



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Roosevelt Children's 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 June 4, 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
- Radiclan Clytus, Senior Analyst

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

Roosevelt Children's Academy Charter School was approved by the State University Trustees in January 2000 and opened in September of that year with 147 students in grades K-2.

Members of the Roosevelt community felt a great need for a public education alternative to the Roosevelt School District, which a state law placed under special supervision of the State Education Department.

The school contracted with Victory Schools, Inc. for its management. The Victory Schools curriculum is built on the principle that all children can learn and integrates the Core Knowledge academic program with Direct Instruction, and Modern Red Schoolhouse standards.

Roosevelt Academy Charter School is located in a newly constructed modular facility on Pleasant Avenue in Roosevelt.

According to the 1999-2000 New York State Education Department district-wide report card of the Roosevelt Union Free School District, 2,908 students were enrolled: 85% African-American; 14.6% Hispanic; 0.2% white; and 0.2% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Some 62.1% of the students qualified for free and reduced price lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 65% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 52% of students in district-run schools did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 37% of students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 89% of students did not meet state standards; 98% of students did not 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. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration shows that the school enrolled an overall population scoring in the 20th percentile in reading comprehension, and the 18th percentile in math, on average. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the same tests shows that in reading comprehension, student scores increased by an average of 15.2 NCE, based on a same-student analysis. In math, students increased their scores by an average of 17.2 NCE nationally, based on a same-student analysis. In language skills student scores increased by an average of 17.5 NCE nationally, based on a same-student analysis.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The Roosevelt Children's Academy Charter School commits itself to developing an academic program in which Direct Instruction in reading and math is augmented by a content rich Core Knowledge program designed "to teach children the substance of history, science, geography, literature, and fine arts at a high academic level." By doing so, the school aims to provide a viable educational option in one of the neediest school districts in its region as its program focuses on the skills and topics of greatest importance for young students. While the school's faculty and parents appear clearly committed to providing students an academically rich educational experience, during first-year visits inspectors found the level of expectation for student behavior and academic rigor were uneven.

The school's practices reflected student achievement expectations that varied between classrooms and between curricular areas. Inspectors found Direct Instruction lessons implemented with the most consistent level of expectation. The school's charter states that during Direct Instruction sessions, "answers are given by the class in chorus or individually, so that all students stay involved and so the teacher can quickly detect whether each individual is learning the lesson." For the most part, inspectors found this to be an accurate description of the program's implementation. Students in several classrooms were observed to respond to Direct Instruction lessons by producing work that demonstrated both mastery and confidence. However, effectiveness varied with students in some classrooms being disruptive despite their eagerness to participate. Several teachers did not display the classroom management skills to marry student enthusiasm with a focus on learning.

Expectations in the Core Knowledge component of the curriculum were less consistent. The content topics of the Core Knowledge curriculum were in line with the school's charter and provided opportunities for students to acquire substantial knowledge in history, geography, science, and world civilizations. Inspectors found that the program conformed to the overall structure described in the school's charter and, due to the limitations of one day visits to the school, were unwilling to draw extensive conclusions about the level of Core Knowledge implementation. Inspectors did note however, a possible lack of emphasis on student acquisition

of substantive content knowledge and skills. Inspectors observed several lessons that emphasized fun and creativity over knowledge acquisition and skills demonstration. As a part of a lesson on Australia, for example, students cut out and colored kangaroos. It was unclear if the cut and color activity maximized the acquisition of knowledge and linked to additional learning about the geography, population, history, culture, or economy of Australia.

Inspectors registered concern that the school and its leadership not mistake the introduction of rigorous subject matter for the effective delivery of learning opportunities. Activities that presented students with challenging tasks and multiple opportunities to concretely demonstrate the knowledge and skill acquired were rarely observed during the Institute's informal visits during the year and its formal year-end inspection.

School Climate

Expectations for student behavior and academic focus varied widely among the school's instructors. In the most effective classrooms, students were eager to take on new problems and to read aloud. In some classrooms, answers were positively reinforced even when they revealed only a tenuous grasp of information or that a student had not been paying attention. Further, several students were clearly observed to avoid doing any constructive work during entire lessons while effectively distracting teachers from working with other students. (One spent the better part of an hour with a sweater over his head and another sat in the middle of a story group and continued to defy for the duration of class her teacher's entreaties to move.)

In most classrooms, inspectors found time off task was a significant issue and in many rooms, 25 to 50 percent of students appeared off task at any given time. In one classroom more than half of class members were listed on the board as deserving negative consequences for their behavior, though this had little apparent effect. Consequences were frequently assigned but were consistently not imposed. Several teachers made comments to the effect that behavior was a function of the time of year. "Can you tell it's June?" asked one. Inspectors believe that students' lack of understanding of and respect for what was expected of them so late in the year was cause for greater and not lessened concern.

Facility

The school's modular facilities were considered cramped and somewhat limited. Classrooms are of an ample size, but meeting and office space is severely limited. Staff members appear to hold meetings – both informal and official -- in the school's hallway. Students eat in their classrooms and recess and gym classes are held in the school's small and sometimes parking lot. No space for special area classes (such as art and music) existed and Special Education services were administered in a pullout space separated from a classroom by temporary dividers.

The situation seems likely to become more difficult as the school makes plans to build additional modular classroom space in the current parking lot (for the 2002-03 school year).

School Mission and Charter Implementation

Many of the school's six classroom teachers appeared to work conscientiously and for long hours to help students succeed. Some demonstrated a clear need for professional development and inspectors saw little indication that school administration was addressing this issue. In the most effective classrooms, students were eager to take on new problems and to read aloud. One teacher set unmistakably high standards for students, gently pushing them to try harder and pay attention longer, often telling them they could do better before insisting that they try to do so. Other teachers seemed to be developing such a climate to at least some degree or with some students. At the same time, some teachers were not able to instill this level of rigor. Classroom expectations were not consistently high. The Principal's assessment of staff and classroom climate differed from that of inspectors and was universally positive.

The charter also commits the school to meeting the needs of all special education students. The presence of a full-time special educator for a relatively small student population indicates that the school will likely have the capacity to develop a responsive program marked by intensive support for students. Inspectors said the pull-out space for special education was small and could limit the school's ability to meet the needs of some students, particularly those with auditory issues, and to meet with parents confidentially about issues requiring privacy. They recommend that the school develop a plan to outline the means by which resources could be adapted to meet the needs of students with those disabilities the school is likely to enroll.