



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Sisulu Charter School

Report

2000-2001
Academic Year

History and Purpose

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of their local school district and are created by civic leaders, community groups, educators and parents interested in creating public school choice in their communities, particularly for children at-risk of academic failure.

Like all public schools, charter schools are open to all children, non-sectarian in their programs and funded with public tax dollars. Each public charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees that, like all school boards, is subject to New York State's Freedom of Information and Open Meetings laws. Public charter schools authorized by the State University of New York Trustees are subject to oversight and monitoring by the University's Charter Schools Institute. Additionally, all public charter schools in New York State are subject to inspection and oversight by the state Department of Education.

In exchange for freedom from many rules and regulations, each public charter school receives a charter, or contract, of up to five years and must meet stated student performance goals or risk losing its charter and ceasing operations. This tradeoff – freedom from rules and regulations in exchange for unprecedented accountability for student performance – is considered one of the most significant differences between public charter schools and other public schools run by school districts.

The specific purposes of the charter schools law are set forth in Education Law §2850(2)(a-f), and they include improving student learning and achievement, increasing learning opportunities for all students (particularly those at-risk of academic failure), expanding parental choice in public schools and moving from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.

Allowed by Chapter 4 of the Laws of 1998, new public charter schools in New York can be authorized by the State University of New York Board of Trustees, the Board of Regents or by local Boards of Education (in conjunction with the Regents). In addition, existing public schools can seek charter status through their governing Boards of Education, again in conjunction with the Regents.

The Charter Schools Institute was established by the State University of New York Board of Trustees to assist in the review, approval and oversight of schools seeking their charter via the Trustees. Inspections, analysis and reporting of information represent one facet of the oversight process conducted and managed by the Institute.

The Institute has created and established a cyclical visitation and inspection process for schools authorized by the University Trustees. The Institute conducts multiple site visits and inspection visits throughout the five years of an approved charter; some visits are announced and others are not. This process allows the Institute to gather regular information regarding teaching and learning within the environment of each school, as well as information regarding each school's administrative operations.

This report reflects the observations and findings from an inspection visit conducted by a 2 – 4 member team comprised of Institute staff and outside educators. Visiting inspectors seek

evidence of effectiveness in key areas: teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment); climate (environment and discipline); facility (building or physical plant); and trueness to the school's charter, including its mission. Although issues regarding compliance with state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed), compliance is not the ultimate purpose of the inspection visit.

On May 9, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter School Institute visited the school. The team was comprised of:

- Michael J. Stevens, Ph.D.
Vice President of Evaluation and Research, Charter Schools Institute.
- Jennifer Sneed, Ph.D.
Executive Director of Personnel for Western Suffolk BOCES
- Evan Rudall
Co-Director, Roxbury Prep Charter School, Roxbury, MA.
- Ivan Hageman
The East Harlem School at Exodus House, New York, NY.

The inspection visit included meeting with the principal/director, classroom visitations, ad hoc meetings/conversations with staff and students and a review of student work. Data from this inspection along with anecdotal evidence from visitations during the school year was used to develop the curriculum and instruction component of the public report. Institute staff considered the following elements of successful schools in preparing the report:

- Do the school's practices reflect high expectations for student achievement?
- How do teachers assess student work?
- Does student work reflect rigorous assessment?
- Do students appear to be engaged and attentive?
- What is the level of teacher professionalism and expertise?
- Assess the school climate and learning environment.
- Is the school orderly?
- Do the physical facilities support effective instruction?
- Is the school true to its purpose as stated in its mission and charter?
- Assess the school's direction, leadership and growth.

This document is designed to share with the school's governing board, parents and the public the inspectors' observations, findings and discussion. It is also designed to provide substantive information that can be used to improve the school's educational programs for students as well as inform parents and other members of the public about the school's progress.

Readers should keep in mind that each start-up charter school faces major challenges, and that schools address them at different rates. There is no one correct time frame for successfully meeting each challenge. The challenges are identical to those of a start-up business enterprise, except public charter schools involve parents and children in the high-profile world of public education. Challenges commonly addressed by public charter schools across the country and in New York State frequently include:

- Establishing a positive school culture that provides high expectations, support and encouragement for students and teaching staff, any necessary remediation for students, and consistent daily routines for all;
- Establishing operational and communication patterns with the governing board, as well as communication patterns with staff, parents and the community;
- Setting up sound fiscal processes and procedures;
- Establishing this operation in often less-than-ideal facilities, without ready access to facilities funding mechanisms available to other public schools;
- Creating an environment where teachers receive timely professional development to address changing student needs;
- Ensuring that all staff are familiar with and consistently use the school-wide system for behavior management; and;
- Retaining qualified staff and minimizing the frequency and rate of any staff turnover by understanding the reason for it, and providing replacement staff with an orientation to the school and its program, as well as the necessary professional development.

School Description

The Sisulu Children’s Academy – Harlem Public Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in July of 1999 and by the Board of Regents in August of that year. It opened in September 1999 with an enrollment of 247 students in grades K-2. The school plans to add one grade level per year, enrolling 75-100 more students. The school’s founders sought to provide a quality public education alternative for one of the poorest areas in Manhattan – the school is located in Community School District 5, at the time of the school’s opening the worst performing community school district in Manhattan, and 30th out of 32 in New York City.

The school is located in two facilities in Harlem. Grades K-2 are located in a facility on 155th Street. Grades 3 and 4 are housed in the Police Athletic League (PAL) Facility located on Manhattan Avenue.

The school has contracted with Victory Schools, Inc. for its management. Victory Schools seeks to improve public education by assisting in the start-up and management of public charter schools of outstanding quality, particularly those created to serve at-risk students. Built on the premise that all children can learn, Victory Schools uses an educational program that employs Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge and an extended school day schedule featuring a strong enrichment component based on thematic curricula.

According to the 1999-2000 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, Community School District 5 contained 10,515 students: 75.7% African-American; 22.5% Hispanic; 0.7% white; and, 1.1% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 86.5% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2000 75% of students in Community School District 5 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade ELA test; 76% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade ELA test, 81% of students failed to meet state standards; 92% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Academic Data

The school has presented data from Fall, 2000 and Spring, 2001 administrations of the Iowa Test of Basic skills to 215 students in grades K-3 using the statistic Normal Curve Equivalent. Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) is a standard score (a score that is expressed as a deviation from a population mean) with the lowest score being 1, the highest being 99 and the mean (arithmetical average) of 50. NCE's may be added, subtracted and averaged and may be used to represent how a student or group of students performed in comparison to the mean. For example, a drop in scores over time means the students are being passed by their peers nationwide and an increase in scores over time means that students are passing their peers nationwide. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration shows students began the year with a mean NCE score of 41.6 (approximately the 35th percentile) in reading, a mean NCE score of 34 (approximately the 22nd percentile) in language and a mean NCE score of 33.3 (approximately the 21st percentile) in math. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the same tests shows that in reading, student scores increased by an average of 3.4 NCE (approximately 5 percentiles), based on a same-student analysis. In math, students increased their scores by an average of 8.8 NCE (approximately 12 percentiles) nationally, based on a same-student analysis. In language skills student scores increased by an average of 7.7 NCE (approximately 14 percentiles) nationally, based on a same-student analysis.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Sisulu Children's Academy Charter School in August 2000 held two weeks of staff training in Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge, school procedures and the school's referral process. Throughout the year, teachers have one hour daily for lunch and instructional planning during student lunch and recess time, in addition to regularly scheduled Direct Instruction training. The school opened for its second year of classes in September 2000.

Most classrooms reflect high expectations for all students. Teachers expected attentiveness and participation from students. Students were required to be articulate and to read with fluency when called upon. "Do-overs" were required of students who made errors.

Sisulu Children's Academy is committed to Direct Instruction for reading and mathematics. Consistent with Direct Instruction design, the format is organized, controlled and consistent from classroom to classroom. Within this orderly system, students clearly value achievement and take pride in their work. To assist students who are not making adequate academic progress, the

school administration trained an aide in Direct Instruction to provide extra assistance to third grade students in a pullout type format. Additionally, the Direct Instruction specialist, employed through Victory Schools, is in each of the two Sisulu buildings one day per week. The specialist evaluates students' reading progress/level to determine if the student is appropriately placed for reading instruction. The specialist stated that students could be moved at any time to ensure appropriate instructional placement.

Institute staff observed the effective use of the Core Knowledge curriculum by teachers. Thematic projects associated with the Core Knowledge curriculum indicated school wide involvement and a high degree of intellectual activity. These thematic explorations, displayed throughout the school, revealed that students were introduced to and engaged with complex conceptual ideas. The displayed student work was corrected with teacher comments (e.g., "excellent!" "very good"), stickers and numerical scores in evidence. To ensure students are prepared for the rigor of elementary state assessments in fourth grade, the school should consider ways to increase the amount of analysis and synthesis (i.e., higher-level skills) in the curriculum.

School Climate

The school's two sites appeared orderly throughout the day of the Institute's visit. At each site, hallway traffic was orderly and student voices were subdued during bathroom breaks. "Tickets" were used in several classrooms to reinforce positive behavior associated with following the school rules. Students accumulate the tickets and redeem them at the school store pens, pencils, stickers and other educational items. Behavioral problems were addressed primarily through two methods: (1) individual students were escorted out of classrooms by the cooperating teacher/paraprofessional in the classroom, spoken to in the hall, and then promptly returned to the classroom; or (2) the teacher would address an individual student during the lesson to re-focus the student before proceeding with the lesson. Although some students were observed off task during lessons, it was not the norm. The school community has worked throughout the year to instill an orderly work environment and it appears that they have achieved it. To further assist with student order and discipline, the school created a vice-principal position in April 2001.

The school climate is positive and reinforces teaching and learning. Students appear to understand and follow classroom expectations and procedures, particularly during Direct Instruction. Classrooms and hallways contain bright displays of student work, both written and artistic, maps, newsprint, stories and calendars. The displays indicated students worked hard at the assignments and that teachers placed a high value on quality work. Students interacted well with each other, teachers and other adults. The principal said she believed the school was becoming "a community of learners."

Facility

The school's two sites appeared sound with security provided at the main entrance on the ground floor. However, the space the school rents in the PAL building (441 Manhattan Ave.) is used for other purposes when school is not in session. During the 2000-01 school year, this meant all school furniture and equipment needed to be detachable, mobile and stored each evening. This

situation created a sense of transiency. Although staff is committed to a general “good housekeeping” philosophy, staff did not have permanent storage areas or classrooms in a more traditional sense. Teachers and students also did not have a place to leave long term or “in progress” projects. Cabinets and blackboards divided several classrooms with a large open space to the smooth concrete ceiling. The combination of shared space, poor acoustics, generally acceptable classroom activity and the call-response nature of Direct Instruction often resulted in unusually high noise.

The space at 125 W. 115th Street was superior to the PAL building in that classrooms conveyed a greater impression of permanence and identity (there were no classroom dividers or storage and setup issues to be negotiated daily).

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school in its charter application identified the following components of its mission:

- Create one of the finest public schools in America;
- Create a role model for charter public school design;
- Improve student learning and achievement through Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge, thematic curricula;
- Increase learning for all students with an emphasis on children at risk of academic failure;
- Use different and innovative teaching methods;
- Increase professional opportunities for teachers, school administrators and other personnel;
- Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system;
- Institute a change from a rule-based to a performance-based accountability system.

The school, under the leadership of the administration, has made great progress achieving many aspects of the charter and mission statement. During the first year of operation, school leadership, faculty and staff focused on the delivery of Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge and thematic curricula and evidence of this is seen throughout the school. Especially noteworthy is the emphasis on the professional development of teachers, especially in the area of Direct Instruction. In the future, Institute staff will be looking for evidence of the “use different and innovative teaching methods” in the school.