



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Child Development Center of the Hamptons 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 5, 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

The Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in July 2000 and by the Board of Regents in August of that year. It opened in Wainscott in January 2001, with a focus on serving severe special needs students residing in eastern Long Island. Initially the school enrolled 24 students in K-4, and plans to expand to 72 by the end of its 5-year charter.

The applicants sought an alternative for children from eastern Long Island who faced a lengthy round trip to the BOCES program that too was far and too disconnected from the communities where the children and their families live.

The school offers a community-based setting stressing parental involvement and benefits from greater access to such local resources as artists and business owners. It employs a multi-grade approach to instruction, which places students in classes based on ability levels and promotes the integration of special needs children with children in the mainstream. A theme-based curriculum designed with Modern Red Schoolhouse is used to meet all New York State Learning Standards

CDCH Charter School enrolls students from 7 different school districts located throughout eastern Long Island.

Discussion of Findings

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 Spring 2001 administration of the Terra Nova suggests that the school enrolled a population scoring on average at the 33rd national percentile in reading, the 30th national percentile in language and the 29th national percentile in math. The school plans to present growth data based on subsequent administrations of the Terra Nova starting in the 2001-02 school year.

The school has presented data on student progress on an internally developed and self-assessed Rubric Scoring System. The data shows school-wide average improvements of 13.1% in reading; 12.7% in Writing; 10.1% in Shapes, Sorting and Numeration; 29.4% in Mathematical Operations; 26.5% in Science; and 18.2% in Social Studies.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The school's charter describes its intent to serve students at risk of academic failure, especially those with significant learning disabilities, while expanding their educational opportunities through "a comprehensive thematic instructional approach" and a "community-based setting" that integrates regular- and Special Education students in a mainstreamed atmosphere.

The school also commits to developing an effective learning environment for all students by tailoring instruction to students' individual needs. The school's mission statement describes the creation of an environment that "promotes educational excellence and personal growth in all children."

At the time of the year-end visit, conducted after the school was open for approximately six months, the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School appeared to be progressing in many of these areas. Areas of particular progress included the fostering of personal and social growth among its students and the integration of regular and Special Education students. Students who had been or had perceived themselves to be at the social or academic margins of previous schools appeared to have been successfully included in the mainstream of the school community. Serving a population made up of approximately half special needs students, the school's leadership was attempting to establish a community where disabled and non-disabled students interact naturally and respectfully. Students who, according to their teachers and parents, had unsuccessful behavioral, social or academic experiences at previous school settings were observed to behave as if they felt comfortable, engaged and included in the school's community.

The effectiveness of the school's efforts to translate inclusiveness into demonstrable academic progress will ultimately be borne out by objective data and the school has embraced a thorough and effective program to gather data and report on its students' progress. Levels of engagement in lessons appeared to be inconsistent. Many students paid eager attention, particularly while working in small group settings, but others did not appear to engage actively in processing or participating in lessons. The school clearly provides students with ample opportunity to learn in an environment that is often rich and engaging. Whether all students take full advantage of the opportunities available to them remains less clear.

The mission statement establishes the school's intent to "build upon each student's unique strengths" and "address their individual needs." The administration maintains an extensive base of knowledge regarding each student's academic and personal abilities and history in helping staff reach this goal. In several cases, this extensive knowledge of individual students clearly shaped faculty decisions and responses to students. While students with disabilities were observed to be receiving an extensive array of educational services and were praised for their



engagement or participation in class, the specific academic skills they were working towards mastering did not appear to be clear to all staff members in some cases.

Classroom instruction included extensive individual attention for students. Typical lessons included three staff members working with ten students on a group activity followed by breakout into work groups of three or four students with one staff member each. Staff members also frequently worked with students in one-to-one settings or shadowed individual students during group lessons. The observation of lessons and the examination of portfolios of written work suggest that the degree to which instruction is effectively differentiated to meet the needs of all learners and planned with a clear instructional outcome in mind varied significantly among teachers and classrooms. The school acknowledges that its curriculum is a work in progress and has chosen to prioritize literacy and math in its first year. Observed reading and math lessons were organized around specific learning standards. References to previous lessons and standards were common in these classes and suggested the intentional sequencing of standards. Lessons in other subject areas were less clearly standards-driven and sequential.

School Climate

The principal described the school's environment as one where students were "talked *with* rather than talked *to*." Students engaged adults respectfully and rationally even when the students' behavior necessitated re-direction. Responses by staff to disruptive or counter-productive behavior often appeared to be based upon individual and situational particulars and were calmly administered. Staff frequently made a clear effort to provide students with options when re-directing them. Questions that might be asked rhetorically at some schools often prompted reflection or sincere conversation on the part of some CDCH students. In some cases they also allowed for the continuance of the behaviors prompting the correction.

Many students appeared to be effectively and consistently engaged in lessons. Students often participated vigorously, with enthusiasm commonplace. Some students were prone to distraction during class and once "off task" they were often unable to return their attention to the lesson. In some cases, they were not reminded by staff to return to work, nor were they helped to do so. Some students seemed unclear as to expectations regarding raising hands to speak, sitting in seats, or having materials ready.

Students appeared to enjoy school and to respect their teachers. While the tone was consistently calm and accepting, distractions limited time spent on task in some classrooms and students appeared to perceive a degree of social banter to be permissible during many lessons.

Social interactions observed in the course of two visits, both during and between classes suggest that students with disabilities and those without mingle easily.

While students seemed to embrace the non-confrontational tone with which corrections were administered, observation suggested that some students did not have a clear idea of what the rules and expectations were for behavior in all contexts, and the administration acknowledged the importance of balancing the need to respond individually to student with disabilities that often included behavioral manifestations with a greater degree of consistency in expectations.

Facility

The school's building, designed originally to house an indoor tennis court, is bright and airy, with ample room available for a variety of activities and support programs. The building is well adapted to use as classroom space and is adorned with rich displays of colorful student projects and written work. Low walls between classrooms foster easy interaction between teachers and allow the principal to engage in supervision by sound- identifying student voices from the administrative area and responding immediately when needed.

High ceilings, tall windows and glass doors to the outside (there are no doors to the classrooms themselves) set a cheery tone and allow easy traffic flow. Spaces within the building are easily supervised, especially given the ample number of staff. Clean, quiet, well-designed areas dedicated to special and related services are available within the building and outdoor space for recreation and instruction is both easily accessed and in excellent condition.

This environment actively supports the school's aims, particularly in terms of the inviting, safe and warm atmosphere it helps create. Though the facilities are currently exemplary, the school expects to out-grow this space at the end of the next school year.



School Mission and Charter Implementation

The current school program appeared to be effectively meeting the goal of serving students at risk of academic failure, particularly those who are at-risk due to learning disabilities. It provided an admirable array of services and supports in a warm and inclusive setting. The school also appeared to have had initial success in building a community where disabled and non-disabled children were connected and interacted positively. Inspectors saw consistent and natural interaction between and among students of all types within the school. Indeed, for students with disabilities, the school appeared to represent a remarkably normalized and mainstream setting.

The school also commits to developing an effective learning environment for all students by tailoring instruction to students' individual needs and by grouping students in multi-age settings. Effective multi-age classrooms have been implemented. While school appeared to be developing its teachers' skills at effectively tailoring instruction to individual students, their ability to do so appeared inconsistent.

Further work in developing a "comprehensive thematic instructional approach" remains to be done in the school's second year. Most teachers appeared to be at the beginning stages of connecting learning in one classroom to the ideas addressed in others. The school's administration has prioritized increasing thematic elements in the Social Studies and science curricula in particular.

The application specifically describes a goal of "bringing [disabled] students 'back home' to create opportunities for connections" in the community. The school has done admirable work in engaging local artisans to provide instruction for its arts curriculum and in exposing its students to the local environment, through, for example, a science field trip to a local salt marsh.