

**NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS
CHARTER SCHOOL RENEWAL EVALUATION TEAM SUMMARY REPORT
STRONG FOUNDATIONS CHARTER SCHOOL
May 27, 2011**

I. INTRODUCTION

The requirements of New Hampshire RSA 194-B:10 call for the ongoing review of charter schools. An on-site visit to Strong Foundations Charter School was carried out on May 6, 2011 following the guidelines outlined in the New Hampshire Charter School Accountability Process. The visit was conducted for the purpose of evaluating the Strong Foundations Charter School on the following criteria:

1. Is the school making progress toward achieving its mission?
2. How is the school responsibly using public funds?
3. Is the school promoting student attainment of expected knowledge and skills?
4. Is the school sustainable?

Evaluation Team

Tom Julius, Ed.D., Team Leader

Julius has been a faculty member in the Department of Education of Antioch University New England (AUNE) for thirteen years. He currently serves as AUNE Director of Academic Assessment. He was a classroom teacher for eighteen years in elementary education. He holds degrees from the Eliot-Pearson Department Child Study, Tufts University and the Department of Curriculum and Assessment, UMASS/Amherst. He is a founding board member of the Surry Village Charter School, Surry, NH, and currently serves as Board Chair.

Michelle Gauthier, Business Administration degree, Southern New Hampshire University

Gauthier has worked as an Administrative Assistant in the Commissioner's Office at the New Hampshire Department of Education as well as supported the former Deputy Commissioner Mary S. Heath. Currently, she is working in the Charter School Office at the New Hampshire Department of Education under the leadership of Administrator Roberta Tenney.

John Hansen, M.Ed. in Educational Administration and Supervision, Plymouth State College

Hansen is currently Teaching Principal at Sandwich Central School, part of the Inter-Lakes School District and has over twenty years of experience in teaching and administration. He served also as Business Administrator for SAU #18, and has taught kindergarten through college level courses. He serves on the Board of the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS), and is responsible for

introducing into his current district the Wilson Reading Program, modeled from the work of Orton-Gillingham.

Gail Taylor, New Hampshire Department of Education, Division of Instruction
Taylor, as a new member of the Charter School Office, participated as guest observer.

II. STRONG FOUNDATIONS SCHOOL PROFILE

Strong Foundations (SF) Charter School currently serves 131 students in grades Readiness-6 with plans to expand to 7th grade in 2011-12 and 8th grade in 2012-13. The students come from many of the surrounding towns including Concord, Loudon, Weare, and others. Of those students, 24% are identified with special needs. The school is situated in Pembroke, NH in a former childcare center that SF has renovated and expanded.

The mission of the Strong Foundations Charter School as stated in its 2006 charter is to:

1. Build early literacy by using an Orton-Gillingham approach and build phonemic awareness so that children are reading at grade level by fourth grade.
2. Create a learning environment wherein 90% of the student population beginning Strong Foundations in Kindergarten or Grade 1 will be proficient or advanced in reading by the end of Grade 4.
3. Create an elementary school where the entire elementary faculty is trained in and uses the Orton-Gillingham approach so that other schools and districts can make use of the school for training of faculty, i.e. elementary teachers, reading specialists, learning disabilities specialists, tutors, and paraprofessionals.

In the 2011 charter renewal application, SF has expanded their mission to include:

4. Incorporate the Core Knowledge Curriculum in grades R-8 in Science, Social Studies, Language Arts, Music, and Art in order to build students' background knowledge and reading comprehension.

The school is administered by a Board of Trustees and building principal. The staff includes an office manager, office assistant, eight classroom teachers, several special education teachers, specialist teachers in physical education, art and music, and paraprofessionals. The school principal is a certified Orton-Gillingham literacy trainer who consults to other schools and districts. SF is utilized as a demonstration school for educators who wish to see Orton-Gillingham in practice. The Core Knowledge and Saxon Math programs were adopted by SF for other curricular areas.

III. EVALUATION TEAM ACTIVITIES

Pre-visit and On-site Materials

A pre-visit was made by the team leader, Tom Julius, on April 13, 2011 to plan for the Review team visit on May 6. Julius met with Beth McClure, Strong Foundations principal, toured the school facilities and met staff. Julius and McClure established a schedule for the Review team visit. It was determined that the following materials would be made available to the Review team on the day of the visit:

- Daily schedule
- Staff Roster/Organizational chart
- Board of Trustees By-laws and Minutes
- Curriculum Materials
- Assessment Tools

The Review team utilized the Strong Foundations website www.strongfoundationsnh.org for access to the Parent Handbook, Board of Trustees roster, and for an overview of the school's curriculum.

Review team Visit Activities

Prior to the on-site visit, the Review team communicated via e-mail to coordinate team logistics. On the day of the visit the team toured the facility, observed classroom activities during instructional time, conducted Focus Groups with parents, staff and representatives of the Board of Trustees and met with the Strong Foundations principal.

Classroom Observations

Review team members visited First, Third, Fourth and Fifth grade classrooms for 30-60 minute periods. The team observed Orton-Gillingham and Core Knowledge lessons in process and examined classroom instructional and assessment materials. There was some time for talking informally with students, teachers and para-professionals during this time. One team member also visited with 6th grade teachers during an instructional break. Additionally, curriculum and assessment materials were made available for Review team members to examine.

The overall climate of Strong Foundations is organized, cheerful, engaged and active. The hallways include extensive displays of students' projects and artwork. Classroom environments are designed for both whole and small group activities. Materials are accessible for both teachers and students. All classrooms contain an interactive smart board and computers for both teacher and student use. Playground facilities are very appropriate for an elementary school. Recess was a very positive atmosphere, students were having fun, no one was excluded, and the playground supervisors did not need to intervene with any playgroups. The facility has been expanded to meet the needs of a growing school.

During the instructional times observed by the review team members, students were focused and productive, curricular activities well-organized. Teachers were well prepared for lessons and attended to the instructional pace. It was clear that the routine of Orton-Gillingham was firmly in place and all students were familiar with and engaged in the lessons. Observed science activities included a text-based reading discussion and an end of unit paper and pencil test. The school uses the Responsive Classroom approach to social curriculum; its influence was evident in the tone of purposefulness and respect evidenced by the students.

Although there was no formal time to meet with students during the visit, interactions with students during instructional time was very positive. Students universally expressed how much they liked their school and their teachers. They also indicated approval of the school's approach to reading, one student stated he "understood things better this way."

Focus Groups

Throughout the day times were set aside for the Review team to meet with specific members of the Strong Foundation community. Although discussion topics varied according to each group's specific perspective, the Review team was interested in hearing from each group about:

- 1) What initially attracted them to this school?
- 2) In what ways is the school meeting their expectations?
- 3) What hopes did they have for the school's future?

Parents

The Review team met first with a group of approximately eighteen parents for an hour. Each parent had an opportunity to speak while the review team listened, followed by a general discussion. Topics focused on parents' prior experiences with schools, the responsiveness of the SF administration and staff, how the SF curricular approach is serving their children, anticipating the impact of expansion, and changes they would like to see.

Parents offered very positive reports of their experiences at SF and expressed gratitude for the influence of the school on their children's lives and education. Parents praised the school as recognizing and addressing students' struggles in a timely way. The school climate in general and the Orton-Gillingham approach in particular were credited with addressing specific reading difficulties encountered by students. The Core Knowledge program was viewed as providing a consistent, motivating, and well-organized curriculum. The Principal and staff were identified as very accessible and extremely responsive to parents' questions or concerns. Parents of children at or above grade level ability expressed a desire for more challenge. Parents expressed some frustration with the geographically dispersed school population, noting that it can make organizing after-school activities and finding parent volunteers difficult. Overall, parents appreciate the relatively small size of the school and hope that, with expansion, the school will retain its feeling of intimacy and the culture of students being well known by all staff.

Teachers & Staff

Teachers and staff met with the Review team in small groups for fifteen to thirty minutes each. Teachers arrived and departed as classroom coverage allowed so there was often overlap between groups. All teachers, readiness through sixth grade participated, as well as the special education teachers and some paraprofessionals.

The teachers noted the positive climate at the school crediting the Responsive Classroom approach, efforts of the principal, and staff collegiality. They cited the multi-sensory, direct instruction, and teaching to mastery strategies as reasons they were initially attracted to the school. They took evident pride in the school being a training center for the Orton-Gillingham program. Teachers appreciate the clarity and structure of the Core Knowledge curriculum, commenting on its consistency with the mastery approach. Some teachers noted that there were times when it was difficult to go into a topic area in depth.

Like the parents, teachers noted the smallness of the school as contributing to a feeling of intimacy and positive community. As the school expands teachers see the need to expand the administrative team. In particular, they took pride in the speed with which special education issues are currently addressed, but note that it is sometimes stressful on staff, and identified the value of having more mid-level administrative coordination. There was recognition of the realities of charter school funding in New Hampshire and concern for how charter school teacher pay will stay competitive with other New Hampshire public schools. Some teachers indicated that they “took a pay cut” to work at the school, because they believed in its mission. One teacher noted that she had heard about the school, came to get some experience, and: “Now, I would never leave. I’ve never seen these kinds of results.” Overall, there was a great deal of pride in the success of the school and appreciation for the commitment and accessibility of the principal.

Board of Trustees

Board Chairperson Kathleen McClaskey and founding Board member Colleen Sliva met with the Review team. The board members expressed a great deal of pride in accomplishments of the school in its four years of operation. They cited the instructional approaches as drawing from identified best practices and noted the inclusion of technology as an integral component to on-going success.

The board members asserted the primacy of a multi-sensory approach to learning and their confidence in attaining the school’s goal of 90% of the student population who begin at Strong Foundations in Readiness or Grade 1 being proficient or advanced in reading by the end of Grade 4. They view the inclusion of Core Knowledge as advantageous for addressing the Common Core State Standards Initiative. They credited the staff, and principal in particular, as critical to the success of the school. They noted that in the current organizational structure the principal holds a lot of responsibility and that the expansion to middle school grade levels will require additional administrative personnel. The board members see

Strong Foundations as being an example of best practice for other schools and a highly replicable educational model in other New Hampshire communities.

Principal

Principal Beth McClure conducted the school tour at the beginning of the review team's visit and met with the team at the end of the day. McClure provided an overview of the school's progress and current status. She noted the advantages of combining the Orton-Gillingham, Core Knowledge and Saxon Math approaches and the coherence that has brought to the school curriculum. She discussed the challenges of having a high percentage of children with identified special needs in the school population and the effect of those numbers on demonstrating adequate yearly progress. McClure described the training and consulting services she provides to surrounding school districts and the usefulness of the school as a model for Orton-Gillingham application. She was enthusiastic in her praise for the work of the school faculty and staff and noted their willingness to address student needs.

IV. CRITERIA FOR CHARTER RENEWAL

1) Is the school making progress towards achieving its mission?

Yes.

The mission of the Strong Foundations Charter School as stated in its charter is to:

a. Build early literacy by using an Orton-Gillingham approach and build phonemic awareness so that children are reading at grade level by fourth grade.

The Orton-Gillingham approach is clearly and effectively embedded in the culture and practices of Strong Foundations Charter School. This is evident in the daily lessons and activities, skills of the students, curricular materials, and school philosophy. The application of the Orton-Gillingham approach for adept readers in the upper grades and its integration with other methods used to meet the needs of those students is less documented.

b. Create a learning environment wherein 90% of the student population beginning Strong Foundations in Kindergarten or grade 1 will be proficient or advanced in reading by the end of grade 4.

The school set an ambitious goal to have 90% of students who enrolled in Strong Foundations in Readiness or Grade 1 reading at grade level by 4th grade. SF is making good progress toward this goal with their first cohort group, achieving a rate of 83%. In practice, SF uses a variety of measures to assess student progress including Aimsweb Reading Fluency, Children's Progress and Measured Progress PTS3. Strong Foundations should continue to incorporate a variety of assessment measures and set measureable achievement goals for all students. Appropriately, this is one of the objectives for the next charter term identified in the SF application for renewal.

- c. Create an elementary school where the entire elementary faculty is trained in and uses the Orton-Gillingham approach so that other schools and districts can make use of the school for training of faculty, i.e. elementary teachers, reading specialists, learning disabilities specialists, tutors, and paraprofessionals.*

The school has met its goal to have the entire faculty trained in and to use the Orton-Gillingham approach. Furthermore, as evidenced by the substantial consulting services provided by the school, Strong Foundations has established itself as a leader in the local public school community, as a center for training, and as a demonstration school of Orton-Gillingham methodologies.

Commendations

- Successful implementation of the Orton-Gillingham approach into the philosophy and practices of the school.
- Making progress towards 90% of students who enrolled in Strong Foundations in Readiness or Grade 1 reading at grade level by 4th grade
- Providing Orton-Gillingham leadership and professional development to other public schools.
- Incorporating a variety of student achievement measures.

Suggestions

- Expand mission to include achievement goals for all students.
- Articulate the application of Orton-Gillingham approach and other literacy strategies for typical students in the upper grades.

2) Is the school responsibly using public funds?

Yes.

Strong Foundations has demonstrated financial responsibility and record keeping procedures that are in acceptable practice for school districts including annual auditing by New Hampshire certified public accountants. Effective and responsible procedures are in place for the budget process.

Commendations

- The school is delivering educational services to a diverse student population at a cost that is less than the State and Federal average per pupil expenditure.
- The school is currently operating with a budget surplus.
- Strong Foundations has a comprehensive Student Handbook including, but not limited to, Section 504 Individuals with Disabilities policy and procedures, Medication and Health information, Bullying policy, Acceptable Use policy.

3) Is the school promoting student attainment of expected knowledge and skills?

Yes.

Strong Foundations curriculum is aligned with the New Hampshire Curriculum Frameworks. The school demonstrated flexibility in its curriculum adopting the Saxon Math and Core Knowledge programs and incorporating the Responsive Classroom philosophy. Strong Foundations has established curricular scope and sequence calendars using the Core Knowledge and Saxon Math programs. SF uses teacher-generated and commercial assessments such as Aimsweb Reading Fluency, Children's Progress and Measured Progress' PTS3 to measure student progress.

Currently, SF students are not meeting average proficiency standards as measured by state NECAP assessments. In Fall 2010, 56% of SF students were proficient or higher in reading compared to a state average of 77%. For math, 67% of SF students were proficient or higher compared to a state average of 72%. This may be due in part, to SF having a special needs population (24%) exceeding the state average (18%) and experiencing an influx of special needs students in the upper grades (37%). The original SF Grade 1 cohort has been strong on NECAP assessments, currently exceeding the state average. Furthermore, SF students with IEP's in grades 3-6 demonstrate strong performance in comparison to New Hampshire state averages for the 2010 testing year. Further incorporation of nationally-normed measures of achievement for all students will help to monitor student progress.

Although not explicitly stated in the mission statement, SF demonstrates good progress in establishing a school culture that fosters students' physical, emotional, and intellectual safety. This is evident in the daily practice of the school. Many members of the school community attributed this to the staff training and implementation of the Responsive Classroom philosophy.

Commendations

- Use of a variety of measures of student achievement.
- Implementation of Responsive Classroom philosophy to promote student engagement and success.
- Inclusion of technology in classroom environments.

Suggestions

- Establish academic standards and growth goals for all students.
- Institute and report measures of progress for all students.

4) Is the school sustainable?

Yes.

Strong Foundations has a history of strong enrollment and teacher retention. The school has attracted both new and experienced teachers to its staff. The Board functions in accordance with public meeting laws and procedures and manages operations effectively. The facilities are safe, clean, and well designed. SF conducts parent surveys that indicate a high degree of parent satisfaction with the school.

The Strong Foundations principal meets formally with each staff member once per month and does written evaluations once per year. Teachers are evaluated by the principal on several performance criteria and receive parental feedback gleaned from the school survey. The teacher evaluation process is being revised to include articulated performance descriptors and narrative feedback. Staff describe their supervisory relationship with the principal as positive, collaborative, and meeting their professional needs. An evaluation process for the principal was recently established and is in process. Evaluative documentation is strictly from the supervisor's point of view, whereas the tone of the evaluation process seems to include opportunities for formative professional development. SF may want to include reflective goal setting and self-evaluation as part of the documented evaluation process.

Through its consulting work and through school district IEP processes, Strong Foundations has established appropriate and beneficial relationships with local LEAs. However, during discussions with the review team various members of the SF community highlighted the success of Strong Foundations by describing the ways in which other public schools failed to meet their expectations, and therefore, how those schools pale in comparison. While not wanting to dismiss, discount, or diminish, the experiences of those individuals, and knowing that comparison is a necessary aspect of critique, we believe it will be in the best interest of Strong Foundations Charter School, and New Hampshire charter schools in general, to foster rhetoric that situates charter schools as a part of the overall public school landscape. This is an important challenge. Innovators, such as charter schools, are faced with the creative tension of establishing a unique identity while simultaneously operating within established professional networks. Recognizing that every school has strengths and challenges they must face, the Strong Foundations Board of Trustees should seek opportunities for the school to work with, learn from, and acknowledge the efforts of other educators. We believe that Strong Foundations is positioning itself as an important model of innovative education and can also be a vital leader in fostering positive, collaborative school-to-school relationships.

The review team was impressed by the leadership of Strong Foundations Charter School's principal, Beth McClure. As evidenced by our on-site experience and the testimonials of SF community members, McClure is highly responsive to staff and parents, communicates well, demonstrates a high level of integrity, and devotes a tremendous amount of time to the school. She is modeling the qualities of a life-long learner by enrolling in a doctoral program with the goal of furthering the vision and effectiveness of Strong Foundations. The entire SF community in general, and McClure in particular, have created and nurtured a wonderful school that meets the multiple needs of a diverse population of students. While acknowledging this admirable success, we believe the next evolution of the school is a more distributed leadership model. We encourage the school to establish mid-level administrative positions in order to strengthen the school's organizational structure.

Those New Hampshire charter schools that function independently of established school districts, such as Strong Foundations, face substantial fiscal challenges. The equity funding provided by the state is not sufficient to operate a school. Strong Foundations has creatively addressed this deficiency by utilizing entrepreneurial revenue to supplement the annual budget. This innovative approach has great potential for establishing long-term sustainability for the school. It also raises a concern. Currently, entrepreneurial revenue is raised solely by the consulting activities of the building principal. Should the principal leave, or be unable to provide these services, this level of revenue will be difficult to achieve. Given Strong Foundation's current budget and plans to expand the school in the coming years, we recommend diversifying revenue sources. It is encouraging to note that this is one of the objectives for the school's next charter term. This objective may be realized in the form of increased fundraising activities, additional Orton-Gillingham consultants, new administrative positions, administrative responsibilities shifted to other personnel, or other organizational/management tactics. Whatever strategy or combination of strategies is employed, Strong Foundations has demonstrated the creativity and wherewithal to make this next evolution a reality.

Commendations

- High retention rate for teachers and students.
- Overall positive and professional work environment.
- Innovative and effective funding strategies.

Suggestions

- Include reflective goal-setting and self-evaluation as part of the staff evaluation process.
- Foster collaborative partnerships that recognize and build on the strengths of both Strong Foundations and other schools.
- Diversify sources of income.
- Identify or train additional Orton-Gillingham coaches to participate in consulting activities.
- Add additional administrative positions and personnel.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In accordance with criteria for Charter School Renewal (RSA 194-B:10), the finding of this team is that the Strong Foundations Charter School has met the review requirements in all areas and is recommended for renewal.



Tom Julius, Ed.D.

Team Leader

Strong Foundations Charter School Renewal Evaluation Team