



Oakland Unified School District

Charter School Renewal Site Visit Report

Ernestine C. Reems Academy

**8425 Mac Arthur Avenue
Oakland, California 94605**

Principal: Lisa Blair

Dates of review: January 13 – 14, 2009

**Lead Reviewer: Renee Middleton
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Cambridge Education (LLC)

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school

Ernestine C. Reems Academy is a small charter school that serves 365 students in grades kindergarten through 8 (K-8). The school's current enrollment consists of 79% African American and 21% Latino. The gender balance in the school is 70% girls as compared 30% boys.

Seventy-five (75%) percent of the students are known to be eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. There are eighteen (18) students with disabilities and 25% of students enrolled at the school have been identified as English Learners (EL). The 2008 student attendance rate average is 92%, with the 2009 mid-year rate of 96%.

While the past five years have seen the school's Academic Performance Index (API) growth, the 2008 API (695) shows a drop of 19 points from the school's 2007 API base score of 714. The school did not meet its 2008 API growth target. The school met 10 of 17 of the 2008 AYP criteria with the Hispanic students meeting the AYP criteria for mathematics proficiency. However, the school did not meet its school-wide AYP criteria overall for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. The school ranks 3 statewide and 9 among similar schools.

Part 2: Overview

School Strengths:

- The school leadership and staff are committed to the charter's mission for the primary purpose of raising student achievement.
- The faculty and staff are diligent in strengthening the school's community.
- There is mutual respect between adults and students in the school.
- Parents appreciate the support their children receive for their personal growth and academic achievement.
- There is consistency of a standards-based curriculum delivery at each grade level.
- The emphasis on literacy and the time spent supporting students' reading and explicit writing components are strengths.
- The Board ensures that policies are implemented with respect to the diversity of the school's community.
- The school maintains a healthy budget with effective fiscal controls.

School Challenges:

- The school lacks a written strategic action plan of accountability based on explicit measures of outcomes.
- The school's instructional professional development strategies are not structured with a scope and sequence.
- There is a lack of an articulated system for the use of student performance data and teachers' own assessments to impact grading of students' work, grouping of students, and informing interventions in alignment to the school's charter petition.
- There is a variance in the opportunities provided for students' academic discourse and higher order thinking skills; there is a lack of rigor in the levels of challenge, differentiation, and pacing in lessons.
- There is limited integration of technology and art within the curriculum.
- There is a lack of whole-school communication and information strategies and systems implemented to empower and ensure that parents are able to support their children at home.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation:

This is a proficient school with under-developed features overall.

Is the School An Academic Success?

Ernestine C. Reems Academy is a school that implements an effective, cohesive educational program. The school has a purposeful and focused instructional program necessary for raising student achievement. Despite a couple years of positive jumps in student achievement, the school's current overall performance is still low, placing the school below state averages. In the 2008 state tests, student achievement in English/language arts (ELA) was highest in grades 6 through 8 compared to the variance from grades 2 to 5 where students are mainly performing at basic level.

Although the school shows a 19 point drop on its 2007 growth API, from 714 points to 695, students are making gains in ELA and general mathematics to outperform many Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) schools. The school made the decision in the last school year to change grade 8 general mathematics to algebra 1, resulting in the low 2008 CST outcome. The school currently ranks at 3 statewide and 9 among similar schools.

The teachers and staff care about the students and expectations for student achievement are high. There is a cohesive curriculum from grade-level to grade-level. The teachers teach to state standards, with well-planned and aligned lesson based on structured ELA and mathematics curricula. Instruction in classrooms is generally good with a few exceptions. There are some shortcomings in the monitoring and evaluation of instruction to impact student learning. The school lacks a rigorous professional development program to address the teachers' varied experiences to further personalize and improve their instructional strategies. The greatest needs for improvement are to better paced lessons, increased student engagement, and opportunities for students' higher order critical thinking.

Students' good behavior enhances their learning. There is mutual respect between adults and students. Parents are receptive to supporting the school through volunteered hours. However, few parents are engaged in the life of the school or in decision making.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Ernestine C. Reems Academy is an effective, viable organization that has established structures and systems for the effective and smooth day-to-day running of the school. The school leadership is effective in implementing a standards-based educational program to impact student learning. The quality of instruction is mainly attributed to the effective hiring of an experienced and committed faculty and staff. The retention of staff is good with little turnover.

The Board is committed to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. However, Board members have not been involved in evaluating the effectiveness of the leadership and the actions taken in the school. The school does not have a written and clear strategic plan that is shared explicitly with the school community. The school has a large reserve (at approximately 10-11% of its entire budget) and has had clean audits from the last two years reviewed. However, the administration has not formulated a plan to improve the school's poorly stocked library and shortage of resources, such as the limited integration of technology and art within the curriculum as stated in the school's charter petition.

Has the School Remained Faithful to the Terms of Its Charter?

The school leadership and staff are committed to the charter's mission for the primary purpose of raising student achievement.

The school has adhered to the educational program outlined in its charter. School policies and procedures are cohesive or consistently implemented within the terms of the charter. One change implemented in the last school year was the introduction of Algebra 1 in grade 8 which was further supported by after-school tutoring. Algebra 1 continues to be taught in the current school year to increase students' preparation for high school and beyond.

Criterion 1: Improving Student Achievement

A charter school promotes student learning through a clear vision and high expectations. It achieves clear, measurable program goals and student learning objectives, including meeting its stated performance standards, state and federal performance standards, and closing achievement gaps of students.

This area of the school's work is underdeveloped.

The number of students achieving proficient and advanced levels in the California State Tests (CST) from 2003 to 2007 consistently increased. While the majority of students continue to score in the basic performance level, the number of students in the below basic and far below basic have consistently decreased for the same period. In 2008, the number of students decreased in the advanced and proficient levels in ELA and mathematics although a number of students scored at the upper end of the performance levels. While the school expected the first year of students' Algebra 1 test results to be low in this area, the school nevertheless, scored better than the district and as high as the state in this subject area.

Ernestine C. Reems Academy has improved the educational program outlined in its current charter focused on the California content standards. Grade 2 through 5 ELA results are attributed the effective instruction that is based on a structured program with strong emphasis on phonemic awareness, decoding skills, vocabulary development, fluency rates, recognition of high frequency words and comprehension development. The middle school ELA program has evolved over time from its 2002 'remedial' program, to a more rigorous literature and language arts program.

Trends indicate overall improvement in student performance in the CST over the past 5 years, those students who have been in the school the longest are not the higher performers over time. In 2008, student CST results in English language arts (ELA) schoolwide at 27.8% and mathematics results at 25.6% proficient and above are below both the state and district averages, whereas, schoolwide student performance in grade 8 history at 35% and in science at 42.6% proficient and above were above the district results. However, according to this data, students who have been in the school the longest have not achieved as high as those new to the school.

While the past five years have seen the school's Academic Performance Index (API) growth, the 2008 API (695) shows a drop of 19 points from the school's 2007 API base score of 714. The school did not meet its 2008 API growth target. The school met 10 of 17 of the 2008 AYP criteria with the Hispanic students meeting the AYP criteria for mathematics proficiency. However, the school did not meet its school-wide AYP criteria overall for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. The school ranks 3 statewide and 9 among similar schools.

There is a cohesive curriculum from grade-level to grade-level and so teachers have a guide as to how to carefully scope and sequence their curriculum. Teachers work collaboratively and plan lessons by grade level in weekly meetings. Lesson planning is comprehensively aligned in each teacher's classroom curriculum for all core content standards. Instruction in classrooms is sometimes too teacher-centered with missed opportunities to further engage students. There is some variance in the quality of teachers articulating clear objectives, tapping for prior knowledge, pacing, checking for understanding and building upon student questions.

The teachers and staff care about the students yet expectations for student achievement are not consistently high. Most students behave well in class and there is mutual respect between adults and students. However, teachers do not consistently and effectively use rubrics to help students understand what is expected to achieve proficiency and mastery in their work. When students are given work that requires applications of skills, they are rarely shown exemplars of what proficient level of mastery looks like or given detailed written feedback on their work. As a result, students do not have a clear idea of the next steps in their learning. Teachers state that they would like to use English language development (ELD) strategies to further support EL students in their learning across the curriculum. Students and their parents feel that the school is a 'haven' that is safe, welcoming, and conducive of learning.

Criterion 2: Strong Leadership

The leaders of a charter school are stewards of the charter's mission and vision and carry out their duties in a professional, responsible and ethical manner. Charter school leaders use their influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school is confidently led by a committed principal who has met demanding goals of building the capacity of her staff and in raising student achievement over time. She manages the school well and ensures the smooth running of the school on a day-to-day basis. The principal provides a clear focus on purposeful instruction to impact learning. There is a shared vision among the school staff for the future of the school with diligent efforts to improve students' academic achievement. However, the school's actions are not as explicitly shared with parents to understand the work of the school.

The school leadership has set aside weekly professional development (PD) for all teachers to meet in grade levels and to plan collaboratively. As some teachers are new to the profession and are new to the school, they welcome the opportunities for improving their instructional strategies. Teachers expressed that the weekly professional development and coaching is beginning to help them manage and maximize learning throughout the school, but they lack detailed guidance for working with EL students and for improving their analysis of data.

Discussions and planning have taken place between the administrators and teaching staff regarding the identification of students' performance results and strategies for intervention. Data informs their decisions. However, the school lacks of a structured strategic whole school improvement plan to address these specific areas of need. The administration's vision for the development of the school is discussed. Yet there is the absence of a whole school plan that is explicitly written to solicit the views of the Board and other stakeholders, such as parents.

The administration often takes 'learning walks' around the school to check in on teachers and students. All teachers additionally receive an annual formal evaluation to hold them accountable for the impact of their instruction on student learning. However, classes are mainly monitored by the assistant principal to ensure that teachers get written feedback, advice, and the support they need. Teachers do not consistently receive verbal feedback on their instruction for further accountability.

The principal maintains good communication with the Board to ensure that policies are implemented fairly and consistently to be in compliance with the law and the school's own charter. Priorities have been identified by the school leadership which are shared directly with the teachers. However, there are limited structures and systems in place to ensure that the work of the school is closely monitored for its effectiveness. Although actions are discussed with the Board and staff, the school lacks a written strategic action plan of accountability based on explicit measures of outcomes. Furthermore, parents do not receive school-wide communication on a regular basis from the administration to keep them informed about the school's work and priorities.

Criterion 3: A Focus on Continuous Improvement

A charter school engages in a process of continuous self-improvement in order to increase the effectiveness of its educational program. The school regularly assesses and evaluates student learning based on stated goals.

This area of the school's work is underdeveloped.

The school analyzes annual state standardized tests and reporting (STAR) data to determine how and what individual students are learning and excelling in. This data, fall assessments, and previous year grades are used to determine classroom compilations, differentiated instruction, textbook and supplemental material purchases, and staffing. Students take weekly quizzes, end of chapter tests and teacher generated tests, as well as monthly tests and annual state tests. These instruments help the administration and staff to determine understanding, application and level of proficiency for grades 2 through 8. Teachers in kindergarten and grade 1 devise their own baseline and benchmark assessments. However, there is a lack of an articulated system for the use of this student performance data to impact

grading of students' work, grouping of students, and informing interventions in alignment to the school's charter petition.

The school does not conduct interim benchmark assessments across grade-levels and subject areas to track student performance school-wide at other intervals of the school year to better inform teachers' planning and intervention strategies for individual students. In 2009, the school plans to move to comprehensive trimester tests to determine school-wide movement towards proficiency.

Students that present deficits, but do not qualify for an special services, are enrolled in language arts and mathematics pull out or push in support groups, where they receive 1-to-1 and small group tutoring during and after school. The pull-out program, 'Redial,' assists struggling and low-performing students improve in reading, comprehension and mathematics skills. Students that are above grade level, but are not Gate students, and are high performing students, are looped up to the next grade level for language arts and mathematics. The students also receive 1-to-1 tutoring and reside in the highest level of differentiated instruction in their classes. Parents appreciate the support their children receive for their personal growth and academic achievement.

Teachers are beginning to collect a variety of student achievement data, but are still developing strategies in its use to drive instructional practices. For example, teachers have collated samples of students' written work in forming a school-wide portfolio. This process has included calibrations and development of strategies for improving writing across the curriculum and grade levels. However, in terms of current student writing, there is limited use of comprehensive and school-wide rubrics to help teachers link their own assessments to plan differentiated lessons.

Teachers are diligent in their communication with parents regarding student progress. Each month teachers produce individual monthly progress reports to update parents on their children's academic progress. The students receive trimester report cards to monitor acquisition and understanding of subject matter. Thus, parents have a general sense of how their children are doing through parent conferences and report cards, though they are not aware of specific benchmarks or what the standards might mean. However, there is a lack of whole-school communication and information strategies and systems implemented to empower and ensure that parents are able to support their children at home.

The school lacks a written strategic action plan of accountability based on explicit measures of outcomes.

Criterion 4: Criterion 4: Responsible Governance

A charter school board and administration establish and implement policies that are transparent and focused on student achievement. Charter school board members and administrators have a cogent understanding of and comply with the laws that govern charter schools.

This area of the school's work is underdeveloped with proficient features.

The Ernestine C. Reems Academy has a Board membership of eleven members who live and work in the community. The current members have varied experiences in business and education and with community organizations in Oakland. There is a teacher representative and one parent who sit on the Board. However, the school's student body has not appointed a student representative in alignment with its charter petition.

Board members show a commitment to having a community-based charter school in the neighborhood. The Board ensures that policies are implemented with respect to the diversity of the school's community. While there is general sense that the school principal is responsible for implementing the school program, the roles and responsibilities between the school administrator and school board of directors are not clearly delineated, so it is unclear who has ultimate accountability for making the school successful. The Board has a strong reliance on the school principal to interpret how well the school implements its academic program and how it is improving. The Board has not carried out an evaluation of the school leadership's accountability in raising student achievement and implementing school improvement.

The Board has an adopted set of bylaws and it implements timely review of all school policies. Board minutes and agendas are in order and board minutes are available upon request. The parent school site council has not yet been established this year, and it is unclear how well communication occurs between this parent site council and the school board. It is not evident that the school has a clear policy in place for resolving concerns or disputes, as it is not included in the parent handbook or other documents submitted. All required reports to the district have been submitted in accordance with timelines established.

Criterion 5: Fiscal Accountability

A charter school fulfills its fiduciary responsibility for public funds and maintains publicly accessible fiscal records. The school conducts an annual financial audit which is made public.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The school maintains a healthy budget with effective fiscal controls. It is in full compliance with financial reporting and management in which it maintains yearly positive balance sheets and an annual budget projection which demonstrate its financial viability. The principal's on-site operational management and financial overview of the school are very good and the finances are secure. The financial group, EdTech, provides timely budgetary information, updates, and monitors the working budget accordingly.

The budget is well-managed to provide necessary staffing and on-costs, such as 100% benefits. However, the allocation of resources is not consistently aligned to the budget or based on explicit educational goals. For example, the current reserve of \$300K is not clearly earmarked for a specific project or identified strategically. This is a significant under-spend of the school's annual budget amounting to 10-11% reserves in 2008. This money goes unspent whilst there are clearly needs for an improved library and further technological resources to enhance student learning. Although the administration indicates that the school has plans for developing the school's educational program for the future, this is not written and shared with the Board.

The Board fulfills its fiduciary responsibility for public funds and maintains publicly accessible fiscal records. Monthly Board meetings include a report on and discussion regarding the budget, spending and fiscal oversight of changes that may affect the operation of the school. It conducts an annual financial audit that is made public.

The school has a comprehensive set of fiscal policies governing the fiduciary responsibilities within the school. In turn, the school aligns its mission and vision with fiscal policies and procedures. Communication is maintained with the authorizers and district policies. It is clear that internal controls are deeply embedded in the principal's understanding of fiscal matters. Annual audits are available and transparent for OUSD and the public to be aware of the school's financial status. The most recent audit indicates that the school is in compliance with all of the district's required fiscal documentation.

School name: Ernestine C. Reems Academy

School Quality Review	5	4	3	2	1
Overall evaluation score		X			

Criterion 1: Improving Student Achievement: A charter school promotes student learning through a clear vision and high expectations. It achieves clear, measurable program goals and student learning objectives, including meeting its stated performance standards, state and federal performance standards, and closing achievement gaps of students.		5	4	3	2	1
Criterion 1 overall score:				X		
1.1	Achieves clear, measurable program goals and student learning objectives, including meeting its stated performance standards, and state and federal standards			X		
1.2	Achieves comparably improved student learning outcomes relative to students in traditional public schools that students would have otherwise attended		X			
1.3	Demonstrates high expectations for student achievement			X		
1.4	Provides a challenging and coherent curriculum for each individual student		X			
1.5	Implements and directs learning experiences (consistent with the school's purpose and charter) that actively engage students			X		
1.6	Allocates appropriate resources in the way of instructional materials, staffing and facilities to promote high levels of student achievement			X		
1.7	Promotes academic risk taking by supporting students in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment characterized by trust, caring and professionalism		X			
1.8	Productively engages parental and community involvement as a part of the school's student support system		X			
1.9	Shares its vision among the school community and demonstrates its mission in daily action and practice			X		
1.10	Involves staff, students, parents and other stakeholders in its accountability for student learning and in the school's program evaluation process			X		

Criterion 2: Strong Leadership: The leaders of a charter school are stewards of the charter's mission and vision and carry out their duties in a professional, responsible and ethical manner. Charter school leaders use their influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success.		5	4	3	2	1
Criterion 2 overall score:			X			
2.1	Effectively communicates and engages stakeholders in the vision mission of the school		X			
2.2	Consistently puts into practice the educational program outlined in its charter.		X			
2.3	Generates and sustains a school culture conducive to staff professional growth			X		
2.4	Actively monitors and evaluates the success of the school's program			X		
2.5	Provides regular, public reports on the school's progress towards achieving its goals to the school community and to the school's authorizer		X			
2.6	Treats all individuals with fairness, dignity and respect	X				
2.7	Has a cogent understanding of the laws that govern charter schools and monitors the trends, issues and potential changes in the environment in which charter schools operate		X			
2.8	Makes management decisions and uses his/her influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success		X			
2.9	Abstains from any decision involving a potential or actual conflict of interests		X			
2.10	Respects diversity and implements practices that are inclusive of all types of learners consistent with the school charter	X				
2.11	Engages community involvement in the school		X			

Criterion 3: A Focus on Continuous Improvement: A charter school engages in a process of continuous self-improvement in order to increase the effectiveness of its educational program. The school regularly assesses and evaluates student learning based on stated goals.		5	4	3	2	1
Criterion 3 overall score:				X		
3.1	Uses information sources, data collection and data analysis strategies for self-examination and improvement.				X	
3.2	Establishes benchmarks and a variety of accountability tools for monitoring student progress and uses the results of these assessments to improve curriculum and instruction			X		
3.3	Establishes both long and short term goals and plans for accomplishing the school's mission as stated in its charter.				X	
3.4	Uses student assessment results to improve curriculum and instruction.			X		
3.5	Uses the results of evaluation and assessment as the basis for the allocation of resources for programmatic improvement.			X		

Criterion 4: Responsible Governance: A charter school board and administration establish and implement policies that are transparent and focused on student achievement. Charter school board members and administrators have a cogent understanding of and comply with the laws that govern charter schools.		5	4	3	2	1
Criterion 4 overall score:				X		
4.1	Ensure that policies are implemented in a fair and consistent manner.		X			
4.2	Monitor the trends, issues and potential changes in the environment in which charter schools operate.				X	
4.3	Seek input from impacted stakeholders.			X		
4.4	Enact policies that respect diversity and implements practices that are inclusive of all types of learners consistent with the school charter.		X			
4.5	Actively engage the school's authorizer in monitoring the school's educational program and its fiscal status.			X		

Criterion 5: Fiscal Accountability: A charter school fulfils its fiduciary responsibility for public funds and maintains publicly accessible fiscal records. The school conducts an annual financial audit which is made public.		5	4	3	2	1
Criterion 5 overall score:			X			
5.1	Creates and monitors immediate and long-range financial plans to effectively implement the school's educational program and ensure financial stability.			X		
5.2	Conducts an annual financial audit which is made public.	X				
5.3	Establishes clear fiscal policies to ensure that public funds are used appropriately and wisely.		X			
5.4	Ensures financial resources are directly related to the school's purpose: student achievement of learning goals.			X		