



Oakland Unified School District

Charter School Renewal Site Visit Report

Millsmont Elementary Academy

**3200 62nd Avenue
Oakland, California 94605**

Principal: Kristin Gallagher

Dates of review: October 22-23, 2008

Lead Reviewer: Ting L. Sun

Cambridge Education (LLC)

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school

Millsmont Elementary Academy (MEA) is a small charter school that serves 222 students in grades kindergarten through 5. The school is managed and operated by the Aspire Public Schools Charter Management Organization (CMO).

Millsmont's current enrollment consists of 32% Latino, 62% African American, 1% Asian and Pacific Islander and 5% Declined to state/unknown. Sixty-seven (67%) percent of the students are known to be eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Approximately 3% of the students have been identified with special needs and 2% have been identified as English Learners (EL). The student attendance rate Millsmont averages at 94%.

The school has shown steady progress on state assessments, either exceeding or meeting its API growth targets over the past two years. In 2007, the MEA had an API base score of 686, ranking the school 2 statewide and 4 among similar schools. These numbers include the additional tests scores of grades 6, 7 and 8, which now in the 2008-2009 school year, have transitioned to Millsmont Secondary Academy, another charter school.

Part 2: Overview

School Strengths:

- The school has established clear and consistent expectations for behavior and a strong and positive culture to support student learning.
- The school is lead by an enthusiastic and knowledgeable principal who is also a strong instructional leader.
- The Aspire CMO mission and instructional model is consistently being implemented throughout the school with success.
- Teachers are using data and the cycle of inquiry regularly to target areas for intervention and reteaching.
- The teaching staff work very well together, and there is a strong sense of collaboration and collegiality.
- The school's student academic achievement data show marked, consistent growth.
- The school facility is clean, safe, attractive and appropriately resourced to support student learning.
- Students trust and respect the adults at the school.
- Parents support and appreciate the high academic and behavioral expectations of the school.

School Challenges:

- Parent participation in the Advisory School Council is not yet at the level of involvement and independence envisioned by the school's charter.
- Student CST scores in 5th grade science are particularly low.
- There are some inconsistencies in rigor of expectations and in pacing of instruction in the classes.
- The growth of the school is limited by its current facilities.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation:

This is a proficient school overall.

Is the School An Academic Success?

Millsmont Elementary Academy (MEA) is a well-managed and well-maintained school with a solid focus on student achievement. The school has evolved into an elementary (grades K-5) only program over the term of its charter; but until the last school year, included middle school grade levels. Overall the school has made good progress in academic achievement as measured by state standardized tests.

The school is in its fifth year of operations and has academic performance trends that have just begun to evolve in the past two years with the growth of its student population. Millsmont Academy exceeded its target with +24 growth on its API between the 2006 and 2007 state testing cycles. The school's base API was 686 in 2007, ranking Millsmont Academy 2 statewide and 4 among similar. In 2008 MEA made its +6 growth target resulting in an overall growth API of 692, with the second grade students performing particularly well on the California Standards Test (CSTs).

The school has high academic and behavioral expectations for its students which has lead to a positive and supportive school culture focused on student achievement. MEA consistently implements the Aspire differentiated instructional model of using grouped centers and varied learning activities to deliver a standards-based curriculum. There are variances in the level of rigor, pacing and questioning from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher; however, the schoolwide focus on targeted areas such as writing and critical thinking are evident in all classes and at all grade levels. Additionally, there is strong evidence that the staff are using a variety of formative and summative assessment data well to target areas for intervention and re-teaching.

Students are attentive and well-behaved and enjoy the positive rewards that come with good grades and good behavior. All students and parents interviewed appreciate the support and attention that is given to the students at MEA and attribute the school staff with students' personal and academic successes.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Millsmont Elementary Academy is an effective, viable organization. The school is operated and managed by support Aspire Public Schools, which provide the school with very good fiscal, operational and programmatic support. The administrators and teachers report that the CMO home office provides them well with the resources, materials and instructional assistance necessary to meet annual targets and goals established. Policies relating to fiscal and programmatic operations are transparent and consistently followed through. The Aspire CMO has a diverse board of directors and a knowledgeable leadership team who are determined to place student achievement first. With the board and CMO leadership support, Millsmont is working to maximize its funding and resources to support the program and school mission. Audits are clean, with one exception in 2006-2007 which has now been resolved.

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

Millsmont Elementary Academy's charter has evolved to serve elementary grades only. It has met the terms of its charter in providing the K-5th grade students a small, safe and nurturing learning environment that focuses students on achievement and success. This is evidenced by its evolving student achievement data, school documents and information collected through the renewal site visit. MEA, with the support of the Aspire CMO is also meeting its charter terms in the areas of governance and fiscal accountability and compliance, though the Advisory School council is yet to become a fully independent site council.

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 proficient.

Millsmont Elementary Academy has created a solid school culture that fosters self-discipline, learning and success. The school's motto is "College for Certain," and this mission is being positively supported through morning call responses exercises, colleges named after classrooms and student town hall meetings. Students and parents report that these activities are beginning to create a mindset for students that college is within their reach. In addition to these activities, the school has effectively outlined and implemented a clear and consistent behavior policy and is starting to instill a commitment the C.A.R.E.S (Cooperation, Assertiveness, Responsibility, Empathy and Self Control) lifestyle.

Student achievement trends at the K-5th grade levels are now beginning to evolve with middle school grade levels moving to Millsmont Secondary Academy. Prior to this year, state and federal achievement data for Millsmont included the middle school grade levels. With the middle grades, Millsmont Academy exceeded its target with +24 growth on its API between the 2006 and 2007 state testing cycles. The school's base API was 686 in 2007, ranking Millsmont Academy 2 statewide and 4 among similar. In 2008 MEA made its +6 growth target resulting in an overall growth API of 692, with the second grade students performing particularly well on the California Standards Test (CSTs). The school met all Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2007, but missed making AYP in 2007 based on subgroup proficiency targets. There is evidence provided through the Aspire CMO, however, that the MEA would have made AYP based grades K-5 student scores only. One area of particular concern, however, is students' performance on the 5th grade CSTs in science, in which only 9% of fifth-graders demonstrated proficiency in this subject.

The school consistently implements the Aspire differentiated instructional model of using grouped centers and varied learning activities to deliver a standards-based curriculum. In most of the classrooms, most of the students were well-engaged in the learning activities assigned. They were aware of what they needed to do and when to do it. However, there are variances in the level of rigor, pacing and questioning from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher. Some teachers are more adept at scaffolding steps to ensure proper behavior; but less in scaffolding questions to stretch students' thinking skills. In general, teachers balance direct instruction with group and independent learning activities. At times, however, direct instruction in classes tended to be rote and mechanical, requiring one-word answers or the copying of vocabulary. Nevertheless, the schoolwide focus on targeted areas such as writing and critical thinking are evidenced in all classes and at all grade levels. Additionally, there is good evidence that the principal, along with Aspire curriculum coaches, continue to monitor, support and work with teachers at the school to refine instructional strategies.

Much more noticeably consistent from classroom to classroom were expectations for student behavior. Students have responded well to "Mills Bills," college charms and the town hall meetings that positively reward them for working hard and for achieving goals. It is these aspects of the school that has most effectively promoted high expectations and a culture of achievement. There is now a steady focus on C.A.R.E.S (Cooperation, Assertiveness, Responsibility, Empathy and Self-control) principles, of which the upper grade students have a better understanding.

MEA classrooms are bright, cheerful and display examples of student work. They are well-resourced and equipped to deliver the instructional model outlined by Aspire Public Schools. The school is continuing to develop its student support systems. For example, MEA has this year acquired this year a full-time reading specialist and a full-time resource specialist. A counselor has been assigned to the school for four days a week. The school also provides additional support to students who may need additional help through the Read 180 program which gives targeted students an additional section of reading/writing daily. MEA also holds three Saturday schools a year. These are half-day sessions

which allow parents to attend school with their children. An afterschool program for currently established for childcare and homework assistance is emerging into an afterschool tutoring program. Because many of these support systems are new, there is not yet enough data to assess their full impact of student achievement; however, teachers, parents and students feel that they are well-supported.

Students, staff and parents are very happy to be at the school. Students reported they like their teachers very much and felt supported by all of the adults at the school. Students in the upper grades discussed the importance of working hard and working with each other cooperatively so everyone can learn. Parents and students are clear that the school expects its students to achieve academically. Parents praised the availability of teachers and the principal and their attention the children's social and academic needs. Parents interviewed, however, stated that they would like to see more regular, parental engagement by a larger number of parents. They feel that all parents need to be held accountable for supporting the school and for supporting their child's learning.

The school has made solid efforts in engaging in more parents in the school's learning process. For example, the principal has utilized creative strategies to increase the average attendance at the Advisory School Council (ASC) from 10 to over 70 this year. Additionally, the school has also put together workshops for parents to assist their children with homework. Parent engagement overall, however, is still not at the level that the school envisioned and that has been described in the school's charter.

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 current Millsmont Elementary Academy principal is proving herself to be an effective site manager and strong instructional leader. The principal took over the position last November after two previous leadership transitions. She has worked diligently with the teaching staff to establish a transparent and clear behavior plan that has brought consistency and order to the school culture. She is new to administration and took up the position around the middle of the last school year. Because of this, she is still learning the nuances of charter school law and school budgets. However, she is well-supported and coached by the Aspire chief financial officer and by the regional director who also oversees a number of other Aspire schools in the region. The regional director provides coaching and works with the principal to establish goals and access related resources to improve the school's educational program.

The principal has done well in establishing herself with staff, students and parents, as evidenced by the 2007-2008 end-of-the-year surveys these stakeholders. Teachers interviewed during the onsite visit report that they appreciate the honest discussions and feedback they receive from her frequent walk-throughs and classroom observations. They also report that the principal is very instructionally focused, as she herself was formerly an Aspire teacher. Discussions in staff meetings additionally focus on curriculum and instruction, and the principal meets weekly with a leadership team of teachers at the school to discuss areas for celebration, for need or for concern. Students speak highly of the positive rewards that she has put in place, and parents also appreciate the clear communication that comes from the school. It is noted, however, that while a solid and positive school culture focused on achievement has been established, the school's mission and vision seem to be more implicitly (college banners, classroom college names, and achievement rallies) than explicitly communicated. For example, when stakeholders were asked what was the mission of the school, many noted, "student achievement," "success," and "learning," but few, until prompted, articulated, "to get to college," which is more explicitly in alignment with the school's motto.

Policies and expectations are clearly outlined in the school's parent/student handbooks and are implemented consistently. Students adhere well to the school's uniform policy, and behavioral and academic expectations are maintained schoolwide and reinforced by the teachers and the school administration. Because this foundation of discipline has now been laid, the principal's next step is to ensure the same level of rigor and consistency in instruction and in academic expectations. There is solid evidence that this is currently being done through the establishment of professional goals and by grade-level areas of academic focus through a "cycle of inquiry." The principal knows her staff well and uses data from a variety of sources to monitor the school program.

General school goals and areas of focus are communicated to parents through weekly newsflashes, monthly newsletters and monthly Advisory School Council meetings. Student-led conferences conducted each trimester invite parents to see student work. It is less clear, however, how the academic progress of students (i.e. API targets and overall schoolwide benchmark assessments) are communicated and discussed with parents. For instance, while many of the parents interviewed felt that the school did a good job in keeping them informed school activities and of how their children are doing in general, many did not get the results of regular assessments or class tests, unless it was specifically requested. Parents interviewed indicated a curiousness to better know and understand how their children are performing against absolute standards and benchmarks.

At this point in time, there is limited community involvement in the school; however, the school provides frequent fieldtrips in the community, such as the library and local museums. The school leaders knows the school well and has accurately identified areas for improvement in order to shape Millsmont Elementary Academy into the Aspire Public Schools elementary program it has now become. With her continuous, solid leadership, Millsmont Elementary Academy is well set to fulfill its mission.

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 proficient.

MEA is beginning to use data and student achievement results to plan for the future. The teachers at Millsmont Elementary Academy use a variety of student assessments, which include their own classroom assessments, Aspire-wide benchmark assessments, school interim assessments, and the state standardized tests, to assess what their students know and how they might be progressing. The results of these assessments are collected regularly; and formal, structured time is set aside for grade-level teachers to review student achievement data and to discuss lessons. For example, the teachers regularly engage in a "cycle of inquiry" discussions in which grade-level teams pull out trends and evidence on a specific student skill or academic standard. The examination of these trends then leads to re-teaching and/or changes in instructional strategies. There is good evidence that adjustments to curriculum are made based on the information collected. Teachers overall report that the reviewing student work and collaborative planning has been effective in planning centers and learning activities and in providing consistency across each grade-level.

Further, the Aspire Home Office annually provides the school with a comprehensive summary of its annual state STAR data, outlining trends and disaggregated significant subgroup performance. The school principal and the CMO director of data share this information with the teachers, who appreciate the detailed information. Last year's CST results for MEA showed improvement on CST's overall, with lower grade levels (2nd and 3rd) performing particularly well. There is evidence, however, of some patterns and trends in the student performance on English/language arts state tests with regards to gender, which the school was not aware as the data analysis provided by the CMO did not include this information.

Similar data is provided to the school for Aspire-wide benchmark assessments. Based on interim benchmark results, with the elementary grade levels disaggregated, Millsmont is performing on par with the other Aspire CMO school; but students in the upper grade levels tend performing lower than other

Aspire schools. The school principal and staff have a good sense of where the school is and where it needs to go. This has been translated to schoolwide, annual instructional focus and strategies, such as writing this year. There are not yet comprehensive short-term and long-term strategic plans that are underpinned by clear benchmarks and targets for achievement at each grade-level and in all subject areas. This is an area that the principal will undertake in the new charter term.

Parents have a general awareness of how Millsmont students perform on state tests. However, the school has not shared formal or structured detailed school performance levels and trends with stakeholders beyond its teachers. Nevertheless the school community has a good pulse on the areas that it needs to improve and there is a strong commitment overall to make this happen.

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 proficient.

Millsmont Academy is managed by Aspire Public Schools, a public non-profit charter management organization (CMO). Aspire has a ten-member board made up of individuals with diverse experiences in real estate, business, education, and finance. The board has monthly meetings which are notified at all Aspire schools sites. It is noted that some of the parents interviewed, however, were unaware of Aspire monthly board meetings. All Aspire board meetings are held in compliance with the Brown Act.

The Aspire CMO board works closely with the CMO management team which includes the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a Chief Academic Officer (CAO), a Chief Operating Officer (COO), a Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and three regional Vice Presidents. There is strong evidence that the CMO management team provides regular reports of its schools' progress, including Millsmont to the board and that board procedures and policies are adhered to based on board minutes. Also, there is a clear emphasis on reviewing data at the board level, so that board members can effectively monitor the CMO-wide student achievement level CMO-wide as well as at each of its sites. Less evident, however, is how well board members understand what the site-specific improvement plans are in place and whether school are making progress on those plans. According the Aspire charter, the Advisory School Council (ASC) has a strong role in this; however, the Millsmont's ASC is still in early stages of development and not at a point where it can take on school-site governance responsibilities. The overarching result is that currently, Millsmont lacks formal parent representation in the governance of the school.

The board member interviewed commented that Aspire is "managed up, not managed down." This is reflected in the strong partnership with and trust in the CMO's management team and in the school site administrators. Responsibility for student achievement, therefore, is placed squarely on the shoulders of the CMO management team and principals. They, in turn, have developed very good support structures to support the teaching, learning and professional development needs of the school sites. The CMO management team has also put in place structures to ensure legal compliance and sound fiscal oversight. While the management team clearly plays a strong role in holding itself and the CMO accountable to the success of its mission, it is unclear what specific roles and responsibilities have been delineated between the board and the senior management staff.

Board meetings are open and minutes can be made available to the public upon request. There is solid evidence that board bylaws and policies are in place and there are comprehensive policies on conflicts of interest and address the disqualifications of interested parties. Community complaints procedures are provided to parents annually in the school's orientation packet to ensure adequate resolution of any parent or community concerns.

All required reports to the district have been submitted in accordance with timelines established.

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.

This area of the school's work is proficient.

The Aspire Board of Directors and management team work collaboratively to effectively monitor the financial plans of Aspire Public Schools as well as the specific budget at each school site through a formal budget process that adheres to required timelines. The Millsmont principal works with Aspire CFO and budget analysts to develop the school's annual budget, and the principal is pleased that she has this year been able to hire additional staff for reading support. As a small school, Millsmont, however, must be diligent in monitoring its annual budget. This year's preliminary budget, for example, shows a deficit (based on conservative figures), which is offset by carry-over funds from last year. However, the goal is to ensure that the school will not be reliant on carryover funds in the future and will stay within the means of its adopted budget.

A challenge that Millsmont currently faces is the limited size of its facility. This is currently impeding the growth of the school and its desire to expand to two classes per grade level (K-5). Expansion, even by two additional classes, would assist in a more sustainable budget for the school. There is strong evidence that Millsmont could easily fill two additional classes if the school had the facilities to accommodate those classes.

The CMO and the school adhere to the audit requirements in law for charter schools, and audits are preformed in accordance with Government Auditing Standards. Audit reports for the past two fiscal years show one audit exception in the 2006-2007 school year, related to credentialing. This exception has now been resolved by way of a State Board of Education waiver. An administration fee of 7% of general purpose block grant revenues is charged to each school site to cover services from the CMO home office. This supports the fidelity of the CMO model and the myriad of instructional and operational support services provided by the CMO to its sites.

The CMO has a comprehensive set of fiscal policies which outline internal controls and ensure an appropriate system of checks and balances. These policies are shared with the school principals and monitored by the CFO. The current Millsmont principal underwent an Aspire-sponsored leadership training at which fiscal management and responsibility was a major component, so she has had some good exposure to managing a budget.

School name: Millsmont Elementary 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				