



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Bronx Preparatory
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 29, 2001 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

Bronx Preparatory Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000, and by the Board of Regents in April, opened in August of that year. The school was founded to provide an alternative within public education for students who live in the South Bronx, in one of New York City's lowest-performing school districts and the country's lowest-income congressional district. The school's charter called for educating 100 5th and 6th grade students in its first year, and adding one grade a year until it reaches at the end of its 5-year charter a planned enrollment of 300 students in grades 5–10.

Bronx Preparatory Charter School, currently located in a former Roman Catholic school, plans to move to a new facility for the 2002-2003 school year. The school's first year was chronicled in *The New York Times*.

Rejecting the notion that low academic achievement and behavior problems are to be expected of children from low-income families, the school's mission is to prepare its students to succeed at the best colleges. It seeks to develop in its students the ability to think critically and creatively, and for them to gain strong skills in mathematics, language, literature, history, science, technology and the arts.

Bronx Prep uses the Junior Great Books program, Core Knowledge curriculum, didactic instruction and a thematic connection among courses. It is partnered with the Bronx Museum of Art to create opportunities for linking the fine arts, liberal arts and the sciences.

The school has a 210-day academic year, and is in session from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. to provide additional time for remedial support and tutoring. It also offers a summer tutorial program for children who struggle with lagging reading skills.

According to the 1999-2000 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, Community School District 9 enrolled 28,984 students: 35.3% African-American; 62.7% Hispanic; Asian and others, 1.5%; and, 0.5% white. Additionally, 89.3% of students in the district are eligible for free lunch, under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 96% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 79% of students in Community School District 9 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 71.9% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 86% of students failed to meet state standards; 92% 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 Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration show that the school enrolled a overall population scoring in the 38th percentile in reading comprehension, the 24th percentile in vocabulary and the 37th percentile in math, on average. Growth data gleaned from the Spring administration of the same tests shows that students in the school increased their scores on all three of these batteries. In reading comprehension, students increased their scores by an average of 6 percentiles nationally. In vocabulary, students also increased their scores by an average of 6 percentiles nationally. In math, students increased their scores by an average of 41 percentiles nationally.

The school has also presented data from an on-site assessment of its own students using measures developed by school faculty. Some 96% of students achieved a passing score of 70% or better on the school's History Final Essay; 94% of students achieved a passing grade of 70% on the school's Science Final Exam; 96% of students achieved a passing grade of 70% on the school's Writing Final Exam.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The school sets the goal of establishing a "classical college preparatory curriculum." Through "high intellectual and conduct standards" the school promises to ensure that all students "acquire organized knowledge," "develop intellectual skills" and "build their ideas, values and aesthetic appreciation."

"Curriculum content will be relatively traditional," the charter notes, while "classroom life will not be." "Classical" content (mathematics, language history, science technology and the arts) it continues, will be delivered via Socratic teaching and an inquiry-driven approach replacing traditional methods. Writing and technology skills, the charter states, will be embedded in the teaching of all subjects.

At the end of its first year of operation, the school appeared to have made impressive progress towards its goals. Expectations for academic achievement and effort were consistently high. Inspectors often observed teachers pressing students to provide more complete or specific responses to questions, even when initial answers were generally correct. No matter how enthusiastic, students were required to be thorough and factual before earning teacher approval.

An emphasis on classical skills and knowledge with a particular emphasis on the processes of learning was evident. Daily routines encouraged preparation, rigor and completeness of work. Teachers broke down larger intellectual tasks, such as solving word problems or writing essays, into clear steps. Teachers often named those steps and developed an acronym as a learning device to help students remember each process.

The emphasis on process resulted in an environment that appeared to build diligent habits of mind and study, particularly in math and English classes. Science and history classes, while effective, were not as strongly designed on the process described in the previous paragraph. In all classes, students seemed to relish the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to solve new and challenging problems.

Class sessions were clear, focused and driven by the mastery of specific standards. All teachers started lessons with a review of the goals and activities to be mastered. This quickly focused students and teachers alike on the task at hand and the great majority of students typically were at work on the first task as or even before the teacher officially began class. Classes were often energetic and marked by almost universal participation.

Lesson plans frequently used a Socratic model as a framework with periods of question-and-answer based inquiry. Lessons also drew upon a wide variety of shorter segments using seat work, applied learning, creative activities or writing prompts to reinforce skills and knowledge. Often this offered teachers an opportunity to differentiate instruction for students of all ability levels.

The degree of teacher effectiveness varied but inspectors said teacher quality was generally high.

In accordance with the charter, writing was assigned in classes across all disciplines, and students were observed writing extended essays in several classes including but not limited to language arts classes. Technology was less evident. Most classrooms at the school currently lack computer technology and access to technology seems limited for students and, to a lesser degree, teachers. As technology is not yet “embedded” in the academic program, as envisioned in the charter, the school should consider setting a time line for technology implementation.

School Climate

“We will repudiate the notion,” the charter states, “that low academic achievement and behavioral problems are to be expected of kids from low-income families. Instead we will deliberately establish a school culture where learning, civility, caring and academic success are not just considered good things but are the expectation.”

In practice, the school consistently held students to high behavioral standards. Positive behavior – characterized by civility, caring and a focus on learning – was the norm for the great majority of students, as observed on several informal visits throughout the 2000-01 school year and on the year-end visit. Students were consistently prepared for class, both mentally and physically. Teachers were often inundated with energetic volunteers, even when questions were difficult or challenging.

Faculty members were observed discussing expectations and rules with students regularly, setting clear expectations in the larger context of the behaviors that lead to success. Rituals and procedures – for arriving in and leaving class, for writing papers, for participating in discussion – were observed shaping activities in almost every setting. Despite the structure, the tone of the school was consistently respectful and positive. Students responded positively to teacher approval.

For the most part, student behavior was consistent with the school's stated belief that orderly behavior is a measure of respect for one's own abilities. A brief reminder was usually enough to keep a classroom full of Bronx Prep students on task. Because many students seemed to enjoy the rigorous and exacting nature of the environment, students appeared to regard the success of peers with approval. Students who performed tasks well often received explicit praise from classmates.

During the formal year-end visit, many students were dressed in a manner inconsistent with the school's uniform policy.

Facility

The mission of the school was only partly supported by its facilities, and physical space at times presented barriers for students and teachers. While students and faculty made the best of the available facilities, some rooms were stuffy, poorly ventilated and offered space for little more than student desks; a few provided little room for academic displays and student work. Science and arts facilities were make-do.

Faculty members lacked office and meeting space and shared access to several computers in the main office on a rotating basis. The school lacks a gym, outdoor recreation space and a library.

Obstacles at Bronx Prep, however, tend to be overcome. It is a tribute to staff and students that limited initial facilities, which could have undercut the school's effectiveness, instead appeared to steel the community to its purpose. The limited facilities were well maintained and respected by students. There was little or no sign of graffiti or ill-use. Interior walls were covered with exemplary student work and exhortations to achieve.

As the administration has acknowledged, the school's facility was not presently compliant with applicable law governing accessibility to people with disabilities. The administration should ensure that it has an up-to-date and legally sufficient plan for making the school's program

equally accessible to students with disabilities should they enroll as well as to any disabled parents of its students.

The current facility is intended for use only through the 2002-03 academic year. The effort to secure a permanent facility is well underway.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school's charter describes a mission of graduating students who "1) think critically and effectively; 2) have attained strong skills in mathematics, language, literature, history, science, technology and the arts; and 3) are committed to a lifetime of learning and civic involvement." In the opinion of the inspectors, the school, though just a year old, made strong progress in implementing this vision. The school appeared to have been remarkably effective in building foundation skills in the areas outlined in the charter, with the possible exception of technology. Further, the school's climate appeared to be helping to mold students of character and commitment.

As described in the charter, the 5th and 6th grade curriculum combined a strong emphasis on mastery of core skills with a rich array of offerings in "classical" subject areas. In underscoring the importance of literacy and language skills, the charter describes a middle school program including two hours a day of English, one for reading and literature and one for composition, vocabulary and grammar. This program has been effectively developed and consistently implemented.

The charter further asserts that success in the above goals is dependent upon establishing "a strong school community and culture." In this matter, the school appears to have made great strides.

Finally, the charter emphasizes the importance of an academic program that reinforces writing and technology skills across the curriculum and "embeds" them in all curricular areas. Inspectors saw consistent evidence that writing skills were taught and reinforced in all subject areas. Students were asked to write in history, science and even, occasionally, math classes, in addition to their English classes. Practical use and application of technology was less evident.