its educational program model in alignment with its charter or request an amendment to its charter to accurately reflect the school's educational program.

Status: Met

DCACS submitted an amendment to alter its educational program on August 1, 2014. The school proposed to maintain the same structure of the educational options, but to make certain components specified in its charter optional, rather than mandatory. The school's amendment request stated that the school would continue to provide the following components as central to its academic program: a standards-based curriculum, differentiated instruction, a focus on literacy, and an assessment of genuine understanding. An interdisciplinary approach, inquiry-based projects, an Aristotelian approach, and cooperative learning are now optional. The request was reasonable and consistent with Department guidelines, statute, and regulations and was approved on September 16, 2014.

Condition 5: By July 31, 2014, the school’s board of trustees must have completed a comprehensive self-evaluation of its own capacity and must have recruited additional board members with needed expertise, as identified by the board of trustees and the Department.

Status: Met

In May 2014, the school’s board of trustees completed two surveys. Each board member assessed the effectiveness of the board as a whole in one survey and completed a self-evaluation of their individual contributions as trustees in the second survey. The board has been able to recruit new members with needed expertise and has four fully functioning committees. Current board membership is 12 with one additional member awaiting approval. Please see additional evidence provided in the *Governance* section of the attached site visit report.

Condition 6: By August 31, 2014, the school’s board of trustees must engage in training conducted by an external consultant, acceptable to and approved in advance by the Department, on the roles and responsibilities of a board of trustees for a charter school.

Status: Met

On July 21, 2014 the school’s board of trustees participated in a training conducted by an external consultant, who had been approved in advance by the Department. Board members reported that the training was helpful and helped them clarify the separation of governance and management.

Condition 7: By September 30, 2014, the school’s board of trustees must develop and implement a formal system of evaluation for the executive director.

Status: Met

The school’s board of trustees developed and implemented a formal system of evaluation of the school’s headmaster, who functions as the school’s executive director, by the time specified. By September 29, 2014, DCACS submitted the following items documenting the formal evaluation process for the school’s headmaster: the headmaster’s self-evaluation on his 12 goals for the 2013-14 school year, staff and board surveys concerning the headmaster’s performance, and the headmaster’s self-assessment using the Massachusetts Model System of Educator Evaluation headmaster rubric. These documents were used by the board to write up a summative evaluation. During the board’s 2014 August retreat, the summative evaluation was discussed and presented to the headmaster. During the site visit in May 2015, board members and the headmaster reported that the evaluation system will be further formalized by using the “Board On Track” tool to gather survey data and generate an evaluation form.

Condition 8: By September 30, 2015, DCACS must demonstrate that it is an academic success by providing evidence that the school has met or is making substantial progress toward meeting benchmarks in its approved Accountability Plan and, in particular, has demonstrated significant and sustained academic improvement in mathematics and English language arts.

Status: Not Met

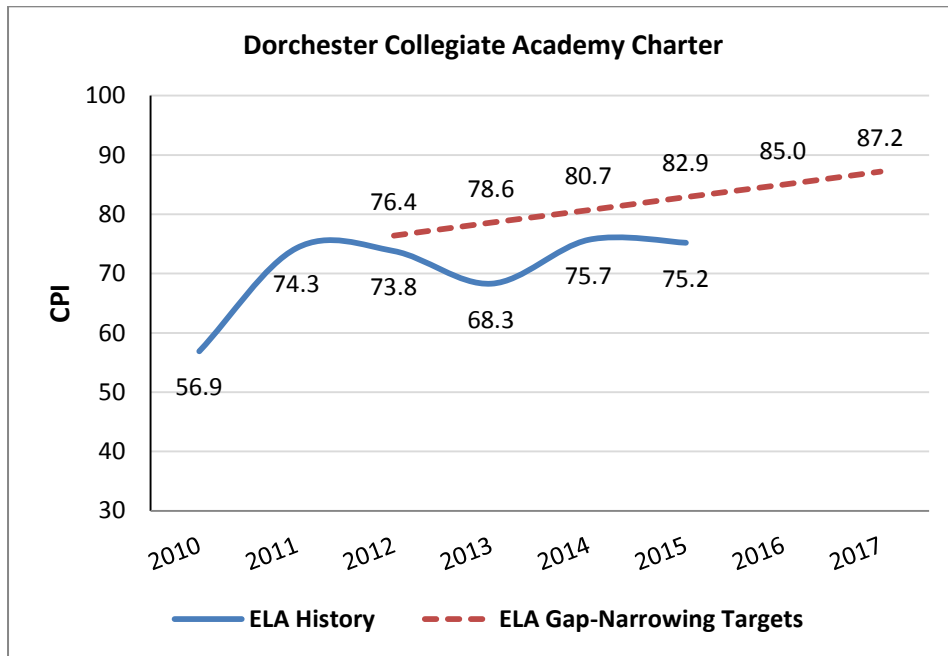
In 2013, the first year the school had sufficient data, DCACS was classified as Level 2, in the 23rd percentile. Based on the academic data from its first charter term (2010-2013),

the school was placed on probation and required to meet the condition listed above. In 2014, the school dropped to Level 3 in the 20th percentile. Currently, in 2015, DCACS is again in Level 2 in the 23rd percentile. As noted in the charts below, DCACS's performance in mathematics and English language arts (ELA)⁷ has improved slightly since the school was placed on probation, but is still below expected performance levels. The school's Composite Performance Index (CPI) for 2015 is: 75.2 in ELA, 66.4 in mathematics, and 48.6 in science, all below gap-narrowing targets.

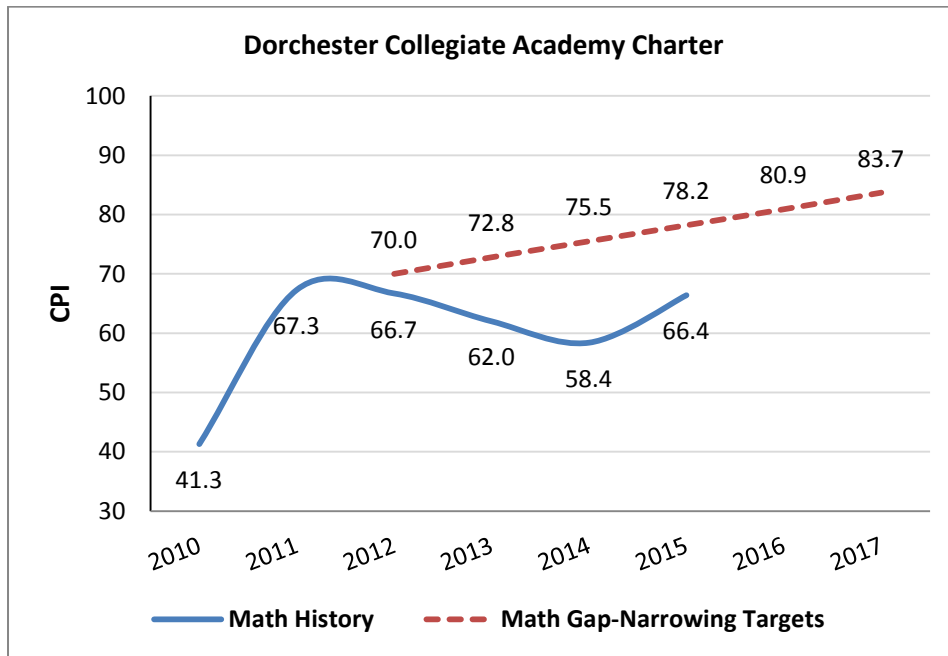
A majority of the school's students have not scored in either the Proficient or Advanced categories in any subject tested by MCAS at any point during the school's charter. Proficiency rates are well below state averages. In 2015, the school's rates of proficiency are alarmingly low for science (grades 5 and 8), with only 7 percent of students scoring in the Proficient category and none in Advanced. DCACS's science rates of proficiency are among the lowest of all elementary-middle schools statewide. Proficiency rates for mathematics are also low, with only 36 percent of students scoring in the Advanced or Proficient categories. English language arts rates are stronger, but still low, with 47 percent scoring in the Proficient and Advanced categories.

⁷ During the 2015 MCAS test administration, fifteen DCACS students (ELA: five students in grade 4, four students in grade 5, one student in grade 6, and two students in grade 7; Math: three students in grade 4) did not transfer their answers from their MCAS question booklet to their MCAS answer booklet. Consistent with our standard policies and protocols, the Department's Student Assessment Unit invalidated the scores for these students, since the incomplete tests would not be a valid measure of the students' abilities. When a student's test score is invalidated, it is no longer included in any aggregate summary of performance for the school.

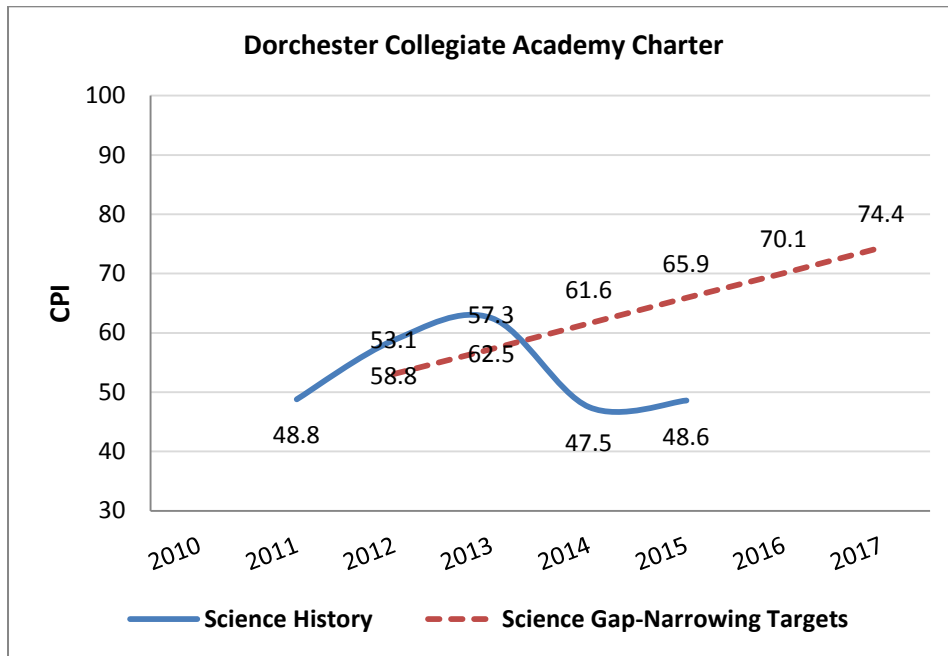
ELA CPI Chart



Mathematics CPI Chart



Science CPI Chart



In terms of median student growth percentiles (SGP) the chart below displays uneven growth over the past four years. In 2015, SGPs were below the state median for ELA but above the state median for mathematics.

		Student Growth Percentile			
		2012	2013	2014	2015
ELA SGP	<i>All</i>	63.5	40.0	57.0	46.0
	<i>High needs</i>	63.5	38.0	57.0	42.0
Math SGP	<i>All</i>	65.0	39.5	42.0	64.0
	<i>High needs</i>	66.0	37.0	41.5	58.0

In terms of the school's Accountability Plan performance, the Department approved DCACS's new accountability plan in April 2015. The school reported on its progress in terms of those measures in its Annual Report for 2014-15. The school met a majority of its measures: eight were met, four were partially met, and one measure was not met. Unmet or partially met measures related to school culture assessments, dissemination of best practices, and professional culture at the school.

Condition 9: By September 30, 2015, DCACS must provide written evidence of consistent implementation of its educational program in alignment with its charter, including any approved amendment(s). The Department must be able to corroborate such evidence through the site visit process.

Status: Met

As noted in Condition 4 above, the school decided to amend its educational program to provide the following components as central to its academic program: a standards-based

curriculum, differentiated instruction, a focus on literacy, and an assessment of genuine understanding. During the May 2015 site visit, the Department observed implementation of three of the four central components of the school's educational program as set forth in the amended charter. Specifically, in a majority of classrooms observed, instruction was derived from a standards-based curriculum, included differentiation techniques, and employed common literacy practices across classrooms. Evidence gathered by the Department during the site visit did not demonstrate that the school had fully implemented assessments of genuine understanding (the fourth component of the school's educational program).

Additional Evidence

As noted in the attached site visit report and data charts, attrition rates⁸ for all students and all subgroups have been high over the past several years. In particular, attrition rates for the 2013-14 and 2014-15⁹ school years were 32.6 percent and 30.2 percent respectively. School administrators have reported that many rising grade six students choose to attend other 6-12 schools. A grade-by-grade analysis of student attrition, however, shows high rates of attrition in a number of grade levels (4-6). Attrition rates from 2013-14 and 2014-15 for all students and subgroups (students with disabilities, English language learners, and high need students) are higher than almost all comparison district and charter schools in Boston (see attached attrition data). Attrition rates for 2015-16 have improved. However, at 14.4 percent, the 2015-16 attrition rate for all students remains among the highest rates of historic attrition for the Boston charter schools. See Attachment B: Attrition Data Detail for more information.

Over the seven-year duration of the school's history, DCACS's combined CPIs for all grades, in all three subject areas, have been the lowest, or among the lowest, of all the charter schools in Boston, and are well below state averages. Over this same time period, when compared to the CPI of the Boston Public Schools at the same grade levels, DCACS falls somewhere in the middle of the range of scores in ELA and science, with generally lower performance in mathematics.¹⁰ Over the past three years, DCACS's school percentile under the state's accountability system (23rd in 2013, 20th in 2014, and 23rd in 2015) also places DCACS's overall performance around or slightly below the middle of BPS elementary-middle schools. Direct comparison with Boston charter schools using the school percentile metric is more difficult, because only a few of Boston's other charter schools are classified as elementary-middle schools. Even so, over the past three years, no other Boston charter school has had a lower school percentile with the exception of Boston Green Academy Horace Mann Charter School, which is currently on probation.

⁸ The attrition rate represents the percentage of students who were enrolled at the end of one school year and did not remain in the same school in the following fall. Students in the school's highest grade are not included in the calculation.

⁹ The attrition rate for 2013-14 captures the number of students who left the school during the summer of 2013, before the school was placed on probation. The attrition rate for 2014-15 captures the number of students who left the school during the summer of 2014.

¹⁰ When compared to the CPI of schools serving the same grades in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), in mathematics, DCACS performs around or below the 25th percentile of schools, though there are some grade levels in some years for which DCACS's CPI approaches or exceeds the median. In ELA and science, DCACS's CPI is inconsistent when compared to BPS, with about an even mix of grades/years for which performance falls around or below the 25th percentile, around or at the median, and above the median.

Recommendation

Given this evidence, I recommend that the Board revoke the charter of DCACS. The school has failed to carry out a key component of its mission statement, which promises that the school will be a “rigorous” school whose mission is to prepare students for college. Student performance on the MCAS has been persistently low and has shown minimal improvement since the school was placed on probation. Attrition rates over the past three years have been the highest or among the highest of all charter schools in Boston, connoting student and family dissatisfaction with the school’s program.

The charter school was notified on November 24, 2015 of my intention to recommend that the Board revoke the school’s charter, and I personally met with the school’s executive director, board chair, and another board member on December 4, 2015 to hear their concerns about my recommendation. I will schedule a meeting at the school to explain the rationale for my recommendation and to hear from parents, teachers, and administrators. I also plan to send a letter to all families whose children currently attend the school to inform them of my recommendation and encourage them to exercise all possible options, should the school be closed at the end of June 2016. In addition, we will begin working with officials at the Boston Public Schools and other Boston charter schools to best position parents of DCACS students with opportunities to apply for admission to other public schools.

The Department has offered the school an opportunity to speak at the Board’s meeting on January 26, 2016. As noted above, the school’s board of trustees is also entitled, under state law, to request a formal administrative hearing if the Board votes its intent to revoke the school’s charter. If the school decides to avail itself of a hearing, the school’s board of trustees must notify the Board within fifteen days of receipt of formal notification of the Board’s intent to revoke the school’s charter.

In making this difficult decision, I would like to publicly acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the school’s founders, leaders, faculty, and staff. Establishing a charter school is a challenging task and we are always indebted to those who give so much of themselves in pursuit of expanding high-quality educational opportunities for children.

If you have any questions regarding this recommendation or require additional information, please contact Cliff Chuang, Associate Commissioner (781-338-3222); Jeff Wulfson, Deputy Commissioner (781-338-6500); or me.

Attachments: Attachment A: Updated Summary of Student Performance
Attachment B: Attrition Data Detail
Attachment C: 2014-15 Year Six Site Visit Report