



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Amber 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 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 6, 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

Amber Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in the fall of that year. The schools charter calls for an enrollment of 120 students in grades K-1. The school plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to educate 280 students in grades K-5. The Amber Charter School is located on the second floor of a building at 125th St. and Lenox Ave. in Harlem, which also houses retail and office facilities.

The Amber Charter School uses a project-based, dual language curriculum to achieve New York State standards and enable all students, both Spanish-dominant and English-dominant, to attain fluency in both languages. The school is partnered with the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans, which has a strong community service history and education experience through its extensive role in development and operation of the Twenty-first Century Academy for Community Leadership (P.S. 210), a New York City public school.

According to the 1999-2000 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, Community School District 5 enrolled 10,515 students: 75.7% African-American; 22.5% Hispanic; 0.7% white; and, 1.1% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 81.6% of students in the district are eligible for free lunch, under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2000, 69.3% of students in Community School District 4 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 67.6% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 78% of students failed to meet state standards; 87% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Academic Data

The school has not presented externally verified, objective data on its students' initial skill levels or on the school's progress in fostering overall student progress. To develop growth data, the school has committed to administering the Test of New York State Standards (TONYSS) to third grade students beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, with the first growth data available from a cross-test comparison to scores on the New York State Assessments administered to fourth grade students in 2003-04, the last year from which data will be available prior to renewal. The school has written into its Accountability Plan an option for gathering further growth data through an administration of the 5th grade TONYSS in 2004-2005.

The school has presented data from an on-site assessment of its own students using the Early Childhood Language Arts Survey (ECLAS), a diagnostic assessment of literacy readiness. The school found that 67% of its kindergarten students scored at the "Emergent Reader" or "Beginning Reader" levels of the exam in a Spring 2001 administration of the test.

The school has begun gathering student work as part of a portfolio assessment system. No data has been presented.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

During its first year of operation, two factors appeared to limit the apparent effectiveness of instruction at Amber Charter School. The first was an overall lack of engagement and orderliness in classrooms. The second was the uneven delivery of the curriculum by the Amber staff.

In the first case, while student behavior in the hallways and classrooms improved over the course of the second half of the school year (based on Institute staff visits on February 14 and April 5, and the year-end visit), student misbehavior was a frequent distraction to teachers and constituted, in the opinion of inspectors, a significant impediment to learning for many of the school's students. While instances of strong teaching were observed during the first year, the persistence of interruptions resulting from student behavior made classroom instructional practice at times difficult to gauge due to its scarcity. With a ratio of one teacher and one teacher assistant to 15 or fewer students in each classroom, the school has adequate resources to ensure that the behavior of some students does not interfere with other students' right to an effective education. In the opinion of inspectors, resolving behavioral issues should be a primary focus the school's second year.

The second concern was the uneven delivery of the curriculum. Teachers were often observed struggling to focus lessons effectively on teaching and assessing specific skills or to engage most students in their lessons. Lack of classroom experience on the part of many faculty members appeared to be one possible cause. Many teachers were in their first year and, due to extensive staff turnover, several lacked even a full year's experience by June. On a limited number of

occasions, teachers were observed to provide to or reinforce for students information that was not factually correct.

The school administration said the school provides staff development opportunities for teachers, which in the 2000-01 academic year were primarily focused on instructional delivery. School administrators said these sessions were generally held on Saturdays and focused on such topics as mathematics. It was unclear at the time of the year-end inspection whether those training sessions were effective.

Based on interviews with staff, the 2000-01 staff at Amber Charter School was a patchwork quilt of individuals from Harlem and Washington Heights wishing to serve their community, and people in search of an urban education experience. Coupled with these staff members are those who have left careers in traditional public education because of a desire to work with underserved, at-risk students, and some that see the experience simply as employment. Overall, teachers appeared committed to their students.

Bright and colorful age and grade appropriate student work was posted in classrooms and in the common areas of the school during Institute visits. Student papers had teacher comments (e.g., “great!” or “super!”). Some posted work, including teacher displays, had factual or grammatical errors.

School Climate

The school operates in a building that provides a physically secure environment for students. The school has an electronic security system and employs a staff person at the front door who monitors the entrance and maintains a visitor log. Within the building, kindergarten and first grade students often played in bathrooms and lingered in hallways unsupervised.

During visitations and the year-end inspection, Institute staff noted that Amber staff generally treated students in a respectful and caring manner, often to the point to avoiding corrections of or confrontations regarding negative behavior. Many students appeared to respond to their teachers caring if lenient approach with similarly caring and respectful behavior; while other students were confrontational and refused to participate. This and other observations indicated that the school failed to implement codes of conduct for the classrooms and the school in general as stated on pages 358-359 of the charter. For example, the first two steps of a ten-step discipline procedure process call for “establish an on-going staff-student relationship based on trust, respect, and safety of expression,” and “develop the conflict-resolution skills of students and adults.” Institute staff did not see evidence that these two steps nor the remainder of the discipline procedures were being consistently implemented.

Facility

Amber Charter School is located in a second story space located on Lenox Avenue, between 125th and 126th streets in Harlem. The Board of Directors of the school rents this space while

planning continues for a permanent home in Washington Heights where Amber's founders originally planned to site the school. Amber's inability to secure space in its intended, predominantly bilingual community appears to have resulted in the enrollment of fewer Spanish language-dominant students than envisioned in the school's charter application. In fact, the enrollment of fewer than 10 bilingual students poses a significant array of challenges to a program based upon the concept of bilingual immersion.

In the Lenox Avenue facility, the majority of classrooms are brightly lit, with natural light entering through large windows. The classrooms had new, age-appropriate furniture and equipment and were well stocked with supplies. Art, drama and movement shared a separate classroom on a rotating basis. There was no dedicated space for physical education or recess. Students, their teachers, and administrators walked to a park two blocks away, weather permitting, for these activities.

One co-director's office is centrally located for teacher, staff and parent access. It is conveniently located across the hall from the school receptionist's desk. Unfortunately, there is limited space in the office for confidential conversations or for meetings that involve more than three people. The other co-director's office is located down the hall.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

Amber's mission statement, contained in its charter, is written in broad statements that encompass several undertakings, many of which were in evidence during the inspection and throughout the 2000-01 school year. Amber seeks to be a "two-way immersion" school with a goal of "full fluency in" English and Spanish." Even while the enrollment of fewer than 10 bilingual students poses a significant array of challenges to a program based upon the concept of bilingual immersion. The school alternates its instruction, five days in Spanish and then five days in English. However, in first grade classes literacy instruction is in English and they have one period of Spanish instruction daily due to the limited number of Spanish-dominant language students who are enrolled in the school. As stated previously, school officials believe this is attributable to the inability to locate Amber in Washington Heights, as first planned by the school's founder.

The school pledges to: provide "academic excellence and high standards;" "increase learning opportunities for all students, with a special emphasis on expanded learning opportunities for children at risk of academic failure;" and implement "different and innovative teaching methods." During the school's first year of operation, a systematic school-wide organization of activities and lessons to support these goals was not observed. However, observers did note emerging practice in all these areas, as well as an emphasis on "child-centered and project-based" activities, as described in the charter.

The mission statement refers to "The Bernstein Center Approach to Artful Learning" and the desire for the school to become a "Bernstein Leadership School." Over the course of several visits during the school's initial year, Institute staff did not observe evidence that this model and its four components of experience, inquiry, creation and reflection had been implemented.