



Susan Akselrad  
Board Chair  
Great Oaks Charter School  
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[Kimberly Santiago](#)

Charter School Office  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Kimberly Santiago,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Board of Great Oaks Charter School, the school leadership, and the GO Foundation. I want to begin by thanking you for steadfast support of the school over the years. Through challenging times, you have regularly and consistently supplied us with guidance and support that has helped make the school stronger. The most recent Renewal Site Visit Report date 2022 is no exception. While there are some specific points of difference, overall, I believe that you have captured the progress of the school in key areas.

**Strengths:**

Notably, I wish to highlight the following areas.

- Benchmark 1: As you said, “the trajectory of this benchmark has been positive” and that “Great Oaks has made numerous staff, curricular and schedule changes over the past two years with a focus on student outcomes.” I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment and look forward to the continued evidence of progress.
- Benchmarks 2 and 3: In both instances, you awarded us a “Meets” designation. While we are determined to reach the Exceeds category, I agree with the assessment that the school has put in place an effective system that supports both Teaching and Learning as well as Culture, Climate and Family Engagement. I am very proud of our progress in these areas, particularly in the context of the pandemic - something deeply challenging for all of us.
- Benchmarks 7 and 8: I agree that here as well: “The school has established a well-functioning organizational structure...to ensure academic success, organizational viability, board effectiveness and faithfulness to the terms of its charter.” As Board Chair, I have worked closely with the Foundation and school leadership to get us to this point.
- Benchmark 9: We have made enormous progress in this area and are on track to meet our enrollment and retention targets for all students and most notably students with disabilities, English Language learners and students who are eligible for free and reduced



priced lunch. This is central to our mission as a school - and our progress in this area has been gratifying. It is important to note that we have maintained enrollment in the context of a broader drop in enrollment across the city.

There were several areas that we assessed as “Approaches”. I do wish to note for the Charter School Office and the Board of Regents that many of the issues noted in the report had been raised previously and *have already been addressed*. To that end, I would urge you to consider that additional evidence. Specifically, I refer to the following:

**Benchmark 4:** The CFO of the GO Foundation has agreed with the findings. There are pandemic-based reasons that made enrollment, and hence the margins for the 20-21 school year particularly challenging and unusual. We do wish to note that the Financial Composite Score remains almost entirely in the “Strong” benchmark. We have addressed the issues that you raised and are committed to remaining in the “Strong” category moving forward.

**FINANCIAL COMPOSITE SCORE**

Composite Score

**BENCHMARK and FINDING:**

Strong; 1.5 - 3.0 / Adequate; 1.0 - 1.4 /

Needs Monitoring; -1.0 - 0.9

1.99	1.63	1.63	2.17	1.48
Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong

**Benchmark 5:** The Chief Financial Officer of the Great Oaks Foundation has surfaced some concerns about the language on page 22 regarding Benchmark 5. Most notably the concerns articulated about the 2021 audit are in fact about the 2020 audit. The snapshot of key text is below. Please note the final sentence which reads, “During the 2021 audit, all items tested followed the FPP (Fiscal Policies and Procedures).”



2021 audit is below:

GREAT OAKS CHARTER SCHOOL  
SCHEDULE OF FINDINGS AND RESPONSES, Cont'd  
YEAR ENDED JUNE 30, 2021

SCHEDULE OF PRIOR YEAR FINDINGS AND RESPONSES

**Finding 2020-001**

*Statement of condition*

During the 2020 audit, we noted the Fiscal Policies and Procedures ("FPP") were not always followed in practice. Our testing identified one instance where a contract for services in excess of \$25,000 was entered into by the Executive Director, but was not approved by the Board of Trustees. This contract was then paid with a check signed by the Executive Director and did not have a second signature as all checks over \$10,000 require.

*Criteria and effect of conditions*

The Charter School entered into a contract agreement without proper approval and the services were paid for without proper authorization.

*Recommendation*

We recommend the proper procedures are followed as documented in the FPP to ensure effective controls are in place with respect to contracts and check signing. If the current procedures are not workable, alternative procedures should be designed and implemented and the FPP updated accordingly.

*Management's response*

We concur with the finding. This finding has been reviewed with the School management and finance staff. Corrective action has been taken to review upcoming procurement needs on a weekly basis to ensure that contracts in excess of \$25,000 are approved by the Board of Trustees prior to a contract agreement or purchase order. In addition, adoption of the online payment processing system for accounts payable will ensure that payments over \$10,000 will require the approval of the school leader and Treasurer for payment.

*Current status*

During the 2021 audit, all items tested followed the FPP.

Importantly, I wish to note the following unqualified opinion of the 2021 audit:

**Opinion**

In our opinion, the financial statements referred to above present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of Great Oaks Charter School as of June 30, 2021, and the changes in its net assets, functional expenses and its cash flows for the year then ended, in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.

To summarize, Great Oaks Charter School does not dispute the findings in the report, but rather has shared clear evidence that these issues have since been addressed. The general ledger accounts have been rectified, and written guidelines & site-based training for cash handling & purchasing were implemented. In addition, the finance and operations teams meet weekly to review these reports. We respectfully request that the SED acknowledge this change in the report. Given that



the issue has been addressed, we are wondering if the SED would consider changing this category to Meets.

**Benchmark 6:**

Finally, I believe that the available evidence demonstrates the Board’s effective oversight and governance. While this is true across Indicators a-f, I will focus on the concerns raised regarding our oversight of fiscal operations. Our Finance Committee has met monthly throughout the most recent Charter term. When the issues were surfaced by the 2020 audit, we moved quickly to address the issue. We implemented the systems discussed above. We worked with the GO Foundation to address the personnel concerns that were at the core of the issue - and that person is no longer with Great Oaks. We dealt with it so clearly and effectively that, again, our 2021 audit yielded an unqualified opinion. While it is true that there was a concern, I would think that the effective and efficient response by the Board would substantiate the quality of our oversight: a board cannot ensure mistakes are never made; a board can ensure that those mistakes are addressed and rectified, including strengthening the systems that allowed for the mistakes. Here as well, we are respectfully requesting that SED consider changing this category to Meets.

**Closing**

The Board, School leadership and GO Foundation deeply appreciate all the efforts of SED to support our school. Both Kimberly Santiago and David Frank have been readily available whenever necessary and have provided in time feedback, insights and follow up that have consistently been helpful in our efforts to improve our school.

As we come out of the pandemic and into our next charter, I have never been more optimistic about the state of Great Oaks Charter School. We have a strong leadership team, led by Timberly Wilson who is entering her fourth year in school leadership and her second as Executive Director. The core of our staff and strongest teachers have withstood the test of the pandemic and remain committed to the school. The demand for our high school from returning students speaks volumes of our progress. Finally, we are close to securing a 30-year lease that will settle our location for decades to come.

Sincerely,

*Susan Akselrad*

Susan Akselrad  
Board Chair  
Great Oaks Charter School



Appendix I: GO NYC 21-22 SY Purchase Request Protocol

**GO-NYC 21-22 SY Purchase Request Protocol**

In line with the school's fiscal policy, this form is to be used for the pre-approval of ***all purchase requests***. Please submit your request **10 business days** in advance to allow for the approval process to be completed. For out-of-pocket purchase requests, please submit your request **at least 2 days** in advance. Please submit one form for each event or budget category. (e.g. a separate request for teaching supplies vs field trips)





## Purchase Request Submission Process

For the purchase to be paid by the school from an invoice:



For the purchase to be reimbursed for an out-of-pocket purchase:

