



Connecticut's Charter Schools

Best Practices Annual Report

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Photographs throughout the report were retrieved from websites of Connecticut’s charter schools.

Connecticut's Charter Schools

In 1996, Connecticut's General Assembly and Governor enacted legislation establishing charter schools in the state and empowering the State Board of Education (SBE) as the sole authorizer of charter schools. As non-sectarian public schools, charter schools represent innovative school models utilizing diverse, research-based educational methods. Currently, there are 24 charter schools statewide. Located in 11 host districts, these schools serve over 9,200 students.

Connecticut has both state and local charter schools. A local charter school is a new school or part of a public school that is converted into a charter school and is approved by the local board of education and the SBE. As independent local education agencies, charter schools are granted significant autonomy in exchange for strict accountability and high expectations for school performance.

Every year, charter schools prepare and submit to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) annual reports summarizing school progress, strategies,

and results aligned to the CSDE's performance framework for charter schools. The annual reports also include certified financial audit statements of all revenues. The CSDE subsequently prepares a best practices report, providing data on the status and achievement of Connecticut's charter schools and identifying innovative and impactful practices.



Charter Schools Statewide

Amistad Academy

New Haven, CT

Achievement First Bridgeport Academy

Bridgeport, CT

Achievement First Elm City College Preparatory School

New Haven, CT

Achievement First Hartford Academy

Hartford, CT

Booker T. Washington Academy

New Haven, CT

Brass City Charter School

Waterbury, CT

Capital Preparatory Harbor Charter School¹

Bridgeport, CT

Common Ground High School

New Haven, CT

Elm City Montessori School²

New Haven, CT

Explorations Charter School

Winsted, CT

Great Oaks Charter School

Bridgeport, CT

Highville Charter School

Hamden, CT

Integrated Day Charter School

Norwich, CT

Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication

New London, CT

Jumoke Academy

Hartford, CT

New Beginnings Family Academy

Bridgeport, CT

Odyssey Community

Manchester, CT

Park City Prep Charter School

Bridgeport, CT

Path Academy

Windham, CT

Side By Side Charter School

Norwalk, CT

Stamford Charter School for Excellence¹

Stamford, CT

Stamford Academy

Stamford, CT

The Bridge Academy

Bridgeport, CT

Trailblazers Academy

Stamford, CT

¹ Charter approved in 2014; opened in fall 2015. ² Local charter school.

Charter School Performance Standards

The CSDE's charter school performance framework holds charter schools accountable for impact and results in four key areas: school performance; stewardship, governance, and management; student population; and legal compliance.

These four performance standards are consistent across all charter school accountability systems and processes,

including the initial application and granting of the charter, annual reporting, and charter renewal. The best practices highlighted in the following sections of this report represent promising practices across Connecticut's charter schools in these areas.

The Performance Standards are clearly defined on page 4.



STANDARD 1: SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Is the school a successful model resulting in strong student outcomes and a positive school climate?



STANDARD 2: STEWARDSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND MANAGEMENT

Is the school financially and organizationally healthy and viable?



STANDARD 3: STUDENT POPULATION

Is the school promoting equity by effectively attracting, enrolling, and retaining students, particularly among targeted populations?



STANDARD 4: LEGAL COMPLIANCE

Is the school acting in compliance with applicable laws and regulations?



Performance Standards Definitions

STANDARD 1: SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Based on Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System launched in the 2014-15 fiscal year, the new accountability system is a broad set of 12 indicators that help tell the story of how well a school is preparing its students for success in college, career, and life. The new system moves beyond test scores and graduation rates and instead provides a multifactor perspective of performance that will incorporate student growth over time.

STANDARD 2: STEWARDSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND MANAGEMENT

Financial Management - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to financial management and oversight expectations as evidenced by an annual independent audit.

Financial Reporting and Compliance - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to financial reporting and compliance requirements (e.g., submits reports on time, annual inventory of current assets and review of appropriate financial controls).

Financial Viability - The school demonstrates strong short and long-term fiscal viability evidenced by ability to meet enrollment projections; reasonability and certainty of revenue projections and funding sources; margins and cash flow; and debt levels.

Governance and Management - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to governance by its board, including training related to charter school governing council responsibilities during the term of the charter.

School Facility - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the school facilities, grounds, and transportation. Viable certificate of occupancy or other required building use authorization, health, safety and fire code requirements and maintaining and documenting requisite insurance coverage.

STANDARD 3: STUDENT POPULATION

Recruitment and Enrollment Process - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws; rules and regulations relevant to student populations; fair and equitable enrollment and recruitment processes; and transparent and open access.

Waitlist and Enrollment Data - The school's enrollment variance equals or exceeds 95 percent in the most recent year.

Demographic Representation - The student body reflects the demographics of the target population and/or surrounding communities. There is strong evidence of efforts to attract, enroll and retain special populations.

Family and Community Support - The school maintains strong parent satisfaction and community support.

School Culture and Climate - The school maintains clear policies and consistent implementation of policies. Ongoing behavior intervention monitoring, low frequency of suspensions and/or expulsions.

STANDARD 4: LEGAL COMPLIANCE

Open Meetings/Information Management - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the maintaining and handling of information; all Governing Board meetings are open and accessible to the public; proper and secure maintenance of education records and regulations; proper transferring of student records; proper and secure maintenance of testing material.

Students with Disabilities - Consistent with a state charter school's status as a Local Education Agency (LEA), the school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, (including but not limited to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, C.G.S.A. § 10-66ee(d)(3), and the school's policies and procedures governing the education of students with disabilities) relating to the education of students with identified disabilities and those suspected of having a disability. A state charter school is a Local Education Agency (LEA), except that state law designates the LEA of the child's residence responsible for the identification of student eligibility for special education services and determination of the special education services to be provided, pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to students attending a charter school.

English Learners - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, (including but not limited to Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), U.S. Department of Education authorities, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA)) relating to requirements regarding English Learners (ELs). Required policies related to the service of EL students.

Rights of Students - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the rights of students, including but not limited to, appropriate handling of student information, due process protections, and State nondiscrimination laws.

Teacher/Staff Credentials - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, relating to state certification requirements as modified by any waivers that have been granted. C.G.S.A. § 10-66dd, Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-145d-401.

Employee Rights - The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, relating to state certification requirements as modified by any waivers that have been granted. C.G.S.A. § 10-66dd, Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-145d-401.

Charter School Performance

Despite growth in the number of charter schools statewide and increases in the amount of students they serve, charter schools account for a small fraction of Connecticut's total student population. Many of Connecticut's charter schools maintain wait-lists of hundreds of students, demonstrating strong demand for charter schools that outpaces the sector's capacity to serve interested students and families. In 2015, over 5,000 students sought enrollment and were wait-listed. Charter schools account for just over one percent of the state's school children. By contrast, charter schools in all of Connecticut's neighboring states serve a higher proportion of students relative to the states' total number of students.

For two years, the CSDE has actively sought feedback regarding the Next Generation School Accountability System from district and school leaders, educators, state and national experts, CSDE staff, and many others. Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System launched in the 2014-15 school year and is a direct result of the extensive stakeholder engagement process. The new accountability system is a broad set of 12 indicators that help tell the story of how well a school is preparing its students for success in college, career, and life. The new system moves beyond test scores and graduation rates and instead provides a multifactor perspective of performance that will incorporate student growth over time.

As part of the Next Generation Accountability System, charter schools receive a report that provides a picture of how the school measures on all 12 of the indicators. The data will provide a more comprehensive holistic picture of student and school performance. In 2015, Connecticut's schools and districts received Accountability Index scores representing overall student performance on the 12 indicators, but student growth will not be measureable until 2016.

9,200+ Students

Connecticut's charter schools currently serve over 9,201 students.

1.5%

Charter schools account for 1.5 percent of Connecticut's school children.

5,000+

Of the 22 charter schools that conducted a lottery prior to the 2014-15 school year, 5,868 students were wait-listed. A total of 3,849 students were wait-listed in the 2013-14 school year.

To learn more about the Connecticut Next Generation Accountability System, visit the Performance and Accountability section of the State Department of Education's [website](#).



School Performance: Charter School Best Practices

Best Practice #1: Common Ground's Outdoor Laboratory for Learning

Common Ground has mobilized an urban farm within the City of New Haven as a laboratory for learning. Teachers have embedded site-based learning experiences in traditional academic courses. Students in Algebra 2 monitor pH of water and soil on site, building their knowledge of logarithmic scales, while also practicing data analysis, visualization, and presentation. Common Ground is ready to work with other urban public high schools. This year, Common Ground is hosting a series of learning exchanges, focused on building a community of practice among these like-minded schools. Learning exchanges will focus on teaching cities (using the urban environment as a learning lab), authentic assessment (moving toward mastery-based grading), city math (building culturally relevant math instruction by using math to tackle urban problems), and developing school-wide strategies to promote student leadership.

Practice #2: ISAAC's Intervention Block

ISAAC uses a professional learning system comprised of Data Inquiry Teams (DIT), Instructional Coaching and whole staff development to support student success. Tiered interventions are used to support student progress throughout the year. Literacy Interventionists and English Learner Instructors pushed into language arts classrooms to support students in the areas of reading and writing.

The growth of ISAAC students is the strongest indicator of the success. Over the course of one year, 95 percent of Grade 6, 89 percent of Grade 7 and 87 percent of Grade 8 students demonstrated growth through the benchmark assessments.

Best Practices #3: Brass City is taking a closer look into Science

Brass City Charter School (BCCS) entered into a unique partnership with the CT Science Center at the start of the 2014-15 school year. The purpose of this partnership is to integrate science programming based on the inquiry method with the school's existing curriculum. The project incorporates professional development for the BCCS staff. The goal for the three-year program is to develop an intensive curriculum, train teachers to implement it and to turn the project over to the teachers.

Evaluation of the program's impact is an important part of the work of the CT Science Center. Based on previous research and evaluation, it is anticipated that in addition to improving student's science inquiry and content skills, the program will support key areas including language, literacy, math and social abilities.

Please visit the CSDE's Charter School Office [website](#) for more best practices and to access schools' annual reports.



Stewardship, Governance, and Management: Charter School Best Practices

Best Practice #4: Elm City Montessori Internal Operations and Organizational Structure

Elm City Montessori's (ECMS) first year of operation focused on building relationships with key stakeholders and involving them in meaningful ways to help build a strong school - core to the school's mission and vision. The Board of Trustees held a parent forum and parent meetings to directly engage ECMS parents. Parents were invited to attend regular monthly Board of Trustees meetings. Through these efforts, the Board directly engaged approximately 30 percent of parents at the school. This has enabled the school to build trust with families and has given parents input into school planning and policy development. In the spring, ECMS parents identified a parent to serve of the ECMS Board of Trustees. The Board and School Leadership also worked closely with colleagues at the New Haven Public Schools; a New Haven Public Schools Board of Education member currently sits on the ECMS Board of Trustees.

Best Practice #5: Integrated Day's Foundation

A very involved group of parents have revitalized the Integrated Day Charter School (IDCS) Foundation. The goal of the Foundation is to create an endowment that will help fund school initiatives. Parent involvement is consistently evident through leadership roles, committee participation and classroom volunteers.

The IDCS Governing Board is very reflective and consistently striving to support the mission and vision of the school, improve instruction and safeguard the future of its unique school community.

Best Practice #6: Elm City College Preparatory Joint Governance Committee

The New Haven Boards have established a joint Governance Committee that meets regularly and undertakes key initiatives to strengthen governance practices in support of the schools' missions. One of the initiatives was to begin the review and update of the bylaws and Charter Management Agreement. The Board recognizes that a growing school has different needs and requirements of an expanding one, and the leadership is committed to keeping the governance, policies and procedures in line with a scaling organization.

Elm City College Preparatory (ECCP) board members attended the required board training sessions hosted by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) presented by the Connecticut Associate Board of Education (CABE) as well as participated in CSDE sessions led by the Department of Education's Performance Office. These steps represent a commitment to a stronger partnership with the CSDE to improve outcomes for all Achievement First students.

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Student Population: School Best Practices

Best Practice #7: Achievement First's Outreach Associates

Achievement First (AF) established a new role of Community Outreach Associate, with dedicated full-time resources in each of its cities, including Bridgeport. These team members devote a majority of their time to community outreach and engagement including visits to community and faith-based organizations. This practice deepens the schools' connection with the communities it serves and attracts applicants from high need groups including students with disabilities and English Learners.

Community Outreach Associates are also leading a new advocacy and community engagement initiative called "AF Ambassadors." Ambassadors are a group of parents, teachers and school staff from each region who lead and model strong engagement and advocacy practices on behalf of its schools and the communities they serve.

Achievement First Schools utilize an online application called SchoolMint which is used to capture lottery application forms and communicate results to families immediately following the lottery. The system includes lottery logic and wait-list management tools, ensuring fairness and accuracy in conducting the annual lottery.

Best Practice #8: Great Oaks Focus on Increased Student Diversity

Great Oaks (GO) is committed to serving special populations. In 2014-15, Great Oaks retained 100 percent of its students with IEPs or 504s and 93 percent of English Learners. GO's mission statement conveys a commitment to getting to know each scholar's underlying well-being - both academic and social-emotional. The Special Services team at GO works closely with the Bridgeport Public Schools and the Culture and Academic team work together to meet the needs of students identified with special needs.

For English Learners, supports include Teaching Assistants in every classroom who are trained to scaffold instruction and daily small group instruction through a tutorial program. The vast majority of GO's English Learners are from homes where Spanish or Portuguese is spoken.

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Student Population: Charter School Best Practices

Best Practice #9: Side By Side's Community Engagement Efforts

Side by Side's Parents as Teachers (PAT) program collaborated with Rehabilitation Associates of Fairfield, and a Birth-to-Three agency. Together they planned and conducted 32 bilingual early learning groups with 12 families. These play and learn groups offer activities to promote speech and social development for children with developmental delays and assist with referrals for further evaluation.

With the Spanish-speaking population growing in South Norwalk, Side by Side offered 24 free Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on Saturday mornings and served 15 Adult English Learners. The school collaborated with social service organizations to promote school-wide and community events providing translators and free childcare.

Additional collaboration with the Norwalk Public Schools occurs with provisions of summer programs such as Personal Fulfillment Camp, and school based programs with Norwalk High School Peace Works. Side by Side engages families through the DARE and Courage to Speak Substance Abuse Prevention Programs which serve students in Grades 5-8.

Best Practice #10: Highville's Partnerships

Highville seeks to develop partnerships with outside organizations giving students as many global and enrichment experiences as possible. Grade 6 and 7 students have the opportunity to have artists in residency through the Young Audience of CT program. Highville has a partnership with the New Haven Museum and Historical Society that develops workshops with the PreK3 – Kindergarten students.

Highville has a partnership with Quinnipiac University called the Rising Scholars Program that gives Grade 7 and 8 students the opportunity to participate in a summer enrichment program on Quinnipiac's Campus taught by Graduate students in the teacher training program. High school students have the opportunity to create real change by spending Fridays outside of the building addressing community problems. They also have access to state of the art technology with each student receiving a laptop needed to access their online courses with Edgenuity and Post University in Waterbury.

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Legal Compliance: Charter School Best Practices

Best Practices #11: New Beginnings Family Academy's fiscal changes

Although New Beginnings Family Academy has had 13 successful audits in its history with no hint of impropriety, the school put in place a number of procedural changes to ensure ongoing efficacy of school operations and sound fiscal management. Specifically, these changes include credit card purchases and increased board oversight of reconciliations and a monthly review of bank statement reconciliations by the board's treasurer. The school's website and Governing Board documents demonstrate that Governing Board meetings are open and accessible to the public. The Governing Board meeting schedule for the year and meeting agendas are posted on the school's website.

Best Practice #12: Trailblazers Academy

Trailblazer's Board completed a comprehensive training program with emphasis on governance, nepotism and conflict of interest. The Board approved by-laws, made changes to contractual procedures, oversight procedures and has strengthened the board by adding additional members.

Best Practices #13: English Learners and their instructors are working Side By Side

Per State law, Side By Side Charter School maintains a blind lottery and open enrollment process for all students, and includes sibling preference. Side By Side supports English Learners in the classroom through both push-in and pull-out support from the English as a second language (ESL) teacher and differentiated instruction provided by the classroom teacher. The ESL teacher comes into the general education classroom to support ELs during content-area lessons. Side by Side's English learner policies and procedures include native language communication, appropriate processes for and communication about exiting students from EL services, monitoring exited students, and mostly accurate procedures and communication regarding identification of ELs. Services are provided in the least restrictive environment with appropriate inclusion in the school's academic program, assessments (with appropriate accommodations).

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