



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Central New York Charter School of Math and Science

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 11, 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

Central New York Charter School for Math and Science 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 September 2000. The charter calls for 528 students in grades K-6 in its first year, and by the end of the 5-year charter the school expects to have 816 students enrolled in grades K-10. The school year lasts 195 days with an instructional day from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. The school is located at 610 East Genesee Street, on a two building campus, formerly science teaching and laboratory facilities for Syracuse University.

The founders of CNYCS included the now-retired president of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, as well as local educators and civic leaders who sought to provide the children of Syracuse with a public school that links rigorous academics with a focus on math, science and technology.

To oversee its management, the school contracted with Beacon Education Management, Inc., which currently runs 31 schools in five states and the District of Columbia. Beacon features the Lightpoints standards and curriculum with particular emphasis on math and science. The school received one of the five waivers from collective bargaining requirements provided the State University in the Charter Schools Act of 1998.

According to the 2001 New York State Education Department district-wide report card, for the 1999-2000 school year 22,778 were enrolled in the Syracuse City School District: 45.2% African American; 5.7% Hispanic; 46.3% white; and, 2.7% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander. 63.4% of the students in the district received free or reduced cost lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 55% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 61% of students the Syracuse City School District in failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 57% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 79% of students failed to meet state standards; 80% 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 the school's progress in fostering overall student growth. Summary data on students initial skill levels, as measured by a Fall 2000 administration of the Stanford Achievement Test has been presented by the school for most but not all students. The data has further not been verified by the submission of supporting data. While tentative, pending verification, and not complete, the data suggests that the school enrolled a population scoring on average at the 44th national percentile in reading and the 46th national percentile in math.

The school also presented data from fourth grade State Assessments in English Language Arts and Math. The Institute considers these tests, designed to measure the sum total of a student's learning during all previous grades and given in the first year of a charter school's operations, to be a measure of the status of students upon enrollment. On the grade 4 English Language Arts assessment, 30% of students scored at level one, farthest from the standard. Some 44% of students scored at level two – nearer but still below the standard; 22% of students scored at level three, above standard; and 4% of students scored at level 4, well above standard. On the grade 4 Mathematics Arts assessment, 31.1% of students scored at level one, 33.3% of students scored at level two, 26.7% of students scored at level three, and 8.9% of students scored at level 4.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

In its charter, the school commits to providing an academic program linking “rigorous academics” with “a focus on math, science, and technology.” Setting the goal of providing “access to a world-class education,” the school outlines a curriculum built on high standards and employing the Core Knowledge program as its foundation. Through a proposed combination of teacher presented instruction, “project-based learning” and technology that “permeate[s] the instructional program” the school proposes to present students with an enriched curriculum and opportunities to apply learning in hands-on settings. Students, it says, will be “actively involved in the learning process” and assume “the role of researcher, creator, interpreter and presenter.”

By the end of its first year of operation, the school had yet to develop a program characterized by the high standards of academic rigor outlined in the charter. Though some individual teachers appeared to have established effective and, in a few cases, rigorous classroom environments, a greater number appear to have been unable to do so and inspectors saw little evidence that the school provided teachers with effective support or guidance in building such environments.

Just as the quality of teaching varied from classroom to classroom, the school still appeared to be seeking consistency regarding the methods used in classrooms. No philosophy, approach, or methodology that could be described as characteristic of the school or its teachers was apparent during the school's first year. Decisions about techniques and methods of teaching, including decisions about whether to group students by ability, appeared in some cases to have been made by teachers individually or in small groups. Inspectors saw little evidence of project-based learning or technology.

Based on several informal visits throughout the school year and a formal year-end visit, evidence that students had become actively involved in the learning process was limited. In many classes, particularly in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, lessons were frequently interrupted by disruptive behavior and student involvement was often minimal or cursory. Students were frequently observed to be unprepared for class and the passivity of students who choose not to participate was regularly accepted. A number of teachers and administrators appeared to hold students to only to minimal standards. In some classes, students were praised even for minimal class participation, and mediocre work was positively reinforced.

The absence of hands-on learning opportunities may have been a result of the school's struggle to implement clear behavioral expectations. Inspectors noted that some teachers appeared to use methods that intentionally *limited* active and independent learning, perhaps in response to student behavior. This was particularly evident in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. In many cases, teachers who limited opportunities for active and independent learning appeared to experience less difficult behavior from students.

Additionally, the school appeared to have made limited progress in achieving its intended focus on enriched math, science and technology. While computers were operational in most classrooms, inspectors saw few students using them during any of their visits to the school. Some efforts by teachers to develop an enriched science curriculum were evident. In general, however, students responded to opportunities to take part in scientific activities with poor behavior and reduced attentiveness. Lessons that gave students leeway to exercise discretion, leave their desks or handle materials (often a necessity in scientific inquiry) tended to deteriorate quickly. Math lessons observed during several visits appeared to emphasize computational skills and often focused on the completion of worksheets, many of which were remedial in nature.

School Climate

In its charter, the school commits to establishing "safe, secure" climate "where everyone assumes a high degree of civility and responsibility for one another." In this atmosphere, a "spirit of inquiry" would be fostered among students who "develop deeply ingrained habits of mind and character" in the process.

In its first year, the school made minimal progress in building such an environment. Inspectors observed little consistency in the application or enforcement of behavioral expectations and policies in the school. Discipline problems were common. Behavior by and among students fostered a climate of disrespect in classrooms and public areas of the school.

While individual teachers in some cases established effective classroom environments, a greater number resorted to appeasement or resignation in the face of negative behavior. There seemed to be little in the way of protocol for teachers to follow when student misbehavior became an impediment to learning. In many classrooms, disruptive behavior continued unabated, even when it interfered with students' education.

In many classrooms in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades in particular, the peer environment often discouraged participation and respect among students. Similarly, public spaces (playgrounds, hallways, cafeteria) were often disorderly. Without shared, school-wide expectations for behavior, enforcement in public settings was dependent on the personal standards of whatever faculty member was nearest and thus was inconsistent. Students seated outside the administrative offices awaiting disciplinary often continued to engage in disruptive, rude or disrespectful behavior to a degree suggesting a lack of concern regarding potential consequences.

In the charter, the school describes a discipline policy addressing three levels of infractions. Students who engage in Level I behavior ("inappropriate use of language," "minor disruptions of class," "minor disrespect to faculty" and "failure to complete work") may be required to stay after school, speak to their teacher after class, or discuss the incident with a "mentor." Recurring Level I offenses may lead to meetings with the principal, the teacher and/or a parent. Students engaging in Level II offenses ("lying to faculty/staff," engaging in "behavior that disrupts the learning climate of the class/school," showing "disrespect to students or faculty" and "repeated failure to attend teacher detention") may be given in-school suspensions, detentions, or out-of-school suspensions, among other possible consequences. Additionally, Level I and Level II behaviors, when engaged in repeatedly, may result in more significant consequences, as may fighting, engaging in "threatening behavior," and causing "re-occurring class disruptions," described in the charter as Level III offenses.

Stating that offenses of various types "may" result in specific consequences, the policy gives administrators wide judgment in disciplinary matters, and the degree of discretion offered by the policy appears to have been exercised with a leniency unwarranted by the level of behavior in the school. Inspectors witnessed frequent and repeated examples of the behaviors cited as Level I and Level II offenses as well as several events that might have been considered Level III offenses. Few appeared to result in the consequences described in the charter or in any consequence at all. Whether teachers failed to follow procedures and enforce rules established by the administration, or whether such rules and procedures had not been established, the school had not implemented the code of discipline described in the charter, nor had it established and implemented an effective alternative.

In addition, despite the discipline code's provision for increased penalties for repeated offenses, the administration did not appear to track or, in many cases, be aware of the many of the examples of behaviors proscribed in the discipline code nor the frequency with which individual students engaged in them.

Facility

While isolated areas within the physical plant may require continued improvements, the school's facilities are essentially strong. Instructional spaces were ample and bright, often with large windows and high ceilings. Centrally located near downtown, the school is situated on a small campus of two buildings that were once Syracuse University science halls. The facility continues to hold strong potential to support an effective academic program.

Issues that may warrant consideration for further attention include the development of science and technology facilities; the development of a library; the further development of effective space for physical education; and the assessment of guidelines for use, access and maintenance of the underground passageway between buildings and the cafeteria.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school struggled in its first year to implement several aspects of the design described in the charter. As discussed above, many key aspects of the school's academic program, including an emphasis on math and science, remained in early stages of development. Similarly, instruction characterized by project-based learning, a "spirit of inquiry," "real world applications" and the "integration of curriculum areas" – all described in the school's charter – had not yet been implemented.

Despite a model emphasizing the "integration of technology," student and even faculty computer use appeared limited. Inspectors observed some teacher utilization of laptop computers but little student use of classroom computers. Plans for computer-based individual learning plans had not been realized. Moreover, paper-based Individual Learning Plans had also not been produced in accordance with the school model, which proposed that such plans would be produced quarterly and would include regular parent conferences.

As discussed previously, neither the school's behavioral expectations nor its discipline code appear to have been effectively or faithfully implemented. Inspectors also did not see evidence of the proposed "professional development program through a goal-based system that includes peer evaluation," an aspect of operations that might prove especially effective in increasing the overall effectiveness of instruction and consistency of expectations. Inspectors also saw no evidence of a character education program, described in the charter as including "clear and consistent moral instruction" in an environment marked by "a high degree of civility and responsibility."

The school's charter commits to a dress code, to be designed by a committee comprised of Board members, staff and parents. Though a poster had been displayed in a main hallway outlining the rules of the school's dress code, observation suggests that the rules were not well enforced.

The school faces significant challenges as it progresses through its charter. The school's Board would benefit from adopting a leadership focus that creates lasting solutions promoting a school culture emphasizing academics and student achievement – the very underpinnings of the school's charter.