



# Connecticut's Charter Schools

## Best Practices Annual Report 2016 - 2017

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## Table of Contents

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| Connecticut's Charter Schools .....                             | 2     |
| Charter School Performance Standards .....                      | 3     |
| Performance Standards Definitions .....                         | 4 - 5 |
| Charter School Performance .....                                | 6     |
| Best Practices in School Performance .....                      | 7     |
| Best Practices in School Performance .....                      | 8     |
| Best Practices in Stewardship, Governance, and Management ..... | 9     |
| Best Practices in Student Population .....                      | 10    |
| Best Practices in Legal Compliance .....                        | 11    |

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

## Connecticut's Charter Schools

In 1996, Connecticut's General Assembly and Governor enacted legislation establishing charter schools in the state and empowering the State Board of Education (SBE) as the sole authorizer of charter schools. As non-sectarian public schools, charter schools represent innovative school models utilizing diverse, research-based educational methods. Currently, there are 24 charter schools statewide. Located in 11 host districts, these schools serve over 10,000 students.

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

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

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



## Charter Schools Statewide

**Amistad Academy**  
New Haven, CT

**Achievement First Bridgeport Academy**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Achievement First Elm City College Preparatory School**  
New Haven, CT

**Achievement First Hartford Academy**  
Hartford, CT

**Booker T. Washington Academy**  
New Haven, CT

**Brass City Charter School**  
Waterbury, CT

**Capital Preparatory Harbor Charter School**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Common Ground High School**  
New Haven, CT

**Elm City Montessori School\***  
New Haven, CT

**Explorations Charter School**  
Winsted, CT

**Great Oaks Charter School**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Highville Charter School**  
Hamden, CT

**Integrated Day Charter School**  
Norwich, CT

**Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication**  
New London, CT

**Jumoke Academy**  
Hartford, CT

**New Beginnings Family Academy**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Odyssey Community**  
Manchester, CT

**Park City Prep Charter School**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Path Academy**  
Windham, CT

**Side By Side Charter School**  
Norwalk, CT

**Stamford Charter School for Excellence**  
Stamford, CT

**Stamford Academy**  
Stamford, CT

**The Bridge Academy**  
Bridgeport, CT

**Trailblazers Academy**  
Stamford, CT

\* Local charter school

## Charter School Performance Standards

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

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

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

The Performance Standards are clearly defined on page 4.



### STANDARD 1: SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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



### STANDARD 2: STEWARDSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND MANAGEMENT

Is the school financially and organizationally healthy and viable?



### STANDARD 3: STUDENT POPULATION

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



### STANDARD 4: LEGAL COMPLIANCE

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



# Performance Standards Definitions

## STANDARD 1: SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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

## STANDARD 2: STEWARDSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND MANAGEMENT

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

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

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

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

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

## STANDARD 3: STUDENT POPULATION

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

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

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

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

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

## Performance Standards Definitions

### STANDARD 4: LEGAL COMPLIANCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Charter School Performance

Despite growth in the number of charter schools statewide and increases in the amount of students they serve, charter schools account for a small fraction of Connecticut's total student population. Many of Connecticut's charter schools maintain wait-lists of hundreds of students, demonstrating strong demand for charter schools that outpaces the sector's capacity to serve interested students and families. In 2017, over 6,000 students sought enrollment and were wait-listed. Charter schools account for 1.8 percent of the state's public schoolchildren. By contrast, charter schools in all of Connecticut's neighboring states serve a higher proportion of students relative to the states' total number of students.

Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System launched in the 2014-15 school year, a system developed under ESEA Flexibility included as part of Connecticut's state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The accountability system is a broad set of 12 indicators that help tell the story of how well a school is preparing its students for success in college, career, and life. The system moves beyond test scores and graduation rates and instead provides a multifactor perspective of performance that will incorporate student growth over time.

As part of the Next Generation Accountability System, all public schools, including charter schools receive a report that provides a picture of how the school measures on all 12 of the indicators. The data will provide a more comprehensive holistic picture of student and school performance.

*Connecticut charter schools continue to provide public school choice options for students and their families.*

*Connecticut's charter schools currently serve approximately 10,173 students.  
A total of 83 school districts have students enrolled in charter schools.*

*Of the 24 charter schools that conducted a lottery during the 2016-17 school year, 6,762 students were wait-listed. In the 2015-16 school year, 6,673 students were wait-listed.*

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



## School Performance: Charter School Best Practices

### Best Practice #1: Brass City Charter School

Brass City Charter School (BCSS), recognized as one of Connecticut's 2015-16 Schools of Distinction, takes seriously its goal to collaborate with parents for student learning. BCCS sponsors four parent-teacher-student conferences annually, so that parents are well informed about the curriculum, and can establish a working partnership with their child's teacher(s). The school provides a longer school day and year so the children are immersed in a high-quality learning environment. BCCS has partnered with the Connecticut Science Center in an effort to create and maintain an inquiry based science program that is transitioning to Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). BCCS knows that cognitive skills alone do not guarantee long-term success and that supporting students' social-emotional development is critical to obtaining positive outcomes for students. Therefore, BCCS has collaborated with Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, **RULER** program. Teachers work to help students learn to **Recognize** emotions in themselves and others, **Understand** the causes and consequences of emotions, **Label** emotions appropriately, **Express** motions approximately, and **Regulate** emotions effectively. BCCS maintains a low student to teacher ratio to maximize individual student engagement.

### Best Practice #2: Stamford Charter School for Excellence

Stamford Charter School for Excellence (SCSE) utilizes a holistic approach to cultivate lifelong scholars equipped with the skills, knowledge, and habits for success in high school, college, and chosen careers. Based on the reading assessments with 10 months of instruction, 100 percent PK, 100 percent K, 92 percent First Graders and 88 percent of the Second Graders were reading at or above grade level recommendations. The twelve key design elements summate the school's model and serve as cornerstones for the schools' quality instructional program. The model, specifically designed to address the individualized needs of every student and promote maximum achievement through collaborative and data-driven instruction. The school offers courses in core subjects of language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as art, music and physical education. Some of the program's key elements are: high academic standards, broad liberal arts education, a "back to basics" educational approach (i.e. phonics based reading curriculum in the early grades that includes direct instruction), extended school days, active parent involvement, commitment to academic performance accountability through internal and external standardized assessments and student portfolio reviews.

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## School Performance: Charter School Best Practices

### Best Practice #3: Integrated Day Charter School

The Integrated Day Charter School (IDCS), is recognized as one of seven Higher Order of Thinking (*HOT*) Schools in Connecticut. As a **HOT School**, IDCS promotes teaching and learning in, about, and through the arts, there is a consistent emphasis on strong arts, opportunities for creativity and the Multiple Intelligences. This practice has contributed to low truancy, low suspension rates and high attendance rates, all indicators of a positive and engaging school climate. The core components of a **HOT school** – strong arts education, arts integration and democratic practice – are evident throughout the school.

IDCS endeavors to create an educational environment that engages all members of the school community in the learning process. This engagement is a critical element of IDCS's organizational values. A foundational tenet of IDCS is the integration of the curriculum and an emphasis on critical thinking. Teachers at IDCS have embraced critical pedagogy as a means to support critical thinking in all content areas. All content areas are integrated to the fullest degree, specifically with the arts, to allow students to make connections from multiple perspectives.

### Best Practice #4: Side by Side Charter School

Side by Side is a true "COMMUNITY" school where students, families, teachers, and staff work together, side by side, to help build curious, resilient, and enthusiastic 21st century learners. The focus on providing opportunities for children and their families is an organic whole-child approach that goes beyond teaching academics. The unique model is deeply rooted in constructivist pedagogy that believes all children come to school with valuable knowledge and experiences to contribute to the school community. The students in the school participate in a curriculum that is engaged with the community in which they live and learn, and are met with a philosophy that embraces the concept of "it takes a village", paying attention to the unique needs of all students. The smaller class size and one section per grade level structure of Side by Side is unique to the mission and success of the school. In direct contrast to deficit models, which position school populations that are demographically diverse as being at risk for failure, Side by Side immerses its students in a culture that believes that they and their families are valuable, and where student success is assumed.

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## Stewardship, Governance, and Management: Charter School Best Practices

### Best Practice #5: Elm City Montessori School

The Elm City Montessori School (ECMS) Board of Trustees had three retreats during the 2016-17 Academic Year to focus on strategic planning. Working with Tim Nee from CREC/Montessori Training Center Northeast, the board developed a Principal search and hiring process. ECMS welcomed a new Principal, Julia Webb, at the end of the 2016-17 school year. In addition, new board members participated in a comprehensive new board member orientation in the fall of 2016.

The Principal and Executive Director are working with the New Haven Public Schools to ensure adequate cash flow to support core-operating expenses.

### Best Practice #6: Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication (ISAAC)

ISAAC's Finance Committee took a deeper look at the school's instructional goals, financial planning and effective budgeting. The goal was to enhance the evaluation of budgetary and educational accountability at the school. ISAAC included a new programmatic structure to the budget to allow all who make request or approvals to expenditures, see more effectively sources of revenue and expenditures.

The new structured programmatic budget supports the school leaders to make informed decisions. Additionally, easing the review process for the school's board and finance committee members, making it less challenging to fully understand the budget presented for approval.

### Best Practice #7: Great Oaks Charter School

The Great Oaks Board of Trustees are composed of eight individuals with expertise in law, finance, education, and organizational development. The Board meets on a monthly basis to discuss, refine, and approve material budgetary and programmatic initiatives. The Board, Principal and Director of Operations work closely with the network's finance team to maintain strong fiscal controls, expense and payroll management, and regulatory compliance. During its startup years, Great Oaks fundraised to support oversized fixed costs such as facilities expenses. The school has raised significant funds in private philanthropy and competitive government grant awards since it opened and plans to be fiscally self-sustaining once it reaches full enrollment.

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## Student Population: Charter School Best Practices

### Best Practice #8: Common Ground

Common Ground reaches out to students of all educational backgrounds to become their students. The recruitment strategies are to (1) send mail to students and families in surrounding districts, (2) visit schools that allow Common Ground the opportunity to meet with prospective students, (3) open houses and opportunities to shadow students at Common Ground, (4) bilingual recruitment brochures, and (5) translators available for student interviews, shadows, and open houses. Common Ground has taken a number of steps to welcome families whose native language is not English, actively working to strengthen relationships with middle schools with large Hispanic and immigrant populations. These opportunities in connection with cooperation from special educators, guidance counselors, and middle school teachers from sending schools and districts, actively engage all interested students, regardless of educational background in order to support the smooth transition of students with specific learning needs into the Common Ground community.

### Best Practice #9: Integrated Day Charter School

Integrated Day Charter School (IDCS) attracts students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ability levels and ethnic groups. The number of students who receive free and reduced lunch has increased each year since the school opened in 1997. IDCS welcomes all who apply and are selected through the lottery process. The school's social worker, paraprofessionals, math tutor, literacy teachers and classroom teachers provide support and work with students with significant needs on an individual and small group basis. A Homework Club is offered three days a week for extra academic help. Children struggling academically are offered a summer school program. Information about IDCS is shared with local organizations serving high needs populations. The Otis Library also receives brochures annually to share with visitors. Word of mouth via current parents who are happy with their IDCS experience continues to bring in new families, increasing the student diversity population.

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## Legal Compliance: Charter School Best Practices

### Best Practices #10: Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington collaborates with the New Haven School District to provide special education services for their students with disabilities. BTWA has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding agreement with NHPS for support in speech, occupation and physical therapy. BTWA employs a certified special education teacher to provide direct service to students with learning disabilities, in line with their IEP requirements. BTWA has also established a protocol for identifying students who may qualify for English Language Learner services that is aligned to the state and federal guidelines for Limited-English proficiency.

### Best Practices #11: Highville Charter School

Highville Charter School has put an emphasis on cost-saving measures. In the areas of facility maintenance, service contracts and purchasing, Highville was able to implement significant cost reductions to maintain financial health and viability. One method that allowed significant cost savings was to expand the partnership with the EastConn Coop to gain better pricing on office supplies, cleaning products, food service paper goods and disposables. Another successful cost saving strategy was the collaboration with Utiliz, a highly recommended non-traditional electricity broker. These costs savings, together with negotiated prices for volume purchasing with other vendors, has allowed Highville financial stability, with carry-over that will allow for necessary technology upgrades and facility repairs in the 17-18 budget year.

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