

## Year Seven Site Visit Report

**River Valley Charter School**  
*Newburyport, MA*

March 17, 2006

River Valley Charter School (RVCS) is located in Newburyport and enrolls 288 students in grades K-8. RVCS opened in 1999 serving children in grades 1-5, expanding by one grade each year until it reached a span of grades 1 through 8. A kindergarten was added in 2003-2004 to reach its current grade span. The school is divided into four multiage groupings: Kinderhaus for 5 and 6 year olds, Elementary I for 6-9 year olds, Elementary II for 9-12 year olds, and Middle School for 13-14 year olds. The school enrolls students primarily at the Kinderhaus level, but also off its waiting list if spots open at other grade levels. RVCS gives preference in enrollment to students from a region including the towns of Newburyport, Newbury, Amesbury, Salisbury, and West Newbury.

The school's mission is "to provide a rigorous academic program based on the Montessori philosophy and rooted in the history, culture, and ecology of the Merrimack River Valley. Students will reach their full potential as scholars and become self-reliant, productive members of society. They will be adept at critical thinking and creative problem solving and will be fully prepared to succeed in future schools, careers, and civic life." The school's educational philosophy, as reflected in the mission and explained in the original charter, is based on the Montessori philosophy. It calls for a challenging interdisciplinary curriculum that combines the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the Montessori scope and sequence, a student-driven educational program within the structure of the school's curriculum, and the integration of local cultural, historical, and natural resources.

As of December 1, 2005 the school reported that of its 288 students, 91 percent are Caucasian, 7 percent are Asian American, 1 percent are Hispanic, and 1 percent are African American. One percent of RVCS students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and none are limited English proficient. 19 percent of students receive special education services.

The following participants conducted the site visit on January 24, 2006:

- Tracy Greenwalt, Accountability Specialist, Massachusetts Department of Education
- Erin Attfield, Dean of Students, Murdoch Middle Public Charter School, Chelmsford, MA
- Janet Begin, former Board Chair, Hill View Montessori Charter School, Haverhill, MA
- Mitch Bogen, Accountability Specialist, Massachusetts Department of Education
- Robin Coyne, Head of School, Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter Public School, Franklin, MA
- Judy Miller, Assistant Coordinator of Federal Programs, Massachusetts Department of Education

Before the visit, the site team reviewed the 2004-2005 Annual Report for the charter school and its current Accountability Plan. On site, the team reviewed curricular information, board minutes, student portfolios and other information provided by the school. The team conducted group interviews with Trustees, administrators, teachers, parents, and students, and observed classes.

The purpose of this visit was to corroborate and augment the information contained in the school's Annual Report, to investigate the school's progress relative to its Accountability Plan goals, and to collect information that will help the Commonwealth decide whether to renew its charter. The focus of the visit is on three central areas of inquiry:

- Academic success
- Organizational viability
- Faithfulness to the terms of the school's charter

The team's findings and the evidence supporting these findings are detailed below.

## 1. Academic Success

*Is the school's curriculum based on high academic standards, both in terms of content and implementation?*

*Finding: RVCS has mapped a comprehensive Montessori curriculum that is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is documented in the form of learning objectives for every multi-age group. As noted in the Year 6 Site Visit Report, RVCS has curriculum documentation from a Montessori publisher (Montessori Made Manageable) who provided appropriate curriculum content for Elementary I and Elementary II levels. As the school added grades, both the Kinderhaus and the Middle School, curriculum was created by faculty members and administrators. Side by side comparisons have been made between this curriculum and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, with explicit supplemental content and objectives noted when the Montessori curriculum does not address elements included in the Frameworks. Board members, teachers and administration all expressed the need for alignment and feel they have successfully merged the two elements to remain true to both Montessori philosophy and state academic standards.*

*Finding: Observed instruction at RVCS was engaging and focused, creating learning environments that encourage exploration and critical thinking for all children. Site team members observed classrooms at every age group and reported consistently engaging instruction. Multiple adults were in every room and teachers worked directly with one student or group of students while other students worked independently. Students were engaged in a wide variety of tasks, with teachers monitoring activity by creating task lists on the board and circulating throughout the room. Classroom observations indicated that extensive curricular materials and the supportive Montessori classroom environment support a healthy framework for providing eligible students with specially designed instruction as required by their IEP's. The low student-teacher ratio also benefits the school's inclusion model.*

*Finding: Students at RVCS were motivated and self-directed and able to communicate the educational purposes underlying their activities. High levels of student motivation were noted throughout classrooms and students often sought out opportunities for peer collaboration. Observations throughout the day indicated a complex academic routine, but one that students understand and embrace. Students demonstrated a sense of pacing even in the early grades and*

consulted a weekly planning sheet to guide their academic work. When asked to explain their activities, interviewed students were able to describe why they were working on the current assignment and what they would need to work on next.

*Finding: In all observed classrooms, student behavior was exemplary, though some inconsistencies were noted regarding time on task, particularly in the middle school.*

With small class sizes and low student-teacher ratios, RVCS has created an environment where teacher energy is spent on learning rather than classroom management. All classes were taught by a lead teacher and an assistant teacher and in many cases a special education teacher or paraprofessional was also present. Observations at the middle school level also indicated a low number of classroom disruptions, although it was noted that students lost time on task as they switched rooms and/or subjects. Certain observed classes took longer than necessary to begin and in some cases six to seven minutes of instructional and learning time were lost due to students leaving to get materials. RVCS does not have a specific passing time built in for older students and one teacher did acknowledge efforts to address this situation. Currently, teachers record the students as tardy and indicate a numbers of tardies on the progress reports that are sent home three times each year. With an expressed concern by teachers that curriculum coverage is a challenge, patterns indicating repeated lost instructional time should be addressed.

***Has student performance improved or been persistently strong on internal and external assessments?***

*Internal Assessments*

*Finding: Learning objectives have been identified for all grades and members of the faculty have developed the RVCS Assessment Toolset as an internal assessment system based on these objectives. However, definitions of proficiency within the Toolset are unclear for outside observers and those without Montessori training.* RVCS bases its internal assessments on the elements of the Assessment Toolset, a set of documents and templates reviewed by the site visit team. One element of the Assessment Toolset is the curriculum-tracking sheet, used to monitor student achievement on the specified learning objectives. Teachers report writing frequent observations of all students and using these observations to determine the level of mastery of the various skills listed on each tracking sheet. Teachers transfer these observations from the tracking sheets to progress reports three times a year. While the team did not review any completed tracking sheets, year-end summary sheets were on file and were reviewed by the team. These exit level reports indicate whether or not a child met expectations on the objectives, but do not provide definitions for proficiency. The administrative team explained that the definitions for proficiency are imbedded in the various activities and manipulatives associated with the learning objectives and are clearly addressed within Montessori curriculum and trainings. All teachers were either involved in creating the definitions for proficiency or have received training on the use of the Assessment Toolset.

*Finding: The school reports high percentages of success on the learning objectives across grade levels, far exceeding their stated accountability goal for internal assessments.* Data in Table I, detailed in the school's most recent Annual Report, indicates percentages of students meeting or exceeding the documented learning objectives. The school defines these objectives as exit level

expectations and teachers are responsible for determining these figures based on daily observations, portfolios, tests and quizzes.

**Table I- Percentage of students who meet or exceed documented learning objectives**

	Kinderhaus	Elementary 1	Elementary 2	Middle School
1.1 Mathematics	100	95	100	100
1.2 Language Arts	97	90	100	90
1.3 Cultural (Science and Humanities)	100	95	100	90
1.4 Critical Thinking	100	97	100	100
1.5 Creative Problem Solving	100	97	100	100
1.6 Personal Development	97	97	100	100
1.6.1 Self motivation				
1.6.2 Self reliance	100	97	100	100
1.6.3 Respect for the prepared environment	100	97	100	95
1.6.4 Community service	N/A	100	100	100

*Accountability Plan Goal 1.1-1.6.4- We expect at least 80% of our students to meet or exceed the documented learning objectives for each of the four levels in each of the following areas: mathematics, language arts, cultural, critical thinking, creative problem solving, personal and social development. **Goal met.** Students in all levels surpassed the target goal of 80% meeting or exceeding documented learning objectives in all subject areas. Teachers evaluate individual student performance on the objectives using observations, portfolios and progress reports. The school reports the use of independent raters to review portfolio samples using established criteria. These reviews are then compared to the assessments of RVCS teachers in order to establish validity of the measurements.*

*Finding: The school has created performance assessments for the middle school grades in the form of Presentations of Learning (seventh years) and Celebrations of Learning (eighth years). Among submissions to the team were documents outlining the requirements for and assessment rubrics for these student presentations. Students assemble a review panel and in addition to a speaking component, are required to conduct a portfolio review as a part of the process. While these assessments are graded on a pass/resubmit basis, they do integrate various academic and social goals as outlined by the school in its Accountability Plan.*

*External Assessments*

*Finding: River Valley has consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), although performance compared to the state and the primary sending district varies. Results are presented below.*

**Table II: RVCS MCAS Results by Performance Category, 2002-2005**

Subject	Students Tested	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Needs Improvement	% Warning/Failed
<b>Reading- Grade 3</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>0</b>
2004	33	0	64	30	6
2003	32	0	75	25	0
2002	34	0	68	26	6
<b>ELA- Grade 4</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>32*</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>9</b>
2004	30	13	50	33	3
2003	34	9	62	29	0
2002	32	6	34	50	9
<b>Math- Grade 4</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>22</b>
2004	30	7	37	53	3
2003	34	6	35	41	18
2002	32	9	34	34	22
<b>Math- Grade 6</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>12</b>
2004	36	28	22	39	11
2003	20	0	45	35	20
2002	41	17	34	34	15
<b>ELA- Grade 7</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>
2004	20	5	75	20	0
2003	41	24	63	12	0
2002	29	52	41	7	0
<b>Math- Grade 8</b>					
<b>2005</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>
2004	38	16	34	39	11
2003	24	8	50	33	8

\*This data is from the school's School and District Accountability Profile, maintained by the Department. At the time of the writing of this report, the Department is reviewing a MCAS correction filed by the school. The outcome of this review may change this testing number from 32 students to 31 students.

Because River Valley has relatively few children in each grade, year-to-year fluctuations in scores can have a large effect on overall proficiency rates. In addition, it is difficult to draw statistically significant comparison conclusions due to small sample sizes. Despite these challenges with data, trends can be drawn from the data above. In general, scores over the past several years indicate higher passing rates on English tests and lower passing rates on math tests. With the exception of the Grade 4 ELA test, the majority of students at RVCS are achieving advanced or proficient ratings in English. The reverse is true when looking at math scores. The majority of students taking math tests in grade 4 and 6 are scoring in the needs improvement or warning categories (percentages were split evenly on the grade 8 test where 50 percent of students were in the advanced/proficient categories and 50 percent in the needs improvement/warning categories).

**Table III: AYP Determination History**

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
ELA	Aggregate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	All subgroups	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes
MATH	Aggregate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	All subgroups	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table III shows RVCS' history of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations for the previous five years<sup>1</sup>.

Table IV compares the schools MCAS scores, in terms of Composite Performance Index<sup>2</sup> (CPI), to the state average and to its primary sending district, Newburyport. Though the school outperforms the state in all listed tests, the index is at times only slightly above that of the state.

**Table IV: RVCS 2005 MCAS Performance Comparison,  
Composite Performance Index**

	RVCS		Newburyport		State
	n	CPI	n	CPI	CPI
<b>Grade 3 Reading</b>	39	<b>91.0</b>	156	92.3	85.2
<b>Grade 4 ELA</b>	32	<b>77.4</b>	175	79.3	78.5
<b>Grade 4 Math</b>	32	<b>65.3</b>	176	71.9	73.7
<b>Grade 6 Math</b>	33	<b>72.7</b>	185	67.2	71.1
<b>Grade 7 ELA</b>	38	<b>89.5</b>	170	93.8	86.3
<b>Grade 8 Math</b>	20	<b>72.5</b>	181	79.3	64.7

*Finding: TerraNova scores indicate students consistently scoring above the 50<sup>th</sup> Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE).* The TerraNova is norm-referenced and allows for comparisons to national norm groups of students at each grade level. River Valley has administered the TerraNova since the school began. The results in Table V show results as reported in the schools' Annual Report.

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Education determines whether each school has made Adequate Yearly Progress based on MCAS results, in accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act. This determination is based on whether the school is on track to have all students score Proficient or Advanced by 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The Composite Performance Index is calculated for all schools by the Department of Education. It reflects the distribution of student scores among the four MCAS performance categories (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, Warning/Failing)

**Table V- River Valley Charter School TerraNova Results 2004-2005**  
**National Percentile of the Mean Normal Curve Equivalent 2004-2005**

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2005	71	72	82	80	81	85	85	84	82
2004	N/A	N/A	81	76	68	85	81	83	80

The data above shows a two-year history of students consistently scoring well above the 50<sup>th</sup> Normal Curve Equivalent in the aggregate. Subject specific percentiles for 2005 indicate a low national percentile (at 53 percent) of the NCE for the Kindergarten reading tests (tests are given in week 5 of school and serve as baseline data) and high national percentiles (at 86 percent) in fifth grade reading and social studies. When using TerraNova as a measurement, RVCS is meeting its goal of scores well above the national average.

*Finding: The school is committed to using analyses of internal and external assessments to inform the educational program.* Documentation provided to the site visit team and conversations with various stakeholders indicated a deep level of commitment to the use of data analysis to impact the academic program. Based on analysis of MCAS data from 2004, particularly Grade 4 math scores, the school leader identified several action steps intended to improve student performance. Two new positions were added in the fall of 2005 to provide additional support in math, one part-time tutor in the early grades, and an additional full-time teacher in the middle school. In addition, the administrative team completed an item analysis of the MCAS and used the results to identify approximately 100 students in need of additional attention in both the Elementary II and middle school age groups. Discussion of data between teachers and administrators led to the identification of certain skills needing improvement and several RVCS teachers attended the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics conference in the summer of 2005 to select new text material based on these identified needs. In addition to extensive analysis of external assessments, certain teachers also use Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA's) as a diagnostic device.

## 2. Organizational Viability

*Are the school's purposes and objectives clear and thoroughly understood by those connected with the school – governing body, professional staff, students, and parents?*

*Finding: All constituencies understand and are committed to the Montessori based academic program at River Valley.* The board and administration have invested significant resources to further the Montessori portion of the school's mission. Classrooms are furnished with a wide spectrum of curriculum resources and much money has been invested in the Montessori training of faculty members. Teachers clearly communicated the principles of learning in the Montessori model and parents, even if they are not well versed in Montessori philosophy, value most those elements that directly relate to the Montessori focus. Most directly, students themselves were able to define the values and methods of learning in the Montessori program.

Less well-articulated is an understanding of how student success is consistently defined within the context of the Massachusetts Charter School Accountability System, and the School and

District Accountability System. While all stakeholders could passionately speak about success of the Montessori model at RVCS, less explicit was an emphasis on academic achievement and a common definition of student academic success. The school is making strides in the use of standardized data to drive staffing and instructional decisions, but members of the school community spoke to the dilemma of implementing the Montessori model with standards-based assessments. The school has employed various structures to ease this tension and meetings with school leaders reveal a commitment to running a school in a standards-based public school environment. However, teachers could not articulate a clear sense of what academic success at RVCS looks like. One teacher spoke to conversations on the topic early in the development of the school, and indicated that revisiting the definition of student success was perhaps warranted.

***Is the school safe and are the physical facilities adequate for the program of the school?***

*Finding: The building is safe and classrooms are organized in a manner consistent with the needs of the Montessori curriculum.* Interviews with students and parents and observations at the school indicate that students feel emotionally and physically safe at RVCS. Classrooms are organized, clean and bright with large work spaces appropriate to age group. The school is fully accessible and the facilities maximize the inclusion of students with disabilities into the life of the school. Additional space was recently secured within the current facility, though members of the board and administration expressed the desire for additional space and a permanent location. The school’s current lease runs through the end of the current charter in 2009.

***Are professional staff members qualified by training and/or experience in the areas to which they are assigned?***

*Finding: According to school reports, 98 percent of the faculty is highly qualified and the majority of teachers have multiple years of teaching experience.* Both head teachers and assistant teachers are experienced and qualified instructors. Table VI shows that the majority of teachers at the school have over five years of classroom experience. While nine members of the teaching faculty are new to the school, many of them have previous teaching experience.

**Table VI: Teaching Experience for RVCS Faculty (Head Teachers and Teaching Assistants)**

<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>1-2</b>	<b>3-5</b>	<b>6-10</b>	<b>11-20</b>
# of teachers	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table VII: Number of Years at RVCS for Current Faculty**

<b>Years at RVCS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2-3</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>6-7</b>
# of teachers	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>

*Finding: The majority of teachers at River Valley have some level of training and/or certification by national or international Montessori organizations.* The school reports that all ten lead teachers in Kinderhaus and the Elementary levels are trained for the levels they teach. Two members of the middle school staff have completed an adolescent program with the North American Montessori Teachers’ Association. School leaders report and teachers substantiate that the school covers the cost of additional Montessori training and desires a 100 percent rate of training for its teachers.

*Finding: While teachers reported high levels of support, the lack of planning time during the day was discussed as a challenge.* Interviews with teachers revealed a highly satisfied and hard working faculty. As a whole, they feel supported by the administration and feel comfortable approaching members of the administrative team when concerns arise. In addition to day-to-day support, teachers in the focus group communicated the priority the administration places on training and the availability of resources to attend workshops or training courses. The one area addressed by multiple members of the faculty as a challenge was the lack of planning time during the school day.

*Finding: Teachers are evaluated based on goals set with the Director at the beginning of the school year.* The director of RVCS described the goal-setting process for these formative evaluations. The teacher and director meet before the school year starts to create goals and the mid-year and end-of-year evaluations are measured by evidence of progress toward these goals. Teachers are aware of this evaluation process, though in the teacher focus group it was acknowledged that perhaps some sort of rubric covering their instructional performance would be helpful.

***Does the school have an effective governance structure and management system for carrying out the purposes and objectives of the school?***

*Finding: The board at RVCS currently operates with multiple structures in place for business, communication and succession.* The Board of Trustees consists of 14 voting members and three ex officio members, with most members serving on more than one of the nine subcommittees. Only one board member is not a parent of a current RVCS student and only one founding board member remains on the board. There are systems in place for both the introduction of new members and a “retirement” option (membership on the foundation board) for members who have served out two full terms. New trustees receive a handbook and the board chair explained that trainings are held to acquaint new members with “board appropriate behavior.” Committees meet monthly, as does the board as a whole, and the site visit team received reports from all committees detailing their current objectives and projects. All nine committees demonstrated reasonable areas of focus, and several communicated ways they have altered their activities based on the changing needs of the school. For example, in previous years the Community Building committee was primarily a social event planning committee, but as the board has shifted from planning to policy, this committee has changed agendas. In light of this shift, the committee read through the charter this fall, identified primary values in the document and compared those to school values identified by the board. An aligned set of values will be published in the spring alongside the vehicles ensuring a reflection of these values in the school community.

*Finding: Members of the Board of Trustees at RVCS are active, dedicated and committed to setting an example for other parents within the school community.* Through an extended meeting with members of the board, it was clear to the site visit team that the Board of Trustees is composed of highly dedicated individuals who express the desire to lead by example for other parents at the school. This leadership was expressed in terms of time and money, with board members strongly encouraged to financially support the school, no matter the size of the

contribution. Thirteen of fourteen board members have children at the school and obviously have a vested interest in the success of the institution. When asked about the high percentage of parents on the board, members spoke to the high commitment level as a barrier to attracting, and keeping, non-parent board members. One board member expressed the need to better utilize the skills of future non-parent board members, and that perhaps this would be an item of discussion for the upcoming board audit.

*Finding: The board recognizes the recent transition from a founder's board to a board focused on sustainability. The current board has focused efforts on evaluating the current structure and practices of both the school and the board in light of this transition. Discussions with board members revealed a healthy level of reflection on the recent transition toward a board focused less on start-up issues and more on issues of sustainability. It appeared to members of the site visit team that this board has safely navigated the transition away from a founder's board and is beginning an evaluation process to identify priorities and needed changes in board policy. The current focus of board operations was described as fine-tuning what the school is doing successfully rather than introducing any new programs. One aspect of this focus is the board audit to be completed by June of this year. The Committee on Trustees subcommittee has been charged with developing the process and members reported that the self-evaluation tool would go to the board for approval in February. In addition to the self-evaluation component, the board reports plans to contract with an external evaluator, though options for the external tool were not presented to the team at the time of the visit.*

*Finding: The board demonstrated an understanding of proper oversight, with particular strengths in school culture and finance. The board at RVCS is highly committed to doing all they can to maintain the current school culture and sustain the school financially. Examples of this commitment include hosting monthly school tours for various members of the community, presenting workshops on Montessori for new parents and contributing financially to the school. Such activities demonstrate an understanding of organizational oversight, but less evidence is available to demonstrate equal understanding of academic oversight. While subcommittee meetings revealed an awareness of elements within the accountability plan as well as types of assessments at use in the school, how academic oversight happens on the board level was not clearly articulated. Future site visit teams should look for increased clarity among the board regarding their role in overseeing the academic success of RVCS.*

*Finding: The board does not currently operate under a comprehensive strategic plan but does have a strategic plan for facilities issues as well as documentation outlining development goals. The current strategic plan focuses solely on facilities issues and is a comprehensive analysis of the various building options before the school. The plan covers new building options as well as scenarios for continued leasing or possible purchase of the existing facility. Reports of conversations with local land groups indicate that the plan is a comprehensive document and is currently in use by the appropriate subcommittees of the board. While not part of a larger strategic plan, a separate report was received from the Development Director that outlined strategies for raising funds from parents, non-parent donors and alumni. It was clear to the site visit team that while a comprehensive strategic plan has yet to be developed, the board at RVCS is aware of long-term needs and goals and has plans in place to make progress toward these goals.*

*Finding: The board and the school leadership have a shared vision and a healthy working relationship founded on constant and clear communication.* Separate interviews with the board and the administrative team revealed regular and lengthy conversation particularly between certain board members and the school director. Members of the board spoke of regular reports from the school director at monthly meetings, in addition to phone calls and email conversations in between meetings.

*Finding: The current school director has assembled an administrative team consisting of an Assistant Director, a Curriculum Coordinator and Special Education Coordinator and delegates appropriate tasks to these individuals.* The school director has gradually increased the size of the administrative team and was able to explain what trends or needs led to the creation of new positions. Interviews with the administrative team, as well as teachers, revealed that job divisions are clear and that the school director delegates appropriate tasks. Board members also recognize the value of the delegation of certain tasks, noting that the board has been able to increasingly focus on policy as the school director has solidified his administrative team.

*Finding: The administrative team displays strong leadership skills and as a group is proactive in dealing with the various elements of running an educational institution.* Teachers and board members were in agreement that school administrators display an appropriate balance of strong leadership and approachability. Since the current hierarchy does not provide for age group or subject area leaders, the ability for teachers to take concerns to administrators directly is critical and teachers report that the current structure allows them to do so. The site visit team found the administrative team, led by the school director, proactive in identifying areas of concern and prompt in reacting to needs when brought to their attention.

***Are families satisfied with the performance of the school?***

*Finding: Parents speak highly about River Valley Charter School and are pleased about the level of education their children are receiving.* Interviews with parents indicated a high level of satisfaction. Parents described RVCS as a place where their children can grow at their own rate without limitation and where students are encouraged to be independent and confident. Parents of special education students were highly satisfied with the level of services provided to their child and the frequent communication about their child's academic progress. Parents felt that the school's inclusion model was well coordinated with the regular education staff and curriculum, providing equal opportunities for their children to participate in all academic and extracurricular programs.

*Finding: The satisfaction of parents at RVCS can be measured by survey results as well as through the allocation of time and resources.* Two goals in the Accountability Plan call for active family involvement and the school exceeded both of these goals over the past academic year. 97 percent of families gave time in the form of community service, far exceeding the stated goal of 80 percent participation. The school set a 50 percent goal for financial contributions, and again far exceeded their goal, with 81 percent of families giving to the Annual Giving program.

***Is enrollment stable?***

*Finding: There has been a consistent demand for seats at River Valley and the school maintains healthy waiting lists across grade level. At the time of the visit, the school had a waiting list of 286 names across grade levels. The most recent enrollment period yielded an additional 159 applications for 35 seats. Combining the waiting list with new applications, 12.7 applications were received per seat. The school set forth a retention goal of 85 percent in the Accountability Plan and reported the retention rate for non-graduates at 93 percent.*

**3. Faithfulness to the Terms of the Charter**

***Do the school's curriculum, program and activities seem consistent with essential legal and regulatory requirements?***

*Finding: The school has assembled a large staff to provide a wide variety of services for a larger than average population of special education students. 19 percent of River Valley students are on IEP's, which is a higher percentage than the primary sending district and the state average. The school's approved Corrective Action Plan has been effectively implemented in response to the Department of Education's Program Quality Assurance Unit's mid-cycle Coordinated Program Review conducted during January 2005. Examples of this commitment include: revised procedures in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, frequency of progress reports to parents, required staff trainings and an evaluation of the special education program and related services. RVCS has conducted a Home Language Survey and has determined that there are no Limited English Proficient students currently enrolled.*

*Finding: RVCS has created a continuum of services for students with disabilities and are using these services to implement elements of individual IEP's. The majority of students with disabilities receive IEP services within the general education classroom with supplementary aids and/or related services. A small number of eligible students receive IEP services through a pullout model or small group instruction, ensuring a continuum of services that meet the needs of student with disabilities. Classroom observations and interviews with special education staff indicate that teachers implement special education services according to each student's IEP.*

***Has the school made efforts to disseminate models for replication and best practices to the public?***

*Finding: The school worked with the local district to produce a joint statement to the state legislature calling for an increase in public school funding. After an informal interaction between board members at RVCS and school committee members, the two groups engaged a facilitator to run several conversations between representatives from both groups. The board reported early conversations about perceptions and later conversations focused on identifying common ground. After multiple conversations spanning a two-year period of time, RVCS produced, in partnership with the Newburyport District Schools, a joint statement calling for an increase in funding for public schools. This statement was taken to the state legislature and*

provided, as reported by school leaders, an important point of agreement between the primary sending district and the charter school.

*Finding: Dissemination efforts have yielded increased dialogue with multiple audiences.* As appropriate to a school in year seven, RVCS has multiple audiences for dissemination activities. In addition to the work with the district noted above, the school has worked with private Montessori schools and organizations as well as with other charter schools in the state. The Assessment Toolset was recently presented by faculty members at a recent Montessori conference and school leaders report high interest in the school's accountability system from the private Montessori community. Various visits from charter school leaders have taken place, and as a result, several schools have implemented items found to be of best practice. Examples of this replication include the River Valley Views monthly meetings and other aspects of the development efforts. The Director referred to graduates as ambassadors, and made a direct tie between the increase in dissemination and the increasing number of graduates making an impact at other schools in the region.

***Is the school achieving or making progress toward its accountability plan goals?***

*Finding: RVCS has achieved or made strong progress towards achieving most Accountability Plan objectives.* The school's Accountability Plan sets several objectives for academic performance, organizational viability, and faithfulness to charter. The school reports on its progress towards these objectives in its Annual Report, making that document an effective tool for evaluating the school's success. As noted in prior sections of this site visit report, the school has met or mostly met most of its objectives. Objectives in the Accountability Plan that have not yet been addressed are discussed below.

**Organizational viability**

*Accountability Plan Goals 2.1 and 2.2- We expect to attain sound financial management and progress toward financial independence from economic and political climates. **Goals mostly met.*** Interviews with the board and review of documentation revealed proper financial management of the school. In addition, the team received a detailed fundraising report from the Development Director. The school has established development goals for the current year and January reports indicate they are over three quarters of the way toward their goal. Using the "meeting or exceeding development goals" measure set forth in the Accountability Plan, the school is well on its way to achieving its targets by the end of the school year.

*Accountability Plan Goals 2.3 and 2.4- We expect to attain long-term retention of highly qualified faculty and administration. We expect [to provide] professional development opportunities for faculty and administration to meet the needs of the school. **Goals met.*** Minimum retention rates of 75 percent are listed for administration and faculty as measurements for this first goal. The school reports a retention rate of 85 percent and 100 percent of faculty members meeting their professional, exceeding the minimum of 75 percent minimum also established as a measurement for this goal. The final measurement for the goals in staffing calls for a minimum of 90 percent of head teachers to be Montessori trained for the level they are teaching. Of the head teachers, 100 percent have certification or in the process of concluding the certification process. Levels of Montessori training and certification for middle school teachers are not as clear but the measurement as listed in the Accountability Plan seems to refer only to head teachers in the Kinderhaus, Elementary I and Elementary II programs.

*Accountability Plan Goal 2.7- We expect to attain a Board of Trustees that provides appropriate stewardship of the school. Goal mostly met.* While the site visit team did not examine the annual goals for 2005-2006, the board did speak to the board retreat and the setting of such goals. In addition, the board is making plans to conduct a bi-annual external audit of board operations. The board chair indicated the audit would be completed prior to the writing of this year's Annual Report. The final measurement of this objective is the turnover rate of less than 25 percent for intra-term trustee turnover. Since the last site visit, two trustees have resigned prior to the end of their terms, meeting the objective of a less than 25 percent turnover rate.

***Is the school becoming the school it promised to become in its charter?***

*Finding: River Valley Charter School is becoming a model for others interested in the notion of Montessori made public and is making strides in the marriage of Montessori curriculum and standards-based assessments.* All stakeholders are vigorously committed to the Montessori philosophy and the school conducts an annual Montessori audit to ensure consistent implementation of a high quality Montessori curriculum. True to the tenets of Montessori philosophy, parents noted that teachers and school leaders encourage the individual development of the whole child, including the qualities of self-reliance, critical thinking and problem solving. In the Montessori realm, the school is performing as a model and all stakeholders can identify the core elements of the program. As stated above, there is not yet such a consistent definition of successful student achievement. Teachers and students made reference to the learning objectives, but it was unclear to the team whether these objectives are benchmarks or demonstrate mastery. The increased commitment to data analysis is one way the school is making progress in this area, but future site visit teams should look for ways that the school community can explain and measure its rigorous academic program, not to the exclusion of the Montessori model, but in ways internal and external groups can understand.

*Finding: Active partnerships, at various stages of development, have been established between most teachers and outside organizations in the community.* Members of this year's site visit team observed significant improvements in how these relationships are documented, noting this as a significant step toward formalizing and deepening partnerships. In addition to reviewing documentation, members of the site visit team were able to meet with a contingent of representatives from the various partnerships who reported on the specifics of each project. In addition, most teachers reported an active working relationship between their class and one of these outside entities. While some of these partnerships have existed for a number of years, many of these relationships are just beginning and do depend heavily on the teacher to direct the program and integrate activities with the curriculum. Levels of integration vary widely, with some relationships dictating significant levels of curriculum in the classroom (the class studying the salmon project is one example of high integration) and some addressed only during short non-instructional segments during the day.

## **Conclusion**

River Valley Charter School is a school not only highly committed to, but is also serving as a model for, the implementation of Montessori curriculum. Stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers and the Board of Trustees, greatly appreciate the environment that has been created and are dedicated to its future success. Parents and students are also aware of the unique

nature of their school and frequently comment on the environment that encourages not only academic but also social progress. Institutions in the private and public sector have sought out the school and several of the development techniques in use at RVCS have been replicated in other environments. The school has become an established institution with an active board focused on issues of sustainability, a highly trained faculty with low turnover and a proactive administrative team committed to the mission of “Montessori made public”. Continued progress in institutionalizing the various curriculum partnerships in addition to conversations regarding the definition of academic rigor and success at the school can only serve to improve an already high functioning school.