



Charter Schools Institute  

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State University of New York

# New Covenant 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 team consisting 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 7 – 8, 2001, an inspection team for the Charter School Institute visited the school. The team was:

- Michael Stevens, Vice President of Evaluation and Research
- Radiclan Clytus, Senior Analyst
- Josephine Baker, Chairperson, D.C. Public Charter School Board, Washington, D.C.
- Leo Kostelnik, Teacher, Fonda-Fultonville School, Fonda, NY
- Ivan Hageman, Co-Founder and principal, East Harlem School at Exodus House, NY, 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. Charter School 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?
- The level of teacher professionalism and expertise.
- The school climate.
- 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
- Evidence of the school's direction, leadership and growth.

The purpose of this document is to share with the school's governing board the inspectors' observations, findings and discussion, and to provide substantive information, which can be used to improve the school's educational programs for students. The information contained herein is offered as a form of assistance to both the governing board and the school. We hope you can glean from the contents insights that will serve as guides in your work.

As you read this document keep in mind that each start-up public charter school faces certain challenges, and that schools address them at different "developmental" rates. There is no one correct time for successfully meeting each challenge. The challenges, however, are somewhat consistent, and could include all or some of the following:

- Establishing a positive school culture that provides support and direction for teaching staff, encouragement and 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 viable fiscal processes and procedures;
- 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.

The Institute hopes this document, which outlines the findings of the school's progress in implementing its charter and accountability plan is received in the spirit in which it is intended, and that you will feel free to invite us for a dialogue regarding the information at a mutually convenient time.

### **School Description**

Founded by a coalition of community leaders seeking to provide a quality public education alternative for the children and families of Albany, New Covenant Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in August of 1999 and opened in September of that year. Located in Arbor Hill, the school initially enrolled 398 students in grades K-5 and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to more than 900 students in grades K-8.

After its first year, the school terminated its management agreement with Advantage Schools Inc., a for-profit school management firm, and amended its charter to allow it to contract with Edison Schools, Inc., also a for-profit school management firm. The switch from one provider to another constituted a significant and material change to the charter and required a charter amendment to be approved by the University Trustees and reviewed by the Board of Regents. Both the Trustees and the Regents voted to approve the amended charter.

The Edison model employs separate school academies using a curriculum that includes Direct Instruction, project-based learning, cooperative learning and other features. The University Trustees granted a waiver from collective bargaining requirements to the school in accordance with provisions of the Charter Schools Act of 1998.

Then-Regent Eleanor Bartlett assumed leadership of New Covenant in August 2000 and soon thereafter implemented changes to the school's program, including as a heightened emphasis on reading and math and an optional Saturday morning tutorial program. In September 2001, New Covenant moved from temporary modular facilities into a new building that houses both the school and a separately managed community center.

In August 2000, the State University Trustees placed the school on probation after the school, in its first year, committed several substantial and material violations of its charter and the law. The University Trustees also imposed on the school a Remedial Action Plan (copies of which are on file with the school, the Institute and State Education Department). That probation continued throughout the 2000-01 academic year.

School district demographics, according to the 2001 New York State Education Department report card for the Albany City School District, were as follows for the 1999-2000 academic year: 9,910 students enrolled, 60% African American, 7.2% Hispanic, 29.7% white, and 3% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander. Some 62.1% of the students received free or reduced cost lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2000, 57% of students the Albany City School District in failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 47% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade Math test. On the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test, 72% of students failed to meet state standards; 77% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math test.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Academic Data**

The school did not submit data from the 2000-01 administration of the Stanford Achievement Test and planned this winter to retest students whose baseline test scores are available from the 1999-2000 school year. This analysis has not yet been presented.

The school has presented data from Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 administrations of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test to 185 students in grades 2-5. The Spring administration of the test revealed a mean increase of 7.7 NCE over a mean baseline score of 26.2. This baseline placed the average tested student at the 13<sup>th</sup> national percentile while the retest indicated improvement to the 23<sup>rd</sup> national percentile.

The school also presented data on fourth grade students' scores on the State Assessments in English Language Arts and Math. These tests are designed to measure the sum total of a student's learning during all previous grades. Given in the first year of a charter school's operations, they are considered a measure of the status of students upon enrollment and thus a baseline against which future data will be measured. Students scoring at Level One are considered furthest from standard, Level Two means below standard, Level Three means meeting standard and Level Four means exceeds standard.

On the Grade 4 English Language Arts assessment, results were as follows:

- 1999-2000: 46% of students at level one, 46% level two, 9% level three, 0% level four.
- 2000-01: 42.2% at level one, 35.6% level two, 22.2% level three, 0% level four.

On the Grade 4 Mathematics assessment, results were as follows:

- 1999-2000: 61% at level one, 36% level two, 3% level three, 0% level four.
- 2000-01: 32.6 level one, 45.7 level two, 17.4 level three, 4.3% level four.

Normal Curve Equivalent is a standard score (like the more commonly known percentile rank) with a low score of 1, a high score of 99 and an 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.

### **School Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

During the 2000-01 academic year, New Covenant Charter School was still struggling to implement an instructional program that will enable all students to excel academically. The school underwent a considerable amount of institutional restructuring after its first year of operation, and shortly before the start of the new school year, New Covenant's Board of Trustees voted to change management companies and hire Eleanor Bartlett as school director. Ms. Bartlett, a former acting superintendent of the Albany City School District, had been appointed to the education policy-setting Board of Regents and resigned that post to join New Covenant.

After analyzing student performance data, observing students and consulting with teachers, Ms. Bartlett made substantive changes to the school's program. Specifically, the principal increased time spent on Math and reading and reduced time on such non-core subjects as Spanish, art and music. She also added optional after school and Saturday tutoring sessions in reading.

Ms. Bartlett also utilized her autonomy and administrative flexibility as a charter public school leader to make staff decisions based on performance. Near the end of the 2000-01 academic year, the Academy Director and 10 of the school's 24 teachers were not offered new contracts for the 2001-02 school year. The Institute's inspection, reflected in this report, was conducted shortly before those teachers were informed of that decision.

Inspectors noticed an overall difference in the quality of instruction in grades K-2 (Primary Academy) in comparison to grades 3-5 (Elementary Academy) and grade 6 (Junior Academy). In the Primary Academy, the majority of teachers employed effective management techniques for governing transitions and classroom participation. These teachers worked with a sense of purpose and made use of such support materials as manipulatives, word charts and overheads to help as many students as possible master concepts. Many of the students in these classes were observed responding positively to verbal prompts, and answering questions that required conceptual thinking. Students appeared engaged and worked efficiently in groups and at individually assigned tasks.

In the school's most effective classrooms, teachers' effective use of classroom management skills was marked by a strong adherence to the educational goals and techniques described in the charter: Multiple teaching strategies, with an emphasis on cooperative learning and one-to-one

tutoring; creative and real-world writing activities; and the application of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division to real-life problems and situations.

The implementation of the academic program was particularly well-managed in the kindergarten, where inspectors observed the successful delivery of writing instruction, math and reading.

In contrast, routines, transitions and teacher expectations for student focus and participation were generally lacking in the Elementary Academy and particularly lacking in the Junior Academy (6<sup>th</sup> grade). In these grades, teachers often labored to implement even basic classroom procedures and considerable instructional time was lost because of student disruptions. Instructional activities requiring a significant level of student focus and participation were often rendered ineffective because of poor student behavior. Teachers were rarely observed asking questions that required or reinforced analytical thinking. Some teachers demonstrated a level of expertise in specific subject areas, but many were ineffective at content delivery and classroom management.

The majority of the teachers' lesson plans in the Elementary Academy consisted of checking homework, reviewing the previous day's instruction or presenting new instruction with some guided practice. This format was methodical and provided students with an ordered schedule of activities. However, teachers did not appear to discuss the purpose of their lessons with students or outline their goals in a manner that promoted a broader understanding of the materials at hand. During instruction few teachers made observable efforts to draw in students who seemed distracted or unmotivated. Inspectors observed very limited evidence of teachers varying instructional activities to meet the individual needs of students.

Posted work was observed in a variety of spaces throughout the school. While many assignments were designed to develop basic literacy and composition skills, particularly in the Primary Academy, a significant number of errors in spelling and grammar remained uncorrected.

### **School Climate**

Inspectors interviewed several fifth and sixth grade students who stated that the education they received at New Covenant was comparatively better than what they had received at their previous schools. Students consistently agreed with one student's assertion that at New Covenant, "smart kids don't get picked on." Students cited the school's uniform policy, emphasis on "learning position," and "more time with teachers" as important in the promotion of academic achievement and high behavioral expectations.

New Covenant's faculty appeared committed to teaching under-served students in an urban setting. They consistently expressed seriousness about their charge and readily embraced their daily responsibilities. Yet classroom observations indicated this commitment was undercut in many cases by a lack of effective discipline techniques and classroom management skills. Inspectors often encountered teachers whose classroom instruction was derailed by disruptive students.

Ms. Bartlett has recognized the connections between discipline and instruction and hired two curriculum consultants to assist her teachers in planning and implementing effective lessons. She also enlisted the aid of outside behavioral consultants to assist in curbing student misconduct and establishing a culture that would value academic achievement and discipline.

### **Facility**

The temporary facility used in the school's first two years posed significant limitations to teaching and learning. Classrooms were sometimes cramped and often noisy. The absence of gym space (physical education was provided outside weather permitting), a place for assembly where the principal could address students as a group or schedule events to build community, and a lunch area, may have had an effect on school culture and student behavior. Also, many disruptions during and between classes developed in hallways that were crowded, noisy and offered a variety of blind corners for those who wished to avoid supervision.

### **School Mission and Charter Implementation**

While the intentions of the faculty and the administration remained extremely positive, New Covenant at year two was still at the foundational stage of "creating a school that will register continuous academic and social gains in student performance while serving the diverse needs of its student population." Teachers' instructional practices did not always mirror the curriculum and educational goals outlined in the school's charter, and evidence that students were held accountable to school-wide rules and participating in lessons was mostly found only in the Primary Academy.

The school director's commitment to increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the school by taking full advantage of the flexibility afforded her under law and by making personnel decisions based on performance is encouraging. Further, the school has undeniably set ambitious goals for a student population that baseline testing indicates has been dramatically and disproportionately ill-served in the past. Nonetheless, inspectors believe that the school must increase the effectiveness of its academic program and raise the level of expectations for and of its students in order to satisfy the goals described in its charter.