

## DRAFT: FOR REVIEW ONLY



### School Quality Review: Oregon Connections Academy Executive Summary

#### Overview:

The Charter Schools Development Center (CSDC) conducted a **School Quality Review** of the Oregon Connections Academy between February and June, 2006. The CSDC School Quality Review addresses two broad **accountability questions**:

1. *Is the educational program a success?*
2. *Is the school a viable organization (i.e. fiscally solvent, with sound, legal governance and operations)?*

#### Method:

A review team, comprised of two experts from CSDC, utilized CSDC's *Charter School Review Rubric*, which is **based on Oregon law and best practice** and designed to evaluate **34 criteria** related to a charter school's Educational Program (Part I) and Operations (Part II). The review team first analyzed the school's foundational documents and other data (March-April, 2006). Then, the team conducted a two-day site review (May 10-11, 2006). The team then organized findings according to **standards** correlated to the charter school statutes and other relevant **laws**, as well as the school's charter **contract**, other foundational documents and other data provided by the school, using evidence gathered for each standard from written documents, interviews, and observations (see *Sources of Evidence*, listed under each standard for specific sources used.) Each element of the school is assessed on a 0-4 point scale, with 4 indicating that the school is exceeding criteria (see page three of the attached *rubric* for more information on the scoring system).

This is an atypical school review in that it is **structured to compile baseline data** regarding specific aspects of the school's implementation rather than determine the school's overall success with its Educational Program or Operations. **Based on Oregon Connection Academy's negotiated agreement with Scio School District regarding the particulars of this evaluation process and report**, the District has asked CSDC to review all rubric criteria specifically, and provide comments on all criteria, and to **"score" only some rubric criteria**; approximately 38% of the criteria in Part I (Educational Program) are "scored," whereas approximately **62% of the criteria** in Part I are **not scored** and approximately 85% of the criteria in Part II (School Operations) are "scored," whereas approximately 15% of the criteria in Part II are not scored. Scio School District (based on negotiated agreement with Oregon Connections Academy) also asked that CSDC not determine or provide any cumulative scores for Part I or Part II. This review and rubric align with said requests.

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### Key Findings:

Instructional Program. ORCA appears to be implementing the educational program described in its charter application and contract, and appears to have made significant and extraordinary efforts to establish working relationships with a large number of school districts and ESDs regarding special education. The school should work with all districts to get contracts in place for all students on IEPs with appropriate funding arrangements. Other key concerns regarding the instructional program that CSDC urges the school to address include:

1. The school's policy, according to its staff and vendor, is to require that all English learner students have a Learning Coach who is English-proficient. Very few of the school's students are non-English speakers, according to school staff, and all are adopted children. CSDC is concerned that the school's policy regarding learning coaches may be discriminatory in nature and is also concerned that the school's online curriculum and assessment systems currently only function in English.
2. Based on data provided, CSDC is unable to determine whether the school is serving the students it specified as targeted in its charter and whether the school's instructional program and culture result in student achievement of individual and school-wide goals

Student Achievement and Assessment. The majority of the curriculum appears to be aligned to Oregon State Standards, based on samples from various grades, and teachers are generally aware of which lessons teach which standards. The Learning Management System allows staff to access individual student and school-wide performance quickly and easily. Additionally, school staff worked extensively and creatively to facilitate student participation in the Oregon Statewide Assessments, partnering with multiple organizations throughout the state for sites and traveling to proctor the tests. Growth of student knowledge within this year is unknown, based on information available/provided during this review. Individual and aggregate student growth over time will become evident as the school is open for a longer period of time.

The schools' stated three key outcomes for student progress are "satisfactory" levels of attendance, participation and performance; however school constituents have conflicting understandings of "satisfactory" (i.e., does 95%, 100% or 70% attendance constitute "satisfactory?"). CSDC urges the school to clarify definitions of "satisfactory" for attendance, participation and performance and ensure that all staff and partners have a common understanding so that student progress is clear. CSDC further urges the school to tighten its protocols for measuring student attendance, participation and performance. Additionally, since school funding remains linked to "time," the school should strengthen means for verifying student "time on task" both with print-based and Internet-based teaching and learning.

Of the five goals outlined in the charter proposal, the only goal for which adequate information was provided/available was teacher quality (which is high). Conclusions regarding progress towards the others—ongoing student progress, standardized test performance, student academic growth, and parent satisfaction—cannot be drawn with the information available/provided. TESA data was not made available and ODE has not yet compiled or released schools' aggregate participation levels and test scores.

Governance. ORCA has established a sound and effective governing board and should continue its efforts to finish and formalize its key policies and procedures. The school is incorporated as an Oregon nonprofit corporation and is governed by a committed and experienced group of

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respected community leaders. The board members appear to be very committed to the school's mission, are cognizant of their primary roles and responsibilities and meet regularly and deliberate thoughtfully over a broad range of key items. They also strive to and have largely developed a very effective and professional working relationship with the sponsor district. CSDC urges the school to continue to work on establishing and formalizing various board policies and in securing approval of its tax-exempt status. The school, including the board, is highly dependent on the services of its primary contractor. This dependence has the potential to compromise the board's independence, and CSDC recommends that the board continue to monitor and review the relationship to ensure that it has the capacity to make decisions in alignment with the school's mission.

Financial Management. The school has a balanced budget and has established effective financial management systems. ORCA's budget is in balance and the school's board, with strong support from its primary contractor, closely monitors the budget to ensure that it remains in balance. ORCA appears to have sound and effective accounting, budgeting, and payroll systems that were established by and are maintained by its contractor. Board members carefully and diligently review the school's budget transactions. It is not clear, however, whether the board has sufficient information to determine whether some of the school's larger bundled contracted items represent a strong value-for-money for the school. The school's budgeted reserves are also very lean and future budgets should strive to build a stronger financial reserve to permit the school to withstand unforeseen events.

Human Resources. The school's especially dedicated team of educators is one of its key assets. The staff at the school appears to be very committed to the school's mission and care deeply about their students. There seems to be a high level of teacher engagement, enthusiasm and satisfaction. ORCA has a defined staff recruiting, interviewing, and hiring process as well as a clear set of goals for staff that are easily measured and in alignment with the school's mission. All teachers plan to return next school year. The school's instructional staff meets the credentialing requirements specified in Oregon's charter school laws, though the school will need to make additional adjustments to ensure that its staff meet more stringent federal "highly qualified" teacher requirements that will take effect at the end of the current school year. CSDC recommends that the Administrator work with teachers to create individual and school-wide professional development plans. Additionally, the school has yet to implement its staff review process and should presumably begin to do so very soon. Furthermore, the ORCA board should adopt all personnel policies and protocols that ORCA uses.

Legal Compliance. The CSDC review team does not include attorneys; rather experts in charter school law, effective education practices and all aspects of charter school operations. CSDC found no apparent violations of applicable law and believe the school is generally compliant. As mentioned above, the school should, however, develop more clear and proactive policies and capacity to serve English learners.

### Recommendations:

CSDC highly recommends that Oregon Connections Academy address all recommendations embedded in the *School Quality Review* report. CSDC further recommends Oregon Connections Academy to prepare for a comprehensive CSDC School Quality Review in early December, 2006, per current agreement with Scio School District, the charter school's sponsor.

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### **CSDC Review Team for Oregon Connections Academy**

**Kaaren Heikes, CSDC Oregon Program Director.** Heikes has worked in the public education arena for fifteen years, with increasing levels of responsibility, consistently distinguishing herself through leadership in program design, implementation and evaluation utilizing a continuous improvement model, always with a student and systemic focus. She taught middle and high school students for five years. In that capacity, in addition to providing instruction, she started and coordinated all aspects of new programs in a Portland-area alternative school and in a public school in Jakarta, Indonesia. For the past ten years, Heikes has served in administrative capacities ranging from an academic department chair and youth policy coordinator to an Education Service District administrator; her work in all of these roles benefited students and schools and built sustainable programs. Nearly all of her professional efforts have built or strengthened educational options within the public school system. Heikes' passion continues to be helping students, educators, schools and communities to realize success. She believes that quality charter schools can be viable options for student engagement and achievement within the public school system.

Heikes has thorough knowledge of Oregon's charter school legal statutes and regulations and of key issues related to charter schools, both from sponsor and operator perspectives. Heikes has extensive experience training and otherwise assisting Oregon charter school developers, operators, sponsors, and state-level stakeholders. She has spearheaded the development and implementation of all aspects of new charter schools, designed and reviewed numerous successful planning and implementation grants, designed charter contracts, led the passage of charter school-related legislation, and evaluated a number of charter schools. Heikes currently serves as a consultant to CSDC as its Oregon Program Director, leading the broad range of expert technical assistance and advocacy services which CSDC provides for charter school sponsors, developers, operators, and other charter school stakeholders in Oregon. Additionally, Heikes currently serves on the Oregon Department of Education's Charter School Incentive Grant review team, as well as on an Oregon charter school board. Heikes' formal education includes a Master's Degree in *Educational Policies, Foundations and Administration* from Portland State University, a Bachelor's Degree in *English* from Central Washington University, and Educational credentials both in K-12 Administration and Secondary Teaching.

**Eric Premack, CSDC Co-Director.** Premack has been involved with the development of the charter school concept since its inception in his native Minnesota in the 1980s. He is known for his expertise in education, finance, management, and labor relations issues and his in-depth grasp of the practical details of charter school operation and charter school legislation. He frequently speaks at state and national education conferences and charter school groups, advises state and national-level policymakers, provides extensive consulting services to charter school developers and sponsors, and served as staff to the U.S. Department of Education-sponsored National Study of Charter Schools. Premack served on the California State Superintendent's Charter School Advisory Committee, was an Advisor to the board of the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC), and serves on the board of the East Bay Conservation Corps and St. Hope Public Schools, both of which operate nonprofit charter schools in northern California. He was twice awarded the Hart Vision Award for outstanding service to the charter school movement in California by CANEC.

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Prior to joining CSDC, Premack was the Associate Director of Fiscal and Management Services with School Services of California, Inc. where he provided fiscal, labor relations, and management consulting services for dozens of California school districts and county offices of education. Previously, he was a K-12 education policy and finance analyst with California's non-partisan Office of the Legislative Analyst where he advised the Legislature on major K-12 education fiscal issues. He is a graduate of both the College and the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy (MA with a concentration in education policy) of the University of Chicago.