

# Higher Ground Academy

*A case study*

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# Summary

*Charter schools are seen as institutions that can innovate, and our innovation should inform the larger public school community.*

— Bill Wilson, Executive Director, Higher Ground Academy (personal interview, February 9, 2011)

Since the early 1990s, charter schools have expanded options for students and families. The intent is to promote educational innovation by freeing these schools from some of the regulations placed on traditional public schools. To learn from charter schools' innovations, it seems important to document and try to understand the approaches they are using. This study presents an in-depth account of one charter school's model. Specifically, the study identifies and describes the key characteristics of a school that, based on standardized test scores, increasing enrollment, and external accolades, appears to be doing quite well with a largely low-income, East African immigrant population. As detailed in the Methodology section of the report, this study's intent is descriptive and not evaluative. A descriptive case study approach was used to identify core components of the school's model largely from the perspective of those responsible for its implementation. This description neither endorses nor evaluates the model or the fidelity of its implementation.

## ***Higher Ground Academy***

Located in St. Paul, Minnesota, Higher Ground Academy (HGA) describes itself as "Minnesota's pre-eminent K-12 Afro-centric charter school." The school emerged from its leaders' concern for black students falling behind in traditional public schools, and their belief that charter schools offer greater flexibility to serve those students. HGA focuses on leadership development, and requires proof of college acceptance in order to graduate from the school. A Learning Year Program enables students to accelerate their learning, and those completing graduation requirements early are encouraged to pursue college-level coursework. Overall, the school has performed well on state-required math and reading tests in recent years, and has been ranked as one of "America's Best High Schools" by *U.S. News & World Report* and identified as a "Beating the Odds" school by the Minneapolis *StarTribune*.

## ***Study design***

Wilder Research conducted a case study of Higher Ground Academy to understand, document, and share its model. Over a period of several months, we interviewed a cross-section of HGA staff as well as representatives of Concordia University, the school's authorizer. We conducted a focus group with student council members, and visited classrooms to observe the school in action. We also reviewed a number of documents, including external reviews of the school. To understand the extent to which HGA's model conforms to and is distinctive from the education research base, we conducted a literature review on characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Finally, we analyzed school test score data from the Minnesota Department of Education to better understand the school's performance in recent years. The study's primary purpose was descriptive, which is different from a program evaluation assessing the model's overall effectiveness. Limitations of the study design are presented in the Methodology section of the report. For example, researchers intended to incorporate the perspective of parents, an important constituency, but a planned focus group with the Parent-Teacher Organization was not able to be held.

## ***School model***

Through our case study, Wilder Research identified 19 core components of HGA's model, which we organized into 5 overarching characteristics. Figure 1 summarizes these characteristics and components, which are described in depth in the body of the report. As described later, many of the 19 components share clear linkages with research on characteristics of schools succeeding with a high-poverty student population. In a number of cases they appear somewhat distinctive in their emphasis and implementation at HGA, however, based on the school's student population.

## ***Reflections***

Based on our literature review, this may be one of the first case studies to document how a school with a predominantly low-income, East African student population addresses challenges posed by being a high-poverty school. Our intent is to shine light on a model serving this population to the extent that it can be instructive to both educators and researchers. Each component of HGA's model is presented within the context of the literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools. For educators who may be interested in replicating some or all components, we provide checklists of the key elements within each component. Ultimately, our aim is to provide sufficient detail and context for the reader to understand, reflect on, and learn from HGA's model.

We also offer our own reflections based on our experience conducting the study, including the following thoughts on HGA's innovations and linkages with the broader research base, as well as additional reflections discussed in the report. It is important to be clear that these insights reflect the experiences and interview sources to which we were exposed. As described in the Methodology section, researchers placed heavy emphasis on drawing from a cross-section of sources, yet did not have access to parents, for example.

## **Innovation**

HGA appears to employ a number of innovative approaches. A primary example is the school's academic program, which was developed by the school for its specific student population. The program combines specific curriculum content selected based on state standards with computer-based lessons used to differentiate instruction. HGA has also developed a unique organizational structure in which grade-level teams share decision making and take the place of an assistant principal. According to school staff, the school also uses a number of strategies to engage parents, many of whom do not speak English as their primary language and have little experience with the American educational system. For example, family liaisons from the school's dominant cultures are intended to help bridge the communication gap between staff and families, and teachers are expected to make monthly phone calls to parents. HGA also developed its own system for evaluating teachers, including a formal matrix delineating tiers of performance and incentives.

## **Literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools**

A number of HGA's components are directly supported by the research. These include its focus on children individually and collectively, high expectations of all students, rigorous academic program, family outreach and support, accountability at all levels, regular assessment of teaching and learning, and alignment with standards. Other components of the school's model share clear linkages with attributes of high-poverty, high-performing schools, but appear distinctive in their emphasis or implementation at HGA. For example, cultural competency relates to creating an environment conducive to learning in which students feel comfortable, but HGA's strong focus on cultural competency specifically seems distinctive. As another example, HGA's emphases on college preparation and leadership development stem from having high expectations for all students, a characteristic identified in the research, but there are different methods of establishing high expectations and HGA's specific emphases are somewhat distinctive. Educators and researchers can consider the merits of HGA's approaches in the context of the literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools presented in this report.

## 1. Core components of Higher Ground Academy's model

<p><b>Focused on the children</b></p>	<p><b>Focus on the children:</b> Central component of HGA's model. All school policies and practices intended to serve the needs of children.</p> <p><b>Accountability at all levels:</b> Staff, students, and parents held accountable for students' success. Mechanisms in place to reinforce accountability.</p> <p><b>Professional learning communities:</b> Grade-level team structure facilitates collaboration on individual students' needs. Weekly team meetings on academics and behaviors.</p> <p><b>Horizontal organizational structure:</b> Administrators accessible to students and staff, and involved in daily operations. Decision making shared with grade-level teams.</p> <p><b>Environment conducive to learning:</b> Culture focused on and respectful of individual students. Positive relationships between staff and students.</p> <p><b>Innovation:</b> Key program elements designed by HGA based on its students' specific needs. Culture of innovation.</p>
<p><b>High expectations for children's future success</b></p>	<p><b>High expectations of all students and teachers:</b> School believes all students can succeed. Explicit expectations for student and teacher performance.</p> <p><b>Emphasis on college preparation:</b> Demonstration of college acceptance required to graduate. College supports (advanced coursework, scholarships, application assistance).</p> <p><b>Leadership development:</b> Students expected to serve as leaders in their communities and careers. Expectations for service learning and experiential learning.</p> <p><b>Learning Year Program:</b> Optional program offering additional 220 hours of instruction per year. Students can accelerate learning or catch up if behind.</p>
<p><b>Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards</b></p>	<p><b>Academic program:</b> Aligned with standards and differentiated for individual students. Developed specifically for HGA's student population.</p> <p><b>Ongoing professional development:</b> Emphasis on teacher professional development that supports school and teacher needs, and the school's model. Tuition reimbursement.</p> <p><b>Alignment with standards:</b> Curriculum, instruction, and assessment directly aligned with standards. Curriculum developed and continually revised based on standards.</p>
<p><b>Data-driven instruction and decisions</b></p>	<p><b>Regular assessment of teaching and learning:</b> Student progress and teacher performance regularly assessed. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment closely linked.</p> <p><b>Targeted instruction:</b> Instruction and academic supports targeted to individual students' needs. Tiered program of student supports.</p> <p><b>Continual improvement:</b> Commitment to actively refining the school's model over time. Decisions informed by data and research.</p>
<p><b>Cultural competency</b></p>	<p><b>Cultural competency:</b> Multicultural perspective is embraced. Accommodations and supports for students' and families' cultural backgrounds.</p> <p><b>Family outreach and support:</b> Family liaisons who share the dominant cultural backgrounds and languages. Frequent teacher contact with parents.</p> <p><b>Technology-rich environment:</b> Technology integrated into teaching and learning to tailor instruction to an immigrant population with diverse needs. Classrooms and computer lab well-equipped with technology.</p>

**Note:** Study focused on identifying HGA's model and not evaluating fidelity with its implementation.

# Introduction

*Higher Ground Academy is dedicated to creating a socially committed, morally responsible, and ethnically diverse learning environment, which values students individually and collectively.*

— School mission statement

## ***School overview***

Higher Ground Academy (HGA) is a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade charter school located in St. Paul's Snelling-Hamline neighborhood. The school describes itself as "Minnesota's pre-eminent K-12 Afro-centric charter school," and operates with the mission "to create a socially committed, morally responsible, and ethnically diverse learning environment that values students individually and collectively." *U.S. News & World Report* ranked HGA as one of "America's Best High Schools," and the *Minneapolis StarTribune* identified HGA as a "Beating the Odds" school based on the academic performance of its low-income students.

In 2010-11, 662 students attended HGA in grades K-12. Most HGA students are East African, primarily Somalis and Oromos. For a majority of students, English is not the home language. Almost all HGA students are low-income, defined as eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

The school emphasizes grade placement based on achievement. When students enroll, they are administered a test that allows for norm-referenced inference, and placed in a grade level according to their academic performance. HGA is intent on preparing all students for college, and requires that students present a letter of college acceptance in order to graduate. A majority of HGA students participate in year-round schooling through the school's Learning Year Program.

## ***Study overview***

In fall 2010, school leadership contacted Wilder Research about the possibility of preparing an independent research document describing the school's model. Wilder Research determined that the school's performance on state-required tests and the external accolades it had received provided rationale for investigation of its model. To this end, we conducted a descriptive case study of HGA to provide a comprehensive account of the school's model and methods.

Our intent with this report is to contribute an in-depth case study account of one charter school to the larger education research base. Those looking to replicate or understand considerations or challenges related to individual components of the model may also find the report instructive. Importantly, the report is not intended to serve as a program evaluation assessing the model's overall effectiveness, the merits of individual components, or fidelity with the model's implementation. Rather, we intend to identify and describe the key characteristics of a school that, based on standardized test scores, increasing enrollment, and external accolades, appears to be doing quite well with a largely low-income, immigrant population. The following Methodology section provides a detailed description of our primary research methods and the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Information presented in the report should be considered in the context of study limitations described in that section.

## ***Historical context***

A distinguishing characteristic of HGA's model is its evolutionary nature. As articulated by its leadership, the school embraces continual improvement. While core principles have remained in place over time, other factors such as the curricula and organizational structure are modified over time based on the school's own experience as well as the changing external environment. The school's model as it is presented at this point in time differs to some extent from its model two years ago, and will likely differ in some ways from the model two years from now. It is important to recognize the historical context in which the current model operates, including Minnesota's charter school environment, modifications in charter school law over time, and HGA's own 12-year history.

### **Charter school history**

The concept of a 'charter' and the subsequent 'contract for results' are central to the chartering idea (Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, n.d.).

Charter schools emerged in an effort to reform public schools by expanding options for students and families and promoting educational innovation. Minnesota was at the forefront of the charter school movement, enacting the nation's first charter school law in 1991. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, in 2010-11 there were 5,277 charter schools across the country, representing 5 percent of all public schools. There were 149 charter schools in Minnesota alone, representing 7 percent of all public schools in the state (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011).

Charter schools receive public funding, but are exempt from a number of state and local laws and regulations pertaining to traditional public schools. In exchange, charter schools

operate under a contract with an overseer that holds the school accountable to pupil performance requirements, fiscal management standards, and legal requirements. Charter schools are held accountable to the same graduation standards as traditional public schools, and must comply with state accountability requirements related to standards and assessments. As public schools, charter schools must be nonsectarian, may not charge tuition, and may not discriminate in student enrollment. In cases where the number of enrollment applications exceeds capacity, students are accepted by lottery (Center for School Change, 2007; Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, n.d.; Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2010; *Minnesota Statutes*, 2010, 124D.10).

### **Minnesota's new charter school law**

In 2009 the Minnesota Legislature passed a new charter school law designed to increase charter school quality and accountability. Oversight is now provided by an “authorizer” (“sponsor” under previous law) in association with the Minnesota Department of Education. The new law strengthens the oversight responsibilities of approved authorizers, thereby shifting the relationship between authorizers and the schools they oversee as well as the relationship between authorizers and the Minnesota Department of Education. Eligible authorizers include school districts, nonprofit organizations, and colleges and universities (*Minnesota Statutes*, 2010, 124D.10). In the Department’s words,

The 2009 law puts in place more robust oversight responsibilities in the areas of capacity and infrastructure, the application process, contracting, ongoing oversight and evaluation, and renewal of charter schools. It shifts the Department’s focus from approving individual charter schools to approving charter school authorizers, which, in turn, will be responsible for approving charter schools and holding them accountable (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011a).

### **HGA's history**

HGA emerged from Executive Director Bill Wilson’s belief that charter schools offer greater flexibility to serve students struggling in the traditional public school system. Dr. Samuel Yigzaw, then a University of Minnesota graduate student and now HGA’s principal, joined Wilson in the school’s early development. Their shared passion for serving black students falling behind in traditional public schools has been the school’s driving force throughout its history.

In fall 1999, HGA opened to kindergarten through ninth-grade students. Based on parents’ desire for a comprehensive program that would also serve younger siblings, the school subsequently added a grade level each year until it became a K-12 school in fall 2002.

The school now offers a pre-kindergarten program as well, although this case study focuses on the K-12 program.

HGA has catered to black students throughout its history, but the composition of the student population has changed from predominantly African-American to predominantly East African students. Over time, East African immigrant families found that the school met their specific needs, and spread the word in the local East African community. These changes in student demographics spurred additional catering on the part of HGA to the cultural needs of this largely immigrant population (Aase, 2008).

HGA has withstood several growing pains throughout its history, perhaps most notably a change in sponsors in 2006. For the school's first seven years, the Saint Paul Public School District served as its sponsor. The school and district differed to some extent in their educational philosophies, and a 2005 district review of HGA identified concerns about compliance and reporting of test results which HGA leadership felt reflected a larger skepticism that its student population could excel academically. A subsequent interim review in 2006 found the school's program to be consistent with its contract and noted satisfaction with progress in specific areas (Aase, 2008). Nevertheless, HGA requested a transfer in sponsorship to Concordia University in St. Paul. Concordia has overseen HGA since 2006, and in summer 2011 renewed the school's contract for two years through June 30, 2013. The proximity of Concordia and HGA, located only blocks from each other, has facilitated professional development opportunities for HGA teachers as well as college-level coursework for HGA students.

## *Contents of the report*

The main body of this report presents core components of HGA's model, with separate sections exploring each component individually. These 19 components are organized by 5 overarching characteristics, as presented in Figure 1. To guide the reader, an arrow in the top right margin of these sections denotes the overarching characteristic for each component.

This presentation of the model is supplemented with contextual information intended to aid in its interpretation, including a discussion of study methodology; profile of the school including its governance, students, and staff; academic test score data; and a literature review on characteristics commonly associated with high-poverty, high-performing schools. The main body of the report ends with a discussion of potential lessons from this case study for educators and researchers. Finally, the report Appendix provides important supplemental information, including more detailed write-ups of the academic test score data and literature review summarized in the report, lists of the

interviews and observations conducted, examples of the interview and observation protocols, and additional information on school staffing.

Within this overall structure, specific report sections include the following:

- Methodology
- School profile
- Academic test score data
- Literature review
- HGA’s model (overview section followed by sections on each of the 19 core components, organized by the 5 overarching characteristics)
- Implications for educators and researchers
- References
- Appendix

# Methodology

## *Case study approach*

As explained in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods*, case studies “provide deep understanding about specific instances.” These in-depth explorations of individual phenomena also make meaningful contributions to the broader research base. “Link by link, case by case, construction of meaning by the researcher, by the reader, and by the research community is how case study contributes to social science and to society” (Mabry, 2008, p. 224).

Wilder Research used a case study approach to identify and describe HGA’s model. This approach enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of core components of the model, and the context in which they operate. The intent was to provide a report sufficient in description and detail to facilitate a deep understanding of the school’s model in the outside reader. In the absence of a program evaluation, the report avoids judgments about or endorsements of the model or fidelity of its implementation. Case study research designs can take different forms, and the primary purpose of this study was descriptive. As explained in one case study research manual, descriptive case studies “attempt to present a complete description of a phenomenon within its context” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 33).

## *Study questions*

This case study was guided by the following core research questions, identified at study onset:

1. What are the core components of HGA’s model? How are they implemented, and what considerations affect their implementation?
2. To the extent possible, how do components of HGA’s model relate to the relevant education research literature?
3. To what extent do charter school policies and requirements affect the school’s model? Beyond basic requirements of all charter schools, what unique qualities or practices differentiate HGA?
4. What are the academic, cultural, and support-service needs of HGA’s student population? What school policies and practices are in place to address those needs?
5. In the perceptions of school staff, what are the key conditions for success in implementing HGA’s model? These could be conditions related to the population served, school leadership, staff, or broader community, for example.

6. What challenges has HGA faced in developing and implementing its model? Are there any “lessons learned” that can be identified for others looking to replicate or learn from the model?
7. Based on test score data available from the Minnesota Department of Education, how are HGA students performing academically?

## *Scope*

Wilder Research worked with HGA Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw to determine the scope of the study. The following topics were identified for exploration to facilitate identification of core components of HGA’s model. These topics informed the development of interview and focus group questions as well as the specific documents requested and observations conducted.

- Academic program
- Extracurricular activities
- Support services
- School policies and practices
- Governance and management
- School culture
- Student demographics, expectations, and requirements
- Staff hiring, expectations, and professional development

## ***Research methods***

This study employed four qualitative research methods commonly used in case studies: observation, interview, document review, and literature review. Descriptions of the individual methods follow.

### **Interviews**

#### **Key informant interviews**

We conducted key informant interviews with school staff, board members, and representatives of Concordia University, as well as a focus group with students. Interviews were conducted in two rounds: an initial round with four individuals identified by school leadership as able to provide an overview of the school, followed by a larger second round of interviews with individuals recommended by these initial four interviewees. A total of 17 interviews were conducted from January through June 2011, typically an hour in length. Most interviews were conducted one-on-one with the researcher and interviewee at HGA, with the exception of one phone interview and two interviews taking place at Concordia. In each case, the researcher took notes throughout the interview and later submitted the notes to the interviewee for his or her review. In a few cases, interviewees submitted corrections or clarifications which were incorporated into the notes.

Interviews were structured around formal protocols. We shared interview protocols with the executive director and principal in advance of the interviews, but did not share transcripts of interview notes. Several different interview protocols were developed, including the protocol for the initial four “overview” interviews and separate protocols for different positions such as teachers or family liaisons. A copy of the protocol developed for the initial four interviews is provided in the Appendix.

The researcher opened each interview by reading a script describing overall study purposes and interview objectives, before proceeding with a list of formal interview questions. Interviews closed with the researcher requesting permission to identify the interviewee in the final report. Within these protocols, we maintained flexibility to explore important points or topics emerging in the interviews that were not captured by planned questions. All interviewees gave permission to be identified, with the exception of one who requested to be identified by title only. With the exception of Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw, interviewees are identified by title in the body of the report. A complete list of individuals interviewed is provided in the Appendix.

## **Focus group**

In addition to key informant interviews, Wilder Research facilitated a focus group with HGA student council members. Nine students participated in the March 2011 focus group. We prepared a formal focus group protocol with pre-planned questions and instructions for students related to focus group conduct and privacy. The discussion was recorded and later transcribed for analysis purposes.

## **Observations**

Wilder Research also conducted site visits at HGA to observe and document the school in operation. These included three classroom observations as well as an observation of a high school student progress meeting. We requested to observe classrooms at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels, and Principal Yigzaw scheduled the specific observations. Specific classes observed included a 1<sup>st</sup>-grade class, 7<sup>th</sup>-grade math class, and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade chemistry lab. We developed a protocol to structure these classroom observations and our notes. This classroom observation protocol as well as a list of the four observations conducted is provided in the Appendix.

## **Literature review**

A literature review was conducted to identify the extent to which core components of HGA's model intersect with characteristics of schools that are high-performing given student demographics considered at risk of lower academic performance. The review emphasized research on characteristics of schools succeeding with minority, immigrant, or low-income populations, and included research on elementary and secondary schools as well as charter and traditional public schools. The intent was to place descriptions of components of HGA's model in the context of the broader research base, to the extent warranted. The following questions guided the review:

- What is known about schools that “beat the odds” or succeed with at-risk populations? Are there common characteristics they share or components they have in place?
- Is there any research specific to charter schools or schools serving immigrant populations?

Wilder Research staff librarians conducted the review, the results of which are summarized in the subsequent Literature Review section of the report and described in greater detail in the Appendix. Characteristics identified in the review are referenced throughout the presentation of HGA's model as applicable. Librarians searched databases such as the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO, and Online Computer Library

Center (OCLC); performed Web-based searches such as in Google Scholar and on websites of research centers with online catalogs; and searched for pertinent books as well as journal articles. Resources with scholarly integrity and from independent, reputable organizations were explored. Key search terms included “high poverty high performing,” “achievement gap,” “school effectiveness,” “excellence in education,” “educational strategies,” “academic achievement,” and “economically disadvantaged,” for example. Librarians restricted the search to publications in the past 10 years. Although none of the studies reviewed exactly matched the demographic characteristics of HGA, a sizable body of research explored characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools.

### **Document review**

We reviewed documents to supplement and verify observations and interview findings to the extent possible, and also to introduce evaluative perspectives which could facilitate critical thinking about aspects of the model in some cases. For example, the school’s annual report provided basic information helpful in profiling the school, as did documents provided by school staff such as the teacher performance-evaluation matrix and Special Education documents. We also reviewed external reports prepared by LarsonAllen LLP and Cambridge Education as well as Concordia University’s charter school renewal report for any important considerations related to implementing aspects of the model which were not raised in the data-collection process. Principal Yigzaw’s 2008 book describing his experience at HGA also provided helpful historical background on the school.

In addition to reviewing documents, we also examined HGA’s demographic and standardized test score data available from the Minnesota Department of Education. These data were important in profiling the school’s student population and presenting evidence of the school’s success with its student population. Readers can consider the merits of the model in the context of HGA students’ academic achievement as summarized in the section on Academic Test Score Data and detailed in the Technical Appendix. While the study’s intent is descriptive rather than evaluative, the school’s test score data and external accolades provided rationale for investigation of its model.

## ***Study design***

### **Triangulation of sources**

To the extent possible, we explored study questions through multiple methods and with the representation of multiple perspectives. As explained in *The SAGE Handbook*, “During data collection, triangulation by data source involves collecting data from different persons or entities. Checking the degree to which each source confirms, elaborates, and disconfirms

information from other sources honors case complexity and the perspectives among participants and helps ascertain the accuracy of each datum” (Mabry, 2008, p. 222). For example, in conducting key informant interviews, we worked to ensure the representation of different staff levels within the school, and looked for commonalities emerging in the interviews as well as any differences that should be explored.

### **Data-collection validation**

We also asked school staff to verify the accuracy of interpretations. *The SAGE Handbook* addresses this type of validation: “Research subjects can help assure the accuracy of data by member-checking, a procedure in which groups representing those observed and interviewed are asked to confirm, elaborate, and disconfirm write-ups” (Mabry, 2008, p. 222). As previously described, interview notes were shared with interviewees for their review and possible correction. We also requested a careful review of the report draft for accuracy by the executive director and principal, while maintaining independence in the final presentation of the study.

### **Qualitative analysis**

Information gathered as part of the study was systematically reviewed. Interview, focus group, and site visit data were analyzed to identify key themes suggestive of core components of HGA’s model. Following this qualitative analysis, a preliminary list of core components was presented to Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw for their review. No changes were requested to the list of 19 components and 5 overarching characteristics we identified. While the vast majority of insights and descriptions presented in the report represent the feedback of interviewees, we also offer our own reflections as researchers from the structured observations as well as our informal interactions throughout the course of the study to the extent that they can help readers interpret the model.

### **Researchers’ role**

Consistent with the descriptive case study approach, researchers’ role in conducting this study was that of the independent observer. The study design facilitated an in-depth understanding and account of HGA’s model, but in the absence of evaluative components precluded judgments about the merits of the model or the extent to which it is implemented as intended. Nevertheless, the independent observer role requires actively working to build multiple perspectives into the research to avoid a narrow or biased observation that could result from more casual observations or observations directed by a single stakeholder. To this end, researchers intentionally incorporated perspectives from a cross-section of staff as well as external reviews prepared by Concordia, Cambridge Education, and LarsonAllen.

Over the course of the study, HGA received some negative publicity when a local television station ran a story about a few unlicensed teachers teaching courses at HGA at the time. The Minnesota Department of Education subsequently investigated the concerns. Checking compliance was outside the scope of our role in conducting this study, but it seemed important to present and try to understand the concern in a detailed presentation of the school's model. We discussed the concerns with HGA leadership as well as a representative from Concordia, but did not discuss the concern with state auditors and therefore cannot draw conclusions about the merits of the claims. In the view of HGA leadership, the story was misleading and exaggerated the issue, but there were some legitimate concerns they felt they should accept responsibility for, such as the use of an effective teacher who was instructed to take but did not pass a licensure exam as well as the principal teaching a class before renewing his license due to hiring constraints. In a June interview, Principal Yigzaw said the school had taken corrective action and notified the state of their actions. As articulated in Concordia's summer 2011 renewal report for HGA,

No teacher or administrator shall teach a subject out of his/her area of licensure. This concern is currently being resolved through a recent state audit that pointed out concerns regarding [the] licensure issue. This is an active question while the school is responding to the state's concerns (Concordia, 2011).

At the end of the study, researchers were also made aware of concerns among some HGA parents by a community organization. As described in the following discussion of study strengths and limitations, researchers made attempts to incorporate parent feedback into the study, but in the end did not have access to parents. It is important to consider this study limitation. Feedback from this community organization suggests some parents may have concerns about practices at the school. As previously described, the descriptive case study approach, while appropriate to the study's intent, did not facilitate judgments about the merits of the school's model, fidelity with its implementation, or compliance with charter school rules and regulations.

### ***Strengths and limitations***

A strength of the case study approach is its facilitation of an in-depth understanding of an individual case. Results are instructive, but in the absence of scientific methods such as treatment and control groups, not generalizable to other cases. The case study approach seemed most appropriate for this study's goal of identifying and describing the core components of HGA's model and the context in which it operates. Wilder Research undertook the case study in a highly rigorous manner, as detailed in the preceding sections. Nevertheless, it is possible that our identification and description of core components could differ to some extent in the absence of study limitations presented

here. Though results are not intended to be generalizable or evaluative, it is important to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the study design.

### **Strengths**

Wilder Research undertook the case study of HGA's model in a rigorous manner. At study onset, we identified core study questions to guide the process as well as data-collection methods commonly used in descriptive case studies. We also intentionally built triangulation of sources into the study design as a means of vetting the data collected given its qualitative nature. The study incorporates the perspectives of a cross-section of school staff as well as board members, representatives of Concordia, and students. Additionally, reports by Concordia, Cambridge Education, and LarsonAllen were used to supplement this data collection with more external, evaluative perspectives on the school. This case study was also conducted over a period of several months, with data collection spanning January through June 2011 and engagement with the school extending beyond that time, enabling researchers to interact with and visit the school on many occasions over a substantial period of time.

### **Limitations**

There are also a few study limitations that are important to present. Though significant effort was made to incorporate diverse perspectives into the study, some important constituencies were not represented. We had originally intended to incorporate parents' perspectives by conducting a focus group with Parent-Teacher Organization members, but the group met relatively infrequently at the time of the study and a scheduled session toward the end of the study was cancelled due to the group's meeting cancellation. It seems particularly important to recognize this study limitation in light of concerns among some parents that were brought to our attention by a community organization at the end of the study. Additionally, although efforts were made to identify interview sources in an organic manner by seeking recommendations from the initial four interviewees, researchers relied on school leadership to some extent to determine the initial four interviews and provide initial entrée to the school. It is possible that perspectives on core components of HGA's model could differ somewhat among staff, parents, or students not represented in the study. The cross-section of staff who were interviewed, the duration of the study, and the review of external reports described above were intended to overcome this limitation to the extent possible.

## **Additional considerations in conducting the study**

Finally, the researchers' role in this case study could be described as both a strength and a limitation. Two primary researchers led the study, one in an oversight role and one conducting the data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings. Wilder Research determined upfront that there were merits in having one primary researcher collecting data in and interacting with the school. This approach facilitated trust between the school and researcher in a setting in which there were typically demographic and cultural differences between the researcher and school, and in which there had been negative experiences with external reviewers in the past. Further, the researcher holding primary responsibility for interacting with the school is experienced in working closely with research clients while maintaining necessary lines of independence.

This reliance on the interpretation of one researcher could be considered a limitation, however, in that the review was qualitative and therefore more subjective than a quantitative study. Several steps were taken to address this possible weakness. Major pieces of the study, such as its design, methods, and initial presentation of the model, were reviewed by a colleague experienced in case study research but external to this project. Further, the literature review was conducted by separate colleagues to ensure the review did not influence identification of components of HGA's model. Finally, the study design, important considerations throughout the study, and the presentation of findings were reviewed by the researcher overseeing the project. In this sense, Wilder Research intentionally incorporated triangulation on the part of researchers into the study design as well.

## ***Background terminology***

In describing the language needs of HGA's student population, a few different terms are used in this report. To be clear, following are U.S. Department of Education definitions for each term (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.):

**English Language Learner (ELL):** A national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient.

**Limited-English-proficient (LEP):** Similar in meaning to English Language Learner, although ELL is often preferred as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits. Both terms are used by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

**English as a Second Language (ESL):** A program of techniques, methodology, and special curriculum designed to teach ELL students English language skills, which may include listening, speaking, reading, writing, study skills, content vocabulary, and cultural orientation. ESL instruction is usually in English with little use of native language.

# School profile

## *Mission*

HGA's mission is to create a socially committed, morally responsible, and ethnically diverse learning environment which values students individually and collectively. The school bills itself as "Minnesota's preeminent K-12 Afro-centric charter school." The goal is to encourage students' maximum intellectual and leadership development to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century education standards through concerted preparation to pursue post-secondary and post-baccalaureate studies. HGA intends that its graduates will be adequately prepared to assume leadership roles in their communities and fields of endeavor (HGA, n.d.; Wilson, 2010).

School tenets include the following (Wilson, 2010):

- All children can learn
- Children learn all of the time
- Experience teaches immediately
- Expectations are built on experience

## *Accolades*

*U.S. News & World Report* listed Higher Ground Academy as one of "America's Best High Schools" on its 2008 and 2010 lists of top schools nationwide. HGA received bronze medals in the rankings based on indicators related to student performance on state tests and the performance of disadvantaged students specifically. More than 21,000 schools nationwide were assessed as part of the 2010 ranking, and only 39 of more than 600 Minnesota schools received a bronze medal or higher (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2010). The Minneapolis *StarTribune* has also recognized HGA as a "Beating the Odds School" based on the proportion of students proficient in reading and math among high-poverty schools. The *StarTribune* identified HGA as beating the odds in both reading and math in 2009 and 2010, and in math in 2011. HGA leadership credit these accolades as well as other school attributes with giving HGA recognition in the Twin Cities' East African and African-American communities (Wilson, 2010).

External reviews by Cambridge Education (Knowles, 2011) and LarsonAllen LLP (Aase, 2008) also found the school to have many strengths, including a strong academic program and success in raising the achievement of students at risk of poor educational outcomes.

As articulated in a 2008 LarsonAllen review intended to inform decisions of The Saint Paul Foundation around continuing funding for the school's scholarship program,

We found HGA to be academically, financially, and organizationally viable. The school's educational program and reputation appears strong. HGA has proven its ability to close the achievement gap, perhaps the greatest challenge facing public education today. HGA is financial [sic] healthy, on a strong trajectory, and benchmarks well against peers (Aase, 2008, p. 3).

## *Governance*

### **Authorizer**

HGA is one of several charter schools authorized by Concordia University in St. Paul. As the school's authorizer, Concordia holds responsibility for overseeing the school's contract, assessing annual performance and fiscal integrity, and determining whether to renew or terminate its contract with the school.

In spring and summer 2011, Concordia completed a required charter school renewal review process, including a review of school documents and records; site visits and observations; interviews with staff, parents, students, and board members; a self-study completed by the school; and a report to the Minnesota Department of Education based on review findings. Authorizers' renewal decisions could fall into several categories, ranging from the school exceeding expectations and being renewed for the maximum time allowed (5 years) to not meeting expectations. Concordia identified HGA at this time as needing improvement in some areas and renewed the charter for a two-year period, through June 30, 2013 (Concordia University, 2011). Areas which Concordia noted for improvement are described in this report as they pertain to components of the model.

### **Board**

Minnesota charter schools are governed by boards of directors comprising teachers, parents, and community members. Board members are elected by school staff as well as parents and student guardians. Boards are subject to Minnesota's open meeting and data practices laws governing meeting conduct and access to public records (Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, n.d.).

A seven-member board of directors governs HGA. Members include Principal Yigzaw; a retired Concordia administrator; a community accountant; two teachers, one of whom is also a parent; an additional parent; and an additional school staff member. Board elections are held annually, with members holding staggered three-year terms. Members received

training in finance and governance from the University of St. Thomas. HGA's current board is new, and Concordia's report noted a few areas for growth in strengthening the board. These areas included further broadening board membership beyond school staff, continuing to improve the timely posting of reports and documents on the school's website, and developing a strategic plan (Concordia University, 2011).

## **Administrators**

HGA is co-led by founder and Executive Director Bill Wilson and its principal, Dr. Samuel Yigzaw. The school emerged from Executive Director Wilson's concern for black students falling behind in traditional public schools. A former St. Paul city council member and state Commissioner of Human Rights, Wilson felt strongly that an alternative system of education could better serve those students, and that given the necessary supports and expectations, even students facing a number of academic risk factors could succeed. Dr. Yigzaw, then a graduate student, shared this vision and partnered with Wilson in the school's early development.

To the researchers spending time in Higher Ground as part of this case study, their shared commitment to helping African immigrant and African-American students "beat the odds" was apparent. Both leaders spoke passionately of their belief in HGA's students and their concern that these students not be dismissed as facing too many risk factors. In 2008, Dr. Yigzaw published a book in which he spoke openly of challenges faced by the school in its early years (Yigzaw, 2008). This shared vision and commitment to the student population fueled their determination to persevere through challenges faced over the course of the school's history.

With his background in public positions, Executive Director Wilson holds deep connections in the community and focuses on community aspects of the school's administration. In his role as principal, Dr. Yigzaw serves as the school's curriculum director and focuses on academic policies. Yigzaw holds a Ph.D. in general education with an emphasis on curriculum as well as a master's in instructional technology. He initially joined Wilson in the school's early development as a volunteer and consultant, and later served as the school's director of curriculum and assessment before becoming the principal in 2003.

## *Students*

### **School size**

During the 2010-11 school year, HGA enrolled a total of 662 students in grades K-12, generally with higher enrollment in the earlier than later grades (Figure 2). According to the school's 2009-10 annual report, average class sizes were 24 students in grades K-3, 24 in grades 4-6, and 22 in grades 7-12 that year. HGA maintains a sizable waiting list of students who want to enroll in the school. In response to this demand, the school is considering adding a second site or developing a new school (Wilson, 2010).

### **Student demographics**

In 2010-11 all HGA students were black, which is more than triple the proportion of black students in the Saint Paul Public School District and 10 times that of the proportion in the state as a whole (Figure 2). Many of those students are East African immigrants. Twenty percent of HGA students were identified by the state as limited-English-proficient (LEP) in 2010-11, meaning English was not their first language, is not their primary home language, or is not their primary spoken language, and they have been determined to lack the language skills needed to fully participate in classes taught in English (*Minnesota Statutes*, 2010, 124D.59). However, the proportion of HGA students with a primary home language other than English is much higher. In 2009-10, 80 percent of HGA K-12 students had a primary home language of Somali and 13 percent Oromo, based on data from the Minnesota Department of Education. Only 7 percent were designated as having English as their primary home language.

The school's Somali and Oromo populations primarily come from Somalia and Ethiopia, although some of the Somali students come from South Africa or Europe, having first moved to Europe and subsequently joined relatives in Minnesota (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Both the Somali and Oromo are Cushitic-speaking populations, and their languages share from 30-40 percent of their vocabulary. The Somali population follows Islam, and a majority of Oromos follow Islam or Christianity, with the remainder following the traditional Oromo religion. Oromos are from Oromia and constitute one of the largest indigenous populations in East Africa.

Almost all HGA students (97%) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Three percent receive Special Education services, lower than the percentages for the Saint Paul district and state overall. Based on data available for 2009-10, daily attendance rates are slightly higher at HGA than in the district and the state (Figure 2). A majority of HGA's students live in Minneapolis and St. Paul, although a few reside in suburbs such as Columbia Heights and Maple Grove (Wilson, 2010).

## 2. Student demographic profile 2010-11<sup>a</sup>

Characteristic	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
Total enrollment	662	37,022	823,235
Kindergarten	81	3,170	62,935
Grade 1	78	3,165	63,206
Grade 2	90	3,004	62,098
Grade 3	56	2,849	60,631
Grade 4	46	2,904	61,612
Grade 5	55	2,851	61,121
Grade 6	45	2,617	60,814
Grade 7	40	2,456	61,296
Grade 8	37	2,464	61,678
Grade 9	46	2,677	63,889
Grade 10	36	2,710	64,957
Grade 11	18	2,816	65,400
Grade 12	34	3,339	73,598
Race/ethnicity			
American Indian	0%	2%	2%
Asian	0%	31%	7%
Black	100%	30%	10%
Hispanic	0%	14%	7%
White	0%	24%	74%
Limited-English-proficient	20%	36%	8%
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	97%	72%	37%
Special Education	3%	16%	13%
Attendance rate <sup>a</sup>	96%	94%	95%

<sup>a</sup> Attendance rate is for 2009-10. Rate is calculated by dividing the Average Daily Attendance by the Average Daily Membership.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

## Students' primary needs

HGA's immigrant families range in the degree to which they have learned American cultural norms. Some of the school's students have recently immigrated, some are first-generation immigrants but have been in the United States for a period of time, and some were born in the United States but still share the culture of their immigrant family. When asked about the primary needs of HGA's student population, Principal Yigzaw responded, "English. English is the need" (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

Further, not only is English new to many of the students, but formal education itself is new. For example, students who have been in refugee camps may arrive at HGA as teenagers without ever having been in school before. Others may have attended school but may not have been instructed in English (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011). Norms at their home country school may also have differed drastically from school norms in the United States. HGA's English as a Second Language (ESL) program, described in-depth in the Cultural Competency section of this report, provides intensive language services to prepare students learning English for instruction in mainstream classrooms.

The ELL population is an asset. To them it's a new experience. They have a high level of motivation and interest in learning, but there are low skill levels. They are new to both education and the English language. It's the biggest challenge. Some have been to school but it's a different program, a different curriculum, in a different language, so that's really a challenge. How do you really get these children to grade level in a short period of time? (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011)

Beyond language needs, the change in student demographics over time from a predominantly African-American population to a predominantly East African population has also brought about a change in the cultural needs of HGA's students and families. HGA works to be responsive to these cultural needs. For example, many HGA students and their families follow Islam. As public schools, charter schools are subject to the First Amendment and may neither teach nor inhibit religion (Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, 2008). The school accommodates many students' Islamic traditions, however, by allowing time for prayer. HGA also avoids serving pork in its cafeteria to respect the dietary needs of Islamic students, and the school cook flavors food to appeal to students' tastes based on their cultural preferences. Additionally, HGA modified its art program, which is offered at the high school level, to avoid representational or figural art out of respect for the beliefs of its Islamic students. Beyond religious traditions, immigrant students may also be facing a number of new experiences. As described by Executive Director Wilson,

...this whole culture from the governance to the geography, the urbanization, from sidewalks to pathways, from cars vs. other models of transportation, all these things are new (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

## *Staff*

### **Organizational structure**

In contrast to the more hierarchical organizational structure of a traditional school district, HGA employs a horizontal structure. Under the guidance of the principal and executive director, leadership is distributed to grade-level team leaders who take the place of an assistant principal. Team leaders support teachers in their grade levels and meet weekly with teachers to discuss student academic and behavioral concerns as a team. These team meetings facilitate information sharing and problem-solving across various staff who may know or interact with a given student. Team leaders serve as a liaison between the administration and teachers, but staff at all levels also have direct access to school administrators. Family liaisons from the two predominant East African heritages in the school, Somali and Oromo, serve as liaisons between the school and families who face language or cultural barriers to communicating with teachers or other school staff.

In 2009-10, HGA employed approximately 81 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). In FTE terms, these included approximately 32 teachers, 2 other licensed professionals, 7 paraprofessionals, 3 administrators, and 38 other staff including non-licensed staff. For reference, Figure 3 provides an overview of several key positions which are helpful in understanding the school's organizational structure and mentioned in subsequent report sections. A complete list of all staff assignments at HGA in 2009-10 is provided in Figure A7 in the Appendix.

The school contracts for some services, such as its Special Education director, school nurse, and school psychologist. Some HGA staff also fulfill multiple positions within the school. For example, the human resources director also serves as the reading specialist, the executive director also acts in a family liaison role with English-speaking families, and three of the team leaders are also teachers while the fourth also serves as the school's service-learning coordinator.

### 3. HGA key staff positions

Position	Overview
Administration (executive director, principal, human resources director)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ HGA is co-led by its executive director (community focus) and principal (academic focus). Principal serves as the school's curriculum director.</li> <li>▪ School administrators also include the human resources director, who reports to the executive director and principal.</li> </ul>
Team leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Four team leaders, one for each of the following grade levels: PreK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and high school.</li> <li>▪ Serve as liaisons between the principal and teachers, overseeing instruction and curriculum implementation and supporting teachers in their grade levels.</li> <li>▪ Responsible for addressing student academic and discipline concerns in weekly team meetings, and discussing higher-level concerns in weekly team leaders meetings with the principal.</li> <li>▪ Alternative to a principal/assistant principal structure (HGA does not have an assistant principal position).</li> </ul>
Teachers and assistant teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ HGA uses a number of Teach for America teachers in addition to teachers with a traditional teacher preparation background.</li> <li>▪ K-2 teachers have bilingual teaching assistants.</li> </ul>
Title I staff/reading specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Students struggling in the classroom are referred to the school's Title I program, Accelerated Learning in Reading and Mathematics.</li> <li>▪ Those needing additional services beyond the Title I program are referred to the school's reading specialist, who works one-on-one with students as a third tier of support.</li> <li>▪ Some students may be referred for Special Education assessment with or without going through the Title I program, depending on their specific needs.</li> </ul>
Special Education staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Special Education (SPED) director contracted from Innovative Special Education Services of Minnesota (ISES).</li> <li>▪ HGA SPED staff include the Special Education coordinator, who is also a speech and language pathologist; a primary-level teacher licensed in specific learning disabilities and developmental delay (currently on medical leave with a long-term substitute); a secondary-level teacher licensed in specific learning disabilities and developmental cognitive delay; two paraprofessionals assisting the primary and secondary teachers; and a developmental cognitive delay specialist. Concordia's 2011 renewal report noted the need for an additional SPED teacher so there would be teachers at the primary, middle school, and high school levels.</li> <li>▪ School also contracts with an occupational therapist.</li> <li>▪ School nurse consultant and contracted school psychologist (described below) are also members of the SPED team.</li> </ul>

**Note:** Figure A7 provides a complete list of all staff assignments at HGA in 2009-10.

### 3. HGA key staff positions (continued)

Position	Overview
ESL staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Two ESL teachers, one for grades 1-6 and one for grades 7-12</li> <li>▪ Instruct English Language Learner (ELL) students in a separate classroom until they are ready to be mainstreamed (with the exception of high school students, who may try some courses such as math or science in mainstream classes while in the ESL program).</li> </ul>
Family liaisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Three family liaisons, including one who works with Somali families; one who works with Oromo families; and the executive director, who serves as the liaison with English-speaking families.</li> <li>▪ Provide a connection between families and the school's administration and teachers, who may have language and cultural differences, and facilitate discussions around academic and behavioral needs. Help families from different cultural backgrounds understand school policies and expectations, and help teachers understand families' cultural norms.</li> </ul>
Service learning coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Coordinates 9<sup>th</sup>-grade service learning requirement that students take one year of service learning in order to graduate from HGA.</li> <li>▪ 9<sup>th</sup> graders serve as classroom assistants within the school and also complete outside service projects.</li> <li>▪ Provides students with initial classroom training at the beginning of their service-learning year and monitors their fulfillment of service-learning expectations throughout the year.</li> </ul>
Other support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ School nurse assistant on staff supported by a licensed school nurse from the Minnesota Visiting Nurse Agency.</li> <li>▪ Services contracted from a school psychologist.</li> <li>▪ Two staff (including one HGA intended to add at the time of this report) support students in their transition from high school to college, one primarily monitoring whether students are on track to graduate and one helping them prepare for exams, visit campuses, and fill out school and financial aid applications. Other staff also support students in these transitions.</li> <li>▪ Five staff serving in the school's food service program.</li> </ul>

**Note:** Figure A7 provides a complete list of all staff assignments at HGA in 2009-10.

### Staff characteristics

We know as everyone knows that good, strong, effective teachers are the key to successful classrooms, and that's based on their love for children; their preparation for the profession, for teaching; and their willingness to continue to grow and develop in the profession (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

HGA uses a combination of teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs as well as Teach for America teachers. In interviews, school leadership conveyed a positive experience working with Teach for America teachers, who constituted the majority of new hires in the most recent hiring round, according to Executive Director Wilson. The school provides mentoring teachers to support those from Teach for America. A majority of HGA teachers are American, but there are also a number who share students' cultural backgrounds. Additionally, K-2 classrooms have bilingual aides who support teachers and facilitate cross-cultural communication.

I think the one thing that distinguishes our school more than anything is the diversity in the staffing, and how respectful ... everyone is of each other's culture regardless (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

## *Facility*

### **Overview**

HGA is located in a renovated former printing company's headquarters in St. Paul's Snelling-Hamline neighborhood, just blocks away from Concordia University. The school incorporated a separate nonprofit corporation which purchased and renovated the facility, and leases it to HGA. State law prohibits charter schools from directly owning real estate (Aase, 2008). In December 2009, construction of a new science and mathematics wing was completed, adding six classrooms, two science labs, and an art room for the high school program as well as a large room for middle school science to this original facility (Wilson, 2010). The building has a security system in place, and students and parents interviewed as part of Concordia's recent charter renewal process indicated they felt safe in the building (Concordia, 2011). The school uses off-site fields and facilities for its physical education and soccer programs, such as Concordia's field, nearby Oxford Community Center, and Como Park.

### **Researcher perceptions**

It seems important to convey a sense of the school's physical environment to the extent that the environment may impact and reflect the educational experience. Though subjective, the perceptions of the primary researcher working on this study are presented to that end. In this researcher's experience, HGA's physical environment has the sense of a school focused on learning and working within its means. Public areas of the school feel clean and orderly, if perhaps not as brightly or elaborately furnished as a counterpart with more resources. Classroom expectations and educational displays were posted on walls in the classrooms visited, and the school is well-equipped with technology in classrooms as well as separate

computer labs. The researcher also perceived what might be termed as a culture of respect in interpersonal interactions in which administrators, teachers, and staff frequently referred to her and each other by prefix and last name (classroom observations: April 28, 2011; May 5, 2011; May 19, 2011).

Students and visitors entering the school pass a student garden in the front lawn. Inside, the building itself feels fairly large with the addition of the second wing. Abstract student art adorns the walls of the front office, a reflection of the school's avoidance of figural art out of respect for Muslim tradition. Perhaps a sign of the school's open access to administrators, Principal Yigzaw's office is visible directly across from the main reception desk. Displays in the three classrooms visited were generally focused on classroom expectations or learning objectives, although displays in the middle school math class also included architecture and art museum posters, and the teacher in the early elementary classroom had posted what appeared to be student artwork made for her. Wall displays in that room also included the alphabet and numbers, a word wall, student writing samples, class rules, and the daily schedule. In the middle school math class, the white board reminded students of the number of days until exams, and the phrase "Rock-Solid Math Understanding=Knowledge, Power, and Opportunity!!!" adorned a wall in large print. The high school chemistry lab was well-furnished with laboratory and safety equipment. Each of the classrooms visited appeared well-equipped with technology, including computers and Smart Boards in the regular classrooms. Blinds were typically closed, perhaps intended to contribute to an environment focused on learning (classroom observations: April 28, 2011; May 5, 2011; May 19, 2011).

Walking through HGA and visiting classrooms, students' culture is perhaps most visible in the composition of students themselves and their dress. Girls typically wear clothing traditional to Muslim women, including head coverings and modest dress. The culture is also reflected to some extent in the schools' staff, including bilingual teaching aides in grades K-2 as well as a number of teachers who share students' cultural backgrounds, although a majority are American. Materials and displays visible in the three classrooms observed for this study were in English only, with the exception of a sign about covering your cough posted in multiple languages in the lower-elementary classroom. Artwork is visible in the school, but less prominently than in some other schools likely due to the school's deference to Muslim values prohibiting figural art and perhaps also in part due to the school's focus on core academic subjects (classroom observations: April 28, 2011; May 5, 2011; May 19, 2011).

# Academic test score data

HGA's overall strong performance on required state tests provided rationale for exploration of its model. A spring 2011 external school quality review by Cambridge Education applauded HGA students' performance on standardized tests, as quoted below. The review was conducted as a service of Charter School Partners, a nonprofit organization with which HGA partners working to support the growth of high-quality charter schools in Minnesota:

Students reach high levels of achievement at Higher Ground Academy compared with similar students in other schools. In all grades, they enjoy learning and make good progress. Test scores in reading and mathematics show improvement and are significantly above State averages for Black students. Graduation rates are very high at nearly 100 percent. This is particularly striking because, as well as accumulating credits, students at Higher Ground Academy must have evidence of acceptance for a college place before they can graduate (Knowles, 2011, p. 5).

Wilder Research compiled data on HGA students' academic achievement and growth from the Minnesota Department of Education. We looked at students' performance on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) reading and math tests over the four-year period from 2008-11 as well as comparable data for the Saint Paul Public School District (SPPS) and the state of Minnesota as a whole. We also gathered data on students' one-year growth in MCA reading and math as well as graduation and attendance rates. Data presented reflect the most recent data available to researchers at the time the report was completed. MCA data for spring 2011 became available as the report was being finalized and were incorporated to the extent possible. We present overall and grade-level MCA data for 2008-11. Other analyses such as achievement within demographic categories, growth rates, and graduation rates reflect 2010 and earlier.

The district and overall state results that are presented provide a point of reference, although there are significant demographic characteristics distinguishing HGA from the district and state (Figure 2). In 2010-11, HGA's entire student population was black and almost all were low-income. Additionally, many HGA students come from families who are new or relatively new to the American culture. Ideally, HGA data would be compared to that of schools serving similarly high percentages of African immigrant, low-income, and ELL students.

Due to the amount of data compiled, this section provides a brief summary of overall findings. A Technical Appendix at the end of the report provides detailed tables and analysis, as well as background information on state testing requirements and the MCAs.

## *Student achievement*

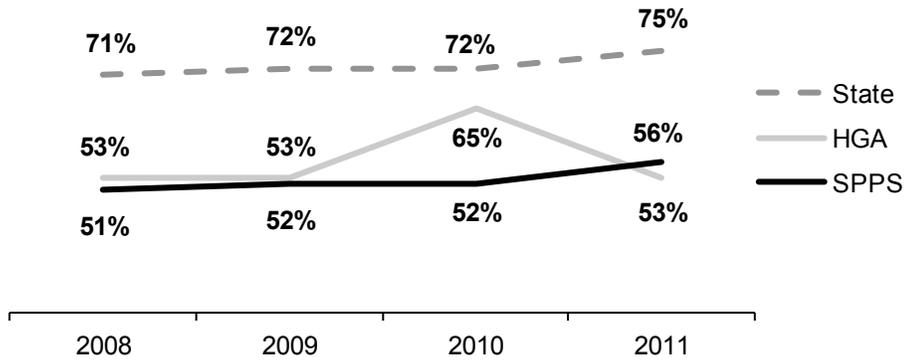
### **Overall achievement**

Overall, higher percentages of HGA students than Saint Paul Public School District students were proficient in reading and math in 2008, 2009, and 2010. The proportion of HGA students proficient in reading fell slightly below that of the district in 2011, although HGA continued to exceed the district's overall proficiency rate in math and was named by the Minneapolis *StarTribune* as a "Beating the odds" school in math that year.

HGA's proportion of reading-proficient students increased by 12 percentage points from 2008-10, but experienced a decline from 2010-11. In 2011, the overall proportion of HGA students proficient in reading was slightly below that of the district (53% vs. 56%, respectively). HGA students' reading proficiency rate remained lower than the state's during this period, as would be expected given the large immigrant population. Reading and math proficiency varied widely among individual grades at HGA, which initially places its students in grade levels based on their performance on an assessment administered upon enrollment, rather than placing students in grades based on their age.

In 2011, Minnesota students in grades 3-8 took a new, more rigorous math assessment tied to the 2007 standards (MCA-III). Eleventh-grade students continued to take the MCA-II, tied to 2003 standards. Therefore, math results for 2011 are not directly comparable to those of previous years. As in the state overall, HGA's proportion of students proficient in math fell from 2010-11 with the introduction of the more rigorous assessment, although HGA continued to show a higher percentage proficient than the district (51% vs. 41%, respectively) (Figures 4-5 below, and A1-A2 in the Appendix).

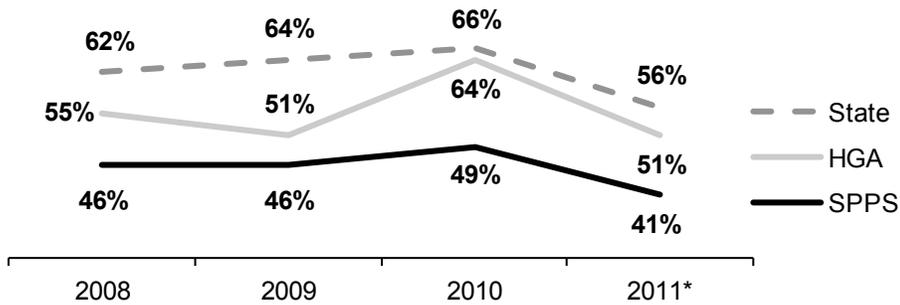
**4. MCA reading proficiency: Spring 2008-11**



**Note:** Data reflect the MCA-II (2008-11). See Technical Appendix for test details.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

**5. MCA math proficiency: Spring 2008-11**



\* Math results in 2011 cannot be directly compared to previous years due to introduction of the more rigorous MCA-III for grades 3-8 that year.

**Note:** Data reflect the MCA-II (all grades in 2008-10 and grade 11 in 2011) and MCA-III (grades 3-8 in 2011). See Technical Appendix for test details.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

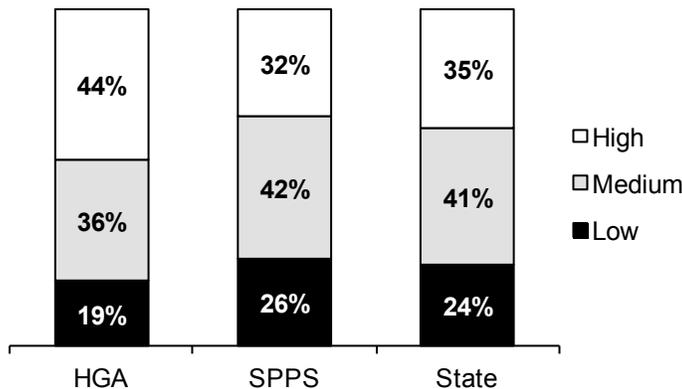
## Achievement of specific populations

HGA showed substantial gains in the percentages of low-income, black, and LEP students attaining proficiency in reading and math from 2008 to 2010. In 2010, higher percentages of HGA students in each of the three categories attained proficiency in reading and math compared to those in the district and state. However, HGA did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements for LEP students in math in 2009, following declines in the proportion of LEP students and overall students attaining proficiency in math from 2008 to 2009. The school subsequently showed increases in those areas from 2009 to 2010 (Figure A3).

## Growth rates

Looking at growth rates for individual students from 2009 to 2010, HGA students showed strong growth in reading and math. Overall, higher percentages of HGA students experienced high growth in their MCA-II reading and math scores during this time than students in both the district and state. Growth rates also suggest HGA is helping to close the achievement gap, with higher percentages of students who were *not* proficient in reading and math experiencing high growth than those who *were* proficient. By comparison, the percentages of proficient and not-proficient students achieving high growth were more similar in the district and state overall (Figures 6-7 and A4-A5). Growth rates for 2010 to 2011 were not available at the time of this report.

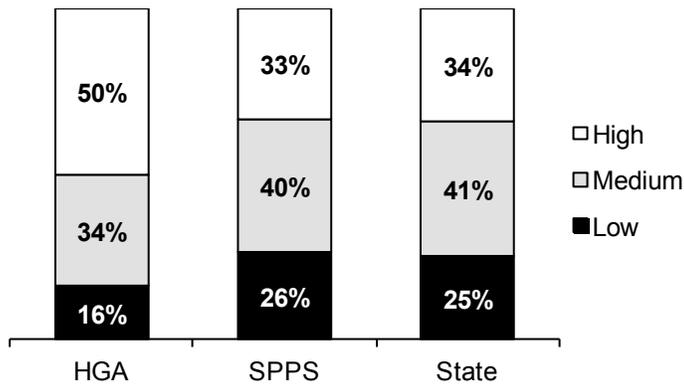
### 6. Students' overall one-year growth in MCA-II reading: Spring 2009 to spring 2010



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

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## 7. Students' overall one-year growth in MCA-II math: Spring 2009 to spring 2010



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

### *Graduation rates*

The four-year graduation rate for HGA in 2010 (58%) was lower than the graduation rates in the district (63%) and state overall (76%). Again, HGA's student population is distinctive in the proportion of students from immigrant families as well as the proportion of students living in poverty. The dropout rate, however, was lower for HGA (0%) than for the district (7%) or the state (5%). The percentage of students continuing at HGA (23%) was equal to the district and higher than the state level (14%). Information was not available for 20 percent of the HGA students in this cohort (Figure A6).

### *Attendance*

As shown in Figure 2, HGA's average attendance rate in 2009-10 was 96 percent, slightly higher than that of the district and state. The school met its attendance requirements for each of the past three school years for which attendance was reviewed here (2008-10), according to its School Report Cards prepared by the Minnesota Department of Education (Minnesota Department of Education, 2008-10). Further, the spring 2011 Cambridge Education school quality review noted that "the average attendance rate for the school is 95.9 percent, and is above the Minnesota State average" (Knowles, 2011, p. 3).

# Literature review

## *Overview*

Wilder Research conducted a literature review to understand the extent to which HGA’s model intersects with research on characteristics of schools that are high-achieving or “beating the odds” given expectations for the population they serve. The review emphasized research on characteristics of schools succeeding with minority, immigrant, or low-income populations. None of the studies reviewed exactly matched the demographic characteristics of HGA, with its predominantly low-income, East African immigrant student population, many of whom come from a household whose primary language is not English. Based on the literature review, this may be one of the first case studies to document how a school with this specific demographic composition addresses challenges posed by being a high-poverty school. Nevertheless, a number of studies explored characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools.

We found considerable overlap between characteristics identified in the literature review and the core components of HGA’s model. Characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools are briefly summarized here, and referenced throughout the subsequent presentation of HGA’s model in cases where HGA’s model intersects with these characteristics. A detailed write-up of the characteristics identified in the literature appears in the report Appendix.

## *Background*

The adverse effects of poverty on student and school performance are well documented. Studies show that schools with high concentrations of low-income students typically score lower on standardized tests than schools with students from economically advantaged and well-resourced backgrounds. Students at high-poverty schools face a set of challenges associated with school underperformance, such as high teacher and student turnover, high student mobility, limited parent engagement, inexperienced teachers and poor quality teaching, and low expectations. However, there are a growing number of schools with low-income student bodies that challenge these trends. These schools often perform at or above the state averages on standardized tests and have become known as “high-poverty, high-performing” schools. These schools have also been characterized as “beating the odds” or “high-achieving.”

High-poverty, high-performing schools have gained substantial interest from policymakers and education researchers in recent years. As a result, a sizable body of literature has emerged that outlines common characteristics associated with these schools. These

characteristics reflect strategies and practices generally accepted to be effective and which have been widely implemented in high-poverty, high-performing schools.

### ***Characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools***

Several lists of characteristics defining high-poverty, high-performing schools exist, but the set of characteristics identified by Barr and Parrett (2007) surfaced frequently in the literature review as the baseline characteristics needed to understand high-poverty, high-performing schools. Some of the characteristics also encompass district-level attributes applicable only to traditional public schools. Figure 8 briefly summarizes the characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools identified by Barr and Parrett. These characteristics are explored in greater detail in the full literature review in the Appendix, and are referenced throughout the report as applicable to components of HGA's model. Researchers found considerable overlap between HGA practices and these characteristics.

These characteristics prove most effective when the strategies and practices overlap, functioning as a holistic system of operation within the school. Most studies reviewed did not specify the number of characteristics that will lead a high-poverty school to become a high-performing school, but almost every study suggested that the implementation of one or two of these characteristics would not be enough to become a high-performing school. Further, the local contexts of the neighborhood and school should inform the implementation of the practices and strategies within each of the characteristics in order for them to be effective.

## 8. Characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools<sup>a</sup>

Characteristic	Description
Ensure effective district and school leadership	Despite challenges facing high-poverty schools, school leadership effectively navigate relationships with students, parents, teachers, staff, district administration, and the broader community, and implement a vision that is meaningful to staff and students.
Align, monitor, and manage the curriculum	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are linked. Curriculum is informed by standards, assessments are used to track student progress on the curriculum, and teachers find effective instructional techniques to support curriculum goals.
Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners	Schools develop mechanisms to effectively engage and sustain trust with parents, often overcoming structural obstacles to parent participation such as sporadic work schedules, transportation barriers, and limited knowledge of how to support children academically.
Understand and hold high expectations for low-income, culturally diverse students	Children are viewed as individuals and emphasized as the top priority. High achievement standards are set for all children, and everything at the school revolves around individual students' success.
Target low-performing students and schools, starting with reading	Students from low-income backgrounds tend to score lower on reading tests, and these schools employ strategies to emphasize reading as a major academic priority.
Create a culture of data and assessment literacy	Schools understand how to interpret and act on student progress data, and integrate data into all aspects of decision making.
Build and sustain instructional capacity	At times overcoming challenges of high teacher turnover and inexperienced teachers, these schools use strategies to support and cultivate highly qualified teachers. Examples include mentoring and support for differentiated instruction.
Reorganize time, space, and transitions	Time, space, and transitions are reorganized to complement learning in purposeful ways, such as by extending the school day or reconfiguring the classroom layout to create an environment conducive to learning.

<sup>a</sup> Barr & Parrett, 2007.

**Note:** A detailed description of each component based on the research reviewed for Wilder Research's literature review is provided in the Appendix.

### *Additional characteristics*

We chose to focus our literature review on research supporting the eight characteristics identified by Barr and Parrett due to their prevalence in the literature. However, several lists of characteristics defining high-poverty, high-performing schools exist. For example, school improvement specialists from the Washington state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction identified nine characteristics of schools with students achieving at higher levels than might be predicted based on their demographic characteristics. These nine characteristics were originally identified in 2001 based on a review of more than 20 studies, and were revisited and validated by an expert review in 2006. There is considerable overlap among the characteristics identified in the Washington review and those of Barr

and Parrett, and the Washington review again found that schools succeeding with these students typically exhibited several of the characteristics.

The Barr and Parrett characteristics summarized here form the basis of comparisons to components of HGA's model described in subsequent report sections. In some cases, however, a component of HGA's model overlaps with a characteristic more explicitly articulated in the Washington review, and is therefore presented in the context of that research. The nine characteristics identified in the Washington review follow (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007):

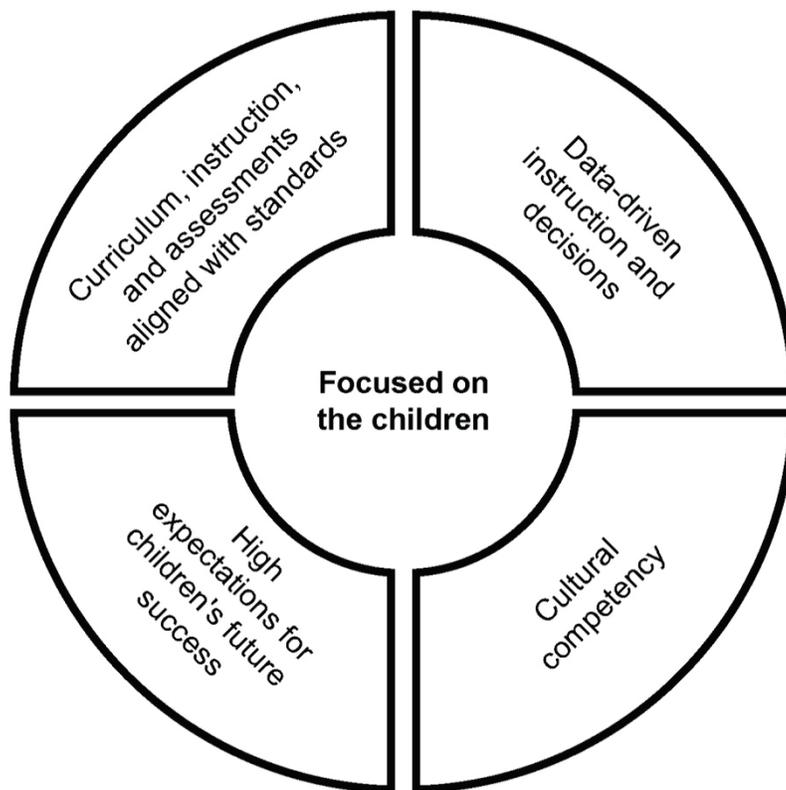
- A clear and shared focus
- High standards and expectations for all students
- Effective school leadership
- High levels of collaboration and communication
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with state standards
- Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching
- Focused professional development
- A supportive learning environment
- High levels of family and community involvement

# HGA's model

Wilder Research identified 19 core components of HGA's model, and 5 overarching characteristics encompassing those components. Figure 9 presents the five overarching characteristics we identified as defining HGA. "Focused on the children" is depicted as the central characteristic based on feedback from interviewees that all policies and practices at HGA are ultimately intended to serve the needs of children individually and collectively. Based on researchers' experience in the school, this is not a superficial slogan, but rather a strongly reinforced principle manifested in daily practices. Other overarching characteristics of HGA include its high expectations for children's future success; curriculum, instruction, and assessments that are aligned with standards; data-driven instruction and decisions; and cultural competency.

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## 9. HGA's overarching characteristics



These 5 characteristics encompass the 19 core components of HGA's model we identified. Based on our data collection, each of these 19 components contributes to the school's mission and daily operations in important ways. Following are the 19 core components of HGA's model, organized within the 5 overarching characteristics. Figure 1 in the summary also depicts and briefly describes these key components and characteristics.

**Focused on the children**

1. Focus on the children
2. Accountability at all levels
3. Professional learning communities
4. Horizontal organizational culture
5. Environment conducive to learning
6. Innovation

**High expectations for children's future success**

7. High expectations of all students and teachers
8. Emphasis on college preparation
9. Leadership development
10. Learning Year Program

**Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards**

11. Academic program
12. Ongoing professional development
13. Alignment with standards

**Data-driven instruction and decisions**

14. Regular assessment of teaching and learning
15. Targeted instruction
16. Continual improvement

**Cultural competency**

17. Cultural competency
18. Family outreach and support
19. Technology-rich environment

The following report sections discuss each of the 19 components in depth, and use an arrow and text in the upper right margin to denote the larger characteristic that the component falls within. We determined that it was important to explore the 19 components separately to the extent that they are distinctive from each other, but it seems instructive to recognize the linkages across individual components within a characteristic. For example, HGA's family outreach and support and its technology-rich environment were determined to be important in part due to their usefulness in catering to an immigrant population with diverse skill levels and family backgrounds (cultural competency). As another example, the school's emphasis on college preparation, focus on leadership development, and Learning Year Program stem from high expectations that its students will excel in their future endeavors (high expectations for children's future success).

# Focused on the children

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## COMPONENT 1. FOCUS ON THE CHILDREN

How are the children? This question guides the emphasis and practices of HGA staff on a daily basis in profound ways. Wilder Research’s literature review found that in high-poverty, high-performing schools, policies and practices revolve around the success of individual children. Children are seen as individuals, and collectively viewed as the school’s top priority. Based on interviews with HGA administrators and teachers, this philosophy is made explicit to and continually reinforced with HGA staff. This focus on the children also resonated with the primary researcher’s own experience interacting with the school. Practices and policies at HGA are intended to ultimately serve children over the needs of administrators, staff, or other external stakeholders. The intent is to prepare individual children for the next phase in their lives, which in the case of HGA students is expected to include college.

### *“How are the children?”*

HGA’s belief that the school shares responsibility for children’s success and well-being is intertwined with its Afro-centric focus. Addressing a workshop opening HGA’s second year, prominent African-American scholar and school choice advocate Dr. Howard Fuller referenced lessons from traditional African societies in raising children. As described by Principal Yigzaw,

According to [Dr. Fuller], in traditional African societies children are the responsibility of all villagers, not just that of their parents. Also, according to Dr. Fuller, traditional African communities assess the welfare of their community by the welfare of all children in their community. An indication to that, according to him, is the way adults greet each other in those communities. Dr. Fuller pointed out that in many African communities greetings between adults goes as: ‘How are the children?’ rather than, ‘How are you?’ The underlying message of such a greeting, according to him, is that if the children are well, the entire community is well (Yigzaw, 2008, p. 64).

HGA adopted “How are the children?” as its slogan during its second year based on this Afro-centric ideology (Yigzaw, 2008). At one point, banners throughout the school reminded its occupants of this guiding question. Based on interviews conducted for this case study, it seemed the question may no longer be an official slogan, but the emphasis clearly remains. According to Principal Yigzaw, administration does everything possible to reinforce this concept with school staff. A kindergarten teacher interviewed explained that when

administrators ask, “How are the children?” teachers are expected to be able to respond that the children are well in learning. In the words of staff interviewed for this study,

It’s all about the children. And if it’s not promoting the interest of the children, then it’s not really worth our time (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

To me that [question] kind of says if the kid is not learning, maybe you’re not doing your part, so you have to try everything that you know (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

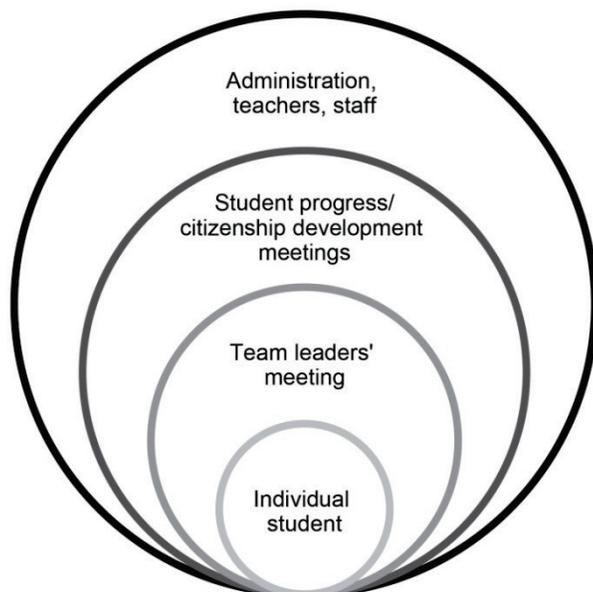
I think we’re in tune [with] how are the children (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

### ***Team structure***

HGA has structural elements in place to facilitate its ability to focus on the needs of individual children. Individual students’ needs are discussed in grade-level team meetings. Academic needs are discussed in weekly grade-level student progress meetings, and behavioral needs in weekly grade-level citizenship development meetings. In these meetings, various staff interacting with a given student discuss the student’s needs and explore strategies for helping the student. Higher-level or persistent concerns are also taken to the team leaders’ meeting with the principal. Figure 10 depicts this organizational framework facilitating discussions about individual students. As illustrated by the figure, student needs are discussed at multiple levels between the primary teacher and administration, but each tier also has direct relationships with individual students. In other words, administrators, teachers, and staff know and engage with students individually outside of this team structure.

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#### **10. Structural supports facilitating HGA’s focus on the children**



## *Students' experience*

Comments from students participating in the student council focus group indicated that students perceive and value HGA's focus on individual children. Responding to a question asking them to describe what they see as the important features of HGA that help students succeed, focus group participants described feeling cared about as individuals by school staff. Students expressed strong appreciation for staff's concern for them, as illustrated in the following comments.

The one thing I like about Higher Ground teachers [is that] teachers are into students. ... They kind of like treat them like their own child, help them (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

One thing I really love about this school is they, they respect us. ... They respect us for who we are. ... They treat every single student equally. ... They don't have anything against us [as Muslims]. They just, they really love us, and they really want us to strive for success, and they want us to succeed in the future. And that's why I think they really focus on education, because they know that education is the key to success, and no matter, you might have some fun once in a while, which is okay, but education—that's something you could never lose (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Back to what (she) was saying about teachers knowing you at a personal level, say... I have a bad day, I'm a little sad, and I'm walking along, the teacher will come up to you, and say like, 'Is everything okay? Do you need help with something?' ... That has happened to me. That shows how much they care about us, that they want to help us, and that makes me, like, love this school more, and want to go here more (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

I was going upstairs, and I fell down. ... [A staff person] said, 'What happened to you? Are you okay?' ... Yeah, they definitely, they care about you (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Implementation considerations*

Factors such as the school's size may facilitate this focus on children's individual as well as collective needs. Instilling this emphasis is not without challenge, however. As described below, interviewees raised a few considerations related to implementation of this focus on the children.

### **School size and composition**

HGA's long-time English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher credits the school's smaller size, relative to other schools where he has worked, with facilitating a strong focus on individual children. While the school may not be considered a small school with more

than 600 students, perhaps it is small enough to facilitate staff’s knowledge of individual children. According to this ESL teacher, in a smaller setting staff know individual students and how they are performing, and students have more access to teachers. At HGA, different teachers and staff interacting with a given student meet to discuss that student’s needs, and communicate with parents as needed to understand the student’s background. In this teacher’s words, individual students are not lost in the crowd. The ESL teacher further pointed out that this ability to focus on individual children may be particularly important for immigrant students.

This school is a small school. We know what’s happening. We know our students. We know their levels. We know their needs. We pick up every student that has concerns. We discuss. ... That’s what I like about smaller schools. You can know your students and do something (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

If you see students coming from other countries ... when they come here to us they do very well. We have students that came from Ethiopia, from Somali that join our secondary school. They do very well (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

### Challenges

Embedding this focus on the children can be challenging in some cases. As articulated by Principal Yigzaw, staff who come to HGA from different teaching experiences or who were trained with a different orientation can find it difficult to accept that everything revolves around serving the children. They may come to HGA with a different outlook based on these prior experiences. Nevertheless, HGA administrators strongly reinforce this school tenet (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

### Checklist of key elements

For quick reference, following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Focused on the children” component of HGA’s model.



#### FOCUSED ON THE CHILDREN: Checklist of key elements

<input type="radio"/>	School's primary emphasis
<input type="radio"/>	Policies/practices revolve around individual children’s success
<input type="radio"/>	Staff at all levels know individual students
<input type="radio"/>	Team structure facilitates group discussions of individual students as needs arise
<input type="radio"/>	Students perceive school's focus on them as individuals

## COMPONENT 2. ACCOUNTABILITY AT ALL LEVELS

Accountability at all levels – staff, student, and parent – emerged as an HGA tenet in this study. Research on high-poverty, high-performing schools supports this principle. At high-performing schools, all adults involved in students' lives are held accountable to high standards. In the words of Principal Yigzaw, external accountability tools such as state tests are important, but there also needs to be internal accountability focused on students and teachers. HGA staff interviewed for this case study described the school's focus on accountability as follows:

I think first and foremost we're held accountable to the parents and the students and the community. We're also held accountable to the people who hired us. We have a lot of accountability as teachers. There are certain criteria that are expected of every teacher (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

I absolutely do think there are more expectations, accountability requirements here. Other schools don't have the kind of communication that we do, which is very unique about our school. Other schools don't have these set criteria. We actually have a rubric that is used at the end of the year for evaluating teachers. There's a rubric for support staff as well. So expectations are set up clearly (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

We follow a strict curriculum, and then [teachers] do those lesson plans, and then because we give them this matrix at the beginning of the year and tell them it's how they will get a raise or not, they try to work well enough and hard enough to meet these expectations (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

As team leader I'm held accountable for making sure certain things are accomplished by my team whether is academic or behavioral (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

At Higher Ground everyone is accountable to what they are doing (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

We accept [the state's accountability requirements] and build it into the culture of our school. We allow teachers to evaluate students and we allow students to evaluate teachers. We provide incentives for teachers who are more effective teachers than others (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

### *Key accountability tools*

Interviews conducted for this case study suggest the school strongly reinforces the concept of accountability at all levels. Reinforcing the principle requires concrete mechanisms for monitoring fulfillment of expectations. Figure 11 summarizes the school's primary tools for reinforcing accountability among staff, students, and parents. Individual tools listed

here, such as the teacher evaluation matrix and regular assessment of teaching and learning, are described in depth in other sections of the report. As with other aspects of HGA’s model identified in this report, elements described in Figure 11 reflect principles and practices identified through the case study methods described earlier. Feedback received from a community organization at the end of the study suggests there may be some parents with concerns about the school, despite accountability including parent accountability having emerged as an important tenet among those interviewed for the study.

## 11. HGA’s accountability tools

Population held accountable	Accountability tools
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parent phone surveys</li> <li>▪ Written document of parent complaints provided by family liaisons</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teacher evaluation matrix</li> <li>▪ Attendance register (timecards)</li> <li>▪ Weekly lesson plan requirement</li> <li>▪ Team leader observations</li> <li>▪ Monthly contact with parents</li> <li>▪ Staff, student, and parent surveys</li> </ul>
Other school staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Support staff evaluation matrix</li> <li>▪ Attendance register for all staff</li> <li>▪ Staff, student, and parent surveys</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ MCA-II tests (standardized tests required by state)</li> <li>▪ NWEA MAP tests (fall/winter/spring)</li> <li>▪ Lesson quizzes and quarterly exams</li> <li>▪ Family liaison calls home to learn reasons for unknown absences</li> <li>▪ HGA moving toward a review system based on portfolios of student work</li> <li>▪ Individual Learning Plans with measurable goals for Title I students</li> </ul>
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Monthly contact from teachers</li> <li>▪ Family liaison calls home to learn reasons for unknown absences</li> </ul>

### *Ongoing refinement*

Despite HGA’s promotion of internal accountability, Principal Yigzaw conveyed that instituting accountability mechanisms is an ongoing process, and that he sees room for further refinement (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011). Concordia’s summer 2011 renewal report to the Minnesota Department of Education encouraged HGA to make greater use of satisfaction surveys of students, parents, faculty, and staff, and incorporate adjustments based on survey findings (Concordia University, 2011). While characterizing HGA’s system for holding students and teachers accountable as a strength which has improved over time, the Cambridge Education assessment also described room

for improvement in the extent to which data are reviewed for small subgroups of students and are used to inform instruction. The review also suggested establishing clear, measurable short-term goals for students who do not qualify for Title I services, which may further strengthen accountability among those students and their teachers.

Students are very well supported if they are not achieving at grade level. Using Title I funding, the school develops very effective individual learning plans for these students which contain clear, measurable and relevant goals for the next quarter. The very good practice in goal setting found in this part of the school is not widely used by other teachers. All students also have long term goals for the year, but few teachers set very specific short-term goals for learning with their students. Students are not always aware of what they need to do to achieve them and whether or how well they are making progress towards them (Knowles, 2011, p. 5).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Accountability at all levels” component of HGA’s model.



#### **ACCOUNTABILITY AT ALL LEVELS: Checklist of key elements**

- School staff, students, and parents held accountable for students’ success
- Staff, student, and parent surveys
- Teacher evaluation matrix
- Support staff evaluation matrix
- Team leader observations of teachers
- Teachers required to submit weekly lesson plans for approval
- Staff attendance register
- Monthly contact with parents
- Written documentation of parent complaints provided to administration
- Calls home to inquire about absences
- Frequent testing of students
- Individual Learning Plans with measurable goals for Title I students

## COMPONENT 3. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

According to the literature, many high-poverty schools are challenged by high teacher turnover and inexperienced teachers. Schools succeeding with this population find mechanisms to build and sustain the instructional capacity of teaching staff. At many of the schools reviewed, teachers supported each other in their development areas. These schools also have effective leaders who encourage and practice collaboration among school staff, and share decision making about how the school operates.

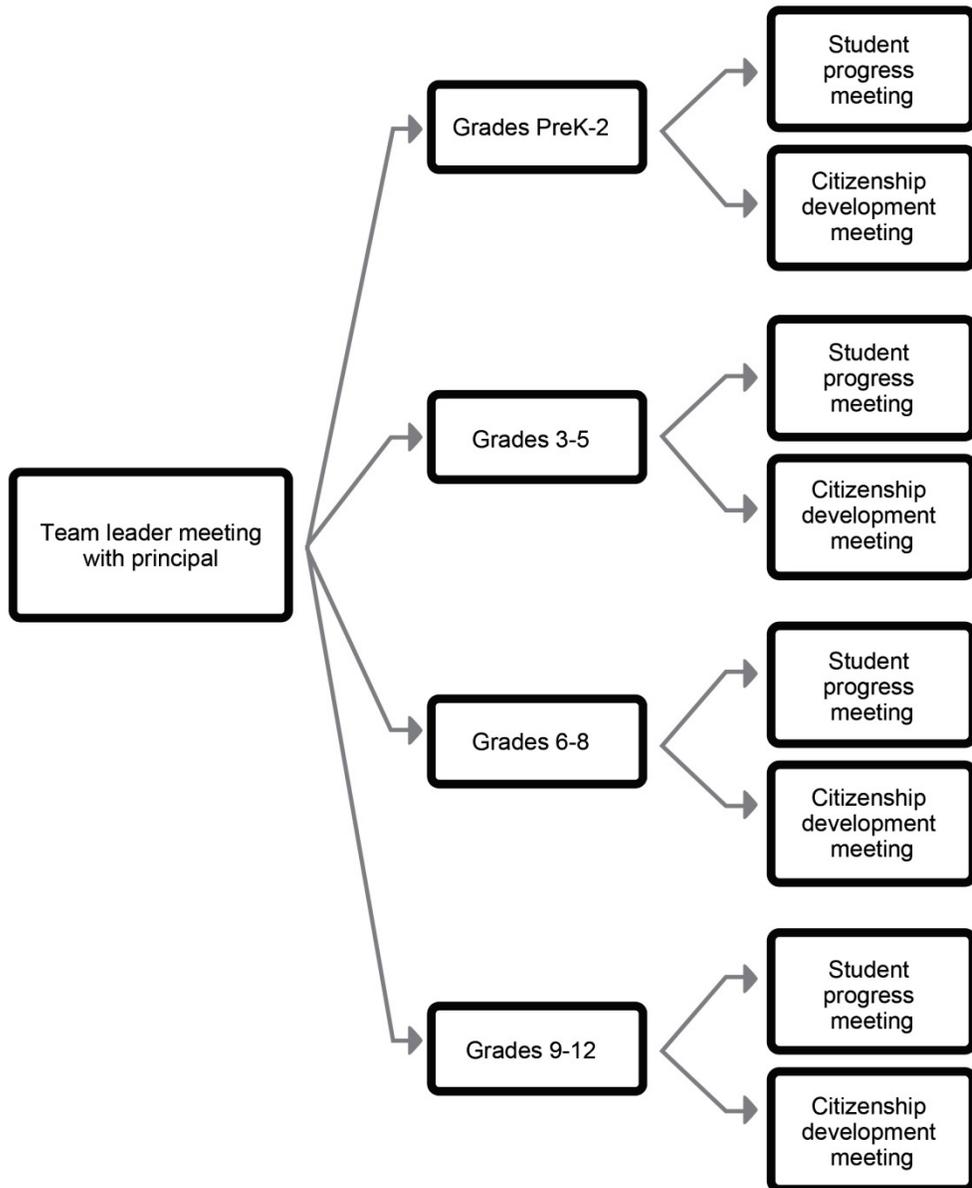
HGA built a formal organizational structure to facilitate ongoing teacher collaboration and shared learning. Teachers meet with their peers weekly in grade-level team meetings to discuss individual students' needs, develop collaborative approaches to serving students, and share instructional strategies. These team meetings in effect serve as professional learning communities (PLCs). Various definitions of PLCs have been offered, but the following definition by Hord (as cited in Center for CSRI, n.d.) provides a clear understanding of PLCs as they relate to HGA:

An ongoing process through which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to seek and share learning and to act on their learning, their goal being to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for students' benefit.

### *Team structure*

As shown in Figure 12, HGA's teachers work in formal teams to address student academic and behavioral issues in collaboration with their peers. In place of an assistant principal, four team leaders oversee teachers. Teams are organized around the following grade levels: PreK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Three of the four team leaders are also teachers, and the fourth also serves as the school's service learning coordinator.

**12. HGA team meeting structure**



Team leaders meet with teachers in their grade levels in two weekly meetings: a student progress meeting to discuss academic issues, and a citizenship development meeting focused on behavioral concerns. Team leaders, in turn, meet weekly with the principal to discuss higher-level issues emerging in their weekly team meetings. Outside of the formal meeting structure, team leaders also regularly observe classrooms and provide feedback and advice to teachers in their grade levels. The structure facilitates collaboration and knowledge-sharing among teachers, as well as mentorship of master teachers (team leaders) to more junior staff. In the words of HGA staff,

My role [as team leader] is to help the third- through fifth-grade team of teachers do their jobs effectively and to relay information to the principal [that] would be important for our school (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

I think [the team leader framework is] unique in that they're giving leadership responsibilities to teachers within a group, so it gives us the opportunity to excel and be better connected in the school. And it gives you an opportunity if you're someone who's worked really hard here to use some of your skills (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

I think that really keeps us connected (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

There is a kind of experience share which is very good really (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

## *Team meetings*

### **Student progress**

Student progress meetings focus on academic issues. During these meetings, teachers report on any students not making adequate progress. The intent is to identify students in need of additional supports or different instructional techniques, and provide early interventions. Within each of the four grade-level groupings, these weekly meetings are attended by the team leader, teachers in those grade levels, and support staff including assistant teachers and family liaisons (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011; Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

As part of this study, the primary researcher collecting data in the school observed a high school student progress meeting. The meeting was chaired by the high school team leader and attended by teachers and support staff, including family liaisons, Special Education staff, and a staff person assisting students with the college transition. Principal Yigzaw also attended and actively participated in the discussions about individual students. The meeting followed an agenda, including sharing timely information on several teacher expectations and school policies, discussing upcoming student tests, and informing teachers of the forthcoming Cambridge Education review. A substantial portion of the meeting was dedicated to an information share about students identified by teachers as having academic concerns. Teachers described their concerns about individual students, and received feedback from other teachers and staff on their experiences with those same students. Teachers shared ideas related to strategies for working with individual students. In the researcher's perception, teachers appeared engaged in these discussions and to appreciate the ideas and advice from colleagues. Some of the 13 HGA staff attending the

meeting shared students' cultural backgrounds, and others were white and American-born (High school student progress meeting observation, March 22, 2011).

### **Citizenship development**

Citizenship development meetings focus on behavioral issues. Similar to student progress meetings, teachers report on any students with concerns in this area, and discuss possible techniques or interventions for addressing the concern with their peers. Also similar to student progress meetings, weekly citizenship development meetings are attended by the team leader, teachers in that team's grade levels, and support staff.

Each grade-level team has a citizenship development staff person assigned to work with the team. Concerns raised by teachers are shared with the citizenship development staff person assigned to work with students at that grade level. The PreK-2 citizenship development staff person speaks Somali, and others speak English but work with the family liaisons as needed where contact with the parents or translations may be necessary. If a student is inattentive, failing to follow instructions, or has other behavioral concerns, the citizenship development staff person pulls them out of the classroom and works with them one-to-one around their area of concern. Some students may need additional support services such as counseling or home services to help parents support their children's needs. HGA has an on-staff counselor and also contracts with the Center for Nurturing and Growth, which is certified by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, to provide psychotherapy, skills training, and crisis assistance (Wilson, personal communication, November 9, 2011).

### **Team leaders**

Each week, team leaders meet with Principal Yigzaw to discuss any higher-level issues emerging from the student progress and citizenship development meetings. For example, team leaders report on any considerations that may require Principal Yigzaw's approval, such as assigning a student to the Title I program or referring a student for Special Education evaluation. Team leaders may also discuss issues raised by their teachers that they themselves have questions about how best to address. Other school staff, such as Special Education representatives, the physical education instructor, and transportation and health representatives, also attend the weekly team leaders' meeting as needed. Team leaders' meetings have traditionally focused on academic issues, but at the time of this report were expanding to encompass behavioral issues as well in recognition that academic and behavioral issues are often intertwined. To this end, citizenship development staff will now attend the team leaders' meetings (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011; Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### *Additional teacher collaborations*

Outside of the school’s team structure, HGA also supports a variety of less formal means of teacher collaboration and mentorship. As described by a kindergarten teacher, the school uses different strategies if a teacher is not performing well, such as suggesting that the teacher observe or speak to another teacher for guidance. For example, a fourth-grade teacher who was struggling to control his class was instructed to observe this kindergarten teacher’s class to learn from her classroom management techniques. Some elementary teachers also use a buddy system in which two classrooms combine for reading groups, or teachers share two classrooms of students but one provides science and math instruction and the other reading and other subject areas. A fourth-grade teacher who teams with another teacher said it was initially difficult to transition from having her own room to dividing responsibilities by subject matter for two classrooms, but said she now prefers the arrangement because she has a peer who knows the same students (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011; Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Professional learning communities” component of HGA’s model.



#### **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: Checklist of key elements**

- Team structure facilitating teacher collaboration and shared learning
- Four grade-level teams: PreK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12
- Weekly team meetings around academics and behavior
- Weekly team leaders’ meetings with principal
- Team leaders regularly observe classrooms and advise teachers
- Support for additional teacher collaborations (e.g., team teaching by subject area)

## COMPONENT 4. HORIZONTAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Research suggests that leaders at high-poverty, high-performing schools practice shared decision making. Rather than a top-down structure, decisions are often made using a horizontal model in which administrators, teachers, and support staff share responsibility for key decisions. This characteristic of high-poverty, high-performing schools is also a defining characteristic of HGA. The school embraces a horizontal organizational structure in which staff at all levels have direct access to administration, and school leadership shares decision making with teachers and other staff.

### *Distributed leadership*

As a charter school, HGA is held accountable to an authorizer but operates independent from a traditional school district administrative structure. Internally, the executive director and principal share decision making with staff through the school's grade-level team structure, described in the previous component (Figure 12). This team structure takes the place of an assistant principal. According to Principal Yigzaw, he is also moving toward more collaborative processes for curriculum refinement and hiring, facilitated by more stable staffing than in the school's earlier years. Teachers have been actively involved in leading the school's transition to an interdisciplinary science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) program, discussed in the later Continual Improvement section, and have recently played lead roles in teacher interviews and hiring decisions.

We are making wise decisions these days by involving more people in the process (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

### *Administrators' daily involvement and direct access*

In addition to distributing decision making, HGA leadership is directly accessible to staff at all levels and involved in the school's daily operations. As found in the literature review, leaders at high-poverty, high-performing schools often have open-door policies and are closely involved in the school's day-to-day work. Illustrative of this concept, Principal Yigzaw's office is located directly across from the main reception desk and in plain view of anyone who enters the school office.

Concordia's summer 2011 renewal report observed that HGA teachers feel there is an open-door policy enabling them to discuss issues with Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw directly (Concordia University, 2011). In the words of one of HGA's family liaisons, the simplicity of the school's bureaucratic structure is a strength. In his opinion, in addition to solving problems themselves, teachers and family liaisons as well

as other staff can easily access administration when a problem arises, rather than having to work through a hierarchical structure. (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011). The following staff and student comments reference HGA administrators’ access and daily involvement in school operations:

They’re [Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yizgaw] more than willing to meet and help (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

For example, Dr. Yizgaw, he’s the principal, he’s a busy guy, you know. ... But if I go to Dr. Yizgaw’s office right now, and I really need to talk to him, he will have the time to actually sit down and talk any time of the day (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### ***Student council and Parent-Teacher Organization***

Structures also exist at HGA to share decision making to some extent with parents and students. A seven-member Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) was appointed in July 2010 to support the school’s mission and students. The school’s student council also gives middle and high school students the opportunity to pursue initiatives such as field trips, assemblies, and a food and clothing drive. Cambridge Education’s spring 2011 review also suggested the school offer similar opportunities to elementary students (Knowles, 2011).

### ***Checklist of key elements***

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Horizontal organizational structure” component of HGA’s model.



#### **HORIZONTAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: Checklist of key elements**

<input type="radio"/>	Decision making shared with grade-level teams
<input type="radio"/>	Movement toward collaborative process for curriculum refinement and teacher hiring
<input type="radio"/>	Administrators have open-door policies
<input type="radio"/>	Administrators involved in school’s daily operations
<input type="radio"/>	Student council and Parent-Teacher Organization provide mechanisms for student and parent input

## COMPONENT 5. ENVIRONMENT CONDUCTIVE TO LEARNING

The Washington review identified a supportive learning environment as one of the nine characteristics commonly associated with high-performing schools. Students at these schools feel safe and respected, have trusting relationships with staff, and are engaged and supported in learning. Further, at diverse high-poverty schools, culturally responsive practices contribute to an environment affirming of students' backgrounds (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

In its spring 2011 review, Cambridge Education identified creating an environment conducive to learning as one of the areas where HGA has performed well. HGA's school climate can be characterized by a culture focused on students, respectful of and responsive to their culture, and rich in student supports as well as expectations. As articulated in the Cambridge review,

The school has created a climate for learning based on valuing students and a strong belief that all children can learn. Staff-student relationships are good, and staff provide high levels of support to students who need extra help or who are falling behind (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

Student council members participating in the focus group conducted for this study reinforced the concept that HGA has created an environment in which students feel comfortable and supported in their learning. The following comments illustrate these students' perspectives on the school environment:

If you have any problems ... no matter what [it] is, the staff is there for you right away and ready to take care of you (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Anything that the student needs, the school provides it, like a prayer room. They gave us that, and then they set time aside for us to pray, and [it] doesn't interfere with our religion or our classes, so we can balance it (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

One of the best things at our school is safety (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

The school's like a learning environment, they don't tolerate [bad behavior] much, they don't tolerate that much of the bad kids (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

In other schools, you have the cool group, you have the nerds, you have this, you have that, and [in] this school you have no groups. Everybody sits at any table they want in lunchroom. No one really hangs out as groups. ... I mean, the [freshmen] are cool with the seniors ... and if one person starts something, everyone looks at them like, whoa, what's going on, and then they back off (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### *Characteristics of HGA's environment*

Figure 13 presents characteristics that appear to contribute to an environment conducive to learning at HGA. These attributes are discussed in other sections of the report and are therefore briefly summarized here, with the exception of the school's discipline model and culture of respect, which are discussed in greater depth below. Figure 13 reflects characteristics identified through the sources consulted for this study. As discussed later in this section, external sources consulted during this study suggest there may be room for improvement or concerns around practices within some of these areas.

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#### **13. Key characteristics of HGA's environment**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Description</b>
High expectations of students	Policies and practices focus on students first and foremost, and school holds high expectations of all students.
Trusting relationships between staff and students	Staff at all levels know students on an individual basis, and students perceive staff's concern for them as individuals.
Cultural responsiveness	School embraces cultural competency, accommodating students' religious and cultural beliefs and providing family liaisons who share the school's dominant cultures.
Comprehensive supports for student learning	Routine assessments of students are used to target instruction and provide tiered instructional supports.
Discipline and safety	Behavioral concerns discussed in grade-level citizenship development team meetings and addressed by citizenship development staff. School embraces a human development approach to discipline, but may need to clarify and more broadly communicate its discipline policies. Students seem to feel safe in the school.
Culture of respect	Staff and students exhibit a culture of respect for one another.

## *Discipline and safety*

### **Discipline model**

HGA leaders characterized the school's discipline framework as based on a human development model focused on helping children understand what is wrong with their behavior and how it can be corrected. As articulated by Principal Yigzaw,

For the last 11 years we have tried to adapt a human development model. ... That is really [about] providing guidance and assistance and also trying to change bad behavior. It's not really punitive. ... It's about helping people understand why they should refrain from acting and behaving in a certain way. The goal has always been to put a lot of emphasis on teachers handling discipline. This is not about deferring the responsibility; it's about understanding that [the student] can benefit more from being in the classroom than being in someone's office all day or detention all day (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

As previously described, teachers discuss behavioral concerns in grade-level citizenship development meetings, and citizenship development staff work one-to-one with students identified as having behavioral concerns. Students who continue to have problems may be referred to additional services such as counseling, and the school may involve the parents to help them support their child's needs. HGA emphasizes a strong home-school relationship. In extreme cases, additional corrective action may be taken such as suspension or in rare cases expulsion (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### **Discipline referral process**

When there are behavioral concerns, teachers work with citizenship development staff to explore ways to address the concern. The school has a document delineating five steps in the discipline process, ranging from a verbal warning to conferences with the executive director and principal, as well as a discipline referral form structured around seven student-conduct values embraced by the school: respect and citizenship, responsibility, courage, fairness and caring, self-discipline, perseverance, and honesty and trust. The form prompts teachers to denote the value that is not being supported by the student's behavior, and provide a written explanation of the concern (Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011).

In practice, it seems that individual teachers vary in their approaches to pursuing behavioral concerns. Concordia's renewal report indicated that some HGA staff perceive a need to strengthen and clarify the school's discipline policy. Staff interviewed as part of Concordia's renewal evaluation expressed concern over weak enforcement of the discipline policy and consistency in responses to discipline referrals. Some students also expressed concerns

over disruptive behaviors in their classes, although they feel safe in the building. Concordia recommended distributing written discipline guidelines clearly delineating types of referrals and a continuum of possible consequences. The report conveyed the importance of making teachers, students, and parents aware of the uniform guidelines. Concordia further stated the importance of studying and following the Pupil Fair Dismissal Act, including implementing a plan approved by the school board for alternate instruction for students who are expelled (Concordia University, 2011). Additionally, some of the parent concerns brought to our attention by a community organization at the end of the study relate to aspects of the school environment and discipline practices.

### **School safety**

Perceptions of school safety were not explicitly addressed by interview questions developed for this study, but both the summer 2011 Concordia renewal report as well as the 2008 LarsonAllen review provided affirmations that students feel safe in the school. As part of their 2008 review for The Saint Paul Foundation, LarsonAllen facilitated a four-hour self-assessment process. The HGA executive director, principal, and a board representative were asked a series of discussion questions, including a question addressing why parents choose HGA for their children. The self-assessment participants mentioned safety along with staff responsiveness to parents and academic rigor:

Many students are from unsafe environments in their native countries, some arriving directly from East African refugee camps. Even for those students who arrive from a local traditional K-12 district school, many parents were [sic] quite simply did not feel comfortable or secure in those district schools. HGA provides students and families with a safe environment, something that everyone at HGA views as fundamental to effective learning (Aase, 2008).

### ***Culture of respect***

At the beginning of this report, we described researchers' perception of a culture of respect at HGA based on formalities used in interactions by school administrators, teachers, and staff. Cambridge Education's spring 2011 review suggested that this culture of respect may also extend to students. According to the review, the quality of HGA's school culture is well established. The review referenced a respectful culture in its characterization of HGA's school climate:

The school’s mission is to create a socially committed, morally responsible and ethnically diverse learning environment which values students individually and collectively. The school’s leaders have done this exceptionally well, and the school recognizes and responds to the diversity of its student population within the Black communities of St Paul. Teachers, parents and students recognize what a strong sense of community the school has achieved and welcome the diversity it brings. Within this culture, students behave well, show great respect for one another and enjoy their learning. They welcome the good support they receive from staff, and [the] way that staff can help them sort out problems. One student commented, ‘We get a great education here – everyone cooperates.’ As a result, students are confident learners and develop into well-rounded individuals with the maturity to move on to the next phase in their education after graduation (Knowles, 2011, pp. 8-9).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Environment conducive to learning” component of HGA’s model.



**ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING:  
Checklist of key elements**

<input type="radio"/>	Trusting relationships between staff and students
<input type="radio"/>	Culturally responsive practices
<input type="radio"/>	Targeted instruction and comprehensive supports for learning
<input type="radio"/>	Students seem to feel safe in the school
<input type="radio"/>	Culture of respect among staff and students

## COMPONENT 6. INNOVATION

*Charter schools are seen as institutions that can innovate, and our innovation should inform the larger public school community.*

—Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011

Charter schools are, by design, intended to promote innovation. Expanding educational options and promoting educational innovation were a driving force of the charter school movement. This report highlights a number of aspects of HGA’s model that, while often related to characteristics of high-performing schools, seem somewhat distinctive in their design at HGA. Interviews conducted for this study also suggested a culture of innovation at the school, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I think the teachers that work here like this school setting. I think I have a lot of freedoms to teach the way so students can learn and try to bring some of their cultural things in and try to relate it, and I don’t have to go to a board (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

Its Afro-centric emphasis has been exciting and successful. It’s kindergarten through grade 12 model has been beneficial for them to realize many of their goals and aspirations. They have been innovative in instructional design and embedding technology into the school and the curriculum, and they are blessed to have passionate educational leaders who seemingly have the best interests of the students at heart and hold dearly to a desire to enhance the achievement of all the students who are enrolled (Concordia University vice president, personal interview, March 30, 2011).

### *Innovative practices*

Based on our literature review and interviews, following are examples of practices at HGA that appear somewhat distinctive and innovative. These practices are explored in depth in descriptions of other components of HGA’s model.

- **Academic program:** Developed by the school for its specific student population.
- **Technology:** Embedded in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- **Organizational structure:** Grade-level teams distribute leadership in lieu of an assistant principal.
- **Family liaisons:** Individuals employed by the school and perceived as trusted in the local community who bridge the cultural gap between staff, students, and families.

- **Parent outreach:** High expectations for teacher contact with parents, including monthly phone calls.
- **Learning Year Program:** Optional program providing an additional 220 hours of educational programming each year, enabling students to accelerate learning.
- **Teacher evaluation:** Formal evaluation matrix developed by the school with clearly delineated tiers of performance and incentives.
- **Grade-level placement:** Students assigned to grade levels based on their achievement on nationally normed tests.
- **College preparation:** Comprehensive supports for college preparation, including Advanced Placement (AP) and Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) opportunities, and proof of acceptance to a post-secondary education institution required for graduation.
- **Continual improvement:** Dynamic school model which, though consistent in principles, has changed over time.

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist of the key elements within the “Innovation” component of HGA’s model.



#### **INNOVATION: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Culture of innovation                                     |
| <input type="radio"/> | Key program elements designed by and specifically for HGA |
| <input type="radio"/> | Dynamic model which has changed over time                 |

# High expectations for children's future success

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## COMPONENT 7. HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF ALL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Wilder Research's literature review found that schools succeeding with high-poverty students believe that those students can achieve high standards in spite of poverty and other perceived risk factors. Moreover, these schools expect that those children will succeed. Importantly, these high expectations apply to all students, and are communicated to the students themselves. High teacher expectations are not delineated separately in our literature review, but seem implicit in other characteristics identified among high-poverty, high-performing schools. For example, characteristics related to instructional capacity, curriculum management, and data and assessment literacy suggest high expectations for teachers.

Based on data collected for this case study, high expectations of all students and teachers is a core component of HGA's model. The school views students as individuals, and expects them to be well-prepared for higher education when they graduate. In fact, students cannot graduate from HGA without demonstrating acceptance at a post-secondary education institution. HGA's high expectations extend to its teachers, who are expected to help students achieve their expectations, and held accountable for doing so.

### *Student expectations*

High expectations of students emerged as a theme across the interviews conducted. One of HGA's core principles is that all students can succeed. By extension, students are expected to make strong academic progress while they attend the school. Staff expect students to make this progress mindful of the larger goals of attending college and serving as a community leader. As articulated in the spring 2011 school quality review of HGA conducted by Cambridge Education,

The school has high expectations for all its students and provides good opportunities for higher-achieving students to accelerate their learning. These expectations are also reflected in a strong focus on college-readiness and access to Post Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) programs (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

## **Belief in ALL students**

In the words of Executive Director Wilson, “We start with the philosophy that all children can learn. We absolutely know that.” HGA recognizes language barriers, Special Education needs, and other challenges students face in learning, but places emphasis on providing the services a child needs in order to succeed. “It’s that they need a special educator, not that they’re a Special Ed child. We shift the emphasis to where it belongs.” Wilson distinguished this orientation from what he described as a deficiency model focusing on students’ weaknesses. Further, this belief in the capabilities of all children is coupled with a recognition of the need for the future contributions of these children (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011). In the words of school staff,

If a child comes in to the school with a vocabulary that’s lower than other students, we see that as an exposure difference, not an intellectual difference (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

I would hope that if anybody wants to replicate what we are doing the most important thing would be to, like we do, give the child the power to know that they can do it, because we believe in all of them. Empower the child to do what they can to the best of their abilities, and then help the teachers (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

We try our hardest so every child should be successful (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

There are no throwaways anymore. This country needs every citizen to be productive, and that means every citizen, every child who finishes high school must have at least two years of college moving forward (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

## **Communication of expectations to students**

As supported by the literature review, schools must go beyond holding high expectations for students. They must also make students keenly aware of these expectations. HGA staff and students indicated that HGA students are aware of their expectations and clearly perceive staff and teachers’ belief in and commitment to their success.

We’re going most of the time past the [grade-level] requirements, so I have a high expectation of these students, and they know it and the parents know it (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

What I love the most about this school, why I kept...going here, [is] the fact that the teachers set higher expectations. I believe that this school has ... higher expectations than most of the public schools (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

One thing I really like that the school really provides for us students is how the teachers, they really want us to succeed, and they will take their time out of their day to explain anything that happened ... to re-explain it to us so we can understand it better, so we won't get lost when the teachers start to go on to the next section or the next subject (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

They know you. They take the time to get to know you on [an] individual basis, know your strengths and weaknesses, and they are gonna set [high expectations]. If you have to take five [Advanced Placement courses], and you think you can't handle [it], and they think you can handle [it], and you don't, they [are] still gonna push you there. Yeah, that's what I like the most about it (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## Academic expectations

### Overview

More than a theoretical concept, HGA's high expectations of students are grounded in specific academic performance expectations communicated to students and parents. According to Executive Director Wilson, HGA tells students that in order to be an effective learner, they must put in an effective effort. Simply showing up to class is not enough. Staff convey to students that students are expected to apply themselves toward the goal of college preparation (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011). Moreover, all students are expected to prepare themselves for post-secondary education. An HGA board member and retired Concordia administrator noted that there are incentives in the form of scholarship dollars tied to these academic expectations (Schoenbeck, telephone interview, February 2, 2011).

According to Principal Yigzaw, in practice students are generally expected to progress by one and a half grade levels in basic skills each year, which is even higher than the expectation of 1.25 grade levels stated in HGA's contract with Concordia (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). However, specific objectives vary for individual students depending on students' strengths and gaps. For example, a student needing to improve vocabulary proficiency in order to progress to the next grade level will be made aware of that expectation (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

We also encourage them and expect them to accelerate their learning because this is a college prep school. We would expect for them to come well prepared at least to get admission to a post-secondary education institution (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

I think that there is a connection to standards that again connects to high expectations. The expectation is that students will meet or exceed the standard, and at the individual or group level if standards aren't met there is remediation that goes along with that (Board member, telephone interview, February 2, 2011).

I think [that] the school feels that academics is very important. ... That's why teachers take their time to make sure every student [is] understanding what is being taught. ... You don't have to get it 100 percent, but you have to know what is going on in the class (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### **Systematic progress monitoring**

As described further in the section on regular assessment of teaching and learning, HGA uses frequent testing to monitor individual students' progress and identify supports needed to achieve academic expectations. In addition to the MCA-II tests required by the state, HGA conducts Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) tests at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Teachers also conduct ongoing assessments of their students which are tied to the curriculum. For example, teachers use lesson quizzes to ascertain whether individual students learned the lesson objectives (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011).

HGA also systematically monitors students' progress toward basic academic expectations through its Academic Probation Program. Students who fall behind with their academic work are identified for an academic probation process. The first step in the process is notifying the student's teachers and giving the student a warning. The student then has a week to remove herself or himself from the warning list before being placed in academic probation. Those placed in probation are prohibited from participating in extracurricular activities until they complete all missing coursework. During scheduled extracurricular activities, these students go to an academic probation center to focus on completing missing work under the supervision of an academic probation officer (Wilson, 2010).

### **Written documentation of expectations**

Although high academic expectations are clearly a tenet of HGA and communicated to staff, students, and parents, there appears to be room for growth in the extent to which these expectations are formally incorporated into school planning documents. Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review recommended explicitly stating and tracking progress toward those goals in formal strategic planning documents. This could provide a means for more formally evaluating progress toward these expectations.

The school sets challenging goals to drive up achievement. Although not all of these were met in 2010, especially in science, they provide a clear focus for the school's development. They are not, however, set out in a strategic plan for school improvement, and there are no interim benchmarks by which to measure progress towards the end of year goals (Knowles, 2011, p. 6).

## **Behavioral expectations**

In discussing HGA's high expectations for students, individuals interviewed for this case study generally focused on the school's academic expectations and less often addressed its behavioral expectations. Though not a general theme expressed, one family liaison interviewed described the school's behavior standards as a core component of HGA's model. In his perception, there have been improvements in this area over time, to the point where now when walking around the school one observes students quietly studying. He credited these improvements in part to a system for expelling students who are compromising the quality of the learning environment for other students (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011). Nevertheless, because high behavioral expectations did not emerge as a theme across the interviews, they are not identified as a key element within this component of HGA's model at this time. The following observations from the researcher and Concordia University are offered to the extent that they help readers consider the role of behavioral expectations within this broader focus on high expectations of students.

## **Researcher's experience**

In the experience of the researcher holding primary responsibility for collecting data in the school, behavior in common areas appeared orderly and there were no serious behavioral problems observed. Walking through the school, staff would stop students and ask them about what they were doing if they appeared to be on their own during a class period. Staff, including administrators, knew individual students by name.

In the three classrooms observed for this study, teachers quickly addressed any student behaviors that were disruptive or inattentive to the lesson, conveying an expectation of orderly participation. Teachers also positively reinforced good behaviors and participation. In a middle school math class observed, the teacher commented several times that students needed a lot of reminders to stay on task that particular period, and acknowledged the difficult start to the class period resulting from the teacher needing to briefly leave the room to address a problem with the copy machine. The teacher used a variety of techniques to engage students in the lesson. Many reminders were required this period, again seemingly due to the difficult start to the class, but the teacher quickly addressed inattentive or disruptive behaviors. The other two classes observed required less behavioral

management on the part of the teacher, but disruptive or inattentive behaviors were quickly addressed and active participation was positively reinforced (classroom observations: April 28, 2011; May 5, 2011; May 19, 2011).

### **Concordia recommendations**

As described more fully in the earlier section on an environment conducive to learning, Concordia University's summer 2011 renewal report to the Minnesota Department of Education described enforcement of student behavior as a concern among faculty, staff, and students, and suggested that some perceive the need for a stronger discipline policy with clear guidelines and consequences. Concerns conveyed by students related more to disruptive classroom behaviors than more serious discipline issues. These observations, combined with the heavier emphasis on academic expectations across the case study interviews, suggest that at this point HGA's high expectations for students may be more clearly defined in the area of academics.

## ***Teacher expectations***

### **Overview**

HGA's high expectations also extend to its teachers, who are expected to help students achieve their expectations and held accountable for doing so. High expectations of teachers emerged as a theme across the case study interviews. Further, the teachers interviewed seemed to embrace these expectations.

HGA teachers face specific performance expectations related to student achievement, development of lesson plans, and their own attendance, and are evaluated and compensated based on their performance. As articulated by one teacher, HGA teachers are expected to be at school every day, be on time, follow the curriculum, and make sure each child is learning (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011). In the words of another, HGA teachers' job is not just to complete the curriculum, but rather to prepare lesson plans, implement the curriculum, and monitor students' progress (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011). Teachers are also expected to work in a team environment and address student concerns in a collaborative, professional manner, as well as to maintain frequent communications with students' families (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

There must be effective teaching also. Covering the content is not enough unless the student is actively, powerfully engaged in the learning process. That's something we're doing. That's why we put so much emphasis on the annual assessments of students to see how effectively the student is learning as well as how effectively the teacher is teaching (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

Be a collaborative person on a team, be willing to be open to new ways of thinking out of the box, learning. ... Make sure we're very professional. We have to be on time, ready for the kids (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

We have to do everything we can to get the kids where they need to be (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

Family connected, that's almost number one. We have to go above and beyond calling families, having them [visit], welcoming them (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

According to Principal Yigzaw, teacher expectations are being made clearer each year. For example, in previous years administration left it to teachers' discretion to match the standards and curriculum resources. Now administration is specifying what portions of the textbooks need to be taught in order to meet the standards. Similarly, teachers must now meet expectations related to their own attendance and student performance in order to receive raises, which has not always been the case at HGA.

As the state upgrades the standards, making them higher, our expectations are higher for students and teachers also (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### **Evaluation matrix**

HGA uses a formal evaluation matrix to determine teachers' performance-based salary increases. Principal Yigzaw and Executive Director Wilson meet individually with teachers at the end of the school year to assess their performance against the matrix. The matrix factors teacher attendance; student performance, including growth over time; communication with parents; instruction; and classroom management. Within each category, there are six levels of performance delineated based on specific criteria, and teachers are awarded a set number of points based on their performance. The overall number of points earned determines the teacher's percentage salary increase, which ranges from a 10 percent increase down to termination depending on performance. The performance matrix was revised in summer 2011. According to Concordia's summer 2011 report to the Minnesota Department of Education, teachers interviewed as part of the renewal process indicated they were satisfied with the school's procedures for teacher evaluation and salary adjustment (Concordia University, 2011).

For illustrative purposes, following are the highest levels of performance delineated for each category for the 2011-12 school year. Teachers achieving this highest level in each category would attain a total of 32 points, resulting in a performance-based salary increase of 10 percent according to the matrix. The highest levels of performance within each category are defined below, followed by more specific information on the school's system for monitoring teachers' attendance and reviewing lesson plans:

- **Attendance:** Present 99 percent of instructional days (5 points)
- **Student performance:** 90-100 percent of the students met or exceeded their target RIT (a curriculum scale used to evaluate achievement and growth on NWEA tests); 80 percent of students meet or exceed MCA proficiency standards (15 points)
- **Communication with parents:** Turned in call logs; home communications are monitored by random calls to parents by administrators as well as parent satisfaction surveys (2 points)
- **Instruction:** Turned in lesson plan every Friday and implemented approved lesson plan (5 points)
- **Classroom management:** Procedures established and class always well-managed and orderly (5 points)

### **Attendance system**

HGA teachers are required to punch in and out for the day. The researcher holding primary data-collection responsibility for this case study observed this practice in the school office at the beginning or end of the school day on a couple of occasions. One teacher interviewed said she would prefer that performance ratings and pay not be impacted by being absent for only a couple of days, but perceived the attendance policy as one way the school demonstrates accountability in light of what she perceived as stronger scrutiny of charter schools compared to traditional public schools.

### **Weekly lesson plans**

HGA teachers are expected to develop weekly lesson plans approved by the principal. The principal reviews and provides feedback on lesson plans, and the team leader receives a copy (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011). Team leaders and Principal Yigzaw also periodically visit classrooms to see whether teachers are following their approved lesson plans. Any diversions from the lesson plan or difficulties observed are discussed during teachers' prep time or the team meeting (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23,

2011). A couple of teachers interviewed said they perceive HGA's weekly lesson plan requirement as a higher expectation than is faced by their peers in traditional public schools (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011).

Dr. Yigzaw really gives us the parameters, but he expects you to be working within a lesson plan and working with the standards (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

They have to be according to the curriculum that we're teaching. Also around these lesson plans, if we are planning field trips, they have to be having something to do with the lesson plan. If the lesson plan is not correct, Mr. Yigzaw will look at it, he will write on it and give it back to you, and you will have to redo it and come and see him (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

Dr. Yigzaw really gives us feedback in our work. I think that's important professional feedback (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

### **Team leader appraisals**

In addition to teachers' annual evaluation based on the matrix, team leaders observe teachers in their grade levels and provide performance appraisals on a quarterly basis. Team leaders observe teachers while they are teaching, and meet with them to provide guidance (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011; Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

### **Communication of expectations to teachers**

As with student expectations, teacher expectations are clearly communicated. Organizing the school into grade-level teams is intended, in part, to facilitate the sharing of teacher expectations, which can differ somewhat by grade. Rather than top administrators holding responsibility for conveying expectations to all teachers, grade-level team leaders share responsibility in articulating expectations to smaller groups of teachers. In some cases, the principal or executive director holds meetings with all teachers in the cafeteria to convey more general expectations.

We share expectations in many ways. In order to increase our effectiveness in sharing expectations, we have reorganized the school into grade-level teams. ... That makes administration more accessible, and that makes communication clearer because people are really talking about things in this smaller group, and focused [on] what do I need to know as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, [for example] (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “High expectations of all students and teachers” component of HGA’s model.



### **HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF ALL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Belief in ALL students                    |
| <input type="radio"/> | High academic expectations                |
| <input type="radio"/> | Communication of expectations to students |
| <input type="radio"/> | Teacher evaluation matrix                 |
| <input type="radio"/> | Communication of expectations to teachers |

## COMPONENT 8. EMPHASIS ON COLLEGE PREPARATION

High-poverty, high-performing schools hold high expectations for all children, believing those children can succeed now and in the future. At many of these schools, adults encourage students to think about their future plans including college and careers. HGA's emphasis on college preparation builds on this characteristic identified in the literature review, but seems distinctive in its specific focus on college attendance. HGA refers to itself as a college-preparatory school, and requires that students demonstrate acceptance into a post-secondary education institution in order to graduate. In the words of Executive Director Wilson,

We say from the very beginning that we expect them to go to college (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

For many HGA students, college attendance may not have been an aspiration in the absence of the school's expectation and related supports. In conducting their 2008 review for The Saint Paul Foundation, LarsonAllen facilitated a discussion group with the HGA executive director, principal, and a board representative. Participants reflected on the meaning to parents of the school's college emphasis:

For many of HGA's new students, pursuing higher education is an opportunity that is often dismissed, or in the least not discussed, let alone encouraged. Parents are attracted to HGA's academic approach – its steadfast dedication to objective assessment, basic skill development, and equipping students for educational pursuits beyond high school graduation (Aase, 2008, p. 9).

### *Supports for college enrollment*

HGA provides a number of additional supports to help students meet the school's college-acceptance requirement. Supports include opportunities to pursue advanced coursework, staff assisting students with college applications, a career course helping students consider future goals, and scholarship support.

#### **Advanced coursework**

HGA offers and encourages students to pursue advanced coursework which will prepare them for college and in some cases enable them to earn college credits while still in high school, reducing their future college costs. The school's Learning Year Program and emphasis on accelerated learning enable high-achieving students to complete graduation requirements early, freeing them to pursue Advanced Placement (AP) or Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) courses, described below. As articulated by Concordia,

Admission to a postsecondary institution is a graduation requirement for all students graduating from the Academy. To prepare students for postsecondary education, the Academy offers a very rigorous curriculum that includes Advanced Placement courses and Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) courses (Concordia University, 2011, Draft document).

In 2010-11, HGA implemented curriculum changes at the high school level intended to prepare students to meet most of the state's requirements by the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, enabling them to take mostly AP and PSEO courses in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). The intent is that students will take some advanced courses at HGA but also take PSEO classes on college campuses (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### **Advanced Placement**

In 2008-09, HGA began offering AP courses, which are college-level courses available to high school students. Managed by the College Board, the AP program offers standardized courses for which students can earn college credit. HGA has offered AP courses in human geography, calculus, and chemistry. The AP chemistry course required a significant investment in lab resources as well as the hiring of a laboratory technician to manage the lab (Wilson, 2010).

### **Post-Secondary Enrollment Options**

The PSEO program provides high school juniors and seniors with the opportunity to take courses at the college level and earn college credit while in high school. Through PSEO, it is possible for a student to graduate from high school with enough college credits for an associate's degree. Students can take a course on a college or university campus, as well as PSEO courses offered at their high school, online, or via interactive television through a partnership between the high school and post-secondary institution (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). HGA students have taken PSEO courses at Concordia University and Hamline University in subjects such as algebra, writing, psychology, and biology. A couple of HGA students who have taken PSEO courses characterized their experiences as follows:

I am a PSEO student. I have been since my junior year, and ... it really helped me challenge myself and see first-hand what college is like. And I already earned, like, 24 credits, and I feel like I am prepared for college. And I really enjoyed my college experience, and I have a good relationship with my professors. ... I know how to talk to them, and I know how to talk to the other students in the class, to ask them if I missed class that day, like what happened and stuff. And I think that was great, and I think I'm well-prepared for college (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

To add on to PSEO, like my junior year, first semester, I wasn't able to join PSEO because it's like you have to have a certain GPA to join it, and the GPA the school requires is higher than the GPA that the college requires. So, the school pushes you further to actually be able to do these things, and so when I made it there second semester ... it was great (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### **Support for college application**

HGA also formally dedicates staff time to support students in their college applications. At the time of this study, the school employed two full-time staff with dedicated responsibilities in this area in addition to general guidance and counseling roles. These staff hold formal responsibilities related to coaching and guiding students in their college plans, and monitoring whether students are on track to graduate. According to Principal Yigzaw, they help students go through the process of transitioning from high school to college, including helping students prepare for exams, visit campuses, and fill out school and financial aid applications. Other staff also support students in preparing for the transition, however. For example, Principal Yigzaw and high school team leaders help assign students to classes as they approach graduation. HGA also partners with Admission Possible and the Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE) to support students' college transitions (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011; Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011).

### **Career class**

According to Executive Director Wilson, many of HGA's immigrant students lack awareness of the breadth of career options available to them. To help students explore future career options and determine the steps they will need to take in order to reach their goals, Wilson teaches a career-exploration class to high school students (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011). The class aims to increase students' awareness of the range of career options, and help students identify their potential career interests. A student council focus group participant described her experience in the class:

Mr. Wilson has this class – career cruising class – right, and every freshman is required to take it. ... And you're gonna take this personality test which ... consists of 50 questions, and depending on who you are, what you like ... it gives you lists of things that would fit who you are. ... Let's say you wanna be a pediatrician, which I wanted to be, and then ... we go on fieldtrips to go job shadowing and work with pediatricians for the whole day. ... We were in the medical lab of the U of M, the medical center, and it was cool, and I think that's one of the things that helps a student. ... And then the students who wanted to be more... engineers, they [emphasized] taking pre-calculus classes, math classes. And the ones who found out that medicine was what they wanted to do, they took AP chemistry, and all those classes (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### **Scholarship support**

HGA offers a scholarship program to support its predominantly low-income student population's college aspirations. The intent of HGA's Martin Luther King Jr. Earn as You Learn Program is to provide each deserving student with a scholarship for higher education upon graduation and acceptance into an accredited liberal arts or technical college. Based on their grade-point average, students earn points toward scholarship dollars which can be cashed at graduation. In 2009-10, the program awarded a total of 536 scholarships ranging from \$100-\$200 to K-12 students. Beyond the financial support provided, school staff credit the program with helping to make students aware of college from an early age and providing an incentive for students to stay focused on their academic achievement. The school fundraises to support the program (Aase, 2008; Wilson, 2010).

The 2008 LarsonAllen review for The Saint Paul Foundation found HGA and its scholarship program to be strong candidates for further support from the Foundation's Katherine B. Andersen Fund, and characterized the scholarship program as follows:

HGA's Martin Luther King, Jr. Earn and You Learn Scholarship Program is rooted in compelling educational merits. The program's focus on early intervention and incentive represents a truly unique approach to student scholarships. HGA's board, management, and staff feel wholeheartedly that this program is essential [to] the school's ability to continue closing the achievement gap, and better prepare its students for success beyond their time at HGA (Aase, 2008, p. 3).

An HGA board member and retired Concordia administrator who has spoken at an HGA commencement ceremony pointed out that the school recognizes and celebrates students' achievement of grades sufficient to warrant scholarship dollars:

At commencement time there is a recognition of the grades the person earned and that these grades result in this amount of money that's available to them to go on to college. I think that is kind of a unique thing (Schoenbeck, telephone interview, February 2, 2011).

### *Student perceptions of college-readiness*

Student council members participating in the focus group were asked whether they think they will be more likely to attend college because they went to HGA. Although they cannot be considered a representative sample of all HGA students, several student council members responded to the question, universally saying they felt the school had prepared them well for college. Examples of their comments follow:

Yes, because Higher Ground is college-bound, and I feel they have prepared me for college. ... Say you're not ready for college ... the teachers will take extra time to prepare you, they tell you a lot about college. ... And then we also have programs that help you with college, like Admission Possible and WISE [Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment] ... so I do feel like I will be able to go to college because of these programs (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

I'm a sophomore right now, so I already kind of feel that I will be ready for college. ... I think by your senior [year], you feel like you're in college, I guess, because if you're a good student, you'll be attending PSEO, so you'll be earning college credit while you're in high school (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

I think that if the school wasn't college bound or whatnot, I don't think I would be ... thinking of all the majors that I want to do right now (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

I do think I am ready for college. ... Basically my teachers made me work to my full potential, and they made me believe in myself and tested my strengths and pushed me there, and I’m glad they did, and set high expectations. ... And the fact that the teachers told me about the things that they were gonna teach ... and the reasons why they need to teach these things, and where in life it’s gonna help me, was very [valuable] because some things in class you think, why am I learning this because it might not be helpful to me. But my teachers, they took the time to tell me this is where you need that ... So I do feel college-ready, and the fact that I had the college experience in taking class at Hamline. And so yeah, I think I’m ... gonna be able to be saying one day that, oh, I went to Higher Ground, and thankfully, I got into college (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Emphasis on college preparation” component of HGA’s model.



#### **EMPHASIS ON COLLEGE PREPARATION: Checklist of key elements**

- High expectations of students include specific focus on college enrollment
- Graduation requirements include demonstration of college acceptance
- Variety of supports for college enrollment
- Advanced coursework (i.e., AP and PSEO)
- Support for college application
- Career class
- Scholarship support
- Students perceive their own college-readiness

## COMPONENT 9. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

*It is intended that students graduating from Higher Ground Academy will be adequately prepared to assume leadership roles in their communities and fields of endeavor.—Wilson, 2010*

HGA has focused on students' leadership development since its inception. Other tenets of the school, such as its emphasis on college preparation, service learning, and experiential learning, ultimately tie into the larger objective of preparing students to become leaders in their communities and careers. The primacy of this leadership development objective seems to be one of HGA's distinguishing factors. As found in the literature review, high-poverty, high-performing schools establish high expectations for low-income, culturally diverse students. This component of HGA's model clearly relates to this characteristic, but seems distinctive in its specific focus on cultivating future leaders. Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw have a clear vision for their students to become well-educated, accomplished in their careers, and involved in their communities. In the words of Executive Director Wilson,

My guess is that the children coming out of this school will be the leaders 10 to 15 years out in the Somali community (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

This section focuses on HGA's service learning, experiential learning, and other opportunities intended to cultivate students' leadership potential. The school's emphasis on college preparation also ultimately serves the leadership development objective, but was described in depth in the previous component. Principal Yigzaw positioned the school's focus on college preparation in the context of leadership development as follows:

Our goal is leadership development, and to that end we are a college-preparatory school. We have a heavy emphasis on academics to prepare students for college (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

### *Ninth-grade service-learning requirement*

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) defines service learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (NSLC, n.d.). HGA's service-learning program is championed by Executive Director Wilson, who initiated the program through a grant several years ago, and managed on a daily basis by the school's service-learning coordinator, who also serves as the team leader for prekindergarten through second grade. In his 2008 book chronicling the early

years at HGA, Principal Yigzaw explained the link between service learning and leadership as follows:

To summarize, when people serve others, they not only apply what they know; they also learn about and from those they serve. A well-planned and a well-structured service learning project teaches humility, caring, kindness, wisdom, and the ability to see things from the perspective of others. In short, it teaches all the qualities that make one a better leader. Since HGA's focus is leadership development, it only made sense to make service learning a part of our program (Yigzaw, 2008, p. 30).

When HGA students are in ninth grade, they are required to take one year of service learning as a graduation requirement. Through the program, students serve as role models for younger children in the school and complete external service projects (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011). To prepare students to fulfill their service requirements, the service-learning coordinator provides initial training to students at the beginning of the school year. Training typically takes place for three weeks and occurs in a separate classroom with the service-learning coordinator. During this time, the coordinator gets to know the students, communicates the program's expectations of them, and conveys HGA's intent to cultivate a lifelong commitment to service (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

### **Classroom service**

Following the initial training, students are expected to serve as peer tutors in HGA classrooms. Students are assigned a classroom, and work in that classroom for the duration of the school year. In 2010-11, students served in their designated classrooms three days a week. The ninth-graders' primary roles are to assist the classroom teacher as directed by the teacher and work one-to-one with younger students in the class. In some cases, the service-learning coordinator may determine that a ninth-grade student is not ready to serve in that role and should wait to participate in the program, or would be more comfortable serving the school in a different capacity, such as helping cafeteria staff (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

The service-learning coordinator frequently visits classrooms and talks with students and teachers throughout the year to monitor students' fulfillment of the program expectations communicated during the initial training. Teachers also track their student helper's attendance and complete a weekly form providing feedback to the student. Students either pass or fail the class, and those not passing need to make up a quarter or more in order to attain the necessary credits for graduation. Students enrolling during the school year and fulfilling less than half a year of the program also need to make up time in the

program the subsequent year (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

It also strengthens the relationship between older and younger students. It's an opportunity to serve as a role model. ... We tell the students, 'You have to come to school every day not only for your own learning but because these younger kids are counting on you' (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

Teachers utilize [their student helpers] very well (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

### **Community service**

In addition to this classroom service requirement, ninth-grade students in the program are expected to complete service projects outside the school. The service-learning coordinator tries to arrange for at least three projects during the year. Past projects have included visiting nursing homes and food shelters, making quilts for children in the hospital, picking up trash, and packing books for Books For Africa, for example. In 2010-11, HGA initiated a school-wide recycling project in which the ninth-grade service students participated. Once a week, the service-learning coordinator pulled some of the ninth-grade students from their classroom assignments to work on the recycling project. In the words of the service-learning coordinator, some students adopt the philosophy of lifelong service while in the program, and continue working on outside service projects following their service-learning year. She provided the example of one student who was in the paper for helping Habitat for Humanity (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

In addition to these formal expectations around classroom and community service, the service-learning coordinator encourages ninth-grade students in the program to help and serve people outside the school environment. The intent is to help students cultivate a broader, sustaining commitment to service. The coordinator follows up and asks students about the ways they have helped or served others (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

In today's world there are a lot of young people who end up being successful who have helped someone. It's one of the pieces that make a whole person (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

My hope is that they will be able to go even more places. It can give them an idea of what is out there, what career paths [they] might be interested in. It can open up the door of what they might want to do with their lives based on the needs of others (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

### *Experiential learning opportunities*

Tied to its focus on service learning, HGA provides students with real-world learning opportunities that will expose them to potential career and leadership paths and help them develop a sense of personal empowerment. In interviews for this study, school leaders described experiential learning as particularly important for HGA's student population, many of whom may have limited experiences in the broader community because they live in poverty or recently immigrated to the United States. In the words of Executive Director Wilson, textbooks alone are not enough when there are resources and exposures missing.

We must complement, supplement because these students must have the same kind of exposure (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

Wilson has promoted a school policy of providing students with at least one experiential learning opportunity a month, typically in the form of a field trip. The intent is that teachers identify a community experience that ties into and extends that month's lessons. In practice, the elementary teachers have found it easier to meet this standard, although the executive director strongly supports experiential learning and hopes to increase opportunities at the high school level (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

Teachers arrange a variety of field trips for their students. With the exception of fun trips at the end of the year, all field trips are expected to relate to academics and specifically the subject matter being taught at the time. Teachers articulate the objective for their field trips on the weekly lesson plans they submit to Principal Yigzaw, and the school pays for students to attend these academic outings. During the 2010-11 school year, HGA worked in partnership with the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, which provided the school with two field trips as well as a plant mobile visit to the school. HGA has also worked with Dodge Nature Center, and two teachers started a garden in front of the school for students to experience nature and extend their science learning. Other field trips have taken students to the Science Museum of Minnesota, the Bakken Museum, the Children's Theatre Company, the SteppingStone Theatre, and the Festival of Nations, for example. The school also provides a fun field trip opportunity at the end of the year, such as the Minnesota Zoo for elementary students and Valley Fair for middle and high school students. Although not directly related to academics, these end-of-year outings provide experiences HGA's students may not otherwise have (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14,

2011; Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011; Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

[Experiential learning opportunities] are an extremely important part of our school model. Teachers can take one field trip every month. Teachers work to get discounted rates for our school, but our school pays for all field trips for our students so parents don't pay for them at all (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

The kids get to do things and see things they've never gotten to do and see (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

### ***Other leadership opportunities***

HGA students and staff also referenced other external leadership opportunities the school has made available to students. For example, Executive Director Wilson said HGA was partaking in the national Genesys Works program for the first time in summer 2011. The program provides students with several weeks of training to prepare them for an internship during their senior year. Students who have completed at least half of their senior work by the time they become a senior can spend up to 20 hours a week working as interns for a private sector employer (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011). As another example, a student described having the opportunity to participate in Model United Nations, where they stayed in a hotel away from home and represented a country, discussed global issues, and learned about the work of the United Nations (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Cambridge Education's spring 2011 review also suggested that the school explore additional ways of providing its students with leadership opportunities given the primacy of leadership development in the school's mission statement. The review observed that the school could explore ways to provide elementary students with leadership opportunities similar to those made available to middle and high school students through the student council, as well as providing more formal training to older students on how to be mentors to younger students (Knowles, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Leadership development” component of HGA’s model



### **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Checklist of key elements**

- Focus on preparing students to become leaders in their careers and communities
- Service-learning graduation requirement
- Frequent experiential learning opportunities tied to lessons
- Emphasis on college preparation
- Support for other leadership development opportunities

## COMPONENT 10. LEARNING YEAR PROGRAM

As described in the literature review, high-poverty, high-performing schools often reorganize time, space, and transitions to extend and enhance learning opportunities in purposeful ways. HGA exemplifies this characteristic by offering an optional Learning Year Program providing students with an additional 220 hours of instruction each school year. The program enables some students to accelerate their learning, and provides others with opportunities to catch up to their peers. The 2008 LarsonAllen review characterized HGA's Learning Year Program as follows:

HGA is also one of a handful of charter schools in the state with a learning year program. This type of program, designated at the school level by the Minnesota Commissioner of Education, provides instruction throughout the year and is intended to allow each district or school to suitably fulfill the educational needs of its pupils. This six week, optional summer program is popular with HGA's students and parents alike, drawing over three hundred students per year (Aase, 2008).

### *Program overview*

HGA began following a Learning Year calendar in 2004. The intent is to facilitate accelerated learning in some students, and also to provide opportunities to catch up for those lagging behind. The program also helps meet the needs of HGA's families, many of whom have both parents working during the day. Students in grades 1-12 can participate. The program is optional, although two-thirds or more of the students choose to participate in the program each year, according to Principal Yigzaw (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011).

By attending the Learning Year Program, students complete the equivalent of 20 percent of a year's coursework (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). The program's 220 hours take place over a six-week, full-day summer program. In the past the program also offered additional school-year programming such as Saturday classes, but attendance was low due to students' interest in attending other culturally relevant programs at those times. The elementary program focuses on math and reading, and also includes physical recreation activities. At the high school level, specific courses offered through the Learning Year Program depend on children's needs (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011; Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011).

The Learning Year Program ties to HGA's emphasis on college preparation in that students completing graduation requirements early are encouraged to pursue AP and PSEO course opportunities. According to Executive Director Wilson, many elementary and middle school students have also been able to skip grades due to their accelerated learning in the program (Wilson, 2010).

As a testimony to the success of [the] program, almost all of the juniors who attended Higher Ground Academy since or before grade nine met their high school requirements. Now, in their senior year, these students are taking PSEO courses at Concordia University and Hamline University (Wilson, 2010).

Similar to the LarsonAllen review, an HGA board member and former Concordia University administrator interviewed for this study characterized the Learning Year Program as one of HGA's distinguishing characteristics. Students participating in the focus group also described the program favorably, explaining that it helps reinforce concepts that students may not have initially grasped in class and frees some students to pursue PSEO courses later in high school. Following are examples of interviewees' reflections on the program:

I think the summer program is also unique to charter schools. Mr. Wilson and Dr. Yigzaw keep abreast of sources for funding because it wouldn't come in the normal funding stream to have a summer school operation. It's basically year-long learning, so the opportunity for students to continue their education during the summer (Board member, personal interview, February 2, 2011).

I think the Learning Year program helps both ... parties because, I have friends that when they're in class, they know what the teacher is saying, but they don't comprehend it, or they're not so much the fast learner, or they didn't catch anything, so they can [in this program]. So [whatever] happened in that classroom, they can relearn it, and you know, really understand what happened. And for the people who really [love] learning, and they want to learn more, they can go [to] this program and learn even more stuff (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

One thing I have to say about [the] Learning Program [is] I love it. I've been in the Learning Program ever since they started it when I was in ... 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They started the Learning Year Program and ... I didn't have to go, but I [wanted to] go because I really wanted to learn more. And I have to say that the Learning Year Program really helped me to succeed even more (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the Learning Year Program component of HGA's model.



### **LEARNING YEAR PROGRAM: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> | Optional program offering an additional 220 hours of instruction per school year |
| <input type="radio"/> | 6-week, full-day summer program  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Students accelerate learning or catch up if lagging behind                       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Focus on math and reading (elementary program)                                   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Open to grades 1-12  |

# Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

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## COMPONENT 11. ACADEMIC PROGRAM

The literature review conducted for this study supports the importance of the school's academic program to student performance in high-poverty, high-performing schools. Based on this research, the curriculum should be directly aligned with standards and assessment, actively monitored, and supported by effective instructional techniques. Further, several studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools identified reading as a major focus within the schools' academic program.

HGA's curriculum, characterized by its quality, rigor, alignment with standards, and cultural-appropriateness, emerged as a theme in the interviews conducted for this case study. Interviewees frequently cited HGA's strong academic program when asked to describe what they perceive as the core components of HGA's model. In conducting its spring 2011 external school quality review, Cambridge Education also cited HGA's curriculum as a school strength:

The school offers a balanced curriculum, with a strong focus on reading and mathematics, which is aligned to State standards. In the high school grades, a wide range of elective courses in the humanities and the sciences enables students to achieve highly and obtain college places (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

### *Characteristics of HGA's academic program*

HGA's academic program was developed by Principal Yigzaw, who serves as the school's instructional leader. As previously noted, Dr. Yigzaw holds a Ph.D. in general education with an emphasis on curriculum as well as a master's in instructional technology. Although Principal Yigzaw held primary responsibility for developing the curriculum, he sees its ongoing refinement as moving toward a more collaborative process involving teachers, in part facilitated by a more stable school staff now than in the early years. An example of this more collaborative approach to curriculum development and refinement is the school's recent work to revise its science curriculum toward becoming an interdisciplinary STEM school. In 2010-11, the school organized a science team comprising teachers and administrators who researched and recommended steps for improving science instruction at HGA. This emerging STEM focus is described in depth in the later section on Continual Improvement.

## Overview

Principal Yigzaw described HGA's curriculum as standards-based and selective. The curriculum was designed, and is continually refined, with state standards in mind. Rather than "teaching the textbooks," HGA studied state standards and identified the content needed to be taught in order for students to reach those standards. To that end, specific content was selected from textbooks and other resources (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011). The Washington study summarized in the literature review identified the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments with state standards as one of the nine characteristics associated with high-performing schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 63):

Research studies from the past twenty years or so indicate that the matching (alignment) of testing content and curriculum content is highly significant in explaining improved test scores (Cohen, 1987; Fenwick & Steffy, 2001). This research also supports aligning the curriculum and tests as a means for leveling the 'playing field' for poor students and students of color (Fenwick & Steffy, 2001).

HGA's academic program is also characterized by its high expectations of students. Following a recent review of curriculum materials in relationship to state standards, Principal Yigzaw determined that the elementary curriculum should be adjusted so that teachers are using materials from one grade level higher in math than the grade they actually teach in order to meet Minnesota's new math standards. The school also combines supports to students who are lagging behind with opportunities for other students to exceed the standards. In addition to providing intensive supports through its ESL and Title I programs, HGA offers a Learning Year Program, as described earlier, which enables some students to finish requirements early and take college-level coursework.

According to Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review, the quality of HGA's curriculum is established. The review characterized the curriculum as solidly structured around state standards with clear expectations for high levels of achievement for all students. Students are successful with the curriculum, according to the review. Identifying areas for potential refinement, the review noted that there currently is not common planning time during the school year for teachers to share their detailed lesson plans, and that development of higher-order thinking skills is not always translated into lesson plans especially in the lower grades (Knowles, 2011). However, a teacher interviewed for this case study said that if her lesson plans do not incorporate higher-level thinking skills, Principal Yigzaw will catch that in his review of the plan (Teacher, personal interview, April 19, 2011).

## → Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

Students receive a reasonably broad curriculum in the elementary and middle grades and a flexible and well-thought-out curriculum in the high school grades that prepares them well for college (Knowles, 2011, p. 7).

The following sample of comments from HGA staff and students illustrate their perceptions of the school's curriculum. The comments address the curriculum's quality, alignment with standards, high expectations of students, and cultural appropriateness.

We follow the standards pretty closely. The state is working on them, refining them, making them better, and we follow the change (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

We really understand the state's role in making sure the children are educated well, and we really understand our obligation (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

I think it has a curriculum that has high expectations for students to perform, and that is communicated from the beginning – from the initial contact with the parents (Schoenbeck, telephone interview, February 2, 2011).

I think we have a quality curriculum. We set our standards high (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

The core piece is the quality curriculum we have or the quality education for our children that we have which is an appropriate curriculum that is convenient for the need of the type of students we have, especially for our immigrant students (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

My sophomore year, I left to another school, right? So, when I came back [to HGA] my junior year, it was messed up because I was not anywhere at where my [peers were academically]. . . . I stayed after school three days a week just to get back up to where they were at, you know? (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### **Key characteristics**

Figure 14 summarizes key characteristics of HGA's academic program. A number of these characteristics are also identified separately in other report sections as core components of the school's model, and therefore discussed in greater depth in those sections.

→ Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

**14. Key characteristics of HGA's academic program**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Description</b>
Standards-based	Curriculum developed based on state standards.
Emphasis on reading and math	HGA has historically placed a strong emphasis on reading and math instruction tied to state standards, and is now working to strengthen the science program.
Beyond grade-level expectations	Math curriculum used in elementary grades is one year ahead of grade level.
Advanced coursework	High school students encouraged to take advanced coursework such as Advanced Placement and Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) courses in preparation for college.
Learning Year Program	Majority of students participate in year-round schooling through optional Learning Year Program providing an additional 220 hours of instruction per year.
Technology integrated into curriculum and instruction	Technology used to engage students and differentiate instruction (e.g., Smart Boards in each classroom, computer labs, computers in the classroom). Core curricula are supplemented with computer-based A+nywhere Learning System (A+LS) curriculum.
Selective teaching of specific content	Emphasis on teaching specific content vs. entire textbooks in order to meet standards.
Weekly lesson plans approved by principal	Teachers expected to develop weekly lesson plans approved by principal.
Differentiated instruction	Based on students' test scores, teachers use technology and various instructional techniques to target lessons and instruction to individual students' levels and needs.
Experiential learning opportunities	Students provided hands-on, real-world experiences through field trips, service projects, the school garden, and collaborations with community organizations such as the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum and Dodge Nature Center.
Strong Title I program	Intensive supports provided to students performing below grade-level expectations. HGA's Title I program cited as a strength by external reviewers.
Multicultural perspective	Incorporates contributions from different groups and respects students' home cultures. ESL and Title I programs address needs of low-income, immigrant population. Arabic taught in grades K-5.
Moving toward becoming an interdisciplinary STEM school	Moving toward becoming a STEM school with an interdisciplinary program. Program will be phased in, starting with grades 3-6 in 2012, and adding grades K-2 and possibly 7-8 in 2013.
Continual refinement of curriculum	Curriculum continually refined based on changes to state standards and students' performance on standardized tests. Staff assess alignment of curriculum and standards each summer.

## *Curriculum*

HGA's curriculum emphasizes reading and math, although the school is in the process of revising its science curriculum toward becoming an interdisciplinary STEM school. Social studies and physical education are also offered, and taken by all students in grades K-9. Students in kindergarten through fifth grades take Arabic. Music and art are not currently offered in the elementary grades, although art is offered at the high school level. After completing basic graduation requirements, students can choose from a wide range of humanities or science electives in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades and are encouraged to take AP or PSEO courses. As articulated in Cambridge Education's spring 2011 review, HGA students can tailor their coursework to their own strengths and interests in high school (Knowles, 2011).

### **Language arts**

HGA uses Pearson language arts curricula. At the elementary level, the Pearson curriculum is supplemented by the A+nywhere Learning System (A+LS) computer-based curriculum. Teachers also use leveled readers, story books, and the Minnesota Perspective website of resources to supplement language arts instruction at the elementary level. High school students take one year of composition and three years of literature, and are exposed to novels appropriate to their age, grade, and performance level (LaManna, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### **Math**

A Pearson curriculum is also used for math instruction at the elementary level, supplemented again with the A+LS computer curriculum. In middle school and high school, students take pre-algebra in 7<sup>th</sup> grade; algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade; algebra II, geometry, and trigonometry in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades; pre-calculus in 11<sup>th</sup> grade; and can choose to take calculus (AP math) or college algebra in 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011; Yigzaw, personal communication, September 22, 2011).

### **Social studies**

HGA uses social studies curricula from the Teachers' Curriculum Institute, Pearson, and GLOBE at different levels in the school. Students take U.S. history and world history in seventh and eighth grades, and different courses are offered at the high school level including U.S. history, world history, AP geography, and government (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

## Science

The elementary and middle school science curriculum was under revision at the time of this report in preparation for the school becoming an interdisciplinary STEM school. Plans were to phase in the revised curriculum, starting with grades 3-6 in 2012, and adding grades K-2 and possibly 7-8 in 2013. At the high school level, a new curriculum was implemented with fall 2011 freshmen. The school intends that students will meet state requirements by the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade. If requirements are met, students can take AP or PSEO courses and choose between a social science and natural science emphasis in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. HGA has a science lab and offers AP chemistry (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

## *Extracurricular activities*

While academics have been the core, HGA's programming has traditionally placed less focus on extracurricular activities. As explained by Executive Director Wilson, the school's focus on academics and organizing during the initial years left little time to develop extracurricular activities. The school has been able to offer a strong soccer program as well as some programs in cooperation with community organizations such as Admission Possible and the Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE), however. Wilson said the school is working to develop more opportunities (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011). Concordia's summer 2011 renewal report also recommended adding extracurricular activities, especially additional opportunities for girls to participate in sports (Concordia University, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within HGA's academic program.



### **ACADEMIC PROGRAM: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Standards-based   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Emphasis on reading and math                                |
| <input type="radio"/> | Beyond grade-level expectations in math (elementary grades) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Advanced coursework   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Learning Year Program                                       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Technology integrated into curriculum and instruction       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Selective teaching of specific content                      |
| <input type="radio"/> | Weekly lesson plans approved by principal                   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Differentiated instruction                                  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Experiential learning opportunities                         |
| <input type="radio"/> | Strong Title I program                                      |
| <input type="radio"/> | Multicultural perspective                                   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Moving toward becoming an interdisciplinary STEM school     |
| <input type="radio"/> | Continual refinement of curriculum                          |

## COMPONENT 12. ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to our literature review, high-poverty, high-performing schools know how to build and sustain instructional capacity. In some cases, these schools need to overcome challenges associated with high teacher turnover and inexperienced teachers. The Washington review found that professional development in high-performing schools is focused, emphasizing training in areas of greatest need, connecting teaching and learning, and tying into school objectives (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). High-poverty, high-performing schools use a number of practices to support teaching quality, such as experienced teachers mentoring junior staff. HGA emphasizes formal professional development of its teachers as an important strategy for supporting quality instruction.

### *Overview*

A number of HGA staff interviewed for this case study, including teachers as well as administrators, referenced the school's strong support for professional development. At the time of this report, professional development at HGA primarily takes place in the form of formal off-site training courses and in-school development workshops. However, the school has also incorporated mentoring to the extent that team leaders observe and provide feedback to their teachers. As described by school administrators, the school arranges teacher trainings around the school's and teachers' needs, which at HGA include working with an ELL population (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011). Trainings have also targeted teacher capacity to support key components of HGA's model, such as differentiated instruction and working within a technology-rich environment. The school also provides reimbursement for individual teachers to pursue their own development objectives. As observed by Cambridge Education in the spring 2011 school quality review,

The school has a well-thought-out approach to professional development which leads to events which support identified needs for the whole school and opportunities for individual teachers to pursue their own support needs and wishes (Knowles, 2011, p. 8).

According to the school's annual report, in 2009-10 almost all HGA teachers participated in professional development opportunities designed to make them more effective. As an example, some teachers participated in a course on differentiated instruction at Concordia University in which they learned to differentiate and plan their instruction based on the "Understanding by Design" (UBD) model. A number also took courses in local teacher training institutes in order to complete their master's degree or generally advance their skills (Wilson, 2010). Examples of other professional development topics which HGA has

## → Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

supported in recent years include teaching ELL students in mainstream classrooms, working with student progress data, and Responsive Classroom techniques, for example (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011; Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

We encourage teachers to go out for continuing education to help themselves. We have reimbursement for that. If they decide to go to school to improve themselves, every semester they have tuition reimbursement (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

The administration is always promoting teachers to attend workshops (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

If there's a class you're interested in that's going to help you, if you go and discuss it with them and how it's going to benefit the children, most likely they will pay for this class (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

In many ways we do what we can to encourage people to continue to grow professionally (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

Based on recommendations provided in Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review, at the time of this report HGA planned to offer a workshop on imbedding higher-order thinking into lesson plans in fall 2011. The school also planned to offer another training on differentiated instruction due in part to staff turnover since the last training on differentiation was offered (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### *Incentives*

Beyond trainings offered and required by the school, HGA provides tuition reimbursement to teachers pursuing preapproved courses. In the words of one administrator interviewed for this study, the school sees this as a good investment on top of professional development that takes place in the building (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011). According to the school's 2009-10 annual report, HGA provided all teachers taking preapproved courses that year with a \$1,250 tuition reimbursement as an incentive (Wilson, 2010).

### *Collaboration with Concordia*

HGA's relationship with Concordia University as the school's authorizer has facilitated professional development opportunities for HGA teachers at Concordia. Moreover, a Concordia administrator interviewed for this study described the relationship as mutually beneficial in that regard, with Principal Yigzaw also working with students and faculty at Concordia. The administrator also pointed out that moving forward, Concordia will need

## → Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

to consider whether the redefined authorizer-charter school relationship under Minnesota’s new charter school law holds any implications for this reciprocal relationship around professional development.

I would say that the relationship between the two schools around professional development of faculty and having Higher Ground administrators and faculty interact with our faculty and students has been mutually beneficial. Samuel Yigzaw has come to Concordia and worked with students and faculty at Concordia around the integration of technology into the teaching and learning environment. Concordia faculty have worked with teachers at Higher Ground Academy to improve their practice. So, it’s been a nice, reciprocal relationship. (Concordia University vice president, personal interview, March 30, 2011).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Ongoing professional development” component of HGA’s model.



#### **ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Checklist of key elements**

- Professional development encouraged by administrators
- Focused on school needs, teacher needs, and capacity to support school model
- Formal training courses and development workshops
- In-school teacher mentoring
- Reimbursement for teachers to pursue individual development goals
- Reciprocal relationship with university (HGA’s authorizer)

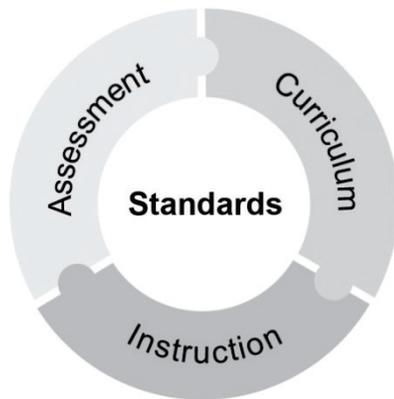
## COMPONENT 13. ALIGNMENT WITH STANDARDS

Research suggests that at high-performing schools, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are closely linked to academic standards. At these schools, curriculum ties directly to standards, teachers understand and use effective strategies to teach what students are intended to learn, and assessments directly measure student progress (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). As depicted in Figure 15, at HGA, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are connected and each tie directly to the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards. In the words of the Washington review,

Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment adds coherence and effectiveness to teaching and learning processes. Alignment is defined as the match between what is to be learned (the planned curriculum based on learning standards), what is actually taught (instruction), and what and how it is tested (assessment) (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 63).

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### 15. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are linked and informed by standards at HGA



### *Curricular alignment*

Cambridge Education’s spring 2011 school quality review described HGA’s curriculum as “well aligned to state standards” (Knowles, 2011, p. 5). According to Principal Yigzaw, the curriculum was developed based on Minnesota’s state standards. HGA studied state standards and identified the content needed to be taught in order for students to reach those standards. To that end, specific content was selected from textbooks and other resources. Curriculum is also continually revised based on updates to the standards. Each summer, the principal initiates a review of what the standards expect and what HGA is teaching, and refines the curriculum as needed (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011). One HGA teacher described the curriculum’s emphasis on standards as follows:

## → Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with standards

I think our academic program is really solid. That's something, though, that's also taken time to create. We're really focused on the academic standards, and I think that's really important, and I think that's part of what's allowed us to be successful as a school on things like MCAs and other areas where we're actually being judged (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

### *Instructional alignment*

HGA's requirement that teachers submit weekly lesson plans for approval provides an ongoing check that curriculum is being implemented as intended in alignment with the standards. Teachers are also held accountable for aligning their instruction with what they are expected to teach. The evaluation matrix used to formally assess teacher performance and offer pay raises factors the lesson plan requirement as well as students' performance on the MCA-II assessments used to monitor proficiency on state standards. In the words of one teacher,

We are all required to make sure we follow the standards. Our objectives have to be from the standards. When we plan our lessons, we have most of the standards that we need to make sure we achieve (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

Teachers also provide supplemental instruction as needed to help students attain proficiency on state standards. HGA's frequent testing of students enables teachers to see when individual students may not be on track in specific areas. Based on this knowledge, teachers differentiate instruction and provide additional supports as necessary. Participants in the student council focus group also described teachers offering targeted instruction during their prep time to help students prepare for the MCA-IIs, such as a math teacher offering optional preparation for the math test during his prep time which students could choose to attend rather than soccer.

They helped us before the MCAs, we were practicing, and what's on there and all that stuff, and then when it came to a test, I found out it was really easy, and I passed on my first try, and for those who didn't pass, they still had that program going on this year (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

[The teacher] said, if you don't want to show up to this, I'm not gonna force you to, I'm not even gonna take attendance. This is my free time, and I choose to help you guys (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Actually, in my freshman year, I was kind of new to the country, because I come from Africa, so when I came here ... everything was kind of ... hard for me. ... [The teacher took] her time to teach me how to write, how summarize everything ... and I passed in my first time, and that proves to me that what she did was amazing (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Assessment alignment*

As described in the following section on regular assessment of teaching and learning, HGA frequently tests students to monitor their progress toward standards. This frequent testing is intended to facilitate early supports and interventions in cases where students lag behind expectations. In addition to the annual MCA-IIs required by the state to formally progress toward state academic standards, the school administers quarterly nationally normed tests (NWEA MAP). Individual teachers also administer quizzes and quarterly exams to assess students' mastery of lesson objectives. School administration reviews these quarterly exams to ensure they reflect the state standards. In the words of one HGA student,

There's a practice test we take before the MCA, and the teachers here grade it. ... Last year's test, we take a practice with it ... and the results come back and you see where [you're weak] and where your strengths are, and they try to work with you (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the "Alignment with standards" component of HGA's model.



### **ALIGNMENT WITH STANDARDS: Checklist of key elements**

- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are connected and directly informed by standards
- Curriculum developed and continually revised based on standards
- Selection of specific textbook content and resources
- Weekly lesson plans required to ensure curriculum fidelity
- Teachers evaluated based on student performance on state tests
- Frequent testing of students to monitor progress toward standards
- Semester exams tied to standards
- Supports provided when students fall behind expectations

# Data-driven instruction and decisions

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## COMPONENT 14. REGULAR ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Tied to its focus on accountability, HGA embraces regular assessment of teaching and learning as a means to track student progress, target instruction to individual students' needs, and oversee instruction. Curriculum, assessment, and student progress are intentionally linked. Assessment takes place in the form of frequent testing of students as well as formal and informal evaluation of teachers. HGA's frequent use of test scores and data emerged as a theme across interviews conducted with school staff as well as affiliates of Concordia University. The school's own annual report describes its practice as "data-driven" (Wilson, 2010).

Barr and Parrett identified creating a culture of data and assessment literacy as one of the eight characteristics often found in high-poverty, high-performing schools. These schools integrate data into all aspects of decision making, including systematically monitoring student progress and providing supports based on that data. The Washington review also identified frequent monitoring of learning and teaching as a characteristic associated with high-performing schools. As articulated in the Washington review,

A steady cycle of different assessments identify students who need help. More support and instructional time are provided, either during the school day or outside normal school hours, to students who need more help. Teaching is adjusted based on frequent monitoring of student progress and needs. Assessment results are used to focus and improve instructional programs (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 86).

### *Student assessments*

#### **Types of assessments**

Student testing at HGA can be summarized in three primary categories: tests required by the state to monitor progress toward state academic standards (MCA-II), quarterly tests used by HGA to develop Individual Learning Plans for all students and monitor individual students' progress during the year (NWEA MAP), and ongoing quizzes and quarterly exams tied to the curriculum which teachers use to assess students' mastery of lesson objectives (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). School administration reviews quarterly exams developed by teachers to check whether exams reflect the standards students were expected to attain (Yigzaw, June 29, 2011). HGA's three primary types of student testing are presented in Figure 16.

**16. Primary types of student testing at HGA**

Test objective	Name	Required by	Grade levels	Frequency
Monitor students' progress toward state academic standards and determine whether school made Adequate Yearly Progress	Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA-II)	State	Reading and math in grades 3–8, 10 & 11; science in grades 5, 8, & year in high school students complete life science; writing in grade 9.	Annual (spring)
Develop Individual Learning Plans and measure individual students' progress during the year	Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP)*	HGA	Reading and math in grades K-12; language and usage in middle school	3 times per year (fall/winter/spring)
Assess individual students' mastery of lesson objectives	Regular teacher assessments tied to the curriculum (quizzes and quarterly exams)	Teacher (per HGA policy)	All	Ongoing

\* MAP tests are criterion-referenced, nationally normed, computer-based adaptive assessments in reading, math, and language usage. MAP also offers a single adaptive assessment in science (Northwest Evaluation Association, n.d.).

In an effort to improve its capability to acquire and use student data, in 2010-11 HGA replaced the GRADE (Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation) and GMADE (Group Mathematics Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation) tests with the Northwest Evaluation Association's MAP tests, presented in the figure. School staff determined that the MAP test offers more relevant data closely aligned to Minnesota's Academic Standards (Wilson, 2010). Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review affirmed this change (Knowles, 2011).

**Use of assessment data**

HGA expects its teachers to actively use data from student assessments. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction based on individual students' needs and include grouping in their lesson plans. Data are also intended to identify students in need of additional supports early, before problems magnify. Students identified as struggling based on assessments are discussed by the grade-level team in weekly student progress meetings, and those in need are referred to the Title I program, reading specialist, or Special Education services, as described in the following report section. In the words of one of the team leaders, a student should not get to the end of the school year and fail without teachers and the team leader having been aware of and discussed the student's concerns (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011). Students' performance and mastery of standards as determined by these assessments factor into teacher evaluations through the teacher evaluation matrix (Human resources

director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011). At the school and teacher levels, assessment data are used to inform curriculum development, instructional strategies, and classroom resources (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

### **Support for assessment capacity**

To support teachers' capacity to acquire and use data, HGA has offered training in data-driven instruction and differentiated instruction (Wilson, 2010). In the words of one teacher and team leader interviewed for this case study, teachers have received extensive support in using assessments (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011).

The uniqueness of Higher Ground is connecting progress with the data. Every teacher knows this. They were trained to do this (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, February 7, 2011).

### **Assessing progress in subgroups**

Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review identified a couple of areas where HGA can further improve its assessment practices. One area noted for improvement is the use of student data to assess progress in distinctive student subgroups. The review provided the following recommendation in this regard:

Extend the use of existing assessment data to provide measures of student progress among different student sub-groups and use these to identify areas of success which can be shared more widely and areas where instruction needs to be improved (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

## ***Teacher assessment***

### **Types of assessment**

In addition to assessing students directly, HGA regularly assesses teachers to ensure their instruction supports the standards students are expected to attain. As described earlier, a formal evaluation matrix is used to evaluate teachers at the end of the year, factoring teacher attendance; student performance, including growth over time; communication with parents; instruction; and classroom management. During the year, teachers are observed by team leaders and the principal, and required to submit weekly lesson plans as well as quarterly exams for approval. These frequent classroom observations and requirements for lesson plan and exam approval are intended to check for compliance with the curriculum and standards (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### Ensuring uniformity in teaching quality

While teaching is assessed as described above, the Cambridge Education review noted some discrepancies in the quality of teaching. The review recommended strengthening the mechanisms by which feedback is provided to teachers on their instruction, and by which quality instructional practices are shared school-wide (Knowles, 2011):

The school has a good understanding about the way students' good progress depends heavily on good learning. It is well on the way to achieving this but is hindered in this aim because the most effective instructional practices are not consistently used throughout the school. Good and sometimes outstanding practices are used in all grades. However, these are mixed with less effective teaching that does not provide the levels of challenge that are needed to accelerate learning to the point where students can match the averages for all students in State assessments (Knowles, 2011, p. 6).

According to Principal Yigzaw, he and the team leaders have already acted on this recommendation by selecting a model for teaching and learning developed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The intent is that the model will facilitate uniformity across the classroom observations conducted by team leaders and the principal. Principal Yigzaw intended to begin using the tool as a basis for frequent classroom observations in fall 2011 (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### Checklist of key elements

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Regular assessment of teaching and learning” component of HGA’s model.



#### REGULAR ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING: Checklist of key elements

- Curriculum, assessment, and student progress closely linked
- Annual state-required tests
- Quarterly nationally normed tests
- Frequent quizzes and quarterly exams
- Support for teachers' assessment capacity
- Annual formal teacher evaluation
- Frequent classroom observations
- Approval of weekly lesson plans and quarterly exams

## COMPONENT 15. TARGETED INSTRUCTION

HGA targets instruction and supports to the needs of individual students. All students are expected to perform well, attain proficiency on state standards, and ultimately demonstrate acceptance into a post-secondary education institution. However, the school recognizes differences across its students, including significant language and other needs for many. Based on this recognition, students are placed in grade levels according to their performance rather than their age. Within grade levels, teachers differentiate instruction based on student assessment data. The school offers formal supports in a tiered structure to students who lag behind expectations. Stemming from the philosophy that all students can succeed, supports are offered in tiers designed to minimize time spent outside of mainstream classrooms and programming.

This component of HGA's model relates to a few different attributes of high-poverty, high-performing schools identified in the literature review, including understanding individual students' needs, believing that all children can succeed, and emphasizing reading supports to low-performing students. However, targeted instruction at HGA also incorporates tiered supports, differentiated instruction, and personalized math instruction through the Title I program. The confluence of these various attributes around targeted instruction specifically may be a unique aspect of HGA's model. A student participating in the focus group characterized the school's targeted instruction as follows:

For academics, the school, they see where you are at [in] academics. ... Okay, you are here, we want you to be right here, so what can we do for you to be over here? And then they will help you, they will do everything for you so you can meet their goal that they want you to make (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### *Grade-level placement*

HGA employs grade-level placement rather than a traditional age-based grade structure which would place students in grades according to their birth date. Rather, HGA students are placed in a grade level according to their academic achievement on a test that allows for norm-referenced inference (NWEA MAP) (Aase, 2008; Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011). For this reason, classes at HGA include students of different ages. The policy applies to students' initial placement in a grade level when they enroll at HGA, as well as their subsequent advancement, which may include skipping or repeating a grade level depending on their performance. As previously described, many students newly enrolling in HGA face significant language deficits or other initial barriers to achieving at grade level. As described in the LarsonAllen review,

Thus, while HGA does still use traditional grade level-based classroom designations (e.g., kindergarten, first grade, second grade) it is common for these classrooms to include students of multiple ages. School administrators try to strike a delicate balance between the students' social development and a pragmatic assessment of their academic development needs (Aase, 2008, p. 7).

Historically, HGA students who fulfill graduation requirements early use their time at HGA to take AP and PSEO courses in preparation for college. However, Principal Yigzaw said the school may move toward early graduation for some students because some students who have met basic graduation requirements would prefer to formally move on vs. continuing to take courses at HGA (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### ***Differentiated instruction***

Within grade levels, HGA uses student assessment data to target instruction based on individual students' needs. This emphasis on differentiated instruction stems from the school's belief that all children can learn and succeed. The intent is to provide individual students with the instruction and supports they need to meet school expectations (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 8, 2011). A fourth-grade HGA teacher who is pursuing a master's in differentiated instruction at Concordia described different methods she uses for differentiating instruction, including establishing individualized objectives; tailoring instruction based on how individual students learn, such as incorporating drawing, manipulatives, books, or audio; working with smaller groups of students; and using technology such as the computer-based A+LS curriculum to differentiate (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

To support teachers' capacity to differentiate instruction, the school has required professional development on differentiation. All teachers of language and mathematics are expected to include differentiation in their weekly lesson plans, and team leaders discuss differentiation with their teachers in team meetings (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011). A team leader interviewed for this case study described reinforcing differentiation as one of the expectations of her as a team leader (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011). Team leaders and the principal also observe classrooms to check for differentiation (Teacher, personal interview, May 5, 2011).

It just simply means that we need to be aware of where our students are at and teaching them at the level they're at so they can be successful (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

We hand in a weekly lesson plan, and it has to include the differentiation. For Higher Ground, it is a huge, huge requirement. It's one of the ones that are really expected from everybody. It's not just differentiation, but differentiation according to the data we receive when we assess our students. That's a huge difference in accountability from other schools I've worked at (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

Despite the school's emphasis on and supports for differentiated instruction, the spring 2011 Cambridge Education school quality review found room for this component to be further strengthened moving forward. As a result of this observation, HGA plans to offer training in differentiated instruction to its teachers again in fall 2011. As articulated in the review,

Teachers do not differentiate sufficiently in planning activities to meet individual needs. Differentiation was strongly present in a class for English language learners, however. Students were working on different tasks according to their ability in English, and two groups doing the same task were writing sentences using very different word lists that matched their current vocabulary. In a younger elementary class, students worked on a range of different and challenging activities that matched their individual needs. In contrast, several lessons observed were whole-class lessons in which all students did the same work, even though some were struggling with it and others had found the work so easy they had finished within a few minutes. Teachers indicated how they used assessment data to plan their instruction for a particular class, but observations indicate that this practice is not consistently used to differentiate activities within a class (Knowles, 2011, p. 7).

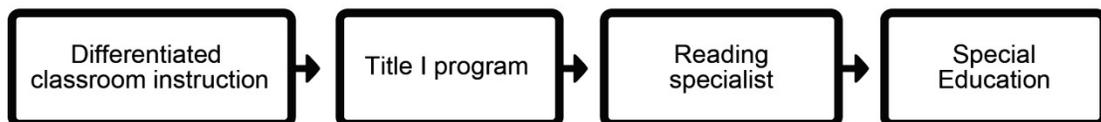
## *Tiered supports*

### **HGA's approach**

Beyond differentiated instruction within mainstream classrooms, HGA offers tiers of formal supports for students requiring additional services (Figure 17). Students requiring additional supports may be referred to the school's Title I program, Accelerated Learning in Reading and Mathematics. Those struggling in the Title I program may then receive one-to-one instruction from the school's reading specialist. Finally, Special Education is considered for those requiring more intensive services. HGA's ESL program described earlier is considered separate from these tiers.

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#### **17. HGA's tiers of academic supports**



**Note:** Diagram depicts HGA's approach to the Response to Intervention model of working with struggling learners.

The intent is to provide services targeted to individual students' needs, and to properly place students in programs according to their needs rather than assuming they require the highest level of service. The practice stems from administrators' belief in the abilities of all students, and framing of student gaps as support needs rather than student deficits.

In our view, one of the things missing from the education of children of color in traditional public schools is the right attitude towards the children. As Giroux and others such as Kunjufu (2005) argue, the standards applied to understanding the behavior of children of color are different from those applied to understanding the behavior of their mainstream counterparts. As a result, children of color, particularly African Americans, are largely represented in Special Education programs. They also account for the largest proportion of suspensions from schools. By creating an African village-like atmosphere in which the children would be loved, cared for, and understood, we hoped to reverse this situation (Yigzaw, 2008, p. 145).

### Response to Intervention

These tiers of academic supports are HGA's adaptation of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model of working with struggling learners, used widely in Title I schools. There are multiple approaches to RtI, but its primary components include the following (U.S. Department of Education, 2009):

- **Core instruction for all students:** High-quality, research-based whole-group and small-group instruction in regular classrooms.
- **Universal screening:** Routine screening of all students based on assessments to identify those who are struggling.
- **Instructional interventions:** Increasingly intensive research-based instructional interventions provided for a specific duration for students identified as needing extra help. Students continuing to struggle may be evaluated for Special Education and related services. Title I and other federal funds can be used to fund the interventions if specific circumstances are met.
- **Progress monitoring:** Students' academic performance assessed and compared to expected rates of learning to inform instructional decisions and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

## Accelerated Learning in Reading and Mathematics Program

Accelerated Learning in Reading and Mathematics (ALRM) is HGA's Title I program. Under federal law, Title I funds are distributed to schools with a high concentration of children living in poverty. The supplemental funding is intended to help close the achievement gap between high-performing students and those who are disadvantaged due to their income status, limited English proficiency, or other factors (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Title I schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years are placed in school improvement status.

Schools and districts are required to meet targets on the accountability assessments in reading and mathematics tests to meet requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by No Child Left Behind. Elementary schools must also meet targets for attendance and high schools must also meet targets for graduation. Districts must meet targets for acceptable performance in attendance and graduation as well as reading and mathematics. Information about student performance is combined across grade levels to determine if schools or districts meet full AYP requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.).

HGA's program aims to prepare struggling students for full participation in the mainstream program in the shortest possible time. The goal is to provide students in need with the essential skills required for grade-level participation in reading. Students are identified for program participation based on teacher recommendations and student performance on a school-wide norm-referenced pre-test (NWEA MAP) indicating the student's relative standing to that of other same-age students. Those for whom there is a gap between their actual performance level and expected performance according to age-grade level qualify for ALRM services (Wilson, 2010). Parents must provide permission for their children to receive services through the program (Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011).

Students identified and whose parents approve of their receiving ALRM services are then further assessed using a criterion-referenced test from Read Naturally which provides content-specific information on the student useful in developing an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). Based on test data and observations from the student's mainstream teacher, an ILP is developed delineating the student's challenge areas, intended learning outcomes, and a plan to ultimately transition the student out of the ALRM program (Wilson, 2010).

There is a very elaborate system of academic support built into the program which uses assessment data to provide what is commonly called 'personalized and precise' instruction. It's based on individual needs (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

When we put them in that program, we have a goal. Where do we want to take them by the end of the year? In order to get them there by the end of the year, how much progress should they have made by December? That's really a benchmark. In December we assess them. If they don't meet that benchmark, we refer them to work with the reading specialist (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

ALRM operates as a pull-out program in which students are removed from their mainstream classrooms for up to an hour a day. Adult-to-student ratios in ALRM range from 1:2 to 1:3 to provide students in need with more individualized interaction. ALRM is a literacy-rich environment supported by storybooks; leveled readers; the Read Naturally and Rosetta Stone curricula in language arts; Pearson enVisionMATH curriculum, adjusted to students' performance levels; and the computer-based A+LS curriculum. The program is operated by three teachers and three paraprofessionals, and supported by volunteers from AmeriCorps and Volunteers of America (Wilson, 2010; Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011; Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review of HGA cited the school's Title I program as a strength:

The school uses Title I funds very effectively to support students who are not working at grade level. The use of detailed goals in students' individual learning plans is a model of good practice, ensuring that students make sufficient progress and narrowing the achievement gap (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

The intensive support provided [in Title I] means that students quickly catch up, make faster progress and achieve sustained success (Knowles, 2011, p. 6).

### **Reading specialist**

HGA's third tier of support provides targeted support in reading. As described in greater depth in the Literature Review section of the Appendix, high-poverty, high-performing schools target low-performing students and emphasize reading as a major academic priority. Following mainstream classroom instruction and the Title I program, HGA's reading specialist serves as a final effort to assist students struggling academically before referring them to Special Education.

HGA's human resources director also serves as the school's reading specialist. In this role, she works one-on-one with kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students who are struggling in the Title I program. The Title I teacher notifies Principal Yigzaw of students not meeting expectations in that program, and the principal in turn notifies the reading specialist of students in need of her services. The reading specialist then talks with the

Title I teacher about the student (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011; Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

The reading specialist administers a reading assessment to determine students' current level and areas where they need to improve proficiency. Based on this initial assessment, the specialist develops an individual plan for the student, such as 5 sessions focusing on one subject and 10 focusing on another, for example. After the initial quarter, she administers a follow-up test to ascertain their progress. Once all planned sessions have been conducted with an individual student, the reading specialist reports to Principal Yigzaw on the student's progress and recommends whether they can continue with mainstream instruction or should be referred for Special Education evaluation. The reading specialist typically works with students for one quarter, with exception in cases where a student is showing progress but may be kept in the program for another month or two in order to complete goals (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

## **Special Education**

### **Overview**

As described earlier, HGA offers the three tiers of differentiated classroom instruction, the Title I program, and the reading specialist for students who may be struggling. However, some students have needs beyond those which can be addressed by those three tiers and are referred for Special Education consideration. In some cases such as those with a medical referral or behavioral need, the Special Education referral process may be initiated without a student having first gone through these three tiers. Students potentially in need of Special Education services are identified by their parents or school staff.

As with traditional public schools, charter schools have Special Education responsibilities as defined by federal and state law. Responsibilities include providing public notification of services for students with disabilities, conducting assessments to determine eligibility and need for Special Education services, developing Individualized Evaluation Plans (IEPs) for eligible students, educating students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) depending on their needs, and affording parents and children with due process protections (HGA, n.d.).

### **Pre-referral process**

Although HGA offers tiers of support with the intent of discerning which students can be served by early interventions and which require Special Education services, the school's Special Education coordinator characterized its Special Education referral process as a

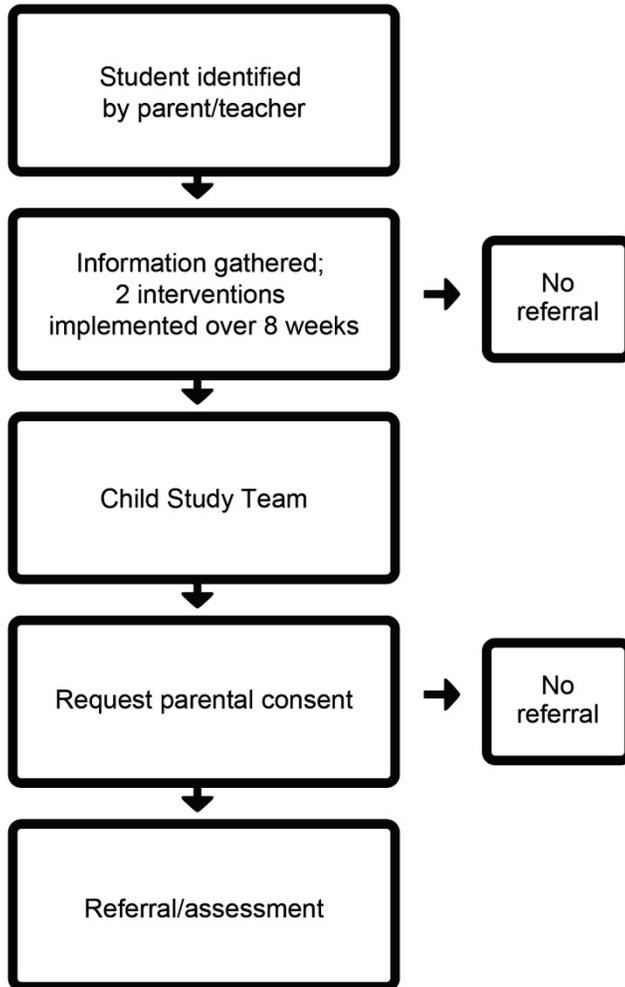
standardized practice in the state. HGA contracts with Innovative Special Education Services (ISES) for its Special Education program directorship (Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011).

Figure 18 depicts main points in HGA's Special Education pre-referral process. Students potentially in need of services are identified by parents or school staff, such as through student progress or citizenship development meetings. Based on the legal requirement that a child receives two interventions prior to evaluation unless requested by the parent or waived because the need is determined to be urgent, HGA teachers are expected to document at least two interventions they tried with the student. Interventions might include the Title I program (ALRM) and reading specialist in the case of academic needs, and counseling services in the case of social or behavioral needs. The school also provides teachers with information on methods of modifying academic tasks in the classroom as well as options for academic and behavioral interventions. The intent is to allow sufficient time to pinpoint a child's needs, determine whether problems can be remediated with early interventions, and build solid documentation of the student's needs and responses to interventions (*Minnesota Statutes*, 2011, 125A.56; Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011; Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011).

The pre-referral and referral process is meant to be slow. It is meant to encompass and involve all team members who have contact with the student. ... It is important to get input of the different team members so that an accurate picture about the student's [present] and [past] level of academic performance and/or patterns of social behavior are understood and documented (Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011).

In some cases, these interventions are successful. In cases where the student's performance remains discrepant from that of classmates, teachers are asked to attend a meeting of the Child Study Team, comprising HGA's Special Education staff and at times the Title I teacher. Teachers submit information on the student and interventions tried to the Child Study Team to initiate the referral process. The team considers the student's case in depth. If the team determines the referral is appropriate, a Special Education evaluation plan is prepared and parental consent requested. By this time, the team has gathered documentation of student assessment scores, classroom observations, and other pertinent information which can help parents understand their child's performance and the need for further evaluation. In some cases this includes data from student assessments and information on students' performance in the Title I program. If parental consent is granted, the Child Study Team proceeds with an assessment to determine whether the student has a disability and needs Special Education instruction and services (Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011).

**18. HGA Special Education pre-referral process**



**Source:** Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011.

**Special Education program**

Special Education services at HGA are provided in the mainstream classroom as well as in a separate resource classroom. The amount of services provided in the mainstream vs. pull-out classroom as well as the specific accommodations and modifications made for individual students differ depending on the student’s individual learning or social needs. The objective is to serve students in the Least Restrictive Environment given their individual needs. A few students also receive services offsite during the school day such as outside medical services (Special Education coordinator, personal interview, May 2, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Targeted instruction” component of HGA’s model.



### **TARGETED INSTRUCTION: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> | Performance-based grade-level placement                    |
| <input type="radio"/> | Differentiated classroom instruction                       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Tiered supports for students requiring additional services |
| <input type="radio"/> | Intensive Title I reading and math program                 |
| <input type="radio"/> | Reading specialist providing one-to-one support            |
| <input type="radio"/> | Special Education program                                  |

## COMPONENT 16. CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

*Becoming an excellent school is a work in progress—even becoming effective. It's a work in progress. I know that we're better than we were at this time last year, and I also know that next year at this time we'll be better than we are now.*

— Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011

Continual improvement is a tenet of HGA. Not only is the school open to change, it actively considers ways the model can be improved. This principle comes across strongly in Principal Yigzaw's 2008 book, in which he candidly discusses early school efforts that were deemed unsuccessful and later modified. HGA's commitment to continual program refinement also emerged in the interviews conducted and documents reviewed for this study, both from sources inside and external to the school.

Though not delineated separately as its own characteristic in the literature we reviewed, continual improvement is facilitated by a number of the characteristics identified in the research on high-poverty, high-performing schools. For example, creating a culture of data and assessment literacy and closely monitoring the curriculum yield information that can be used to make program adjustments. In this sense, this component of HGA's model relates to the literature, but appears somewhat distinctive in its primacy at HGA.

### *Refinement of the model over time*

Since the school's inception, HGA's leaders have continuously assessed and refined elements of the school's program. In the words of Executive Director Wilson, academics have always been the central focus, but the model has evolved over time. For example, leaders originally intended the school to be a high school, but soon learned from parent feedback that a full K-12 program was needed to meet families' needs. The academic program itself has also received a number of revisions (Yigzaw, 2008). Student test data is actively reviewed and used to inform practices in both the short- and long-term (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011). Most recently, the school has undertaken a revision of its science program, as detailed below. HGA has also adjusted over time to provide more accommodations to meet the needs of its growing Muslim population.

HGA's leaders and its authorizer offered the following reflections on the school's commitment to continual improvement:

*We've been very flexible. What we had in mind in 1998 and what we have today are totally different. Why? Because we are very pragmatic. We saw what worked and what didn't, and we changed. It's not a onetime process; it's ongoing*

(Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

The other thing that institutions have to keep in mind is that they have to always be ready for change. There's simply no using last year's instructional strategy in this year's classroom. It just won't work (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

The Academy makes Annual Yearly Progress. Therefore, it has never been required to develop a formal School Improvement Plan. However, the staff continuously takes initiative to improve and grow. Two examples of this are the recent additions of Advanced Placement courses to the high school curriculum and the current effort to incorporate STEM (Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) opportunities into the school's program (Concordia University, 2011, Draft document).

Despite HGA's strong commitment to continual improvement, there may be room for the school to more formally plan for, document, and monitor its efforts. Both Concordia University and Cambridge Education offered reflections in this regard:

Set out a clear strategic plan for the school's development that incorporates interim measures of success to enable its progress to be monitored (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

Although the school has a clear idea of some of the areas which it wishes to develop, these are not set out in a coherent plan with interim benchmarks that can be used to measure progress towards its goals. Without such a plan, the school is also not in a position to communicate effectively its areas for development to all stakeholders (Knowles, 2011, p. 5).

Strategic planning is an important aspect of any school's success and we would encourage the school leaders to look into the future and develop a written plan about how the school will move forward focusing always on student learning and setting about to accomplish 'continuous improvement' for all faculty and staff (Concordia University, 2011, Draft document).

### ***Emerging STEM focus***

At the time of this report, HGA was in the process of revamping its science program at the elementary and middle school levels, providing a clear example of its commitment to continual improvement. In 2009-10, HGA failed to meet its own goals in the area of science education and also underperformed compared to the previous year with the exception of eighth grade. HGA student performance on the MCA-II science test was well below the 50 percent proficiency goal set by the school that year. The school's 2009-10 annual report described improving science education as a challenge area for the school requiring attention (Wilson, 2010). Additionally, student surveys had indicated that a number of HGA students are interested in pursuing scientific fields, such as engineering and medicine (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011). In the words of Principal Yigzaw,

It's one thing to get the reading and math right, but we also have to get the science right, too (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

To address these concerns, in 2010-11 the school organized a science team comprising teachers and administrators who researched science instruction and visited a number of area schools to learn about their science programs. The team was charged with recommending steps for improving science instruction at HGA, focusing on curriculum, instruction, resources, and staff development, and providing both short- and long-term recommendations (Wilson, 2010).

We came to the conclusion that we need to be more informed about what is out there. Are there models, and what does the research say? So we decided to read articles and come talk about the articles. We decided to go visit other schools. We visited a number of schools [that we thought had better programs] (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

According to Principal Yigzaw, the team's research reinforced building a comprehensive STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) program. Two primary program approaches emerged: a discipline-based program offering specific STEM courses in different grade levels, and an interdisciplinary program organizing the school's curriculum around STEM themes. The team determined that a comprehensive, interdisciplinary program is supported by educational research and the best approach for HGA, according to Principal Yigzaw. At the time of this study, the school was in the process of developing an interdisciplinary STEM program tied to state standards, after determining that existing programs did not fully meet the school's needs. The intent is to phase in the program, starting with grades 3-6 in 2012, followed by K-2 and possibly 7-8 in 2013.

It's developing what's called the critical path. Our goal is implementation by 2012. What does it require to do that? Writing the curriculum, staff development, and pilot testing (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

It will very much change the school's curriculum in the future from discipline-centered to interdisciplinary, and it will be a strong curriculum and make us more competitive (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Continual improvement” component of HGA’s model.



### **CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Commitment to actively refining the model over time       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Data used to inform decisions in the short- and long-term |
| <input type="radio"/> | Accommodations to meet changing student demographics      |
| <input type="radio"/> | Collaborative approach to program adjustments             |
| <input type="radio"/> | Decisions based on research                               |

# Cultural competency

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## COMPONENT 17. CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Research suggests that high-poverty, high-performing schools create an environment conducive to learning in which children feel comfortable. At schools with a diverse student body, this involves respecting and reflecting students' home cultures. As an Afro-centric charter school, HGA embraces a multicultural perspective. The school provides a strong ESL program, Arabic courses, accommodations in its food service and art programs, and a soccer program popular among its specific student demographic. Support for students' cultural backgrounds also extends to students' families, with family liaisons on staff who speak the primary home languages of the school's East African immigrant population. HGA's authorizer describes the school as "seeking to fulfill its goal of preparing children to be successful, while seeking to support their former cultural values" (Concordia University, 2011). As articulated by Executive Director Wilson,

We first look at the culture of students and their families and see what they bring, because we know if we have a program and a culture within the school that resonates with that culture, it will be much more effective as an instructional strategy (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

### *ESL services*

Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review described HGA's support for ELL students as a strength:

The school's approach to supporting students who join the school with few or no language skills in English sees them join mainstream classes when their reading ability is close to grade level, irrespective of their grade. The benefits of the school's intensive teaching of English are seen in these students' high levels of achievement (Knowles, 2011, p. 6).

When they enroll at HGA, students identified as non-native by a home language survey are assessed using NWEA MAP tests to determine their language needs. Based on their performance on these assessments, students are either mainstreamed or referred to the ESL program where they receive intensive instruction in a separate classroom for ELL students. Once referred to the ESL program, the ESL teacher clusters students and differentiates instruction according to their language needs. Students referred to the program range widely in their needs and language abilities. For example, there may be a

sixth-grade student who cannot recognize the alphabet, or a high school student who has an academic background but lacks language skills and needs to catch up quickly in order to graduate. Students coming from refugee camps may require intensive supports. Students' home languages vary as well. Some speak Somali while others speak Arabic or Oromo. The elementary ESL teacher speaks Somali, but cannot instruct the class in Somali due to the range in home languages. In some cases, the educational assistant or a fellow student helps explain something to a student in their home language (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

It's an intensive work: eight hours of reading, writing, and speaking, some arithmetic. We give them assessment on every three months to see who can join the mainstream classrooms (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

The school has two primary ESL teachers, one for grades 1-6 and one for older students. Kindergarten ELL students stay in the mainstream classroom. The elementary-level ESL teacher interviewed for this study said he had 20 students in his classroom in 2010-11, which he characterized as a high number by ESL standards. HGA's approach is to provide intensive ESL instruction in a separate classroom before mainstreaming students. Students' entire day is spent in this separate classroom, with the exception of activities such as physical education and the high school level where ELL students can try taking some mainstream courses such as math and science before transitioning out of the program. The ESL teacher spends the entire day with students rather than pulling them out of their mainstream classes for a portion of the day. In the words of the elementary-level ESL teacher,

Here we try to intensify because our school is basically ESL students in a way (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

The ESL teacher uses the Minnesota English-language proficiency standards for ELL students to guide instruction, concentrating on reading, writing, speaking, and arithmetic. Once ELL students' language skills are closer to those of mainstreamed students based on the NWEA tests, they are transitioned to mainstream classrooms (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011). Students may not necessarily be at grade level at the time they are transitioned, but they are determined to be within an acceptable range of grade level. This could be a year or two below grade level for elementary students, or two or three levels below grade level for middle school students (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). After transitioning out of the ESL program, students needing additional supports may receive Title I services.

While “their pressing need is to be able to communicate,” in the words of the elementary ESL teacher, these students and their families may also need additional support in understanding and fulfilling school expectations. For example, students may need guidance for doing their homework, and parents may need resources or support in order to help their children with homework. For example, in some cases the elementary ESL teacher needs to show parents how to use a computer so they can help their children with homework. Both the primary- and secondary-level ESL teachers speak Somali and can communicate directly with Somali parents themselves, and the Oromo family liaison provides a resource for communicating with those families (ESL teacher, personal interview, June 27, 2011).

### ***Family liaisons***

HGA employs two family liaisons, one working with Somali families and one with Oromo families, to serve as a link between the school and students’ families. Further, Executive Director Wilson performs the liaison role with the school’s African-American population. Each of these liaisons comes from the culture of the families with whom they specialize, and has held leadership positions within the local community. These liaisons play a critical role in helping families who may be new to the American education system navigate HGA policies and expectations, and bridging communication between families and teachers or other school staff who may not speak the same language. Interviews with the family liaisons also suggest they play an important role in developing trust between parents and the school. The liaisons can explain unfamiliar school policies and concerns involving their children in parents’ own language and from the framework of parents’ own cultural beliefs and experiences (Family liaisons, personal interviews, March 21, 2011). The role of family liaisons is further described in the subsequent Family Outreach and Support section of the report. Again, these descriptions reflect information provided by the sources consulted for this study. It seems important to note that despite the school’s family liaisons and focus on cultural competency, at the end of the study a local community organization informed researchers that there were concerns with the school among some Somali and Oromo parents.

### ***Additional culturally relevant practices***

Beyond its formal ESL instruction and staffing geared to meet the needs of the school’s large ELL population, HGA also offers a variety of additional programs and practices based on the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of its students. These school offerings can be tools for engaging students and helping them feel comfortable in the school. As articulated by staff and students,

[HGA's soccer program is] tied to the culture of the constituents, who are mostly East Africans. They enjoy soccer, and it is used as a way to really keep them engaged in school. The interest level is very high (Yigzaw, personal interview, January 21, 2011).

The school...respects very much what our culture and our religion is, so it's not just the [not having] prom thing, it's a lot of the other things that the parents and school associate together. It's made the school... comfortable, so nobody feels offended, like they don't serve pork at the school and things like that, so we feel welcome, I guess (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

And what I also like is that...they, anything that the student needs, the school provides it, like a prayer room. They gave us that, and then they set time aside for us to pray, and [it] doesn't interfere with our religion or our classes, so we can balance it (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Following are several specific accommodations and offerings HGA makes based on its students' home cultures:

- **Soccer program:** HGA offers a boys' soccer program coached by Manuel Legos, who played with the former Minnesota Thunder professional soccer team, and a girls' program coached by Fartun Osman, a professional basketball player from Somalia
- **Arabic instruction:** Students in kindergarten through fifth grades take Arabic, which is a significant world language to students' culture and tradition.
- **Lunches:** HGA avoids serving pork in its cafeteria to respect the dietary needs of Islamic students, and the school cook flavors food to appeal to student tastes based on their cultural preferences.
- **Art:** HGA modified its art program, offered at the high school level, to avoid representational or figural art out of respect for the beliefs of its Islamic students.
- **Prayer time:** HGA accommodates many students' Islamic traditions by allowing optional time for prayer.
- **Teaching assistants:** K-2 teachers have bilingual teaching assistants.
- **Substitute teachers:** HGA uses a teacher on the school's staff to serve as the substitute teacher to have someone who is familiar with the student population. When there is no need for a substitute, this person works with HGA's Title I paraprofessional.

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Cultural competency” component of HGA’s model.



### **CULTURAL COMPETENCY: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | Separate, intensive ESL instruction before students are mainstreamed        |
| <input type="radio"/> | Family liaisons from students’ home cultures                                |
| <input type="radio"/> | Extracurricular activities tied to students’ culture (e.g., soccer program) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Arabic instruction  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Lunch accommodations  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Respect for students’ religious values (e.g., avoidance of figural art)     |
| <input type="radio"/> | Provision of optional prayer time   |
| <input type="radio"/> | Bilingual teaching assistants in K-2  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Substitute teacher familiar with student population                         |

## COMPONENT 18. FAMILY OUTREACH AND SUPPORT

Limited parent engagement with the school and their children's education can be a challenge faced by high-poverty schools. Conversely, high-performing, high-poverty schools have developed strategies to effectively engage parents, according to the literature review. Engaging parents may involve finding ways to make the school accessible to parents who face language, transportation, work schedule, or other barriers to participating in the school. This engagement also involves engaging parents in supporting their children's learning at home, such as by providing take-home resources, communicating with parents about their role in supporting their children's learning, and updating parents on their children's school performance.

In the information collected for this case study, family outreach and support emerged as a core component of HGA's model. Further, Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review characterized HGA as "very successful in engaging with parents" and involving parents in their children's education, although as previously described researchers became aware at the end of the study that there may be concerns among some parents in the East African community. The Cambridge report provided several examples of HGA's parent outreach, such as the use of quarterly parent-teacher conferences, monthly parent phone calls to discuss children's progress, the availability of Arabic- and Somali-speaking staff, and the school's ties in the community (Knowles, 2011).

Higher Ground Academy has set out to change attitudes among parents and caregivers so that they play a much fuller part in their children's education (Knowles, 2011, p. 9).

### *Family liaisons*

As previously described, HGA employs two full-time family liaisons who share the cultural backgrounds and languages of its two predominant East African groups, Somalis and Oromos. Additionally, the executive director serves as a parent liaison for the school's smaller African-American population. Each speaks the home language of the population they serve, and has held prominent positions within the local community. These family liaisons are deeply integrated into the fabric of the school, working closely with teachers, administrators, and other staff to facilitate cross-cultural communication and understanding. At the highest level, their role is to ensure parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other school staff understand each other. In the words of one administrator, the family liaisons have also facilitated parent involvement in the school:

The fact that they are here has made us have more parent involvement than we might otherwise have had (Human resources director and reading specialist, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

### **Family liaisons' roles at HGA**

HGA's family liaisons hold three primary roles: recruiting students to the school, retaining students who are there, and navigating parent-school communications. As described by one of the liaisons, the liaisons bridge the family and school in matters related to academics, discipline, and other issues.

Families, teachers, and administrators contact the liaisons directly with any needs. For example, a teacher struggling to communicate with a student from another culture may ask the liaison to facilitate communication. As another example, a parent aware of a problem their child is facing at school may contact the liaison to discuss the issue with someone who speaks their language and understands their cultural background. Liaisons assist with translations at parent-teacher conferences, and play a role in students' daily accountability by contacting parents to learn why a student is absent and notifying parents of student misbehaviors. Liaisons also facilitate communication with administration by preparing written reports of parent concerns or complaints for the administration, and helping to explain to parents the reasons behind student consequences such as suspension, for example. In some cases, a parent may perceive action on the part of the administration as unfair or disrespectful until standard rules and expectations of American schools are explained.

In addition to responding to direct requests from parents and school staff, family liaisons attend regular school meetings to learn of any student issues that they can help navigate and to offer their input based on their understanding of students' cultures. For example, liaisons attend the weekly citizenship team and student progress meetings with teachers and administrators. Liaisons may also attend Special Education or other meetings as needed to help communicate student issues or concerns to parents. Liaisons have also held seminars for parents to share information about the school system in parents' own languages (Family liaisons, personal interviews, March 21, 2011).

Our input is to explain if there are any cultural issues or to take that information and to contact the parent and to explain to the parent also if there are issues that are not solved in that meeting. We bring the parents in that meeting, or we reach out and tell them (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

As described by the liaisons, on an ongoing basis they also reinforce HGA tenets with students and families from the perspective of a trusted member of their community. As

previously described, liaisons explain school expectations and policies to parents who may be new to the American education system. Liaisons also encourage parents to participate in the school and support their children's learning, which may differ from their experience with schools in Africa where the school held primary responsibility vs. shared school-parent responsibility for a child's education. For example, a parent may not understand why they need to provide permission for a field trip when they are used to teachers holding primary responsibility for those decisions. Liaisons also regularly reinforce HGA's expectations with students, communicating that students are expected to study, take tests such as the MCAs, behave, and follow the school's rules. Liaisons reinforce with both students and parents that the ultimate goal of students' time at HGA is to be well-prepared for college and their future careers (Family liaisons, personal interviews, March 21, 2011).

The primary need of the parent is the need to understand what their student is learning. They need to understand how the system works of this school, and the discipline, the expectations of students, the expectations of the school (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

### **Liaisons' community connections**

HGA's three family liaisons have each held prominent positions within the local community of the population they serve. As previously mentioned, Executive Director Wilson is a former St. Paul city council member and state Commissioner of Human Rights. The Somali liaison heads a local mosque, and the Oromo liaison is the former executive director of the American Oromo Community of Minnesota and continues to be involved in the organization. According to the family liaisons, these positions in the local community have played an important role in their ability to secure trust with HGA families, although researchers were made aware at study close that there were some concerns with the school among some parents in those communities. In many cases, families know the liaison from a trusted environment outside the school. For example, the Somali liaison described having contact with a number of the families on the weekend at his mosque, building a trust that extends to the school environment. These community connections have helped liaisons in their efforts to recruit students to the school (Family liaisons, personal interviews, March 21, 2011).

It's not a parent liaison only, but someone who is known publically or has a trust of the whole community (Family liaison, personal interview, March 21, 2011).

## *Income supports*

The literature review suggests that parents at high-poverty schools can face structural barriers to participating in their child's education, and that high-performing schools find ways to close this accessibility gap for parents. Primary structural barriers facing HGA parents include language and financial barriers. Almost all families of students attending HGA are low-income, based on students' eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch. In addition to providing family liaisons in support of parents' language and cultural needs, HGA provides resources where possible to help its low-income parents support their children's education. For example, the school has provided families in need with computers to enable students to work on computer lessons at home. The school has also provided financial support for school supplies, field trip participation, and transportation needs to the extent possible (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

Also, for example, if a family doesn't have resources, the school will try to provide the family with those resources. Like, let's say your family doesn't have a computer, we have a lot of computers in the school, and then the school provides you with a computer, and then also like, let's say, most people that go to this school [are] low-income, so the school understands that. ... When we're going on field trips, we have ... these forms that we fill out that helps you pay for the field trips (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Teacher-parent communication*

HGA teachers are expected to communicate frequently with parents. Parent-teacher conferences are held three times a year, and teachers are expected to have contact with parents at least once a month, including with parents of students who are meeting expectations. The Cambridge Education review noted HGA's emphasis on regular communication with parents, as did teachers interviewed for this study:

The school places considerable emphasis on contact with parents through monthly telephone calls home and quarterly parent-teacher conferences. Staff have a strong focus on helping parents to support their children's education (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

Family connected, that's almost number one. We have to go above and beyond calling families, having them [visit], welcoming them (Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011).

We're also held accountable for parent communication (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

## *Parent education*

HGA has provided both formal and informal education to parents to help them navigate the school system, which may differ in significant ways from that of their home country. Family liaisons explain school expectations and policies to parents as questions and needs arise. As previously described, the liaisons have also held parent seminars to share information about the school. Staff have also given parents information about English-language classes in the community to help them feel comfortable attending conferences and communicating with the school (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Team leader and service learning coordinator, personal interview, March 8, 2011; Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011). Executive Director Wilson also described efforts to continue building parent education at HGA, such as the possibility of hiring a trained parent educator to develop a curriculum rooted in Muslim parenting traditions that can be used to teach parents about the school and school staff about families' traditions (Wilson, personal interview, February 9, 2011).

## *Staff accessibility*

HGA staff interviewed for the case study described their accessibility to parents as an important factor in helping parents feel comfortable with the school. However, the community organization expressing concerns among some East African parents also expressed concerns about the school's openness and responsiveness to those parents. In the words of HGA staff interviewed, parents have direct access to staff at all levels, from their child's teacher to the principal and executive director. As described by Principal Yigzaw, the policy is open-door but planned in order to minimize classroom disruptions.

We have an open-door policy, yes. We want them to come in and be a part. But always there is a downside to everything. What we noticed is that sometimes when we have three or four parents sitting in a class and talking to each other, sometimes you have parents interrupting classes. ... So we now say all (classroom) visits should be scheduled. ... They are welcome to come in, but they need to schedule them ahead of time (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

When [parents] come to our school, they feel very welcomed. ... For us it's an extra task ... but the up side and the positive side is that both children and parents feel like this is a safe place, and they don't worry about their kids being here (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011).

## *Parent input*

Parents have input into HGA decisions in both formal and informal ways. In July 2010, HGA's board of directors appointed a seven-member Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) to support the school's mission and students. The PTO is intended to meet on alternate months, although meetings happened less frequently at the time of this study. HGA also gathers formal feedback from parents through a survey often administered by phone at the end of the school year (Yigzaw, e-mail communication, September 19, 2011). The school's menu was modified based on feedback provided through this survey. Parents also provide input in informal ways through their conversations with family liaisons and other school staff. Students participating in the focus group referenced parents' input into school decisions:

One thing that I've noticed going here ... is that the parents have a big part. ... This school, we don't got senior proms, we don't have homecoming, all that, because it...it's an Afro-centric school ... the religion is majority Muslim people. And so, the parents, they don't want that whole idea of prom. To them [it doesn't] seem right, so the school pleases the parents as well. So I think that's where it comes from and the majority of the parents call their friends, parents' friends, and they tell them you know, there's a school here, they do all these great things, they like our ideas, they make us feel important, so bring your kids here because you're gonna feel important, too, and your kids (will like) school, education, and they can come here (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

Most of the time it's the parents that make the majority of the decisions. The teachers and parents have a good connection. ... Parent-teacher conference every quarter, more parents show up, so the parents being more involved also helps and taking a part of the changes that are being made in the lunchroom (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

## *Community engagement*

HGA's outreach to its families appears intertwined with its outreach in the community. As previously described, word of mouth and the prominence of some school staff in the local East African community has helped parents feel comfortable choosing this school for their children and communicating with the school themselves, according to staff interviewed for this case study. As articulated in Cambridge Education's spring 2011 school quality review of HGA,

The school has exceptionally strong community involvement through its Executive Director. Because of this, the school has achieved considerable success as the school of choice among parents, who see this as a very good school (Knowles, 2011, p. 4).

## *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Family outreach and support” component of HGA’s model.



### **FAMILY OUTREACH AND SUPPORT: Checklist of key elements**

- |                       |                                       |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | Family liaisons                       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Income supports                       |
| <input type="radio"/> | Frequent teacher-parent communication |
| <input type="radio"/> | Parent education                      |
| <input type="radio"/> | Access to school staff at all levels  |
| <input type="radio"/> | Parent input into school decisions    |
| <input type="radio"/> | Community ties                        |

## COMPONENT 19. TECHNOLOGY-RICH ENVIRONMENT

*To me, they're really making efforts to embed technology into the teaching and learning cycle, and they believe that's going to have a positive impact on student learning.*

— Concordia University vice president, personal interview, March 30, 2011

HGA classrooms are well-equipped with technology in the form of Smart Boards and personal computers, and the school's computer lab enables entire classrooms of students to complete computer-based assignments and assessments. Further, core curricula are supplemented with computer-based lessons used to differentiate instruction. Staff interviewed for this study frequently cited the school's use of technology as a core component of its model.

Although a technology-rich environment did not emerge in our literature review as one of the main characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools, HGA uses technology to support other identified characteristics. According to the research, these schools focus on individual instruction. They also find ways to embed students' cultures in the fabric of the school. HGA uses computer-based lessons and Smart Boards to differentiate instruction in a student population characterized by a high proportion of immigrant, ELL students.

### *Incorporation of technology into teaching and learning*

The classrooms observed for this study appeared well-equipped with technology, supporting interviewees' descriptions of the school as a technology-rich environment. The elementary and middle school classrooms observed each had Smart Boards and personal computers, and the high school chemistry lab was well-furnished with laboratory equipment. The school also houses a separate computer lab where entire classes of students work on computer-based lessons and take computer-based assessments. To support students' ability to complete assignments at home, HGA has provided computers for families unable to afford one on their own. The school has purchased computers at reduced rates through Minnesota Computers for Schools, and donated those computers to parents when the school has upgraded to newer computers (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Wilson, personal communication, November 9, 2011). A student participating in the focus group characterized the school's technology-rich environment as follows:

I think technology plays a big role in our school because we have a ... whole lab downstairs, and every classroom has like enough computers for half of the class to use the majority of the time ... and most of the teachers require everything typed nowadays. ... To practice for tests, you have to go online and do the practice part. ... [With] AP chemistry, there are some practices online, so the teacher encourages us to do that (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

HGA also provides resources and support for teachers to incorporate technology into their own practices. Teachers use Smart Boards and the A+LS curriculum to differentiate instruction, in addition to tools such as audio CDs, video, and online resources (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011). The school also recently revamped its website, a primary communication tool, although Concordia's renewal report noted concerns about the website being down during construction given the school's reporting requirements (Concordia University, 2011). A team leader described HGA's supports for technology integration as follows:

We have Smart Boards. We have computers in the classroom where we can use a curriculum that our school has purchased which is called the [A+LS curriculum]. We also have various software tools that we can use. As a teacher we have a grade-keeping program. We have access to many other tools I know that the school has purchased. We can use the Internet. I know for a while they did some Web conferencing and ... they found that a lot of the parents didn't have Internet access at the time. I know also that we have a brand new website that was changed recently (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 11, 2011).

### *A+LS curriculum*

As described in the section on HGA's academic program, at the elementary level core curricula are supplemented with the A+LS (A+nywhere Learning System) computer curriculum. A+LS is a subject-oriented, scoped and sequenced curriculum. The software is interactive, requiring students to process information in the lessons, and includes tests tied to the content. Behind the scenes, teachers can customize the content presented to students in order to individualize instruction (Yigzaw, 2008). Principal Yigzaw conveyed the curriculum's value to the overall elementary program as follows:

[A+LS is] really good to build basic skills, especially working with children who are struggling. It's really an interactive online curriculum. Lessons are assigned, and students complete them. Sometimes they take diagnostic assessments, and after they complete that diagnostic assessment, the software analyzes their performance. ... Other times teachers assign lessons that meet the weekly lesson objective. ... I think the children love it, and also it's really a good tool for differentiation (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

It's self-paced and also regulates the pacing, meaning moving from a lesson to another lesson. You set a mastery level. At the end of each lesson, there is a test. They have to achieve a certain proficiency level to move from A to B (Yigzaw, personal interview, June 29, 2011).

### *Staff and student instruction in technology*

In support of its technology-rich environment, HGA provides training to teachers and students in the use of technology. For example, teachers have received training in using Smart Boards and are offered a technology-for-teachers course at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (Team leader and teacher, personal interview, March 14, 2011; Teacher, personal interview, March 23, 2011). Students also receive instruction to support their ability to complete work on computers. HGA students are required to take a technology course, usually in their freshman year, which covers software, keyboarding, and other computer skills. As described by a student participating in the focus group:

We have ... technology class for [freshmen] downstairs, and they basically teach you ... how to do more stuff on the Microsoft and stuff like that, just about technology, because most kids ... don't know a lot of stuff, they just know the basics—search, go on Google, and stuff like that—so we do have classes for technology. And going back [to] the A+ lessons, they are very beneficial because I had them, back in elementary and middle school. ... Basically what you learned in class on the computer, you get to test yourself, and go on to the lessons and go learn and read yourself (Student council member, focus group, March 31, 2011).

### *Checklist of key elements*

Following is a checklist summary of the key elements within the “Technology-rich environment” component of HGA’s model.



#### **TECHNOLOGY-RICH ENVIRONMENT: Checklist of key elements**

- Classrooms well-equipped with technology (e.g., Smart Boards, personal computers)
- Separate computer lab
- Core curricula supplemented with computer-based curriculum in elementary grades
- Computer-based curriculum used to differentiate instruction
- Assistance to families unable to afford computers for home
- Technology training to teachers and students

# Implications for educators and researchers

*When the charter school movement started in Minnesota nearly 20 years ago, one of the founding principles called for the programs to be used as educational laboratories. Give charters the freedom to innovate, supporters argued, then share successful strategies with traditional public schools.*

— *StarTribune* editorial page, December 16, 2010

An original goal of this study was to contribute a detailed account of one charter school to the larger education research base. If charter schools are intended to spur innovation, it seems important to document and try to understand the approaches they are using. Beyond documenting the model, we offer the following reflections on this case study which may be instructive to researchers or educators interested in learning from HGA's experience.

## *Implications for researchers*

This report contributes an in-depth case study to the research on high-poverty, high-performing schools. To a large extent, HGA's model appears to reinforce the literature on characteristics associated with these schools. Their implementation is distinctive at HGA, however, based on the school's specific student population. Based on our literature review, this case study may be one of the first to explore a school model that, based on standardized test scores, increasing enrollment, and external accolades, appears to be succeeding with a predominantly low-income, East African immigrant student population. The following discussion explores ways HGA's model supports and is distinctive from the current literature base on high-poverty, high-performing schools. We also present considerations with using the case study approach in a school setting based on our experience.

## **HGA model's relationship to current research**

As discussed throughout the presentation of HGA's model, we found considerable overlap between components of HGA's model and characteristics identified in the research as associated with high-poverty, high-performing schools. Each section presenting a component of HGA's model opens with a brief discussion of the extent to which the component relates to the research on high-poverty, high-performing schools. Additionally, the full literature review in the Appendix presents a more comprehensive summary of the research. The ties between HGA's model and the broader research base are not purely happenstance. Principal Yigzaw, who serves as the school's director of curriculum and assessment, holds a Ph.D. in general education with an emphasis on

curriculum. His 2008 book on HGA's early years discusses educational theories and research that informed the program's development and adjustments over time.

A number of HGA's components are directly supported by the research, including a focus on the children, high expectations of all students, the presence of a strong academic program, family outreach and support, accountability at all levels, regular assessment of teaching and learning, and alignment with standards. Other components share clear linkages with attributes of high-poverty, high-performing schools, but are distinctive in their particular emphasis at HGA. For example, cultural competency relates to creating an environment conducive to learning in which students feel comfortable, but HGA's strong focus on cultural competency specifically seems distinctive. Similarly, HGA's emphases on college preparation and leadership development stem from having high expectations for all students, a characteristic identified in the research, but there are different methods of establishing high expectations and HGA's specific emphases are somewhat distinctive. These schools also individualize instruction, and HGA uses a technology-rich environment to differentiate instruction for a largely immigrant population with diverse skill levels. The literature review also found that these schools develop mechanisms to build and sustain instructional capacity, and at HGA this takes the form of grade-level professional learning communities and ongoing professional development specifically. Likewise, the literature found that these schools reorganize time, space, and transitions, and at HGA this characteristic manifests as a Learning Year Program.

### **Reflections on the case study approach**

At study onset, we determined that the descriptive case study approach was most conducive to the primary study objective of identifying and describing core components of HGA's model. We offer our reflections here on our experience undertaking this approach in a school environment to the extent that they may be instructive to other researchers. Our perception that the case study approach best suited this endeavor remains unchanged at study close, but we also now have a greater appreciation of the merits and potential challenges in undertaking this approach in a school setting.

In our view, the descriptive case study approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of HGA's model. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of an alternative approach to identifying a model that, though rooted in research, was not previously documented. This study differed substantially from a program evaluation of a known model, in which researchers study the implementation and effectiveness of pre-determined program attributes. Rather, the objective of this study was to identify and document the attributes themselves so that they could be shared with the broader community.

In our experience, this approach to a large extent facilitated a trusting relationship with school administrators and staff in which researchers had good access to the school over a fairly extended period of time. This access facilitated intangible observations, enabling researchers to get a “feel” for the school important to understanding and reflecting on the relative weight of various components of the model. We felt we were able to adequately balance more subjective observations with a rigorous study design which incorporated a cross-section of perspectives, triangulation of sources, and external perspectives on the school.

Though we perceive the descriptive case study approach to be the most appropriate for this study’s specific objectives, there are also challenges inherent in the approach. In our view, it may be particularly important to monitor lines of independence between researcher and subject in a study lacking evaluative components. One can conceive of how a study could be influenced by the subjects trying to direct its course or content. We appreciated our relationship with HGA leadership in this regard. HGA’s executive director and principal provided feedback when requested, but deferred to our leadership on the study and identification of the school’s model. Still, because of our reliance on the school to a large extent for access to key constituents, we were unable to access parents over the course of the study. This study limitation was magnified when, at the end of the study, a community organization shared that there were concerns among some parents. Our experience raises important questions about researcher roles and responsibilities in engaging in a descriptive case study approach: When the study purpose is descriptive and not evaluative, what is the researcher’s responsibility in investigating any complaints or criticisms that may arise about the subject? We took the approach of trying to generally understand and be transparent in sharing our awareness of some concerns, while stopping short of formally investigating complaints which was outside our role and study purpose.

On a practical level, it also seems important for those considering a case study to appreciate the potential time and resources involved. Depending on the scale and scope of the study, there may be considerable time involved in data collection and analysis. In a more quantitative study, data may be collected through closed-ended questions conducive to quick summaries across subjects. Our study was largely qualitative, involving identification of themes across lengthy interviews, observations, and a variety of documents. The study could have taken different shapes, but we felt it was important to build in a considerable amount of time in the school and individual interviews with a strong cross-section of staff.

### ***Implications for educators***

The main body of this report documents the core components of HGA’s model, providing a template for those who may be interested in replicating portions. In considering adopting practices from HGA’s model, educators can reflect on how HGA’s model works together

as a whole as well as the importance of individual components, the extent to which the model is supported by research, and considerations and potential challenges in its implementation. Beyond the information and reflections provided in this report, educators interested in adopting components of HGA's model are encouraged to contact Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw at Higher Ground Academy, as they are the model's principle designers and champions, and therefore most familiar with its implementation on a daily basis.

### **Reflections on HGA's overall model**

This report details the 19 core components of HGA's model identified through this case study. As articulated upfront, "Focus on the children" can be viewed as the model's central component in that ultimately, all policies and practices at HGA are intended to serve the needs of children individually and collectively. Judgments about the model's overall effectiveness and the contributions of individual components cannot be made in the absence of a formal program evaluation. However, we offered an organizational scheme of 5 overarching characteristics that we believe encompass the 19 more specific core components to the extent that it may provide insights to those considering the merits of HGA's model. Beyond the analysis we provide, educators can consider for themselves how individual components interact with each other and whether some hold more relative weight than others to a school's success.

Further, while these characteristics may at a high level largely define the school, we believe they cannot on their own account for HGA's success. Although it did not emerge as a core component of the model in our data collection, it seems important to recognize the role of HGA's strong leadership in weathering challenges at different points in the school's history. To Executive Director Wilson and Principal Yigzaw, running the school is not so much a job as a life passion. Their vision and concern for black students who are struggling in traditional public schools has fueled their commitment to overcome challenges along the way, and Wilson's deep connections in the community and political savvy have on a practical level enabled the school to rally necessary resources and support at times of need. For example, partnerships with community-based organizations have enabled the school to provide students with physical education, leadership development, and other opportunities the school would be unable to provide with its own limited resources. Principal Yigzaw's 2008 book *Keeping the promise: One charter school's experience* provides a candid account of challenges faced by the school during its early years, leadership's efforts to overcome those challenges, and lessons learned along the way.

## **Implementation considerations**

Components of HGA's model overlap considerably with research on characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools, but their distinctive execution at HGA seems inextricably linked with the school's specific student population. The overall model is rooted in research, with specific practices intended to cater to a largely low-income, East African immigrant population. Therefore, the extent to which specific practices can be extrapolated may depend to some extent on the similarities and differences of another school's student population to that of HGA. Educators considering adopting HGA's model can consider the extent to which individual components are broadly supported by research and the extent to which their specific execution at HGA stems from the school's student population. To this end, we suggest reading the preceding discussion on the model's relationship to current research, as well as the full literature review in the report Appendix.

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# Appendix

*Literature review*

*Technical Appendix: Academic test score data*

*Interviews conducted*

*Protocol for initial “overview” interviews*

*Observations conducted*

*Classroom observation protocol*

*2009-10 Staff assignments*

## ***Literature review***

*Following is a more detailed presentation of the literature review conducted for this study and summarized in the body of the report.*

Wilder Research conducted a literature review to understand the extent to which HGA's model intersects with research on characteristics of schools that are high-achieving or "beating the odds" given expectations for the population they serve. The review emphasized research on characteristics of schools succeeding with minority, immigrant, or low-income populations. None of the studies reviewed exactly matched the demographic characteristics of HGA, with its predominantly low-income, East African immigrant student population, many of whom come from a household whose primary language is not English. Nevertheless, a number of studies explored characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools.

### **Background**

The adverse effects of poverty on student and school performance are well documented. Studies show that schools with high concentrations of low-income students typically score lower on standardized tests than schools with students from economically advantaged and well-resourced backgrounds. Students at high-poverty schools face a set of challenges associated with school underperformance, such as high teacher and student turnover, high student mobility, limited parent engagement, inexperienced teachers and poor quality teaching, and low expectations. However, there are a growing number of schools with low-income student bodies that challenge these trends. These schools often perform at or above the state averages on standardized tests and have become known as "high-poverty, high-performing" schools. These schools have also been characterized as "beating the odds" or "high-achieving."

High-poverty, high-performing schools have gained substantial interest from policymakers and education researchers in recent years. As a result, a sizable body of literature has emerged that outlines common characteristics associated with these schools. These characteristics reflect strategies and practices generally accepted to be effective and which have been widely implemented in high-poverty, high-performing schools.

### **What is a high-poverty, high-performing school?**

The studies reviewed did not yield a singular, established definition of a high-poverty, high-performing school. In fact, very few studies precisely defined the meaning of both "high-poverty" and "high-performing." The following 90/90/90 formula setting a clear and high bar offers an exception (Reeves, 2003):

- More than 90 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch
- More than 90 percent of the students are from ethnic minorities
- More than 90 percent of the students met or achieved high academic standards, according to independently conducted tests of academic achievement

Many numeric thresholds have been set to define “high-poverty” schools, such as the percentage of students whose households live below the poverty threshold or the percentage of students enrolled in free or reduced lunch. In most studies, a school is defined as high-poverty when more than 50 percent of students attending the school come from low-income houses, measured by the percentage of children receiving free or reduced school lunches (Carter, 2000; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002).

While studies typically defined “high-poverty,” they were less likely to tightly define “high-performing.” Nevertheless, most studies characterize “high-performing” as schools scoring at or above the state average on standardized assessments. Because standards vary by state, this definition varies across state lines (Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; McGee, 2004; Picucci et al., 2002; Reeves, 2003).

### **Characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools**

Several lists of characteristics defining high-poverty, high-performing schools exist, but the set of characteristics identified by Barr and Parrett (2007) surfaced frequently in the literature review as the baseline characteristics needed to understand high-poverty, high-performing schools. Some of the characteristics also encompass district-level attributes applicable to traditional public schools. As identified by Barr and Parrett, high-poverty, high-performing schools:

- Ensure effective district and school leadership
- Align, monitor, and manage the curriculum
- Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners
- Understand and hold high expectations for children
- Target low-performing students and schools, starting with reading
- Create a culture of data and assessment literacy
- Build and sustain instructional capacity

## ■ Reorganize time, space, and transitions

These characteristics prove most effective when the strategies and practices overlap, functioning as a holistic system of operation within the school. Most studies did not specify a number of characteristics that will lead a high-poverty school to become a high-performing school, but almost every study suggested that the implementation of one or two of these characteristics would not be enough to become a high-performing school. Further, the local contexts of the neighborhood and school should inform the implementation of the practices and strategies within each of the characteristics in order for them to be effective. Descriptions of the individual characteristics follow.

### **Ensure effective district and school leadership**

Every school needs their leadership to effectively navigate relationships with students, parents, teachers, staff, school district administration, and the broader community. At high-poverty schools, leadership needs to not only manage these relationships, but do so in the face of substantial challenges such as disengaged parents, high teacher and student turnover, and financial constraints (Carter, 2000; Heck & Moriyama, 2010; Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman, 2005; Loeb, 2003). Effective school leaders also put forward a vision that is meaningful to staff and students, employ innovative decision-making models, and cultivate a school culture that is relevant to all students. Following are descriptions of specific practices and strategies employed by leadership in high-poverty, high-performing schools.

*Leadership develops and implements a vision believed by students and teachers.* School administrators lead the school toward a vision that does not allow students and teachers to become entrenched in expectations of high-poverty schools as low-scoring, troubled, and underperforming. These school leaders succeed in encouraging students and teachers to see success in school and life as their ultimate outcome (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Curry, Pacha, & Baker, 2007; Izumi, 2002).

*Leadership encourages and practices collaboration with school staff of all levels.* Though approaches to shared decision making differ among individual school leaders, successful school administrators include staff in making key decisions regarding school matters such as curriculum and instruction (Kannapel et al., 2005; Strand, 2010; Williams et al., 2005). Rather than a top-down structure, decisions are often made using a horizontal model in which teachers, support staff, and administrators share responsibility for determining how the school functions. Additionally, school leaders often have open-door policies making them accessible to staff. They are also intimately involved in the school's daily operations, and are consequently aware of student and teacher performance across grade levels (Carter, 2000; Reeves, 2003).

*School leadership possesses qualities that engage students, parents, and staff.* Key qualities of effective school leaders have been identified. As articulated by Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009, p. 2),

Regardless of the leadership label, there are universal characteristics that commonly surface when considering qualities of effective leaders: sense of vision, ability to set goals and plan, personal charisma, strong communication skills (particularly verbal and negotiation abilities), strong sense of self and personal convictions, relationship and empathy skills, and the ability to motivate and influence others. It is this last virtue, the ability to activate others to follow, which actually defines leadership itself.

*School leadership understands the role of the school district.* In traditional public schools, the district's role varies from school to school. At some schools, the district plays a minimal role in school functions, while at other schools the district serves as a watchdog (Kannapel et al., 2005; Levine & Lezotte, n.d.). However, in almost all instances the school's administrative leadership maintains a working relationship with the district administration and accountability office, evidenced by the district supporting the leadership's decisions. High-poverty schools can falter when districts do not understand the particular needs of these schools. School leadership needs to communicate and work with the district to meet the school's needs, such as increased funding for Special Education or support to maintain extracurricular activities (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Cole-Henderson, 2000).

### **Align, monitor, and manage the curriculum**

Classroom curriculum sets the trajectory for the school year and defines the methods by which students learn and teachers teach. High-performing, high-poverty schools effectively align, monitor, and manage the curriculum by engaging in the following practices.

*Curriculum is aligned with assessment.* High-performing schools dedicate the time and resources to align, track, and implement a curriculum that is meaningful and effective for positive school performance. However, many schools lack the discipline to meaningfully use assessments as a tool that informs the shape of the school curriculum. A curriculum that parallels established assessment standards ensures that students are taught the material needed to be successful at their grade level (Kannapel et al., 2005; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Barth et al., 1999). Teachers have a stronger foundation to work from when mechanisms are in place at the school level to evaluate student performance on a set of metrics, and then find immediate resources and support to tailor the curriculum. Kannapel and Clements' (Kannapel et al., 2005, p. 14) research explains that

...curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be the central focus and must be addressed simultaneously, coherently, systematically, and intentionally if the school is to reach high levels of achievement among all students.

*Teachers find effective instructional techniques to support curriculum goals and student outcomes.* There are different techniques and approaches to teaching that support student learning, and the specific practices used can vary within each approach. Generally, in direct instruction students are taught at their instructional level and often placed in homogenous level groups to enhance learning. This is a track system that emphasizes cohort learning and achievement (Heck & Moriyama, 2010; Ross et al., 2004; B. Thompson, 2006). In differentiated instruction, individual students' needs are considered and attended to, curriculum is tailored to the individual needs, and teachers work directly with students to craft a plan that leads to school success (B. Thompson, 2006; B. R. Thompson, 2004). In experiential instruction, the collective, real-world experience of the class is used as the driving factor to learn (B. Thompson, 2006).

*Teachers work across grade levels and curriculum areas to support each other.* At many high-achieving schools, individual teachers' development areas are identified and supported by other teachers who have strengths in those areas. These teachers work collaboratively to develop curriculum and understand the level at which they must teach to prepare students to enter the next grade. This often means that teachers work with teachers across all grade levels, helping individual teachers understand their role within their profession and at the specific school. In accepting their professional role in student success and failure, teachers should receive support in the form of professional development opportunities and be challenged to contribute expertise in their areas of strength (Chenoweth, 2009; Clarke, 2005; Kannapel et al., 2005; Ragland, Clubine, Constable, & Smith, 2002).

*Standards inform curriculum, instruction, and student and teacher assessments.* Studies indicated that high-performing, high-poverty schools use standards extensively. These schools and their teachers use state standards to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teacher performance (Barth et al., 1999).

### **Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners**

Research illustrates that high-poverty schools are challenged by limited parent engagement with the school and in their children's education (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Trimble, 2002). Structural elements often limit opportunities for these parents to take part in their child's education. Barriers include sporadic work schedules, lack of transportation, and limited knowledge about supporting children academically (Russell, 2010). High-poverty, high-performing schools have developed mechanisms to effectively engage and sustain trust with parents. Parent engagement in the school can

also translate into broader community support for the school and the perception of the school as a trusted partner in supporting children (Gordon, 2010).

*Schools meet parents where they are.* As described above, some parents face constraints related to challenging work schedules, language barriers, lack of transportation, and other factors that pose barriers to participating in their child's school. Successful schools have found ways to close the accessibility gap for parents by incorporating support mechanisms to facilitate and foster a strong parent-school relationship. For example, an all-Latino, Spanish-speaking school described in the literature provided parent-run bilingual councils so parents who spoke a language other than English could feel comfortable discussing school issues. A council representative served as a parent-school liaison to represent the views of those who could not communicate directly with the school due to language barriers (Carter, 2000; Jesse et al., 2004).

Teachers and administration work with families to establish the home as a center for learning.

In high-poverty, high-performing schools, teachers and school principals strongly believe that learning cannot be confined within school walls. Learning must occur at school, in the community, and most importantly at home. In a summary of findings about high-poverty, high performing schools, the Center for Public Education provides evidence that these schools find ways to involve parents, and treat parents as partners in their children's learning (Center for Public Education, 2005; Carter, 2000; Barth et al., 1999). Many schools have worked hard to shift the attitudes of parents and students about learning at home through interactions at home visits, parent-teacher conferences, school events, and in the classroom. At many of the successful schools, teachers provided take-home resources to help parents better support children's learning. Examples of take-home resources included free books, worksheets, and summer enrichment materials (Carter, 2000).

*Schools institute accountability at all levels.* At high-performing schools, all adults involved in students' lives are held accountable to high standards. Barth et al. (1999) have shown the positive effects for high-poverty, high-performing school that share the responsibility for student success among teachers, staff, and administrators. Reeves (2003) argues that a child's school success is also significantly influenced by their out-of-school time, and that accountability should start before the children arrive at school. For example, parents are held accountable if their child does not complete the material sent home. A direct, honest parent-teacher relationship is important for the communication of both positive and negative news about a child's performance. Trustworthy relationships between school and home also prevent parents from feeling blamed for the child's shortcomings.

## **Understand and hold high expectations for low-income, culturally diverse students**

*Schools focus on children first and as individuals.* While curriculum, school leadership, and relationships with parents are important factors to a school's success, everything at these schools revolves around the success of individual children. Research shows that high-poverty, high-performing schools have emphasized the children as the top priority and find practices that view children as individuals (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Izumi, 2002; McGee, 2004). For example, a low-income urban elementary school on the East Coast focuses on individual students at three levels: immediate personal attention, testing, and basic skills. The school aims to identify the individual student need and find a way to help the student gain the particular skill that is productive to their learning (Carter, 2000).

*Schools create a safe and comfortable environment supportive of learning.* The literature suggests that high-poverty, high-performing schools create a school environment that is conducive to student learning, where the cultures of the student body are respected and embedded into the fabric of the school. At a number of all-black schools, an Afro-centric curriculum is used as a centerpiece to student learning because students are able to hear about and see people who look like them and reflect their experiences. At schools composed of large immigrant populations, the languages, customs, and cuisines of their home culture are integrated as a way to build a sense of familiarity from home within the school. Making children feel comfortable at school increases their confidence and supports their learning capabilities (Carter, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Center for Public Education, 2005).

*Schools and administrators believe all children can succeed now and in the future.* Teachers and administrators at these schools frequently tell students that they are succeeding and will continue to succeed. These adults provide positive reinforcements and incentives for good school performance. Additionally, in many high-performing, high-poverty schools students are encouraged to think about college, careers, and extracurricular activities and how to pursue related goals (Ali & Jerald, 2001; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Barth et al., 1999).

*Schools set high achievement standards for all children.* High-poverty, high-performing schools push the limits by setting the highest expectations for their students. Some schools expect students to perform at least one grade level higher than their current grade, and the school crafts its curriculum accordingly. Other schools aim for 100 percent of students to pass standardized tests (Reeves, 2003). Teachers and school administrators frequently communicate these expectations to the students, and reward students who achieve or exceed these expectations (D'Agostino & Borman, 1998; Elias & Haynes, 2008; McDonald, Ross, Bol, & McSparrin-Gallagher, 2007; Muñoz & Dossett, 2004; Reeves, 2003).

## **Target low-performing students and schools, starting with reading**

Reading is a basic and important competency for all young students to master. Research shows that students from low-income backgrounds tend to score lower on reading tests and consistently fall behind grade level in reading (Chenoweth, 2009; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Elias & Haynes, 2008; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). Many students from low-income backgrounds lack out-of-school support structures that encourage reading, which contributes to their falling behind in reading achievement especially during the summer when students are not enrolled in school (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996). Several studies identify reading as one of the most important academic focus areas within high-poverty, high-performing schools (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001; Picucci et al., 2002; Reeves, 2003). A number of practices and strategies are employed in high-poverty, high-performing schools to emphasize reading as a major academic priority, such as the following.

*Schools set a target threshold for students to read.* This practice reflects a belief that if a child cannot read, then it is very difficult to succeed in school because the ability to read crosses all subject areas and classes. At a predominantly Latino elementary and middle school with more than 75 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch, reading was placed as the school's first priority. The school enforced consequences in the early grades if students needed to improve their basic literacy skills. While some would argue against the practice, at this particular school students who could not read at the end of kindergarten were held back to give them an extra year to learn and acquire reading skills before first grade (Carter, 2000; Reeves, 2003).

*Time in elective classes is reduced to increase time dedicated to reading.* A strong emphasis on placing reading first is a driving key characteristic at a high-poverty, urban elementary school on the West Coast. The school sets aside 1.5 hours of reading per day for students. Physical education and other topics are limited in order to focus on reading comprehension. While this approach has been criticized for limiting the creativity of students by not offering classes such as art, or encouraging inactivity by not offering physical education, this school believes that this sacrifice is what it takes to keep children at or above grade level in reading (Carter, 2000). Other schools increase instructional time not only in reading but also in math (Barth et al., 1999; Goddard et al., 2000).

## **Create a culture of data and assessment literacy**

Many high-performing, high-poverty schools make decisions informed by data, and work to create, implement, and utilize data systems to develop student work plans and evaluate student progress. A challenge in using data is to find ways to make the data suit the school's purposes, which requires understanding the data and knowing how to follow up with

direct, meaningful action. Research shows that these schools carefully select assessment tools that match their school's mission, and use assessments that provide data that can be directly translated into teacher action. A number of the schools have effectively acculturated the use of data into the functioning of their school in ways that are deeply embedded and accepted by teachers and administrators (Borman, 2002; Byrne & Gallagher, 2004; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001). A number of practices and strategies are employed in high-poverty, high-performing schools that accept and utilize data and assessments, such as the following.

*Data is integrated into all aspects of decision making.* Schools need to develop data reporting templates that best meet their needs. This means that the type of data collected varies significantly from school to school. If schools want to learn about progress in reading, then there are multiple ways to evaluate this progress, which may require data from multiple sources. For example, in Reeves' study (2003, p. 12) of 90/90/90 schools, "Successful schools included an intensive focus on student data from multiple sources, and specifically focused on cohort data. They were less interested in comparing last year's fourth grade class to this year's fourth grade class ... and more interested in comparing the same student to the same student." Data must be understood for its utility to take action in the school, not simply as a means for reporting figures in an annual report. Additionally, many of the successful schools use assessments and data weekly to monitor student progress (Kannapel et al., 2005). The frequency of using data does not supersede data utility, but data is most effective when it is used as a part of a continual process of student evaluation.

*Student progress is systematically monitored, and data used to provide supports.* At an all-African-American, high-poverty school in New York City, teachers begin the school year by assessing students' core academic competencies. Students are then grouped according to their assessment performance and placed into a tracking system within each classroom. While students enter at different stages at the beginning of the school year, the goal is to have all students merged into one performance group by the end of the year. In order to achieve a single group by the end of the school year, specific outcome data for each student is continually collected and evaluated throughout the year. Based on the data, individual plans are created and periodically adjusted to ensure student achievement. Targeted instruction for individual students is often made through streamlined, data-driven decision making (Barth et al., 1999; Carter, 2000).

### **Build and sustain instructional capacity**

Many high-poverty schools are challenged by high teacher turnover and inexperienced teachers. Successful schools often deal with these circumstances by creating mechanisms within their school to build and sustain the instructional capacity of teaching staff. Ascher and Fruchter (2001) have shown that classrooms with highly qualified teachers enable

students to succeed. A number of studies suggest that it is crucial to prioritize teacher development and supports, and to build teachers' capacity as instructors in order to bring success to a high-performing school (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000). A number of practices and strategies are used in these schools to support and cultivate highly qualified teachers, such as the following.

*Master teachers mentor junior staff and model teaching practices.* Carter (2000) argues that master teachers bring out the best in a faculty. Overcoming inadequate teacher training "is perhaps the single greatest accomplishment of high-performing, high-poverty schools" (Carter, 2000, p. 18). For example, at one school described in the literature, team teaching is central to teacher mentoring. The master teacher helps train less experienced teachers. As another example, an all-black school with an Afro-centric curriculum uses the "Marcus Garvey method" where teachers teach beyond their own skill set in order to build their capacity (Carter, 2000).

*Continual assessment of students facilitates individualized instruction.* Teachers must be provided with the time and tools to continually assess students, determine student needs, and create meaningful work plans for the students to acquire and then sustain high levels of school achievement (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Kannapel et al., 2005). Many of the studies suggest that one teaching style is not necessarily more effective than another, but rather that teachers should adapt to multiple teaching approaches in order to meet the learning needs of as many students as possible. This focus on individualized instruction and students as the center of learning is commonly known as differentiated instruction (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008).

*Teaching is high-quality.* An emerging strand in the literature on low-performing schools argues that the problem in these schools is not poverty, but poor teaching quality (Haycock & Chenoweth, 2005). While many would argue against Haycock's thesis that poor teaching quality is the primary factor for underachievement at high-poverty schools, a number of studies show that teacher quality does matter (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001; Merseth et al., n.d.; Taylor et al., 2000). In these studies, teacher quality factors include experience, advanced degrees and training, professional development opportunities, and effective instructional skills.

### **Reorganize time, space, and transitions**

The reorganization of time, space, and transitions has been a common practice at high- and low-performing schools, with mixed results (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Williams et al., 2005; Zadavasky, 2009). Schools have often extended the school day by two hours to increase instructional time, incorporated double class periods into the schedule to place emphasis on single subjects such as math or reading, or reconfigured the classroom

layout to create an environment conducive to learning. These factors have often been identified as secondary factors that make a difference in students' performance. These adjustments are often a byproduct of a broader systemic change to focus on certain aspects of learning. Schools and students do not suddenly perform better simply because the day has been extended by two hours or the school requires double class periods. Instead, adding time must be done in a manner that is purposeful and supported by evidence. For example, research shows that a double dosage of reading and math in consecutive class periods can lead to improved school performance (Ragland et al., 2002; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The literature suggests that time, space, and transitions need to be reorganized based on sound evidence in order for schools to experience effective change.

## ***Technical Appendix: Academic test score data***

*Following is a detailed presentation of state testing requirements and HGA's academic test score data, summarized briefly in the body of the report. Graduation rates are also provided at the end of the section. Data presented reflect the most recent data available to researchers at the time the report was completed. State proficiency test data for spring 2011 became available as the report was being finalized and were incorporated to the extent possible. We present overall and grade-level proficiency data for 2008-11. Other analyses such as achievement within demographic categories, growth rates, and graduation rates reflect 2010 and earlier.*

### **Background**

#### **Adequate Yearly Progress**

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, schools are assessed for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on state academic achievement standards based on state assessments. The intent is to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education and attain proficiency in core subjects. Progress is assessed for students overall as well as for subgroups of students based on income, race, English Language Learner status, and disability. To make AYP, schools must attain annual proficiency targets in reading and math. States must also use at least one other academic performance indicator, which at the secondary level must at least include the high school graduation rate. Looking back over the past four years, HGA met AYP requirements in 2008, did not meet AYP requirements for LEP students in math in 2009 despite meeting requirements for reading and attendance, and again met AYP requirements in 2010 and 2011.

States must identify any Title I schools not making AYP for two consecutive years for school improvement. In the first year of school-improvement status, the school receives technical assistance in addressing the academic achievement concerns and must develop a two-year school improvement plan, and students are offered public school choice or supplemental educational services. Schools continuing not to make AYP move on to more intensive interventions and serious consequences in subsequent years (Education Week, 2004; Minnesota Department of Education, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

#### **Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments**

In Minnesota, proficiency is measured through the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs). Reading and math tests are administered in grades 3-8 (reading and math), 10 (reading), and 11 (math). Science tests are also required by federal law but do not factor into AYP calculations. MCA science tests are administered in grades 5, 8, and the year in high school when students complete life science. In order to graduate

from a public Minnesota high school, students must pass the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade reading test, 11<sup>th</sup>-grade math test, and a separately administered 9<sup>th</sup>-grade written composition test. Together, these tests comprise Minnesota's Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD). Students not initially meeting requirements are given subsequent retest opportunities (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.).

Proficiency on the MCAs is defined as meeting or exceeding the grade-level standard. For ELL students taking the alternate Mathematics Test for English Language Learners (MTELL) and Special Education students taking the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS), results of those assessments substitute for the corresponding MCA results (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d. & 2010). In 2011, the MTELL was eliminated with introduction of the new MCA-III math tests, described below. Most students took the MCA assessments in 2011, with the exception of some Special Education students taking either the MTAS or new MCA-Modified (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011b).

With the exception of math scores from 2011, data presented in this report reflect the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments Series II (MCA-II). In 2011, a new, more rigorous version of the math MCAs, the Mathematics MCA-III, was administered to students in grades 3-8. The new math assessment is aligned to the state standards adopted in 2007, whereas the previous MCA-II math tests were aligned with the 2003 standards. Students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade continued to take the MCA-II. For this reason, math scores in 2011 should not be compared to previous years for grades 3-8 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011b).

## **Achievement data for students overall and by grade**

### **All students – Reading**

Overall, a higher percentage of HGA students than Saint Paul Public School students were proficient in reading in 2008, 2009, and 2010. HGA's proportion of reading-proficient students increased by 12 percentage points from 2008-10, but experienced a decline from 2010-11. In 2011, the overall proportion of HGA students proficient in reading was slightly below that of the district (53% vs. 56%, respectively). HGA students' reading proficiency rate remained lower than the state's during this period, as would be expected given the large immigrant population (Figure A1).

Reading proficiency varied widely among grades at HGA, although less in 2011 than earlier years. HGA initially places its students in grade levels based on their performance on an assessment administered upon enrollment, rather than placing students in grades based on their age. In 2011, HGA grade-level proficiency rates in reading were generally

below that of the district and state. However, HGA's eighth-grade proficiency rate surpassed that of the district (Figure A1).

**A1. Students' proficiency in reading overall and by grade: MCA-II results in spring 2008-11<sup>a</sup>**

	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>READING</b>			
<b>2008<sup>b</sup></b>	53%	51%	71%
Grade 3	77%	61%	79%
Grade 4	35%	52%	72%
Grade 5	48%	56%	73%
Grade 6	63%	54%	70%
Grade 7	23%	44%	65%
Grade 8	60%	43%	66%
Grade 10	56%	47%	71%
<b>2009<sup>b</sup></b>	53%	52%	72%
Grade 3	57%	60%	78%
Grade 4	47%	55%	75%
Grade 5	53%	52%	72%
Grade 6	56%	57%	73%
Grade 7	33%	44%	65%
Grade 8	72%	43%	67%
Grade 10	57%	50%	74%
<b>2010<sup>b</sup></b>	65%	52%	72%
Grade 3	74%	58%	76%
Grade 4	52%	51%	73%
Grade 5	51%	59%	76%
Grade 6	55%	56%	72%
Grade 7	68%	44%	66%
Grade 8	93%	45%	68%
Grade 10	85%	49%	75%

**A1. Students' proficiency in reading overall and by grade: MCA-II results in spring 2008-11<sup>a</sup> (continued)**

	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>2011<sup>b</sup></b>	53%	56%	75%
Grade 3	56%	58%	79%
Grade 4	44%	56%	75%
Grade 5	56%	65%	80%
Grade 6	56%	60%	75%
Grade 7	50%	51%	70%
Grade 8	60%	47%	68%
Grade 10	46%	53%	75%

<sup>a</sup> "Meets" or "exceeds" the standard for grade level

<sup>b</sup> Grades 3-8 and 10 combined. Includes students who took the MCA-II (2008-11).

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

**All students – Math**

As with reading, a higher percentage of HGA students overall were proficient in math in 2008, 2009, and 2010 compared to students in the Saint Paul District overall. Math proficiency rates declined for HGA and the state overall with the introduction of a more rigorous math assessment for grades 3-8 in 2011, although HGA continued to show a higher percentage proficient than the district (51% vs. 41%, respectively). While HGA's overall math proficiency fell below that of the state (56%) in 2011, proficiency rates among higher grades at HGA (7, 8, and 11) exceeded that of the state overall (Figure A2).

Also similar to reading, math proficiency varied widely among grades at HGA. In four of the seven tested grades (grades 4, 7, 8, and 11), proficiency decreased between 2008 and 2009 and then experienced a sharp increase in 2010. As previously mentioned, HGA did not make AYP in 2009 based on the proficiency of LEP students, and it is possible that efforts to address this concern resulted in the increases seen from 2009 to 2010. Principal Yigzaw attributed subsequent gains to focused attention on the needs of those students and providing the additional supports they needed (Yigzaw, personal communication, November 9, 2011). As would be expected with the introduction of the more rigorous math test for grades 3-8 in 2011, proficiency rates for those grades generally declined from 2010-11 with the exception of grade 7. However, HGA's math proficiency rate for 11<sup>th</sup> grade, which was administered the same assessment both years, increased substantially from 2010-11 (Figure A2).

In 2011, four of the seven tested grades at HGA (grades 4, 7, 8, and 11) surpassed the proportion of math-proficient students in the district. Compared to the state, three of the seven tested grades (grades 7, 8, and 11) surpassed the proportion of math-proficient students.

**A2. Students' proficiency in math overall and by grade: MCA-II (spring 2008-11) and MCA-III (spring 2011) results<sup>a</sup>**

	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>MATH</b>			
<b>2008<sup>b</sup></b>	55%	46%	62%
Grade 3	98%	65%	81%
Grade 4	50%	54%	72%
Grade 5	56%	49%	66%
Grade 6	31%	53%	65%
Grade 7	48%	44%	61%
Grade 8	48%	38%	58%
Grade 11	11%	18%	34%
<b>2009<sup>b</sup></b>	51%	46%	64%
Grade 3	78%	64%	82%
Grade 4	47%	56%	75%
Grade 5	56%	49%	65%
Grade 6	60%	52%	64%
Grade 7	30%	44%	63%
Grade 8	36%	36%	60%
Grade 11	10%	23%	42%
<b>2010<sup>b</sup></b>	64%	49%	66%
Grade 3	57%	66%	83%
Grade 4	78%	57%	77%
Grade 5	43%	51%	69%
Grade 6	70%	56%	69%
Grade 7	75%	48%	64%
Grade 8	78%	39%	59%
Grade 11	38%	26%	43%

**A2. Students' proficiency in math overall and by grade: MCA-II (spring 2008-11) and MCA-III (spring 2011) results<sup>a</sup> (continued)**

	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>MATH</b>			
<b>2011<sup>b</sup></b>	51%	41%	56%
Grade 3 <sup>a</sup>	46%	49%	70%
Grade 4 <sup>a</sup>	52%	51%	67%
Grade 5 <sup>a</sup>	21%	41%	54%
Grade 6 <sup>a</sup>	33%	38%	50%
Grade 7 <sup>a</sup>	78%	39%	52%
Grade 8 <sup>a</sup>	73%	37%	53%
Grade 11	89%	28%	49%

<sup>a</sup> "Meets" or "exceeds" the standard for grade level . In 2011, students in grades 3-8 took the MCA-III, which cannot be directly compared to previous years' MCA-II results. Grade 11 continued to take the MCA-II.

<sup>b</sup> Grades 3-8 and 11 combined. Includes students who took the MCA-II (all grades in 2008-10 and grade 11 in 2011) and MCA-III (grades 3-8 in 2011); therefore, 2011 results are not directly comparable with previous years' results.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

**Achievement data by demographic category**

Figure A3 shows the proportion of HGA students attaining proficiency in reading and math within demographic categories of interest. As previously mentioned, these data reflect 2008-10. Comparable data are presented for the Saint Paul Public School District and state overall, although there are significant differences among the school, district, and state even within the same demographic category. At HGA, many students fall into all three demographic categories presented here, meaning they are low-income, limited-English-proficient, and black. Further, almost all HGA black students come from African immigrant rather than African-American families.

**Black students**

Despite these differences, performance of black students overall in reading and math has been consistently higher at HGA than in the district and state the past three years. For example, 65 percent of black HGA students met or exceeded proficiency standards in math in 2010, compared to 32 percent of black students in the district and 37 percent in the state.

## **Low-income**

HGA showed higher increases in the proportion of low-income students attaining proficiency during this time. Of HGA students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, reading proficiency increased by 13 percentage points and math proficiency by 11 percentage points between 2008 and 2010. In 2010, 65 percent of low-income HGA students were proficient in reading, compared to 41 percent of low-income students in the district and 55 percent in the state. Similarly, 64 percent of low-income HGA students were proficient in math in 2010 as opposed to only 40 percent in the district and 49 percent in the state.

## **Limited-English-proficient**

During the 2010-11 school year, approximately 2 of every 10 HGA students were identified as limited-English-proficient (LEP). In 2008, only one-quarter of LEP students at HGA were proficient in reading. This proportion steadily increased to 69 percent in 2010, double the proportion of LEP students proficient in reading in the district and the state at that time. Math proficiency among HGA's LEP students increased from less than half to 70 percent proficient between 2008 and 2010, after an initial decline from 2008 to 2009. As noted earlier, HGA did not make AYP in 2009 based on math proficiency of its LEP students. By 2010, the proportion of HGA's LEP students proficient in math (70%) was substantially higher than that of the district and state (40% and 38%, respectively).

**A3. Students' proficiency in reading and math by demographic characteristic:  
MCA-II results in spring 2008, 2009, and 2010<sup>a</sup>**

	HGA	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch</b>			
<b>Reading<sup>b</sup></b>			
2008	52%	40%	51%
2009	53%	41%	53%
2010	65%	41%	55%
<b>Math<sup>c</sup></b>			
2008	53%	36%	44%
2009	50%	36%	46%
2010	64%	40%	49%
<b>Limited-English-proficient</b>			
<b>Reading<sup>b</sup></b>			
2008	25%	37%	31%
2009	42%	37%	32%
2010	69%	34%	33%
<b>Math<sup>c</sup></b>			
2008	46%	40%	38%
2009	43%	36%	37%
2010	70%	40%	38%
<b>Black, Not of Hispanic origin</b>			
<b>Reading<sup>b</sup></b>			
2008	53%	38%	43%
2009	53%	41%	45%
2010	65%	41%	47%
<b>Math<sup>c</sup></b>			
2008	55%	29%	32%
2009	51%	30%	34%
2010	65%	32%	37%

<sup>a</sup> "Meets" or "exceeds" the standard for grade level.

<sup>b</sup> Grades 3-8 and 10 combined.

<sup>c</sup> Grades 3-8 and 11 combined.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

## **Science**

As discussed earlier, students are also required to take the MCA-II in science in fifth grade, eighth grade, and the year in high school when they complete life science, although science tests do not factor into AYP calculations. HGA's performance in science was not as strong as in reading and math, prompting the school to assess and redesign its science curriculum. In 2009-10, only 13 percent of HGA students taking the MCA-II science tests attained proficiency, compared to 27 percent for the St. Paul District and 49 percent in the state (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). The school's review of and planned changes to its science curriculum are described later in the report.

## **Student growth**

Researchers also examined HGA students' performance based on Minnesota's growth model, which tracks individual students' progress toward proficiency from year to year. Specifically, researchers looked at growth from spring 2009 to spring 2010 in reading and math, again presenting HGA results alongside those of the Saint Paul Public School District and state overall.

## **Overall growth**

From 2009 to 2010, higher percentages of HGA students experienced high growth in their MCA-II reading and math scores than students in both the district and state overall. Half of HGA students experienced high growth in math, compared to about one-third of students in the district and the state. In reading, 44 percent of HGA students had high growth from spring 2009 to spring 2010, compared to about one-third for the district and state (Figure A4).

#### A4. Students' one-year growth in MCA-II reading and math

	Growth from spring 2009 to spring 2010 <sup>a,b</sup>		
	Higher Ground Academy <sup>b</sup>	Saint Paul District <sup>c</sup>	State of Minnesota <sup>c</sup>
<b>READING</b>			
High growth	44%	32%	35%
Medium growth	36%	42%	41%
Low growth	19%	26%	24%
<b>MATH</b>			
High growth	50%	33%	34%
Medium growth	34%	40%	41%
Low growth	16%	26%	25%

**Note:** Includes only students who were enrolled in the school on October 1, 2009 and were tested at the school (took MCA-II) in spring 2010.

<sup>a</sup> One-year growth in MCA-II scores (or MTELL scores in math) is measured using the Minnesota Growth Model created by the Minnesota Department of Education.

<sup>b</sup> Includes students in grades 4-8 and 10 for reading and 4-8 and 11 for math during the 2009-10 school year.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

#### Growth by proficiency level

Students' growth was further examined based on their proficiency level in 2009. Data suggest HGA is helping to close the achievement gap. A higher percentage of HGA students who were not proficient in reading in 2009 achieved high growth (59%) than HGA students who were proficient in 2009 (32%). By comparison, the percentages of not-proficient students achieving high growth in the district and state were more similar to the percentages of proficient students achieving high growth (Figure A5).

As in reading, a higher percentage of HGA students not proficient in math in 2009 experienced high growth (65%) in their scores than proficient students (38%). Again, growth rates were more similar between students who were and were not proficient in math in the district and state overall (31-38% experiencing high growth). In both reading and math, HGA students who were proficient in 2009 were most likely to experience medium growth (47% and 43%, respectively) (Figure A5).

## A5. Students' one-year growth in MCA-II reading and math by proficiency

	Growth from spring 2009 to spring 2010 <sup>a,b</sup>		
	Higher Ground Academy	Saint Paul District	State of Minnesota
<b>READING</b>			
Proficient in 2009			
High growth	32%	32%	34%
Medium growth	47%	40%	41%
Low growth	22%	28%	25%
Not proficient in 2009			
High growth	59%	33%	38%
Medium growth	24%	44%	42%
Low growth	16%	23%	20%
<b>MATH</b>			
Proficient in 2009			
High growth	38%	31%	33%
Medium growth	43%	41%	42%
Low growth	18%	28%	25%
Not proficient in 2009			
High growth	65%	36%	38%
Medium growth	23%	39%	39%
Low growth	13%	25%	23%

**Note:** Includes only students who were enrolled in the school on October 1, 2009 and were tested at the school in spring 2010.

<sup>a</sup> One-year growth in MCA-II scores (or MTELL scores in math) is measured using the Minnesota Growth Model created by the Minnesota Department of Education.

<sup>b</sup> Includes students in grades 4-8 and 10 for reading and 4-8 and 11 for math during the 2009-10 school year.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

### Graduation rates

Figure A6 presents the 2010 four-year graduation rates for HGA, the Saint Paul Public School District, and the state of Minnesota. Again, HGA's student population is distinctive in the proportion of students from immigrant families who may face language and cultural barriers as well as the proportion of students living in poverty. The four-year graduation rate includes students who were enrolled as ninth graders in the 2006-07

school year, adding students who moved into the cohort and subtracting students who moved out. Four-year graduation rates were not available for HGA in 2008 and 2009 because a cohort equal to or greater than 40 students is required, and there were too few students to measure.

The four-year graduation rate for HGA in 2010 (58%) was lower than the graduation rates in the district (63%) and state overall (76%). The dropout rate, however, was lower for HGA (0%) than for the district (7%) or the state (5%). The percentage of students continuing at HGA (23%) was equal to the district and higher than at the state level (14%). Information was not available for 20 percent of the HGA students in this cohort (Figure A6).

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**A6. 2010 four-year graduation rate<sup>a</sup>**

	<b>HGA (N=40)</b>	<b>Saint Paul District (N=3,121)</b>	<b>State of Minnesota (N=72,810)</b>
Graduate	58%	63%	76%
Dropout	0%	7%	5%
Continuing	23%	23%	14%
Unknown	20%	7%	6%

<sup>a</sup> This rate includes ninth-grade students in 2006-07 plus students who moved in and minus students who moved out.

**Source:** Minnesota Department of Education

## *Interviews conducted*

Aburia, Abeer. Higher Ground Academy middle school team leader, Grade 6 English and math teacher. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 14, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Ahmad, Abdirahman Sheikh Omar. Higher Ground Academy family liaison. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 21, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Buse, Abdurahim. Higher Ground Academy family liaison. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 21, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Effiom, Emilia. Higher Ground Academy human resources director and reading specialist. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 23, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Guidera, George. Concordia University Charter School Council member, liaison to Higher Ground Academy, and professor of education. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 10, 2011. Concordia University, St. Paul, MN.

Hasan, Brenda. Higher Ground Academy board vice chair, PreK-Grade 2 team leader, and service learning coordinator. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 8, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Higher Ground Academy Special Education coordinator (requested to be identified by title only). Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, May 2, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Kemp, Ernestine. Higher Ground Academy kindergarten teacher. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, May 5, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

LaManna, Pamela. Higher Ground Academy Grade 4 teacher. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 23, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Mako, Laurie. Higher Ground Academy Grade 3-5 team leader, Grade 3 math and science teacher. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 11, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Maly, Lonn. Concordia University Vice President for Academic Affairs and Charter School Council chair. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, March 30, 2011. Concordia University, St. Paul, MN.

Mohamud, Abdulcadir. Higher Ground Academy board chair, high school team leader, math teacher, and parent. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, February 7, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Samatar, Ismail. Higher Ground Academy ESL teacher and board treasurer. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, June 27, 2011.

Schoenbeck, Carl. Higher Ground Academy board secretary, retired Concordia University administrator and faculty member. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Telephone interview, February 2, 2011. Wilder Research, St. Paul, MN.

Wilson, William. Higher Ground Academy executive director. Interview by Caryn Mohr. Personal interview, February 9, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Yigzaw, Samuel. Higher Ground Academy principal. Interviews by Caryn Mohr. Personal interviews, January 21, 2011, and June 29, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

## ***Protocol for initial “overview” interviews***

### **HGA Key Informant Interviews: Round 1 Interview Protocol**

#### Prior to interview:

*The protocol will be e-mailed to interviewees prior to their interview.*

#### Opening script:

*Thank you for your willingness to meet with me today. My name is Caryn Mohr, and I’m from Wilder Research. I’m working with Executive Director Wilson and Dr. Yigzaw on a case study of Higher Ground Academy. Before we begin the interview, I thought I would provide some background information on the study and the research document that will be prepared.*

*Director Wilson and Dr. Yigzaw contacted Wilder Research because they were interested in a detailed report that would present the school’s model, providing an in-depth account of its academic program, extracurricular activities, policies, governance, support services, culture, staffing, and student population. The intent is to produce a document with sufficient detail to inform those who may be looking to replicate or learn from Higher Ground’s experience.*

*Wilder Research is taking a case study approach to learn about and describe the school’s model. Our primary research methods in this study include key informant interviews, site observations, document review, and a literature review to the extent that key components of the model intersect with education research literature. The primary purpose of our study is descriptive, which is different from a program evaluation. Our goal is to provide a detailed account of the school’s model and the context in which it operates, and not to make judgments about the merits of the model.*

*We are beginning by interviewing you and a few others who can provide an overview or “big picture” perspective on the school. Our next step will be to identify staff at different levels within the school and other constituents who would be important to interview. Do you have any questions before we proceed? If it is alright with you, I will type notes on my laptop throughout the interview.*

#### Questions:

1. First, I would like to ask about your relationship and history with Higher Ground Academy. Can you tell me how long you have served or worked at the school, and what your specific position or title is?

2. I'll proceed with the main interview questions now. In your opinion, what are the core components of Higher Ground Academy's model? (Study Question 1)

[PROBE:] What are some of the specific details about how these components are implemented that you think would be important to describe in the report? (Study Question 1)

3. In what ways do charter school policies and requirements affect the school's operations and programming? Have any changes in charter school requirements affected the way the school operates? (Study Question 3)

4. Beyond basic requirements of all charter schools, what unique qualities or practices differentiate Higher Ground Academy? (Study Question 3)

5. What would you say are the primary needs of Higher Ground Academy's student population? These could be academic, cultural, support-service, or any other needs specific to the school's student population. (Study Question 4)

[PROBE:] What policies or practices does Higher Ground Academy have in place to address those needs? (Study Question 4)

6. In thinking about Higher Ground Academy's model, including both its programming and operations, what would you say are some of the key conditions needed for its successful implementation? This question is intended to identify conditions that might be important for other schools to have in place if they are looking to replicate the model. They could include conditions related to the population served, school leadership, staff, or broader community, for example. (Study Question 5)

7. What would you say have been some of the challenges Higher Ground Academy has faced in developing or implementing its model? This question is intended to provide insights that may be helpful to others hoping to replicate or learn from Higher Ground Academy's experience. (Study Question 6)

[PROBE:] Can you identify any "lessons learned" from these experiences that may be helpful to others? (Study Question 6)

8. Who would you suggest we interview as part of this case study? This might include various school staff as well as other constituents of the school.

9. Are there specific observations you would suggest we conduct to gain an in-depth understanding of the school's model, such as a specific classroom or extracurricular activity?

10. That completes the questions I had for you today. Are there any other comments you would like to offer at this time?

Closing script:

*Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview with me today. I will e-mail you a copy of my notes from the interview to make sure I have recorded things accurately, and to give you the opportunity to make any changes that you think should be made.*

*I am also asking interviewees whether I have permission to identify them in association with their feedback in the final report that we prepare. Would you be comfortable with my citing you specifically?*

*Thank you again for your time and input. I will be in touch in the next few days with a copy of my interview notes for your review.*

## ***Observations conducted***

Grade 1 classroom. Observation by Caryn Mohr. April 28, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Grade 7 math class. Observation by Caryn Mohr. May 19, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

Grade 10 chemistry lab. Observation by Caryn Mohr. May 5, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

High school student progress meeting. Observation by Caryn Mohr. March 22, 2011. Higher Ground Academy, St. Paul, MN.

## *Classroom observation protocol*

### **HGA Classroom Observation Protocol**

Date:	Lead teacher:
Observer:	Other staff present:
Activity observed:	Number of students:
Location:	Start time of observation:
Grade level:	End time of observation:
Subject:	Duration of full activity:

Languages spoken in the classroom:
Examples of culture in the classroom:
Physical environment/classroom supplies (e.g., contents, organization, technology, books, examples of student work):
Activities observed:
Classroom management (e.g., teacher communication/intervention, student behavior):
Types/degree of student participation:
Examples of core components of model in practice:
Practices supporting/differing from interview findings:
Additional observations:

## *2009-10 staff assignments*

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### **A7. HGA staff assignments, 2009-10**

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Number of staff in position</b>
<b>School administrators</b>	
Executive director	1
Principal	1
Director of human resources	1
<b>School management and faculty<sup>a</sup></b>	
Administrative assistant	2
Data manager	1
Discipline	3
Family liaison	2
Food service	5
Nurse aide	1
Paraprofessional	6
Receptionist	1
Service learning coordinator	1
Soccer coach	2
Student support	1
Teacher's aide	17
Technology director	1
Title I paraprofessional	6
Transportation director	1

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**A7. HGA staff assignments, 2009-10 (continued)**

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Number of staff in position</b>
<b>Teaching faculty<sup>b</sup></b>	
Kindergarten	3
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	3
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	3
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	2
4 <sup>th</sup> grade	2
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	2
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	2
ELL	2
High school language arts	2
High school mathematics	1
High school science	1
Middle school mathematics	2
Middle school science	1
Middle school social studies	1
School psychologist	1
Special Education	2
Speech pathologist	1

<sup>a</sup> School staff holding non-licensed positions.

<sup>b</sup> Teachers employed by the school or providing services contractually (e.g., Special Education teacher, speech therapist).

**Source:** Higher Ground Academy 2009-2010 annual report on curriculum, instruction, and student achievement (Wilson, 2010).

**Note:** Numbers of staff reflect individuals and not full-time equivalency status. Individual staff are counted only once and in their primary role, although in some cases staff also perform additional roles at the school. For example, four of the faculty listed here also serve as grade-level team leaders.