

Third Year Review

External Review and Prioritization

Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS)

The Third Year Review is a process that has been designed by the Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools (ONS). The primary purposes of the Third Year Review are to: 1) engage the charter school in an analysis of its own performance through the lens of the school's unique programs and services and 2) provide feedback to charter schools on current performance that can be used to guide improvement efforts prior to renewal.

Central to the Third Year Review is the continued professional dialogue between ONS and the charter school in order to build a clear, common understanding of the progress a school is making and important initiatives that are being implemented.

The Third Year review process is in a pilot phase during the spring of 2009. The pilot is designed to gather input from schools on aspects of the Third Year Review that are most effective and should be maintained, as well as those that did not work as well and should be revised. ONS seeks to work collaboratively to design a process that is most beneficial to charter schools.

The Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS) participated in the Third Year Review pilot. On the following pages are the findings and evidence collected during the two day external review. The final pages document the results of the prioritization process and corresponding recommendations. Prioritization planning occurs on the third day of the review.

Recommendations in this report are based on the team's review of the evidence (classroom visits, focus groups, documents) across three domains: Teaching and Learning, the Learning Community and Governance and leadership gathered while on site at CVCS.

NOTE: The Office of New Schools will not be monitoring the school's adoption or use of these recommendations, nor is the school required to implement these suggestions in any fashion. The recommendations below are written in the spirit of enhancing and supporting improvement at CVCS.

The external review and the prioritization process to CVCS were conducted on April 22-24, 2009.

Components of the Third Year Review

***Self Study:** An analysis completed by the school about its performance in relation to the performance indicator ratings set forth in charter school agreements and accountability plans. The self study ensures that the school has the first voice in the process.*

***External Review:** A formative site visit that is used to provide specific feedback to schools on strengths and areas for improvement. The self study guides the focus of the external review, which provides the external review team insight into the school's perceptions of its own performance. It also provides information about the school's unique context and its plans for the future. The criteria and indicators in the Renewal Site Visit (RSV) protocol are used to guide the external review. Currently used to assess critical aspects of a school's program at the time of renewal, these criteria may also be used to provide a lens to reflect on current school programs, practices and operations.*

***Prioritization:** Typically an extension of the external review, the prioritization process is used to assist schools in thinking through the areas for improvement that are most important and should be addressed first, thereby setting the stage for developing action plans.*

Teaching and Learning

Strength: There is a comprehensive, standards-based virtual curriculum and associated materials that support the teaching and learning process.

- The Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS) uses the individualized curriculum from K¹² that includes courses in five subject areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, history and art. Courses move through a series of lessons, followed by mastery-based assessments.
- In addition to on-line programming, there is a range of additional materials used to support student learning – for example, books, workbooks, videos and hands-on materials that students can manipulate (e.g., art supplies, science experiments). In addition, CVCS provides families with computers and Internet services.
- The On-line School (OLS) provides a foundation and structure to promote learning. In focus groups, administrators and teachers reported that the K¹² curriculum is aligned to the state standards.
- In focus groups, school stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, students and parents) spoke highly of the virtual curriculum, citing individualized instruction, the ability to move at one's own pace, flexibility and autonomy as key benefits.

Strength: There is a range of assessments that are used to understand student performance and achievement.

- In focus groups, teachers and administrators described a range of external assessments used by the school to understand student performance, in addition to state test information. For example:
 - Scantron – a computer-based assessment that corresponds with the Illinois state standards – is administered two times per year. It is used to measure student gains and document student proficiency levels. The self study completed by CVCS also indicated that Scantron was helpful in providing “individualized instruction,” “immediate access to a list of strengths and next steps for each child” and “identifying at-risk students who need additional support.”
 - At the lower grade levels (K-2), the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is used to monitor student's early literacy skills, including fluency and phonemic awareness.
 - CVCS recently began using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), in particular for students who are at risk. The DRA provides a more comprehensive picture of students' reading and comprehension skills. In interviews, teachers of at-risk students reported that this has been very helpful in targeting students' specific learning needs.
- As mentioned above, on-line lessons culminate with a mastery-based assessment. Students are required to master a lesson's skills, as evidenced through the assessment, before proceeding to the next lesson. School leaders and teachers reported that most assessments are completed by students independently or administered by the learning coach who enters the student score. Teachers monitor student mastery and progress completing lessons on a regular basis.
- In focus groups, teachers reported other informal assessments that are used to ensure student mastery – for example: question-and-answer sessions during monthly conference calls; in some cases, students work during Elluminate sessions (an on-line, interactive program) and through informal observations during face-to-face sessions at the learning center.

Area for Improvement: There is a lack of expectations around key aspects of the academic program: 1) comprehensive scope and sequence; 2) delivery of instruction; and, 3) use of assessments. As a result, the full benefit of resources has not been fully realized.

- ***There is no comprehensive scope and sequence that links on-line content delivery with face-to-face instruction across grade levels and subject areas. As a result, programming is currently under-realized.***
 - In focus groups, some teachers reported developing a scope and sequence at the beginning of the school year at the request of the former head of school. One teacher who completed the curriculum mapping process stated, “It is beneficial if you do it.” Both teachers and school leaders, however, reported that use of a curriculum map (or scope and sequence) is not occurring school-wide, nor is this a clear requirement.
 - **Recommendation:** A comprehensive scope and sequence across grade levels and subject areas may assist the school in the following ways: 1) create increased enhancements to the curriculum (additional enrichment opportunities, for example); 2) fill gaps in the on-line curriculum that can be supplemented either virtually or during learning center sessions; 3) expand assessment systems; and, 4) continue to build the high school program on the current K-8 foundation. A clear scope and sequence will provide a foundation to begin to create a road map for content delivery across virtual and face-to-face coursework.
- ***There are no clear expectations to ensure rigorous delivery of instruction. The school’s hybrid model provides extensive instructional opportunities that are not being fully realized.***
 - Most on-line instruction occurs through the self-paced virtual curriculum, without oversight. In focus groups, students – particularly in the lower grade levels – reported that they spend the majority of their time working alone. Students also indicated that their parents are the primary resource when they have questions.
 - CVCS teachers (certified educators), who have specific expertise to deliver rigorous instruction, spend the majority of their time on logistics and monitoring student learning, as opposed to delivering instruction. For example, a recent survey conducted by school leadership indicated that teachers spent most of their time: 1) conducting conference calls, 2) using email/kmail, 3) recording notes, and 4) monitoring OLS/attendance. Out of 10 possible responses, teacher time spent hosting Elluminate sessions and lesson preparation were rated five and six respectively.
 - CVCS has recently begun to use Elluminate for intervention sessions. In focus groups, teachers reported that it is not a requirement to use Elluminate; some teachers use it and some teachers do not. This was corroborated by school leadership. A review of Elluminate sessions by the team also indicated that some teachers were using Elluminate for parent conferencing only.
 - As part of the external review, the external review team reviewed lessons, viewed Elluminate sessions and observed instruction in the learning center. The team saw limited evidence of higher-order thinking. Most classroom-based questions, Elluminate sessions and on-line lessons asked students to convey knowledge and comprehension, as opposed to analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Higher-order questions are central to rigorous instruction.
 - **Recommendation:** The rigor of teaching and learning could be increased by: 1) setting expectations for the amount of time teachers spend on instruction; 2) increasing use of Elluminate to deliver instruction for all students, not just those who are struggling; and, 3) incorporating higher-order activities into on-line activities and learning center lessons.

- *CVCS has sufficient assessments; however, they are not being used systematically to validate student mastery in multiple ways.*
 - Inherent to the virtual curriculum, mastery assessments are primarily computer generated. Both teachers and learning coaches rely on the virtual program to track student performance. Teachers regularly monitor student's progression through lessons and performance on assessments.
 - Other school based assessments are used to measure progress (e.g., DIBELS) or diagnose learning needs (e.g., DRA). In focus groups, teachers also reported informal observations during learning center time and question and answer sessions as methods for monitoring student mastery of content and skills.
 - In an interview, school leadership reported that "end of course assessments" have just recently been implemented in ELA and mathematics as a "stop gap" measure. That is, students must demonstrate mastery on an assessment before progressing to the next course. However, there are not currently systematic measures, or benchmarks, to monitor student progress within the course. This is currently the responsibility of the teacher and the learning coach.
 - **Recommendation:** Establish a systematic method for monitoring student learning at various intervals throughout courses. This may include formal processes (e.g., tests) or informal processes (e.g., criterion-driven teacher observations at regular intervals).

Area for Improvement: The purpose and use of learning center time is not clearly used to provide maximum benefit to the teaching and learning process.

- As previously described, there is not a clear scope and sequence across grade levels or subject areas to guide the delivery of content.
- In focus groups, school leaders indicated that in at least some cases, students are assigned learning center times based on convenience for the parent. As a result, not all students are placed in classes with their regular teacher. This was corroborated by teachers, who also indicated a strong desire, as stated by one individual, to "teach our own students in the learning center."
- There is limited evidence of differentiated instruction in the learning center. As described by teachers and school leaders, each teacher teaches the same four classes. Observations by the external review team revealed teachers delivering the same lesson to all students (e.g., workbooks, reading a single book), across almost all classrooms visited, including classrooms that incorporated students at several grade levels. It is not clear how whole group lessons are providing instruction to students who are progressing at different rates throughout the curriculum.
- Across classrooms visited, the external review team did not see any learning objectives posted to articulate to students what they need to know and be able to do by the end of the lesson. While objectives were noted in the on-line curriculum, it is important that students see the connection in the classroom as well. This also indicates that learning center activities are disconnected from the on-line curriculum.
- Finally, in focus groups, students described learning center time as an opportunity to "be with friends" or "to be with parents;" Most indicated that they go home to learn. One student stated, "I learn better at night." On the other hand, high school students were more articulate about projects (e.g., work with DePaul) and learning opportunities that occur in the learning center.
- **Recommendation:** Consider establishing clearer expectations for learning center time, which are focused on maximizing instruction and benefit to student learning. Increasing the rigor of classroom activities and connection to the virtual curriculum are also likely to yield increases in attendance.

Learning Community

Strength: Within the CVCS community, there are a number of stakeholders (i.e., parents, students) who understand the school's purpose and are committed to the virtual education model. For these individuals, the program is working well.

- During the visit to CVCS, the team noted the extensive commitment necessary on the part of learning coaches (parents or parent designees) to implement the virtual education program as intended. For example, learning coaches must have both the time and material resources to commit to support student education and to ensure proper implementation and programming. Parents in focus groups expressed that the program works well for those parents that have the ability to commit both time and resources (e.g., travel to the learning center).
- In focus groups, the team spoke with parents who took advantage of the learning center experience on a regular basis (e.g., trainings, collaborations with other learning coaches). These parents also reported active participation in other CVCS activities. For example: brown bag sessions (e.g., parent/student writing course), meetings and attendance at board meetings.
- In addition, this cadre of parents also report strong communications and collaborations with teachers (e.g., power conferences, additional phone calls to strategize support for student programming). They understand student performance and monitor progress. One parent stated, "I know more about what my child is doing than I ever have before."
- In focus groups, some students reported taking advantage of extra opportunities provided by CVCS to supplement the academic programming. For example, competitions to help foster community and provide incentives and motivation, participation in Elluminate sessions and field trips. High school students in particular, spoke extensively about collaborative projects with peers.
- Other students reported opportunities to collaborate with peers outside of learning center time as central to the education program (e.g., students get together who live in the same community). Students indicated this was often driven by their parents.

Strength: There is informal collaboration among the CVCS community to support the school program and promote student learning.

- In focus groups, CVCS teachers reported communicating regularly with colleagues via phone, email, kmail and skype. Communications are focus primarily on student performance and progress.
- In focus groups, both administrators and teachers reported extensive communications with learning coaches. In most cases, discussions are focused on the students or content support; other communications are focused on logistics (e.g., power conferences to describe a school policy or procedures). This was corroborated by learning coaches.
- Most teachers also reported collaborating with administrators (e.g., academic, student support) regarding student performance. This most frequently occurs when there are specific questions.
- The school has recently begun holding Monday meetings used to promote face-to-face collaboration, in addition to the virtual communications. At the current time, most activities are focused on logistics (e.g., announcements, procedures), though CVCS administrators reported that in the future, this time will be built around collaborative professional development opportunities focused on teaching and learning. A review of a recent agenda indicated some meeting time was used for Elluminate practice.

Area for Improvement: There is no shared understanding of the purpose or philosophy of the school program. This has resulted in a fragmentation in some areas of the school culture.

- In focus groups, when asked about the mission and purpose of the program, the review team received a range of responses – for example, “to optimize student education,” “a personalized approach with a parent,” “to help students succeed,” “to support students to learn and master [content],” and “to provide an alternative option.”
- In focus groups and interviews, other staff members recognized the lack of clarity around the program’s purpose directly. One staff member stated, “We are all things for all people.” Another staff member reported, “This is not as clear as it could be. I think it is starting to come together.”
- In addition, CVCS enrolls a diverse student body for a number of reasons from across Chicago city limits. Administrators reported that some students enroll because, among other reasons, parent jobs require extensive travel or student athletes need the flexibility to learn within a demanding schedule. In focus groups, parents reported enrolling students for safety reasons (e.g., the local public school is not safe). Other parents had previously provided home schooling to their children and found that CVCS provided this opportunity with “additional support.”
- In focus groups, several parents described CVCS as an alternative to home-schooling. Students – in particular, at the elementary level – also described their education as “home-school.” On the contrary, the majority of CVCS teachers described the program as a virtual education program, not as a home school option. Administrators reported strong beliefs that CVCS is not a home school program but, rather, a virtual school. These inconsistent beliefs, at least in part, have contributed to a fragmented culture at the school.
- The self study completed by CVCS indicated that attendance at the learning center is a problem. There are different levels of involvement by learning coaches and students, which is an important component of the CVCS program. Some are willing and able to participate in learning center activities, for example, whereas others are not.
- In focus groups, teachers reported varied expectations for communications with parents. Teachers reported difficulty communicating with some parents due to time and job constraints. In addition, teachers also have provided parents with varied guidelines around availability for communications.
- **Recommendation:** Establishing a common program purpose is likely to assist CVCS in creating uniform expectations and clearer guidelines around roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders.

Area for Improvement: There is no clear system for feedback to improve teaching and learning.

- In focus groups, administrators reported that an evaluation process for teachers has existed, but that it is under revision. Evaluation forms were not available at the time of the external review.
- In focus groups, most teachers reported never having been observed in the learning center course. In addition, teachers indicated that they received little to no feedback on virtual instruction, nor did they have opportunities to observe peer instruction. One teacher stated, “We are given ideas, but there is no follow-up.” Another teacher reported, “[Administration] has no idea what we are doing.”
- In focus groups, learning coaches indicated that they are given content support and often discuss student progress, but feedback is not provided.
- **Recommendation:** Providing formative feedback to staff is central to improving instruction and, therefore, student learning. The hybrid nature of the CVCS program provides many opportunities for feedback and reflection that have yet to be developed and implemented.

Area for Improvement: There is no comprehensive professional development plan to improve teaching and learning.

- In focus groups, administrators reported that K¹² offers a range of professional development opportunities and trainings and that CVCS can opt for participation in these programs. In addition, K¹² will send employees to CVCS to conduct school-based trainings that occur primarily at the request of the school. Other than an initial orientation – which occurs both in a face-to-face format and virtually – it was not clear to the team specifically what types of ongoing professional development K¹² requires of teachers or learning coaches.
- In focus groups, parents reported participating in trainings at the learning center and speak highly of these sessions. Learning coach trainings were also observed by the team while on site. As described above, however, parent participation in trainings is variable because attendance is highly irregular. Illuminate sessions are not regularly recorded so if parents miss the initial transmission they have no opportunity to view it at another time.
- CVCS teachers have individual professional growth plans. However, plans reviewed by the team vary in detail – for example, “identify at-risk students...,” “parents will have positive things to say...” – and it is not clear how most goals will lead to improved outcomes. Other goals focus on participation and attendance. In addition, professional growth plans do not include school-wide goals. CVCS does not currently have a clear professional development plan to support teaching and learning.
- **Recommendation:** Developing a targeted, purposeful plan for professional development for all parties that is linked to a strategic plan is likely to benefit the teaching and learning process. The CVCS program relies on specific teacher and learning coach expertise to ensure program success.

Governance and Leadership

Strength: The school is in transition, which inherently provides opportunity for improvement and evolution.

- CVCS has a new head of school (the third in three years). The school was without a leader for several months this year. During this time, various CVCS staff members took on additional responsibilities that have since shifted (e.g., learning coach coordinator).
- In addition to the head of school, there has been a shift in the administrative structure. A leadership team has been created, which includes the head of school, the academic administrator, the operations manager and the student support services administrator. While the head of school is responsible for oversight of all aspects of the school, other administrators have specific responsibilities for supporting aspects of the school program.
- In interviews, the head of school indicated that personnel from K¹² supporting the school has also shifted. At the current time, it is not clear who is providing supervision for CVCS employees contracted by K¹².
- The new head of school has focused efforts in the first six months on understanding the nuances of the school program, communicating with various stakeholders (including building relationships with the Board) and informally identifying necessary changes to the school program (e.g., promotion policy, special education services, safety plan).

Area for Improvement: Clear systems are not in place for communication. There are a lot of individuals involved in the management of the school. As a result, there is a lack of clarity around authority and decision-making.

- When asked in focus groups, “To whom do you go with questions?” teachers provided varied responses, ranging from the head of school to other members of the administrative team (e.g., academic administrator, student support administrator, operations manager). Some stakeholders indicated the parent coordinator as a primary resource, as well as the attendance office. Teachers reported a significant amount of autonomy and authority to make decisions, particularly pertaining to individual student academic programs.
- In focus groups, parents indicated communicating with a range of individuals at the school who are decision-makers. Some parents reported communicating with the head of school, whereas others do not. The parent coordinator is a primary resource for most learning coaches. Only a few parents reported communicating with other administrators, primarily to address specific questions.
- In focus groups, students also provided varied responses to the above question. Younger students direct their questions to parents. At the high school level, students view their parents as monitors and the teacher as the authority. Students reported minimal contact with the administrative team.
- Currently, there is also some confusion around school governance. Some stakeholders reported that K¹² is the ultimate decision-maker, whereas others view the Board as the ultimate authority. Parents are in the process of organizing a parent-teacher organization to vet concerns and advocate their stance on decisions made with regard to the program.
- **Recommendation:** Developing and sharing (to create increased transparency) may assist the school in clarifying lines of communication and decision-making authority. Neither an organizational chart nor clear job descriptions currently exist at the school.

Area for Improvement: Currently, there is no strategic plan/operating plan that sets a mission and vision and then establishes goals for performance based on the mission and vision. As a result, there is a lack of clear expectations and accountability (for both performance and task completion) at CVCS.

- As previously established in this report, there is no uniform understanding of the program's purpose (see Learning Community). There is a lack of clear expectations around key aspects of the academic program (see Teaching and Learning) and systems for communication and decision-making are blurred.
- There is no clear evaluation process of administrators or teachers and, as a result, expectations for performance are unclear. Processes for providing formative feedback to teachers and learning coaches do not exist, which is difficult to accomplish without clear goals and expectations.
- The self study completed by CVCS cited that procedures for recording, gathering and reporting student attendance have been a persistent problem at the school. In addition, the self study indicated that there is "no system for accountability" for the learning center attendance; that "the current policy is too weak;" and, there are too many people "working at cross purposes with each other in managing attendance."
- Interviews with school leadership indicated that at least some of the school's policies and procedures are not working for the school and that the process for refining policies is unclear. Not all expectations and policies set forth by K¹² fit the hybrid nature of CVCS. In addition, the school, as a charter school authorized by the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education, must work to abide by public school law.
- As reflected in a comment made by several members of the school's administrative team, many members of the CVCS community are currently "working in silos."
- **Recommendation:** To ensure clear expectations and increased accountability for performance, the school should consider creating a plan that provides a clear roadmap for the school and its stakeholders –currently and into the future.

Prioritization and Recommendation

The prioritization process is used to assist schools in thinking through the school's strength and areas for improvement that are most important and should be addressed first, thereby setting the stage for developing action plans.

The review team, in collaboration with school leadership, used a consensus-based process to identify key strengths and areas for improvement at the school on the basis of evidence collected during the external review and information reported in the self study completed by CVCS prior to the external review.

Consensus Strength

- There is a comprehensive, standards-based virtual curriculum and associated materials that support the teaching and learning process.

Consensus Areas of Improvement

- **Teaching and Learning:** There is a lack of expectations around key aspects of the academic program: 1) comprehensive scope and sequence; 2) delivery of instruction; and, 3) use of assessments. As a result, the full benefit of resources has not been fully realized.
- **Learning Community:** There is no shared understanding of the purpose or philosophy of the school program. This has resulted in a fragmentation in some areas of the school culture.
- **Governance and Leadership:** Currently, there is no strategic plan/operating plan that sets a mission and vision and establishes goals for performance on the basis of the mission and vision. As a result, there is a lack of clear expectations and accountability (for both performance and task completion) at CVCS.

Discussion

A link exists across the areas for improvement identified in each domain. Establishing clear expectations for the school – beginning with the purpose of the program – is a central priority. The development of a strategic plan, or operating plan (including aspects of school management), will continue to clarify roles and responsibilities and increase accountability for school stakeholders. This plan should also focus on establishing clearer expectations for the academic program.

Use of hard data to understand what is working well and what needs to be improved is important to consider as CVCS establishes plans for the future. Individual perceptions are important, though they are likely to vary greatly. Use of multiple forms of data provides concrete information that the school can use uniformly to understand what is occurring, without question.

Next Steps (in priority order)

1. ***Develop a shared mission and vision.*** This is the first task; the others evolve from this. The process should be collaborative and used to create ownership across the school community. The Board should play a key role in establishing the mission and vision.
 - Mission – establishes the purpose; what you do every day trying to accomplish key tasks
 - Vision – establishes the road map; what you see down the road
2. ***Implement a strategic planning process.*** This stems from and overlaps with the development of a shared mission and vision. Time and resources are a consideration:
 - **Time:** There is a retreat occurring in June that provides opportunity for strategic planning to occur. There is urgency to develop a clear roadmap to dissolve the silos that individuals are currently working in and to ensure that all stakeholders are focused on the key task – providing a strong academic and educational program that is focused on CVCS students. In addition, the school will be up for renewal in the fall of 2011.
 - **Resources:** It is important for the strategic planning process to be conducted by a third party. This ensures that school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders have an equal voice in the process.
 - Recommendations for facilitators to assist with strategic planning will be provided to the head of school by the review team.
 - The head of school and the Board should carefully select facilitators for strategic planning who are a good match for the school’s culture and philosophy.
3. ***Establish clear expectations for the academic program.*** This can be considered as part of the strategic planning process. There is at least some consensus that expectations need to be clarified.

Appendix A

The Third Year Review to Chicago Virtual Charter School was conducted on April 22-24, 2009 by a team of educators from SchoolWorks LLC and the Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools.

Jennifer Dai, Co-director of Accountability, Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools

Susan Jamback, Consultant, SchoolWorks, LLC

Heather Minihan, Co-director of Accountability, Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools

Romeldia Salter, School Support Specialist, Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools

Megan Tupa, Chief Operating Officer, SchoolWorks, LLC

Mathew Wicks, Consultant, SchoolWorks, LLC