

**NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS
CHARTER SCHOOL RENEWAL VISITATION SUMMARY REPORT**

GREAT BAY eLEARNING CHARTER SCHOOL

I. Introduction to Charter Renewal:

Purpose of the Site Visit

The requirements of New Hampshire RSA 194-B:10 call for the ongoing review of charter schools. The site visit to the Great Bay e Learning Charter School (GBeCS) on March 30, 2009 was conducted in the context of the five-year accountability process for charter schools as presented in the New Hampshire Charter School Accountability Process. As such, the site visit was conducted for the purpose of assessing the relevance of the philosophical foundation for program development and delivery and the related strategies for governance, staffing, instructional, assessment methodologies, and community outreach.

Criteria for the sustainability of NH Charter Schools are defined as follows:

- The demonstration of the school's progress toward achieving its mission
- The demonstration of the school's accountability in the use of public funding
- The demonstration of the school's promotion of student acquisition of expected knowledge and skills
- The planned sustainability of the school's mission and the programs designed for students, families and the communities they serve

Consistent with the established criteria, the visiting team was attentive to the following:

- The overall educational structure and relevance of the programs and services to students, their families and their communities
- The implementation of the mission of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School
- The effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction in meeting the needs of a diverse student population
- The indicators of student performance for Great Bay eLearning Charter School students in comparison to that of traditional school settings, inclusive of accommodations for education disabilities and socio-economic disadvantages
- The effectiveness of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School in terms of cost accounting, school environments, and sustainability planning

Visiting Team participants for the site visit:

Maryclare J Heffernan holds the degree of M.Ed. in Educational Administration and Supervision from the University of New Hampshire, and has 35 years of experience in teaching, administration and consultation in the areas of both general and special education. Maryclare is currently an independent Education Consultant working with school districts, the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the Southeastern Regional Education Service Center. She has most recently facilitated the design and implementation of district and school improvement plans with several New Hampshire school districts. Maryclare is a member of the Bureau of Special Education's Focused Monitoring Process Management Team. She is also an adjunct faculty member for Plymouth State University.

Jill Cane holds an Ed.D in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine. She has worked as a public school principal and curriculum consultant and is currently working as a contracted employee facilitating curriculum development at the Academy for Science and Design, a charter school located in Merrimack, NH.

Mark MacLean holds an M.S. in Business Education from Southern New Hampshire University. He has a Principal certification and is completing a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (CAGS) from Plymouth State University. Mark is currently serving as the Dean of Academics at Alvirne HS in Hudson, NH where he has most recently directed the development of the district's High School Competencies and Student Mastery Assessments.

II. DESCRIPTION OF CHARTER SCHOOL RENEWAL ACTIVITIES

Pre-visit and On-Site Materials

A pre-visit was made by the team leader on January 15, 2009 for the purpose of visiting the facility, meeting staff and students, and learning more about the Great Bay eLearning Charter School's mission, history, as well as the curriculum, instruction and assessment models utilized at the school. Also discussed were the expectations and format for the March 30, 2009 New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) review visit. At the pre-visit, it was agreed that the following would be gathered and made available to the visiting team two weeks prior to the visit:

- The Great Bay eLearning Charter School application for renewal as submitted to the NHDOE on August 1, 2008
- Educational mission and program goals, objectives and standards
- School Profile
- Master Schedules
- Student performance assessments
- Summaries of External Assessment Tools
- Internal Assessment tools
- Student Demographics
- List of Trustees
- Staff Roster

- Organizational Chart

Great Bay eLearning Charter School Review Activities

The activities conducted during the one day visit to the Great Bay eLearning Charter School included: an Orientation, visiting team's attendance at morning meeting, tour of the school facility, classroom observations during classroom instruction and advisory; Focus Groups conducted with students, parents, administrators, Board of Trustee representatives, as well as with faculty and staff members. In addition the visiting team reviewed relevant student and school documents.

Focus Groups

The site visitation team conducted focus group discussions with faculty, staff and students, as well as parents, Board of Trustee members and administrators at GBeCS. The purpose of the discussions was to gain insight into the program structure, the effectiveness and the investment of faculty and staff, and the level of student and parent satisfaction in the non-traditional approach to education through this charter school's programming.

Student Focus Group Discussion

The student focus group discussion held at GBeCS was conducted for the purpose of obtaining the observations and insights of students attending the school. The student group included more students than originally scheduled as the GBeCS students were eager to discuss their school experience with the visitors. The informal conversation included a series of pre-determined questions that helped guide the dialogue with questions about the students' current school experience compared to previous school settings; their perception of the welcoming environment and sense of safety at the school; the level of academic rigor and relevance; individual student achievement, and the differentiation offered within the instructional model offered at this Charter School. Students talked specifically about the project based learning offered at GBeCS and their high level of their engagement in learning.

Parent Focus Group Discussion

As part of the review process, parents were invited to participate in a focus group discussion conducted by the visiting team. The purpose of the parent focus group was to seek feedback from parents regarding their perspective and involvement in their child's educational programming as well as their level of satisfaction with GBeCS approach to instruction and the extent to which their students are demonstrating academic progress.

Fifteen parents attended the focus group, a larger than anticipated group, as they were eager to share their enthusiasm of this school with the visiting team. Two members of the visiting team listened to the parents' remarks, with each of the parents having the opportunity to speak. The parents offered very strong positive comments about GBeCS. Most of the parents indicated that their children had not flourished in their previous school setting and stated they were witnessing changed youngsters as a

result of the enrollment at GBeCS. They wanted to convey to the visiting team the significantly positive influence the school has had on the life and education of their children.

Administration Focus Group Discussion

The visiting team met with GBeCS Co-principals and the Superintendent of Schools for SAU 16 for the purpose of hearing the leadership perspective on the school's successes and challenges and goals for the future. The discussion covered a range of topics from the funding challenges currently facing Charter Schools to the growth of the GBeCS program design and the academic and social successes of the GBeCS students.

The administrative perspective provided valuable context to the benefits and barriers that have existed and continue to exist in the establishment of the first generation of charter schools in New Hampshire's public school history. This administrative team expressed optimism for, and a commitment to, the future of the charter school model and specifically to the anticipated successful future of GBeCS.

Board of Trustees Focus Group Discussion

Members of the visiting team met with several representatives of the GBeCS Board of Trustees. The focused conversation included a series of pre-determined questions that helped guide the dialogue and addressed similar topics covered with the other focus groups including the school's mission, role and responsibilities of the board, the criteria used to determine school success and the performance of school leaders as well as the school's challenges and successes.

The Board members reiterated the core belief that all students can learn when provided the appropriate instruction and stated that the original concept for GBeCS came out of a concern for the struggling, poorly performing student who may be underserved by the public school. The SAU 16 Superintendent of Schools, at that time, Dr. Arthur Hansen, suggested that a Charter School model may be able to meet the needs of those students. The concern was at that time, and remains today, for ongoing adequate public funding and financial stability of the Charter School model. They acknowledge that the strengths of the GBeCS programs are seen in the overwhelming support of the parents and the strong academic success of the students. The Board members expressed their support for the future of the GBeCS.

Faculty/Staff Focus Group Discussion

A primary interest of this Focus Group was to gain insight from faculty and staff regarding the diversity of educational needs of the students at GBeCS and the instructional design utilized by the project based curriculum to allow staff to meet the wide range of student learning needs. Many of the GBeCS staff bring previous experience in larger public school settings and were able to offer some comparisons of the larger school setting to the public charter school model. In addition faculty and

staff described the evolution of the school's curriculum, instruction and competency bases assessment models and the vision and philosophy that drives the program's progress, as well as strengths and challenges of the program. The GBeCS teachers participate in ongoing and relevant professional development. They spoke highly of the educational model, the individualized approach to student-learning and the respectful culture that GBeCS offers to the students and educators alike.

III. Great Bay e Learning Charter School Profile

The Great Bay eLearning Charter School (GBeCS) is a public charter school currently serving 131 male and female students heterogeneously grouped in grades 8 through 12. Of those 27, or 20.6% are students with an IEP. Seventy percent of the students reside in SAU 16 and 30% attend from other local school districts. The school is located in the town of Exeter, NH in the former Exeter High School building. The Great Bay eLearning Charter School is sponsored by SAU 16, the Exeter Cooperative School District, including the towns of Exeter, Brentwood, East Kingston, Stratham, Kensington and Newfields. Oversight to GBeCS is provided by the Great Bay eLearning Charter School Trustees and the New Hampshire Department of Education.

The Great Bay eLearning Charter Schools Core Beliefs are:

- All students can learn if we, as educators, allow for differences in learning styles, abilities, interests, and needs.
- Engaging students in project-based and service oriented education curriculum will allow our students to more fully achieve their educational goals.
- The judicious use of technology is essential to enhance education and to prepare students for either post-secondary education programs or employment.
- Educators in the Great Bay eLearning Charter School have the responsibility, the capability, and the will to provide assistance to other students in the area, state and beyond.

IV. Criteria for Charter Renewal

As established in RSA 194-B:10, the requirements for renewal of the Charter School license are defined in The New Hampshire Charter School Accountability Process which presents four distinct areas to be evaluated;

- (1) Progress toward meeting the Mission of the charter school
- (2) Evidence of the responsible use of public funds
- (3) The evidence of the student attainment of expected knowledge and skills
- (4) Indicators of purposeful planning for the school's sustainability

The site visitation team is charged with the responsibility to obtain the evidence that substantiates the school's self-study and material representation of indicators of achieving the intent of the Charter School Accountability Process. The report to follow will give an overview of general impressions and observations followed by Commendations, Suggestions and conclude with a Recommendation as to status of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School in meeting the requirements described above.

**V. Summary of Visitation Findings for Great Bay eLearning Charter School
Recommendations to the NH Commissioner of Education and the NH State Board of Education
Progress toward Achieving the Mission of Seacoast Charter School**

Governance/Leadership:

The growth of a new school model often includes unanticipated challenges but the GBeCS evolution has been supported by a committed and competent Leadership team that includes the sponsorship of SAU 16, specifically support from the SAU 16 Superintendent of Schools, the Great Bay eLearning Charter School Trustees and Co-Principals. Together this Leadership Team has successfully navigated the early design, development and effective growth of this charter school.

GBeCS is organized around a set of Core Beliefs that includes the key concepts that all students can learn if educators allow for differences in learning styles, abilities, interests and needs; engaging students in project based and service oriented curriculum this allows students to more fully achieve their goals; the judicious use of technology that is essential to enhance education and to prepare students for post secondary life; and the belief that the GBeCS educators have the responsibility, capability and will to provide assistance to other students in the area, state and beyond. These Core Beliefs have provided the Leadership Team with a clear vision and direction in the design of this successful charter school.

The Co-principals have assumed collaborative responsibility for both the vision and the day to day leadership of the school throughout the early years of design and implementation. Their collective belief in the ability of all students to learn when provided with the appropriate and relevant instruction is seen in the classrooms and student work throughout the school. The students reflect the success of the GBeCS school model in their active engagement in the learning experience and in their desire to talk about their insights into the learning process.

The GBeCS Core Beliefs are clearly evident in the academic success of the students enrolled there. The sustaining guidance of the Board of Trustees and the full engagement of parents have proven an important aspect of the school's success and will contribute to future sustainability. The dedicated instructional leadership of the Co-principals is evidenced not only by the well designed organizational systems in place but also by the constant presence and hands-on leadership of the administrators in the GBeCS classrooms. The central role of the GBeCS leadership team in the early development of the school's foundation and evolution has been critical to the successful Charter School model that exists today.

Commendations

- The Leadership Team comprised of the GBeCS Board of Trustees, SAU 16 Superintendent of Schools and Co-Principals have very successfully worked together to design and support a public charter school that recognizes and appreciates the individual learning strengths and needs of each student and ensures that all students are provided with a rigorous and meaningful educational experience.

- The Leadership Team has supported the development of a true community of learners. The rigorous high standards-based curriculum provides the foundation for learning and the instruction and assessment components ensures that all of GBeCS students are provided with access to and success in the curriculum.
- The Leadership Team has provided direction and guidance to the school community in navigating the uncharted waters of the first generation of New Hampshire public charter schools which will provide the state with a solid, well organized model for the design of future Charter Schools.
- The success of the GBeCS students is a clear indicator of the school's effectiveness. Notably 100% of GBeCS first graduating class of 2008 successfully met all requirements and graduated, and 100% of the graduating students were accepted into a post-secondary college/university program.
- The sustaining commitment of the GBeCS parents and their promotion of the school in the greater community is acknowledged and commended.
- The GBeCS faculty, staff and administrators are commended for their clear focus on a culture of respect, individualized student learning and for their commitment to the GBeCS program. There is a shared sense of the Core Beliefs and a common effort toward the future programming for the GBeCS students.

Suggestions

- As the GBeCS Leadership team acknowledged they will continue to plan for the future of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School in the areas of Governance and funding. Clarification of the role of SAU 16 in the governance of GBeCS, as well as identification of additional financial supports that may be needed to sustain the present high quality of GBeCs programs are areas to consider.
- The school leadership team may want to identify additional funding to support ongoing program development, staff salaries and benefits, replacement of equipment, purchase of new materials, leasing of the facility, among other areas. Charter schools are currently eligible for federally distributed Title I or Carl Perkins funds but may need to identify other possible funding streams to access in the future.
- There may be a need to further clarify the districts' responsibility for IEP students.

Recommendation for Renewal:

In accordance with the criteria for Charter School Renewal (RSA 194-B:10), Great Bay eLearning Charter School meets the requirements for progress toward meeting their mission and is recommended for renewal in this category.

Promotion of Student Attainment of Expected Knowledge and Skills:

Curriculum

The Great Bay eLearning Charter School's core foundation is seen in the school's well designed curriculum that is aligned with the New Hampshire Department of Education Curriculum Standards and Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) and Grade Span Expectations (GSEs) and measured against standards based competencies in each curriculum area. The GBeCS approach to student learning is rooted in the belief that all students can learn if provided with learning experiences that are differentiated, project based and service oriented to meet the needs of all learners. The term all learners apply to students with and without educational disabilities.

The effective evidence of this approach to student learning was observed in each of the GBeCS classrooms by the visiting team where all students were engaged in their learning and participating in their own education. Teaching and learning at GBeCS is elevated to a high level and students regard their own knowledge with respect. GBeCS emphasizes writing across the curriculum and supports co-teaching, two models of effective instructional practice.

The use of competencies and competency based assessments are provided in the core content areas of English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Fine or Practical Arts and Wellness, as well as in cross curricular areas of: Problem solving and decision making, Self-management, Communication skills, the Ability to work with others, and Use of information.

A significant early indicator in the success of the GBeCS curriculum, instruction and assessment model is evident in the 100% graduation rate for the school's first graduating class of 2008. In addition, 100% of the graduating students were accepted into a post-secondary school college or university. This clear evidence of the success of the rigor and relevance of the curriculum, instruction and assessment represents the quality of instruction provided by the GBeCS staff to all of the students.

The GBeCS staff works hard to support all learners and to create educational opportunities for each curriculum component. Instruction is designed to align with state curriculum standards and meet a wide range of learning needs. Student progress and learning is assessed through a variety of curriculum based and standardized measures. Students report that they feel responsible for and engaged in their own learning, often for the first time in their educational experience, and that they feel successful as a result. Parents support this insight and provide specific examples of student learning and outcomes.

Commendations:

- The standards based curriculum, differentiated and project based instruction and competency based assessment model in place at GBeCS contributes to a rigorous, effective and supportive learning environment.
- The level of student engagement in the classroom and evidence of student learning is clear as indicated in a range of assessments and results utilized by GBeCS.
- The school curriculum and programming is driven by high standards and alignment with NH Curriculum Standards as well as GLEs and GSEs.

- The GBeCS teaching staff is committed to providing each student with relevant learning experiences that are adjusted to meet a range of learning needs.
- The culture of mutual respect within the GBeCS programs is a strong and central component of the school.
- The culture of continuous learning is evident throughout the GBeCS school community. The faculty and administrators are engaged in their own professional learning and communicate the sense of lifelong learning to their students.
- The lines of communication with GBeCS parents and families are well established and effective.

Suggestions:

- The GBeCS Leadership Team should continue to review and evaluate the programs to determine if any additional resources may be needed to meet evolving student learning needs.
- Continue to identify opportunities for community based learning as a way to further to integrate the curriculum into the real life learning situations.
- Continue to review the GBeCS curriculum, instruction models and assessment results to evaluate the ongoing effectiveness and make adjustments to ensure optimal student learning as the student population grows and changes.

Recommendation for Renewal:

In accordance with criteria for Charter School Renewal (RSA 194-B: 10), Great Bay eLearning Charter School has met the requirements for promotion of student attainment of expected knowledge and skills and is recommended for renewal in this category.

Sustainability of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School

The effectiveness of the Great Bay eLearning Charter School is realized through the commitment by the leadership team, the staff, parents and students to the vision and Belief Statements of the school that all students can learn when provided with the instructional experience that meets their learning needs. The Charter School Review Process visiting team found the GBeCS school community to fully demonstrate these Core Beliefs. Students who may have struggled to fit in to large public school settings are learning and thriving in the safe and supportive learning environment provided by the Great Bay eLearning Charter School. The GBeCS parents strongly support this school’s mission and acknowledge the often new found success that their students find at the charter school if offering an opportunity for learning and achievement that was not available in a large public school setting. While the level of state adequacy funding to the charter school increases next year, the SAU 16 facility cost adjusts and therefore there will be a need to identify new funding sources such as grants. The future sustainability of the GBeCS model is excellent provided the financial supports continue.

Commendations:

- The GBeCS Leadership Team is commended for collaboration and expertise in designing and supporting a viable academically challenging alternative school experience for students.

- The GBeCS faculty and staff are commended for their dedication to the success and ongoing development of this charter school and for their support of each of the students learning needs. The enthusiasm and professional talent the staff brings to GBeCS is impressive.
- The positive student centered learning culture and climate within the school is welcoming and supportive of student learning.
- The facility provides adequate learning space, and is welcoming to students and their families.

Suggestions:

- The GBeCS Leadership Team is encouraged to continue to review the need for funding via discretionary grants or other sources to ensure the future viability of this effective charter school.
- The GBeCS Leadership Team as well as staff, students, parents are encouraged to continue to communicate the success of this school model to the community at large to increase understanding of the charter school model.

Recommendation for Renewal:

In accordance with criteria for Charter School Renewal (RSA 194-B:10), Great Bay eLearning Charter School meets the requirements for establishing a commitment to sustainability and is recommended for renewal in his category.

The Responsible Use of Public Funds

Great Bay eLearning Charter School has demonstrated financial responsibility and record keeping procedures that are in accordance with acceptable practice for school districts to include the contracting for annual audits by New Hampshire certified public accountants. SAU 16 in relationship with the Great Bay eLearning Charter School administrators have been successful in managing the responsible use of public funds to support the GBeCS program as evidenced in this no frills, well designed, well run, and efficient charter school.

Recommendation for Renewal:

In accordance with criteria for Charter School Renewal (RSA 194-B:10) Great Bay eLearning Charter School meets the requirements for responsible use of public funds and is recommended for renewal in this category.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF SEACOAST CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION FOR RENEWAL

Great Bay eLearning Charter School has presented evidence in the Renewal Application that has been validated by a comprehensive review of the school by a Site Visitation Team that meets, if not exceeds, the statutory requirements for NH Charter School Renewal.

The visitation to the Great Bay eLearning Charter School by a visiting team found that high academic standards are in place and differentiated learning is supported through a well designed curriculum and effective instructional and assessment practices that recognize the learning differences of each student. The level of respect and engagement of the students in their own learning provided clear evidence that the GBeCS model as designed is an effective and valuable approach to education.

The students and their parents were eager to tell of the successful program in place at GBeCS. Many of the students had previously experienced school situations where they struggled as learners and the interventions available to them were few or non-existent. The students and parents at the Great Bay eLearning Charter School expressed appreciation for the opportunity to attend this charter school and an appreciation for the high academic standards offered here.

A key indicator of this school's success is seen in the 100% graduation rate in the 2008 graduating class and the 100% acceptance rate into post-secondary schools, as well as the currently anticipated 100% graduation rate and post-secondary acceptance rate for the 2009 GBeCS graduating class. This indicator speaks volumes. The GBeCS students acknowledge that they were on an unsuccessful educational path in their previous school setting. They realize the challenges of large public schools but also highly value the individualized and effective educational experience that the Great Bay eLearning Charter School has been able to offer each of them. They have offered a unanimous endorsement of the GBeCS program.

The Charter School Visiting Team appreciates the extensive efforts of Great Bay eLearning Charter School administration, faculty and staff, and Board of Trustees in preparing for the site visit. By all accounts the visit represented a 'normal day' in the life of a school that 'cares' about the learning and purposeful development of the students they serve.

The Great Bay eLearning Charter School is recommended to the New Hampshire Commissioner of Education and the New Hampshire State Board of Education for Charter School Renewal.



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