



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Rochester Leadership
Academy 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, in some cases, outside experts. 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. The evidence obtained by the inspectors in a visit to a first-year school functions as baseline information regarding the school.

On May 15, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the school. The team was comprised of:

- Michael Stevens, Ph.D. , Vice President of Research and Evaluation
- Douglas Lemov, Vice President for Accountability

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 first year 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

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. It opened in fall 2000. The school's charter called for 325 students in grades K-8 its initial year. The school plans to expand to 648 students in grades K-8 by the end of its 5-year charter. It occupies the first three floors of an office building in downtown Rochester, sharing the building with professional tenants

Based on a belief that a child's self-esteem is developed through diligence and achievement, the school's founders sought to create a school that provides an orderly environment with high academic and social expectations, and in which parents play a key role in helping the school to achieve its mission.

The school has contracted with National Heritage Academies to oversee its management. National Heritage Academies, which has a network of 28 schools in Michigan, North Carolina and New York educating 13,940 students, uses a well-known and highly regarded curricula, including Core Knowledge, Open Court, and Saxon Math, as well as a character development component. The school's governance structure includes a School Leadership team consisting of parent chairs of nine school committees reporting to the school's board of trustees.

According to the 1999-2000 New York State Education Department district-wide report card of the Rochester City School District, 36,784 students enrolled: 62.6% African-American; 18.3% Hispanic; 16.7% white; and 2.4% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 83.5 % of the students in the district received free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 62% of its students in the first year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 63% of students in the Rochester City School District failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 62% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th

grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 73% of students failed to meet state standards; 88% of 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 Metropolitan Achievement Test. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration shows that the school enrolled an overall population scoring in the 39th percentile in reading comprehension, and the 32nd percentile in math, on average. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the same tests has not yet been presented in a format that allows for valid conclusions.

The school also presented data from 4th grade State Assessments in English Language Arts and Math. These tests are designed to measure student learning to date – not just 4th grade learning. For a school administering the assessments for the first time, the scores are considered a baseline measure of the status of students upon enrollment. On the grade 4 English Language Arts assessment, 24.4% of students scored at level one, farthest from the standard; 56.1% of students scored at level two, nearer but still below standard; 19.5% of students scored at level three, above standard. No students scored at level 4, well above standard. On the grade 4 Mathematics assessment, 25% of students scored at level one, farthest from the standard; 47.7% of students scored at level two; 25% of students scored at level three and 2.3% of students scored at level 4. On the 8th grade English Language Arts assessment, 25% of students scored at level one; 62.5% of students scored at level two; 12.5% of students scored at level three and no students scored at level 4. On the 8th grade Mathematics assessment, 44.4% of students scored at level one; 22.2% of students scored at level two; 33.2% of students scored at level three and no students scored at level 4.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

In its charter, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School commits to building an academic program characterized by:

- A safe orderly environment
- A clear school mission
- Strong instructional leadership
- High expectations for student achievement
- Increased time on task
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Strong home-school relations

In its first year, the school made considerable headway in the majority of these areas, particularly in raising academic expectations and establishing an orderly learning environment. By spring,

students in many classrooms were observed to work industriously and independently even when not directly watched by their teacher. In many classrooms a tone of civility prevailed with students not only using “please” and “thank you” in addressing classmates and teachers but whispering conscientiously while working problems with a partner so as not to disturb other classmates.

Observation and conversations with staff suggested that school personnel had a common interpretation of the school’s priorities and mission. Staff members consistently reinforced the link between high behavioral and high academic standards. In interactions with students, many teachers referred explicitly to the connection between positive behavior and academic success.

As viewed on multiple visits throughout the school year and on the formal year-end site visit, teacher effectiveness varied. However, the principal said personnel decisions would be based on teacher effectiveness.

Instruction was generally purposeful and standards-driven. Lessons were organized around clear concepts and skills and used a wide variety of techniques including lecture, question and answer, group work, partner work, independent seat work, Socratic method, dramatizations, and audio-visual presentations of material. Most teachers began lessons using a teacher-centered approach and diverged as warranted, often periodically and effectively increasing or decreasing the amount of leeway offered to students. In many classrooms, time lost in transition was minimized and many teachers were observed to take steps explicitly designed to maximize time on task. The administration has made this aspect of its teachers’ work a high priority in its oversight of staff and appears to be working to improve classrooms where school standards are not upheld.

Inspectors observed significant variation in teachers’ individual methods of evaluating and tracking student performance. Some teachers tracked homework daily, others did not. Some graded “seat work” while others did not appear to collect it. Most teachers used tests and quizzes with some frequency. Though students generally approached these activities with effort and diligence, other teachers did not appear to have a clear-cut approach to assessment. Though the school has committed to refusing to promote students who have not mastered academic standards in their present grade, the school did not yet appear to have fully standardized its policies and practices in implementing this policy. However, the school did report plans to keep several students back, but only if the parents agreed.

School Climate

The school’s charter commits to a culture reinforcing strong values and clear expectations for student behavior. School administration has made the establishment of these elements a priority and student engagement and attentiveness in many of the school’s classrooms was impressive.

In most classrooms, interactions among students and faculty were marked by a tone of respect and personal responsibility that seemed deliberately fostered by teaching staff and school administration. Deliberate follow through and careful attention to detail regarding behavioral issues were typical of the school’s strongest teachers and many faculty members were particularly effective in explaining the connection between their respect for students and their

high standards for behavior, integrity and responsibility. In public settings as well (cafeteria, hallways, gym etc) almost all students demonstrated a clear knowledge of the school's expectations. The school in its first year was also effective in establishing a shared vocabulary of terms describing good character and several teachers were observed to explicitly reinforce these ideas in conversations with students.

In a minority of the school's classrooms, student attentiveness and engagement did not meet the school's standards and teachers were unable to implement the school's positive and constructive culture. However, the school administration discussed plans to address this situation, noting that personnel decisions would be influenced by these considerations. Inspectors noted that the freedom to consider staff members' alignment with school priorities and mission is a significant advantage afforded to public charter schools as part of the enacting legislation. The school appeared to be using this freedom as intended.

By addressing behavior and orderliness firmly and consistently in its first year, the school set a tone likely to support and maximize effective instruction and learning.

Facility

Facilities somewhat limited the program but the administration has made efforts to maximize current space while planning for new and more ample space for the future. Classrooms in grades K-4 are large, bright and in excellent repair. Grade 5-9 classrooms are located in the school's basement. They lack windows and, in some cases, are cramped and less neat, quiet and clean than other rooms. The school's physical education space is limited and specific facilities for science are not presently available.

Despite these limitations, the school effectively uses its space to support its academic mission. There is consistent effort to display student work. Further, this student work is up-to-date and in good repair. Student work displays reinforce school goals by including discussions of the assignment, explicit references to the standard addressed and in some cases identification of the characteristics of successful work. Posters and charts affirming and reinforcing traits of good character were also common and in many cases these posters were made by students and teachers themselves to reflect intentional work on issues of character.

School administrators say plans were being developed for a new building that will allow for anticipated growth while fully supporting the school's academic program. The successful completion of these plans may be an important factor in the school's continued progress.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school's charter places special emphasis on the importance of developing "values," "traditional principles" and a safe and orderly learning environment. Inspectors saw consistent and persuasive evidence that the school takes this commitment seriously and was, after its first year, well on its way to meeting the terms of its charter in this regard.

The school appeared to be making effective progress in implementing additional elements of the school model – a core curriculum focusing on fundamental skills and concepts, increased time on task, and high academic and social expectations.

Evidence of progress in the frequent monitoring of student work was less prevalent, as was evidence that the school had implemented a school-wide system of integrated technology, as indicated in the school's charter. Inspectors saw few students using technology in the classroom and few operating computers in classrooms. While some faculty members said they had made use of on-line lesson planning resources provided by the school's management partner, such use seemed to be inconsistent.

The school's administration and faculty have faced significant challenges during the school's first year of operations but have held fast to the school's core principles, values and standards. They have effectively addressed issues in accordance with the priorities expressed in the charter, making effective and timely interventions to improve school culture, particularly in the school's first months.