

*Trailblazers Academy Charter
School
Annual Report*



2013-14

Trailblazers Academy

83 Lockwood Ave.
Stamford, CTY 06902
203-977-5690

info@trailblazersacademy.org
www.trailblazersacademy.org

Executive Director or Principal: Dr. Christopher Emmerson Pace – Director

Telephone Number: 203-977-5690

E-mail Address: cemmerson-pace@trailblazersacademy.org



Mission Statement

The mission of Trailblazers Academy is to successfully transition students to high school on track to go to college.

While maintaining small classes and fostering positive relationships, the school builds a strong academic foundation for each student by emphasizing core subjects, high academic standards, life skills, and character development.



Contents

Letter from the Director of the School and
Governing Board Chairperson..... 1

About Our School 2

Curriculum Design and Instructional
Method and Modification..... 3

School Goals 4

Efforts to Effectively Attract, Enroll and Retain Students
from Among High Need Populations 8

Financial Information 9

Best Practices 10

Status of Charter Renewal Findings
and Follow-Up Activities 13

Governance 14

Summary of Other Key Accomplishments..... 15

Attachments 16



About Our School

School Program

The Charter of Trailblazers Academy specifies that the procedure for admittance is through a lottery. The lottery is held at the end of May each year at Trailblazers Academy. This lottery is attended by prospective parents, community members, and witnesses. We typically receive double the number of applications as there are slots. Siblings of current Trailblazers Academy students receive sibling preference and are automatically enrolled into the school.

All applicant names are kept in a sealed envelope, placed into a bin, and selected randomly. Students are admitted according to their selection in the lottery. Those students who are not among the first 60 picked are placed on the waiting list according to their selection number. In August, the school holds another lottery for late applicants. All of these names are placed on the waiting list as well.

Recruitment

Trailblazers Academy actively recruits students through a variety of outlets. City-wide mailings throughout the year to 5th grade families. Elementary school visits are conducted to meet with 5th graders and teachers to introduce the school program. Advertisements are printed in local newspapers with dates of upcoming Open House and Information Session nights.

Transportation

Trailblazers Academy students are provided transportation to school by First Student Bus Company.

Student Information 2012-13 School Year

number of applications received [by grade as of date of lottery]

Grade Six

Total by lottery date: 66
Total by residence: 63, Stamford; 2, Bridgeport; 1 Norwalk

Grade Seven

Total by lottery date: 7
Total by residence: 6 Stamford; 1 Norwalk

Grade Eight

Total by lottery date: 6
Total by residence: 4 Stamford; 5 Bridgeport

number of students on waiting list [by grade as of October 1, 2012]

Grade Six

Total: 6
Total by residence: 6, Stamford

Grade Seven

Total: 2
Total by residence: 2 Stamford

2013-14 School Year

number of applications received [by grade as of date of lottery]

Grade Six

Total by lottery date: 61
Total by residence: 57, Stamford; 1, Bridgeport; 2 Norwalk

Grade Seven

Total by lottery date: 11
Total by residence: 10 Stamford; 1 Bridgeport

Grade Eight

Total by lottery date: 11
Total by residence: 10 Stamford; 1 Norwalk

number of students on waiting list [by grade as of October 1, 2013]

Grade Six

Total: 0
Total by residence: 0

Grade Seven

Total: 1
Total by residence: 1 Stamford

Grade Eight

Total: 2
Total by residence: 2 Stamford.



Curriculum Design and Instructional Method and Modification

Brief Summary

Statement of Curriculum Philosophy

The written curriculum at Trailblazers Academy represents commitment to the core values of the organization and the commitment to our belief that all students can learn at high levels of academic rigor. The curriculum balances the unique learning needs of individual students as well as our student body as a whole with the priority learning needs of our students. Based on the Squires model of curriculum design, our curriculum is aligned to state standards for learning and grade-level expectations for all Connecticut students in grades 6-8. The curriculum is also aligned with our school's five community learning goals, which are detailed below. This multi-tiered alignment ensures that our students are being prepared for high school with a 21st-century skill set, are being challenged at high levels of thinking, and are being engaged in their education as active participants rather than as receptacles of an institutionally relayed knowledge base.

The Trailblazers Academy curriculum is designed to encourage teachers to use research-based teaching strategies that are proven effective in raising student achievement and engaging students with higher-order thinking skills. It is also designed to allow our teachers to build on the unique strengths of our students and engage them in a variety of learning modalities so that all of our students are presented with diverse opportunities to learn. In this way we can best assure that every Trailblazers Academy student can actively participate in the learning process.

The Trailblazers Academy curriculum is balanced across grade levels so that students do not repeat content but engage with new and increasingly complex skills and strategies as they progress through the grades. Our curriculum is balanced across content areas so that students explore concepts through different lenses as they move between subject areas. Our curriculum also is balanced so that students build skills as they acquire knowledge and develop dispositions that enable them to thrive as scientific, historical, mathematical, artistic and linguistic thinkers.

In addition to state standards for learning in grades 6-8, the Trailblazers Academy curriculum is aligned to tenets of the school's vision of a well-rounded, educated person who engages in critical thinking—what we refer to as our Community Learning Goals, detailed below:

Trailblazers Academy Community Learning Goals

Making Connections

Students will construct a body of knowledge that is built upon the notion that throughout the world people, places, events, ideas, actions, philosophies, texts, human expressions and multimedia are interconnected through cause and effect, systems, patterns, relationships and other commonalities. A critical thinker understands and recognizes these connections and by accessing this body of knowledge can actively explore the possible connections between unfamiliar concrete and abstract agents.

Communicating Effectively

Students will develop the ability to communicate and substantiate ideas and thoughts by means of written, verbal and visual media and artistic expressions. Through the study of linguistic and nonlinguistic human expressions and active listening skills, and using technology as a communication tool, students will increase the effectiveness of their communication, understanding that information can be communicated and interpreted in a variety of ways. Students will learn to communicate in writing using Standard Written English.

Problem Solving and Reasoning

Students will develop the ability to reason and solve both theoretical and practical problems in the world beyond the school walls. Students will learn to look at the disparate elements that comprise problems and, by accessing a body of previously learned knowledge, use reasoning and logic to propose solutions to philosophical, practical, scientific, social and mathematical problems. A critical thinker will develop questions for investigation and can use multiple strategies for problem solving, including rationalization, experimentation, systems analysis, troubleshooting, common sense, and inductive and deductive reasoning.

Discovering and Synthesizing Information

Students will develop the ability to rationalize the need for information and decide the best resources to acquire it. As a goal of information literacy in the 21st Century, students will explore the ethical discovery and use of information from both primary and secondary sources and make decisions regarding the best way(s) to synthesize information into a new and original product. A critical thinker will explore multiple channels of research, choose the one(s) most appropriate to the situation, and combine the information with original thought.

Reading for Understanding

Students will build on existing reading strategies to explore the world through text, language and nonlinguistic representations. Reading strategies focus on fluency, vocabulary, decoding, and comprehension. Essential for active reading is the ability to access background knowledge so that students can make connections with what they read. Combined with direct, explicit comprehension instruction and contextual decoding strategies, students will develop the skills of an active reader using both traditional and online texts and non-text sources, such as graphs and works of art. Critical thinkers engage with what they read as metacognitive readers and reflect on their own learning.

Trailblazers Academy Vision Statement

Trailblazers Academy will provide students, families and staff the structure, support and opportunity to build a collaborative community invested in the growth of our students as role models and 21st-century leaders. As we continuously adapt to best achieve this goal, the students' academic, emotional and social development will be at the center of the decision-making process.

We have a school environment and culture that creates enthusiasm for learning, where all students are challenged to embrace the value of learning for its own sake. Our students will:

- expand critical-thinking and problem-solving skills
- find the courage to express their own views
- advocate for the pursuit of their goals

- understand their connection to the world beyond the school walls
- appreciate the diversity present within their own lives and their communities
- develop a realistic and positive self-image, and
- explore their aptitudes, interests, and special talents.

These are the aspirations for our school, our families and our community.

Year-long curriculum is broken down into units paced throughout the year, with each unit having an overall description and a number of significant performance tasks that students will complete and on which they will be assessed. Teachers build daily instruction with these tasks as the end result.

Additionally, there are eight guiding principles that each unit of study follows:

1. **Alignment to Standards:** Each unit of study is aligned to the Common Core State Standards, adopted by Connecticut in 2010. Additionally, social studies, science, art, and physical education are aligned to state content and performance standards within those disciplines. Science is further aligned to state standards of scientific inquiry.
2. **Learner Expectations:** Each unit of study details the specific grade-level learner expectations for the students at the completion of each unit. These learner expectations are followed by a number in parentheses that indicates Bloom’s taxonomy level. Each unit of study contains learner expectations at each of the six levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.
3. **Pacing:** Each unit of study is mapped out according to the order in which the skills and concepts are sequenced along a continuum of development. Units are paced to allow the students the best opportunity to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills necessary before moving to the next unit.
4. **Embedded Literacy:** Each unit of study is embedded with essential literacy skills that 21st-Century students will need when they enter high school. Teachers engage students in literacy activities during class, and literacy is embedded into each unit’s significant tasks.
5. **Teaching Strategies:** Each unit of study documents the research-based teaching strategies that classroom teachers will use when instructing the units and engaging the students in the learning. Additionally, each unit documents common misconceptions that students have when learning the material.
6. **Learning Activities:** Each unit of study documents the primary cognitive experiences that help learners perceive, process, rehearse, store and transfer new knowledge or skills.
7. **Assessments:** Each unit of study documents the ways that the school measures and monitors a learner’s progress and guides instructional decisions. The range of student assessments is detailed in the next section.
8. **Resources:** Each unit of study details the print and, digital and multimedia texts and resources that support the teaching and learning for that unit.

Student Assessment Plan

Trailblazers Academy assesses student growth and achievement in a variety of ways in order to make instructional decisions that maximize student growth. This balanced approach ensures that student growth is measured in a variety of ways that capture the diversity of learning experiences to which our students are exposed. Additionally, as our students learn in a vast multitude of ways, our students are assessed in a variety of ways that provide an equitable system of measurement.

Diagnostic Assessments

- **Roe/Burns Informal Reading Inventory:** Trailblazers Academy assesses every student at the beginning of the school year using an informal reading inventory that measures students' reading comprehension with questions about implicit explicit information from short reading passages. The assessment places students at instructional, frustration, and independent reading levels. All students are re-assessed mid-year and at years end to determine grade-level growth.
- **DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency:** Trailblazers Academy assesses every new student using the DIBELS NWF assessment to determine decoding needs.
- **STAR Reading:** Trailblazers Academy assesses every student at the beginning of the school year using a computerized standardized reading assessment. STAR is a cloze reading activity and places students at a grade level equivalency. The students are also assessed using STAR at year end to measure grade-level growth.
- **STAR Math:** Trailblazers Academy assesses every student at the beginning of the school year using a computerized standardized reading assessment. STAR math places students at a grade level equivalency. The students are also assessed using STAR at year end to measure grade-level growth.

Formative Assessments

- **Common Formative Assessments (CFAs):** Classroom teachers use a variety of common formative assessments to measure student growth in short time periods (as often as daily or weekly). The CFAs are administered to every student equitably, and the teachers use the results of the CFAs to make daily adjustments to teaching strategies.
- **Daily Do Nows and Exit Tickets:** Classroom teachers use a variety of Do Now and Exit Ticket formative assessments to check for understanding of the day's discrete objectives.
- **Interim Assessments:** Every student takes an interim assessment every six weeks based on the skills and content being taught in their core classes throughout the year. Students are not graded on these assessments. Rather, the scores from the assessments are used to make instructional decisions moving forward.

Performance Assessments

- **Significant Tasks:** Each unit contains between two and five significant tasks that the students will complete both during class time and out of class as homework assignments. The purpose of the significant task is to connect the students' learning with our five community learning goals and to use a rigorous assessment of the standards that requires students to call on a variety of skills from multiple domains, oftentimes transferring skills from one subject area to another.
- **Science Lab Reports:**

Summative Assessments

At the teachers' discretion, students are assessed using a variety of summative tests and quizzes based on the content of the curriculum. **Every** student takes a final exam at year-end in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social studies. Summative assessments are modified for students with IEPs to ensure that we are measuring accurately the students who have had accommodations and modifications to their academic programs.

Benchmark 1: The amount of students scoring below proficiency will decrease by ten percent in reading on the CMT.

Benchmark 2: The amount of students scoring below proficiency will decrease by ten percent in math on the CMT.

Progress Towards Meeting Goal/Improvements Needed

According to the 2013 CMT, Trailblazers Academy did not meet safe harbor. That said, the school still made significant progress in many areas. Specifically, vertical scale score growth continued to outpace the district and the state averages in reading and in math. In our 6th grade 31% were above proficiency in math, 40% above proficiency in reading and 18% were above proficiency in writing. In the 7th grade 48% were above proficiency in math, 55% in reading and 43% in writing. In our 8th grade, 52% were above proficiency in math, 66% in reading and 49% in writing.

IV. Accomplishment of Mission, Purpose and Specialized Focus.

GOAL A: *Create a school climate where each student is valued for his/her talents, contributions, and unique potential and is empowered to use them.*

Measurable Objective A.1: Students will solve problems and resolve internal and external academic and social conflicts by using internal control mechanisms.

Measurement Tool: Records of visits to “Problem Solving” room

Benchmark 1: Students will decrease their number of appearances in our Problem Solving room by 50% (based on September/October and May/June comparison).

Benchmark 2: Recidivism of returning students will decrease by 50% from year to year.

Progress Towards Meeting Goal/Improvements Needed

The September/October 2012-2013 average for daily visits to Problem Solving was 9 visits. The May/June 2011 daily average was 8 visits, representing a 12% reduction. Each year our visits to problem solving diminish. We use this facility as a last resort and insist that each visit to problem solving be following by a life space interview. This helps reduce the recidivism rate.

Measurable Objective A.2: Students will be able to choose how they present material they have learned to encourage individual expression and the use of each student’s strengths, both in the classroom and in the school at large.

Measurement Tool: Records of curricular planning/assessment

Benchmark 1: All students will participate in four community/school presentations in which they will be responsible for teaching a character trait that is important to our school community.

Benchmark 2: All students will participate in at least one “School-Wide Project,” which groups students across grades and ability levels in the study of a “real-world” issue that affects us all.

Progress Towards Meeting Goal/Improvements Needed

The school upheld its tradition of having each homeroom present at school-wide assemblies that take place each Friday. Students prepare and perform presentations on positive character traits, including honesty, responsibility, respect, motivation, integrity, fortitude, and perseverance, among others.

In March Trailblazers Academy performed its 12th annual African American History Presentation. This has become a rich tradition for the school and has included topics such as Connecticut’s complicity in the slave trade and the evolution of voting and education rights. In 2012-13, the school focused on Black history from the perspective of influential figures in the arts and sciences. Each group was responsible for a specific discipline (e.g., technology, music, economics, law) and designing a presentation that showcased the achievements of African-Americans in that discipline throughout history.

Measurable Objective A.3: Students will be celebrated by the entire school for their special achievements.

Measurement Tool: Records of Friday “Town Meetings”

Benchmark 1: At the end of each week, the entire school will participate in “Town Meeting,” which consists of the following: (1) Students will be nominated and recognized weekly with the Lion Award (emblematic of achievement in academics, behavior, community service and leadership); (2) One homeroom each week will be presented with the preparedness award (emblematic of achievement in dress code, homework, attendance, punctuality and number of disciplinary incidents); and (3) the school will celebrate student birthdays from the preceding week.

Progress Towards Meeting Goal/Improvements Needed

Each week the school nominates selected students who have exemplified the qualities we hold near and dear. In addition, homerooms compete for preparedness awards each week. All homerooms won the award at least once and 40 students received the “Lion of the week”. At graduation, an exemplary 8th grade student was awarded the “Lion of the Year” based on staff nominations.

Efforts to Reduce Racial, Ethnic and Economic Isolation to Increase the Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Student Body.

GOAL A: *The Trailblazers Academy student body will accurately reflect the rich diversity of our community, while serving those students who are most in need of our specialized approach.*

Measurable Objective A: At least 15% of the school will be non-Hispanic and non-African American.

Measurement Tool: Public School Information System Data

Benchmark 1: Student recruiting will occur in venues where we can target those students in need of our services that are also non-Hispanic and non-African-American.

Progress Towards Meeting Goal/Improvements Needed

As of October 1, 2013 3% of our students were both non-Hispanic and non-African American. The school recognizes the need to attract a diverse student body that represents the unique diversity of the surrounding area. Each year, school representatives visit all of the elementary schools in Stamford and present information about the school to Stamford's 5th graders and their teachers in an effort to build interest in the school among the children themselves. Additionally, the school holds several open house information nights throughout the year, advertised to the parents of 5th-grade students in Stamford. Based on self-reports from families, more than 15 students in 2012-2013 applied to Trailblazers Academy based on the elementary school presentations. We will continue to present to the fifth grade classes at each elementary school in Stamford, and we will place a greater emphasis on diversity in the materials we publish. The school also will be broadening its outreach efforts into the Bridgeport and Norwalk communities in the 2013-2014 school year.

Measureable Objective B: Students will be exposed to diverse perspectives and worldviews through the written curriculum and experiential learning beyond the school walls.

Measurement Tool: Written Curriculum/Field Trips

Benchmark 1: Students will produce evidence (artifacts) of class work that focuses on diversity and an exposure to the world outside of the school walls. .

In the 2012-2013 school year, students were exposed to a diversity of thought and cultures through both the written curriculum and extra-curricular activities. For example, 6th-grade students went to the Silvermine Arts Center and took docent-guided tours of the art exhibits. The 7th grade students, studied food preservation, raised money throughout the school community to be able to offer a micro-loan to a woman in Africa to start a home business through the Kiva Foundation. Eighth-grade students visited the World Trade Center memorial in October while studying a unit on oil politics and the Middle East. As part of our annual holiday celebration, students were grouped with students from all different grade levels and presented the challenge of learning about a winter holiday from somewhere outside of the U.S. and teaching the rest of the school about that holiday through a short presentation.

Our school was created to provide an environment of learning for the most struggling students. As such, we continue to attract the city's lowest performing students. The profile for the incoming 6th graders was:

- 88% were reading at a 3rd-grade or below reading level
- 76% were computing at a 3rd grade or below math level
- 42% have IEPs
- 92% qualify for free/reduced lunch

(b) students who receive free or reduced priced lunches pursuant to federal laws and regulations,

The State average for LEA students below the poverty level is 34%. Our school serves 90% free and reduced.

(c) students with a history of behavioral and social difficulties,

The students who attend Trailblazers Academy tend to come with significant trauma histories and difficulties adapting to normative schooling. More than 25% of students have involvement with the judicial system and DCF.

(d) students identified as requiring special education or

Stamford Academy personnel routinely meet with representatives of Stamford, Bridgeport, and Norwalk Public Schools to share offerings and explain services available for students with disabilities. Once enrolled, SA continues the process to ensure the individualized needs of students are met.

(e) students who are English language learners.

The school did not have any identified ELL students in the 2012-2013 school year.

Describe the school's efforts to comply with the law. Detail how the school will comply or increase efforts to comply with the law. Charter schools will need to report on these outcomes as part of the charter renewal process. As such, provide data in your reporting which supports the narrative.



Improvements Planned for 2014-15:



Efforts to Effectively Attract, Enroll and Retain Students from Among High Need Populations

Pursuant to Section 10-66bb(g) of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) describe efforts the charter school has made to effectively attract, enroll and retain students from among the following populations.

- (a) students with a history of low academic performance,
- (b) students who receive free or reduced priced lunches pursuant to federal laws and regulations,
- (c) students with a history of behavioral and social difficulties,
- (d) students identified as requiring special education or
- (e) students who are English language learners.

Describe the school’s efforts to comply with the law. Detail how the school will comply or increase efforts to comply with the law. Charter schools will need to report on these outcomes as part of the charter renewal process. As such, provide data in your reporting which supports the narrative.

Our school was created to provide an environment of learning for the most struggling students. As such, we continue to attract the city’s lowest performing students. The profile for the incoming 6th graders was:

- 92% were reading at a 3rd-grade or below reading level
- 86% were computing at a 3rd grade or below math level
- 33% have IEPs
- 93% qualify for free/reduced lunch

- (b) students who receive free or reduced priced lunches pursuant to federal laws and regulations,

The State average for LEA students below the poverty level is 34%. Overall, our school serves 90% free and reduced.

- (c) students with a history of behavioral and social difficulties,

The students who attend Trailblazers Academy tend to come with significant trauma histories and difficulties adapting to normative schooling. More than 25% of students have involvement with the judicial system and DCF.

- (d) students identified as requiring special education or

Our school works closely with Stamford and neighboring districts to identify students with IEPs who might benefit from our small classes, structured environment, and focus on literacy remediation and social/emotional skill building.

- (e) students who are English language learners.

The school did not have any identified ELL students in the 2013-2014 school year.

Financial Information for 2014-15 Fiscal Year

*Traiblazers Academy
(In Whole Numbers)*

	Unaudited <u>FY 13-14</u>	<u>FY 12-13</u>
Revenues		
Operating Revenue		
Individual Donations	618,209	689,163
Foundation	207,890	111,158
Corporate Donations	97,024	134,100
Federal Grants	147,025	187,949
State Grants	1,705,536	1,718,477
City Grants	588,282	585,274
Interest Income	183	740
Miscellaneous Income	79,558	67,252
In-Kind Income	<u>917,213</u>	<u>917,115</u>
Total Operating Revenue	<u>4,360,920</u>	<u>4,411,228</u>
Total Revenues	<u>4,360,920</u>	<u>4,411,228</u>
Personnel Services		
Salaries and Wages		
Teachers Payroll	1,097,436	1,188,873
EdAsst/Fellow Payroll	84,949	94,990
Administrative Payroll	311,662	324,757
Other Payroll	<u>24,770</u>	<u>59,955</u>
Total Salaries and Wages	1,518,817	1,668,575
Fringe & Indirect		
HRA Payments	0	900
HSA ER Contribution	8,945	0
Other	<u>797,930</u>	<u>808,775</u>
Total Fringe & Indirect	<u>806,875</u>	<u>809,675</u>
Total Personnel Services	<u>2,325,692</u>	<u>2,478,250</u>
Other Than Personnel Services		
Discretionary OTPS		
Training/Conferences	1,340	2,077
Student Activities/Field	20,613	17,354
Trips		
Prof.Serv./Consulting	14,338	3,240
Equipment-Office	106	0
Gas	2,228	1,991
Travel Expense	269	2,805

Food	7,271	13,763
Office Supplies	16,332	16,615
Instructional Supplies	36,100	17,411
Other Supplies	0	0
Postage	11,468	5,221
Advertising	4,390	603
Dues & Subscriptions	3,750	0
Computers - H/S	6,887	30,059
Clothing	2,560	9,144
Participants' Incentives	1,060	120
Other Program	<u>0</u>	<u>6,428</u>
Expenses		
Total Discretionary OTPS	128,712	126,832
Non-Discretionary OTPS		
Auditing	14,650	21,200
	5,723	5,917
Bookkeeping/Accounting		
Professional	10,450	0
Services/Consulting-IT		
Family Advocacy	352,227	319,523
Services		
Depreciation Expense	6,995	11,433
Vehicle Maintenance	1,839	1,503
School Supplied Food	123,306	132,596
Maintenance/Cleaning	44,287	23,679
Supplies		
Rent	916,413	916,413
Utilities	180,434	154,306
Maintenance & Repair	126,596	46,630
Telephone	3,791	6,408
Insurance	82,917	94,560
(Liab,Auto,D&O)		
Copy Expenses	13,646	12,691
Financial Expenses	1,271	3,181
Gift in-kind Expense	<u>800</u>	<u>702</u>
Total Non-Discretionary	<u>1,885,345</u>	<u>1,750,742</u>
OTPS		
Total Other Than Personnel	<u>2,014,057</u>	<u>1,877,574</u>
Services		
Total Expenses	<u>4,339,749</u>	<u>4,355,824</u>
Net Income	<u>21,171</u>	<u>55,404</u>



Best Practices

NOTE: Pursuant to Section 10-66cc(b)(5), you will report the Best Practices employed at your school that contribute significantly to the academic success of your students. Per Section 10-66ii, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) must annually publish all charter school Best Practices to each public school superintendent and the board chair of each charter school.

The CSDE must compile, disseminate and promote practices for educators and families with the goal of improving educational opportunities for all children.

DIRECTIONS: The CSDE has identified research-based practices connected to standards found in successful schools that improve student performance. Below is a list of three standards, including effective practices associated with each standard. Choose **one** standard and describe the practices employed at your school during the 2013-14 school year. Only the most effective practices employed by the school that contribute significantly to the academic success of students should be considered. Refer to the indicators below as guidelines for your response. *Limit your response to two pages or less*, single-spaced, 12 point font. Please review your school's Best Practices from previous years on the CSDE's Web site: http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/equity/charter/best_practicespage.pdf to ensure that you are using the proper format.

1. **Monitoring, Accountability and Assessment:** In successful schools, teaching and learning are continually adjusted on the basis of data collected through a variety of valid and reliable methods that indicate student progress and needs. The assessment results are interpreted and applied appropriately to improve individual student performance, the instructional program and curriculum.

Indicators

These research-based indicators represent qualities found in successful schools;

- The goals for student performance are clear and explicit.
- A variety of valid and reliable assessments, which are free from cultural, racial and gender bias, are used to evaluate student performance.
- Assessments are well designed and aligned with state standards, school curriculum and classroom instructional methods.
- There is a strong, continuous link among curriculum, teaching and assessment.
- Assessment methods, procedures and the amount of time allocated to assessment is in balance with the time allocated to instruction. All are closely monitored so that the maximum amount of useful data and information is obtained in the most efficient manner.
- Modifications are made, as needed, in assessment methods and procedures to address special needs of students.
- When appropriate, assessment instruments are accompanied by clear descriptions of how the quality of student performance will be assessed and decisions can be made to improve the performance of all students.
- There is sufficient time allotted to interpret and use data; use data and other information related to student performance of individual students/groups of students over time, so that decisions can be made to improve the performance of all students.

- There is sufficient time allotted to interpret and use data and other information related to student performance for the improvement of instruction and curriculum.
- Assessment provides information to both the students and their parents on a timely basis so that they will become active participants in improving their child's performance.
- Teachers and administrators receive training in how to create, use and interpret the results of tests and assessments to make changes that improve the performance of all students.

2. **Curriculum and Instruction:** High-performing schools have vertically and horizontally aligned curricula with core learning expectations to improve the performance of all students. Students achieve high standards through rigorous, challenging learning. Staff delivers an aligned curriculum and implements research-based teaching and learning strategies. Students are actively involved in their learning through inquiry, in-depth learning and performance assessments.

Indicators

These research based indicators represent qualities found in successful schools:

- Instruction is personalized and emphasizes motivation, as well as knowledge and skills.
- All classes have a current standards-based curriculum that promotes enduring understanding of concepts and promotes learning across the disciplines, connections to the larger world and skills for lifelong learning.
- Curriculum reflects clear and explicit goals, and promotes consistency and continuity of learning to improve student performance.
- Curriculum supports the practices of differentiated instruction and provides a continuous improvement model of teaching and learning to improve the performance of all students.
- Curriculum promotes the students as motivated, constructive, self-reflective learners who take responsibility for improving their performance.
- Teachers are involved in the development and review of curriculum using curriculum standards, student performance and the needs of lifelong learning as a focus for the review and revisions.
- Teachers are engaged in a variety of professional development activities based on curricular goals and student performance.
- The school system supports a systematic, systemic and sustained process of curriculum improvement and implementation, and provides appropriate instructional materials to implement the curriculum.
- All staff can describe the degree to which student performance is improving.
- Supervision, through ongoing classroom visitations by the principal, supports best instructional practices.

Formative Assessments and Data Teams

Like many schools across Connecticut, Trailblazers Academy will continue to follow the state-wide initiative to improve student performance by developing clear, essential standards and better aligning classroom assessments to those standards. Students continue to enter sixth grade at Trailblazers Academy two to five grade levels below in reading and math. By creating clear objectives, designing pre/post formative assessments, and collecting data, we will be able to better pinpoint effective instructional methods and identify students who are not making achievement gains.

This process was started in the 2004-05 school year with staff members attending trainings in Making Standards Work and Data-Driven Decision Making and continued through the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years as staff was trained in Formative Assessments, Data Teams, and Data-Driven Decision Making. In 2010-2011, staff was trained in rubrics and looking at student work. In the 2010-2011 school year, teachers met weekly for data team meetings to analyze discrete data on student achievement on specific grade-level expectations. Data teams met weekly for 60 minutes, with rotating content areas so that each content area was addressed every four weeks (math, science, English and social studies), allowing the weeks in between content focus to change instruction and target students not making gains and also formatively assess the students again and analyze the data from the assessments,

Weekly Curricular Supervision Meetings

Based on the social work model of having weekly clinical supervision meetings, our Co-Directors meet with each teacher for a minimum of 30 minutes per week. During this time the Co-Directors are able to ask questions about lesson plans, choices of modes of instruction and needed support. This time is also an opportunity for the teacher to bounce ideas off a master teacher and converse about both struggles and successes in the classroom. Coupled with classroom observations, this is a professional development tool that is meaningful and consistent throughout the year.

Classroom Observations

During the 2012-2013 school year, Dr. Emmerson-Pace performed four clinical classroom observations per teacher throughout the year. Teachers were required to complete pre- and post-observation self-assessments in order to determine thoughts and feelings that have an impact on pedagogical practices. Dr. Emmerson-Pace used an observation framework based on the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching with research-proven indicators that were standardized for the school based on the needs of the students. Teachers met with Dr. Emmerson-Pace following each observation to debrief the experience and were required to implement instructional improvements based on observed data. Teachers were also encouraged to observe their colleagues during release time to understand pedagogical practices in other content areas and grade levels.

Readers Workshop

In the summer of 2009, the Dr. Emmerson-Pace and four teachers attended a summer institute at Columbia University's Teacher's College on the Readers Workshop. These individuals brought the model back to the school and implemented it in the school's English classes with great success. The model also was used to further build a culture of literacy in the school as other faculty members attended the institutes and implemented the workshop model in their classrooms. Dr. Emmerson-Pace continued to provide professional development in this model to the teachers throughout the 2012-2013 school year.

Language! Literacy Remediation

In the 2012-2013 school year, the school began a three-year initiative in a research-based literacy remediation program called Language! All students take 90 minutes of literacy remediation using the Language curriculum each day,

3. **Curriculum and Instruction:** High-performing schools have aligned curriculum with core learning expectations to improve the performance of all students. Students achieve high standards through

rigorous, challenging learning. Staff delivers an aligned curriculum and implements research-based teaching and learning strategies. Students are actively involved in their learning through inquiry, in-depth learning, and performance assessments.

During the school year 2012-13, we implemented standards based instructional practices, aligned with the common core and state standards. Born out of our curriculum restructure and rewrite, the school modified the curriculum to address the needs of 21st century learners. Specifically, we made sure that all content areas were equipped with a curriculum document that was relevant, standards based, and one that would be a usable, ever evolving, living document.

The new curriculum document was formatted to be more user friendly, and to include 8 specific tenets for Best Practice:

- Alignment to Standards – Common – core and state standards were aligned using the crosswalk document provided by the SDE.
- Learner Expectations – statements about what students should know were clearly defined and expectations have been outlined in the document. Included in this section are the Blooms Taxonomy tenets.
- Pacing – The order in which skills and concepts are sequenced along with a continuum of development were developed and prioritized.
- Embedded Literacy – Reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and presenting across all content areas is now present in all subject areas.
- Teaching Strategies – The plan for and actions are by teachers to engage students in the learning process have been clearly defined. These include common misperceptions and strategies for dealing with these misperceptions. The curriculum includes clear and concise examples for teacher use. Importantly, there are placeholders for teachers to mark new, improved strategies.
- Learning Activities – Have been changed to cognitive experiences that help learners perceive, process, rehearse, store, transfer new knowledge and skills. Performance tasks now allow students to demonstrate what they know and what they can do.
- Assessments – The method to measure and monitor our students progress and guide instructional decisions, modifications has been rewritten. Now teachers understand the rationale behind the assessments and include the diagnostic, formative and summative assessments (in the curriculum document).
- Resources – Each content area has suggested literature, teaching strategies, books, internet sources and other source document locations.

Simply stated, the document and in turn the pedagogical practices have more rigor. Additionally teachers are involved in the continued systematic, systemic and sustained process of curriculum improvement and implementation, based on practice, professional development and data driven evidence. Our teachers are involved in a variety of school-based, purchased services and other professional development opportunities that will serve to enhance instruction.

During the eight-hour school day, the teachers at Trailblazers Academy each devote six-and-a-half hours of the day to classroom instruction. The school has two special education teachers who co-teach on a rotating schedule in every classroom over the course of each week to service the high number of students with IEPs. Students with IEPs are rarely pulled out of the general education classrooms as we believe that inclusive learning environments respect the wide diversity of our students and promote

their ability to learn from each other. Classes at Trailblazers Academy are highly differentiated to address the personal needs of the students, and teachers document differentiation in their daily lesson plans, which are reviewed weekly by the co-directors.

The curriculum identifies specific and measureable learning expectations for each unit in each grade. These learning expectations become the foundation for instructional daily objectives and can be measured on a daily basis through common formative assessments. Each unit in a specific course in a specific grade scaffolds skills and knowledge throughout the course of the unit, and each subsequent unit throughout the year in any subject area builds on the previous unit's knowledge and skill development on a continuum. This skill and knowledge continuum also works vertically as the curriculum for each content area (e.g., mathematics) relies on the previous grade's learning to develop enduring understandings that build as students become better critical thinkers and information analysts over the course of three years at Trailblazers Academy.

Best practices in Readers Workshop and Writers Workshop encourage the teachers to daily confer with students to provide targeted instruction and support that build students' individual skills, based on their unique needs. This model supports, not replaces, whole-class instruction. Teachers keep running records of student progress and use that data in data teams to evaluate weekly progress of students. Additionally, these teaching practices are used in all classes, not just in language arts and literacy classes.

Classroom observations at Trailblazers Academy are performed using a metric developed using the Common Core of Teaching. Dr. Emmerson-Pace conducts a minimum of four clinical classroom observations on every teacher each year. These observations become a part of year-long evaluation procedures for the teachers and provide the foundation for identifying teacher professional development needs. Additionally, each teacher has a personal growth and development plan that is tied to overarching school targets and their own development needs and goals for each school year. Dr. Emmerson-Pace further identifies schoolwide professional development needs and provides that development for the teachers in weekly hour-long faculty meetings every Friday throughout the school year. Additionally, every teacher meets weekly with one of the co-directors for a supervision meeting where needs and supports are identified and addressed.

Curriculum improvement and development is an ongoing and persistent process at Trailblazers Academy. In addition to the most recent curriculum revisions for the Common Core Standards, the school has a systematic procedure for curriculum review that involves both teacher input during supervisions but schoolwide curriculum audits with the entire teaching faculty. Curriculum is consistently refined to reflect changes in technology and changes in the demographic background of the school's students. For example, in the 2012-2013 school year, the school implemented a STEM curriculum for all students, focusing on the integration of math and technology.

4. **Professional Development:** Ongoing professional development, which is aligned with the school's common focus and high expectations to improve the performance of all students, is critical in high-performing schools. These professional development offerings are focused and informed by research and school/classroom-based assessments. Appropriate instructional support and resources are provided to implement approaches and techniques learned through professional development.

Indicators

These research-based indicators represent qualities found in successful schools:

- Professional development addresses student learning needs as well as program needs, identified through a variety of means (assessment, data, mandates and curriculum changes).
- Professional development is planned, ongoing and systemic.
- Professional development, which addresses school goals, is a collaborative process involving all stakeholders.
- Professional development supports the development of collaborative learning communities by providing time for staff to meet, share, reflect and modify instructional practice.
- Modifications are made, as needed, in assessment methods and procedures to address special needs of students.
- Professional development results in improved student performance.
- Professional development outcomes are implemented with appropriate support and resources.
- Professional development programs are monitored and evaluated through data gathering and analysis.

Professional development in the 2013-2014 school year focused on explicit instruction and backward design, data-driven interventions, and increasing the intrinsic motivation of students. Professional development was delivered weekly to the faculty and also embedded in the school culture through frequent peer-to-peer observations and supervision meetings. The year-long professional development series (of which every teacher received 45 minutes each week) produced backward-designed year and unit plans for each subject and grade that supplemented the school's written curriculum. This effort helped to build capacity and sustainability in our commitment to universal high expectations and rigorous instruction.

- Explicit Instruction combined with a backward-design sensibility: systematic, dynamic, responsive and direct instruction to promote achievement for all students. Explicit instruction emphasizes logical and selection and sequencing of content that is then broken down into manageable instructional units based on students' cognitive capabilities.
- Data-Driven Interventions: Data teams analyze data from 6-week interim assessment cycles to determine best strategies for closing learning gaps and moving students through our Common-Core curriculum.
- Increasing Intrinsic Motivation: Research based strategies for identifying gaps in intrinsic motivation and increasing student engagement with learning.

Status of Charter Renewal Findings and Follow-Up Activities

Review all follow-up activities associated with the school's last charter renewal. Provide a concise update on all matters detailed in the report which required follow-up.

It is important to be clear and concise as this information will be used by state reviewers as part of the charter school's next charter renewal.

Topic	Finding	Suggested Action	Our Corrective Action
Curriculum & Instruction Overview	Curriculum not user friendly and does not contain the 8 elements for sound pedagogical practices Needs more rigor, especially ELA Rubrics not present Resources not present	Needs to be more user friendly in all areas and contain 8 elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment to standards • Learner expectations • Pacing • embedded literacy • Teaching strategies • Learning activities • Assessments • Resources Indicate intentionality of the standards with practice Need to indicate	Curriculum re-write completed June 2013 All units in all subjects have been rewritten in 2014 using a Understanding By Design approach to planning and assessment.
Assessments	Good, but not referenced in curriculum document	Include in curriculum document	All assessments have been included in curriculum document Interim Assessment have been refined and used consistently in 2014.
Board governance	Boards operate together No committees present (i.e. finance, audit, etc) Domus affiliations unclear No record of voting Agenda and minutes not on website	Separate boards Create committees Need to separate Domus and SA board members Need to record and publish votes Publish agenda and minutes	Boards have been separated and operate autonomously Committees have been created for 2013-14 school year. Votes published in minutes on school website.

Certification	<p>Advocates serving social work function and not certified</p> <p>Some staff not properly assigned</p> <p>PE teacher has no health endorsement</p> <p>Some staff not eligible for certification</p>	<p>Need MSW and certification or need to be contracted</p> <p>Reassign properly</p> <p>Apply for DSAP and take test</p> <p>Take test and apply for CSEP</p>	<p>Family advocates have been out-sourced.</p> <p>Staff have been reassigned per certified staff file</p> <p>Complete</p> <p>Dr. Emmerson-Pace received CSEP for 2013-2014 and will re-apply for 2014-2015.</p>
Teacher Evaluation	<p>Forms need to be updated</p> <p>Need to incorporate goals into observations</p> <p>Evaluations should include CCS</p>	<p>Suggest Kim Marshall form</p> <p>Suggest Kim Marshall form</p> <p>Include in observation form</p>	<p>School converted to SEED model</p>



Summary of Other Key Accomplishments

Odyssey of the Mind

This year, 7 students participated in the state-wide Odyssey of the Mind competition. They attended Saturday meetings throughout the first half of the school year and met after-school with a teacher/advisor. In May, the TA team went to Hartford for the regional competition where they presented their research and focus question.

School-Wide Problem Solving and Character Education

A large part of the curriculum at Trailblazers Academy is centered on school wide problem solving and character development. This method of teaching reflects our attempt to show students the inter-connectedness of learning and its relevance to their lives. Each problem-solving unit has at its core a school, community or world issue that needs to be solved. All of the major subject areas are incorporated in each unit. These units also serve as an opportunity to group students differently than we normally do, across grade and ability level. Typically we have one school wide problem-solving unit per semester.

As a school, we continue to find this format to be very successful. Student attendance is always up during this unit and, most importantly, we find that many of the students who are less successful in a more traditional classroom environment often shine in this arena because of the multi-modality approach.

PeaceWorks Project

Trailblazers Academy partnered with the Domestic Violence Crisis Center in year long programming for students and teachers that focused on bullying and cyber-bullying. The PeaceWorks Project is a curriculum that teaches young people effective social skills as a way to address bullying and other destructive behavior. Programs explored the definition of bullying and cyber bullying, who it affects and common language that could be used by students and staff in the school community.

Sparks and Tauck Family Foundation

20 Trailblazers Academy students were selected to participate in a week long trip, sponsored by the Tauck Family Foundation and Tauck Tours, to visit Washington, D.C. Highlights of the trip included visits to. This is the fourth year that the Tauck Family Foundation has invited our students to participate in one of their Sparks trips.

State Science Fair

In 2012-2013, five Trailblazers Academy students submitted research projects to the Connecticut state science fair. Two of the student teams received Honorable Mention for their research projects presented at Quinnipiac University

Trout in the Classroom

In 2011-2012, Trailblazers Academy participated in the Trout in the Classroom program. The school purchased two large aquarium tanks and housed them in science classrooms. The students were able to

care for the fish, hatched from eggs, and watch them develop and grow into small fish. In the spring, the students brought the fish to a local stream and released them into the ecosystem.

Community Garden

6th Grade students planted and cared for a school community garden in tandem with their science classroom and the study of the sun in the earth's energy system. The fresh produce was collected and served to students at lunch through the Work and Learn Culinary Arts program.

Soundwaters

Trailblazers Academy continued its relationship with *Soundwaters*. Two teachers from the school partnered with staff members from Soundwaters to teach students about issues that affect the preservation of Long Island Sound. Exploratory trips, which took place over eight consecutive weeks, had students studying samples from the sound and canoeing through local spots.

Social/Athletic Accomplishments

Trump Tower Climb

In the 2012-2013 school year, more than 20 students participated in the Trump Tower climb, a charity event for American Lung Society. With the lead of the school's physical education teacher, the students raced up more than 30 flights of stairs to bring awareness to the cause.

School Wide Camping Trip

As part of the annual end-of-the-year celebration, over 140 Trailblazers Academy students and staff members attended an overnight camping trip in the Catskill region of New York. The students look forward to this trip each year. The focus is on team- and community-building between students and staff. The itinerary of events included swimming, fishing, basketball, horse back riding, and field games. The day was capped off with a school-wide campfire. For many of the students it was their first time outside the city of Stamford.

Hoops for Heart

This year, more than 50 students participated in Hoops for Heart, an awareness-raising event for the American Heart Association. Students and staff jumped rope and played basketball in friendly competition.

Girls Circle and Boys Council

This year, Trailblazers Academy offered Girls Circle and Boys Council groups for all students. Girls Circle is designed to promote an emotionally safe setting and structure where girls can develop strength, confidence, communication skills and caring relationships. Boys Council addresses masculine definitions and meets a core developmental need in boys for strong, positive relationships.

Parent Academy

Parent Academy is a parent focused group that met once a month to discuss issues that were important to the school, families and community. Meeting topics ranged from budgeting money, positive youth development, and connecting with social service organizations.

Back to School Barbeque

In August, Trailblazers Academy invites all students and families to a Back to School Barbeque to kick off the school year. This past year, 90% of our families attended this event. Students and parents were able to meet staff, tour the school, purchase uniforms, and pick up academic supplies.

Thanksgiving Celebration

Each year, the staff at Trailblazers Academy invites students and their families, including graduates, to our annual Thanksgiving celebration where staff prepares and serves a full Thanksgiving dinner. Attendance in the 2010-2011 school year was the best ever, with more than 350 people attending the celebration.

Trailblazers Academy After-School Program

Trailblazers Academy runs Lion's Den, an after-school program open to all of its students. The program runs from 3:30 until 6:00 p.m. and includes activities such as homework help, organized sports, music, and field trips. Stamford Youth Foundation also runs many of its after-school programs out of Lion's Den including chess and Odyssey of the Mind.

East Side Day

One of the many accomplishments of our Lion's Den After-School program was hosting East Side Day. The day is a celebration of the community involving music, dance, health and fitness and local vendors.

Trailblazers Academy Athletics

Trailblazers Academy continued to participate in the city-wide competitive league, offering our students the opportunity to participate in football, cheerleading, boys' and girls' basketball, cross country, boys' baseball and girls' softball. Encouraging students to balance academics and athletics has proved valuable for our graduates as they prepare for the challenges of high school. Our school, although much smaller than the other area public middle schools, continues to succeed athletically. Each of our athletic teams is coached by a school staff member on a volunteer basis, which helps us develop strong relationships with students and families.

Psycho-Education Curriculum

In the 2012-2013 school year, the school began teaching a psycho-education curriculum several times throughout the year. The curriculum contained more than 20 modules that focused on the topics of safety, emotional management, loss and future. The curriculum aligned with the school's focus on becoming a trauma-informed environment.

Additional Partnerships

In addition to the many successes above, Trailblazers Academy has developed meaningful relationships with agencies and organizations in Stamford and Fairfield County. The following groups have donated time, money and a variety of other resources:

- YMCA of Stamford
- Child Guidance
- Person to Person
- MBIA
- Emerging Young Leaders
- The Training Floor
- Silvermine Arts Center
- Family Centers
- Stamford Youth Foundation
- General Electric
- Thompson Corporation
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority
- 100 Black Men of Stamford
- STAMP

Additional strategic partnerships:

Silvermine Art Center, Teach For America, Sanctuary Institute, Blessings in a Backpack (but not for FY1213), East Side Partnership, Fleet Feet Sports, ING, GE, Stamford Public Schools, City of Stamford, Odyssey of the Mind, Rockin' Meditation, McKinsey & Co., Volunteer Center, MLK Service for Peace Day, Starwood Hotels, True Colors, Loft Artists Association, cartoonist Jerry Kraft, Chelsea Piers, Road Trip Nation, TOPS, Stamford Mentoring Program, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Community Health Center