



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Harlem Day Charter School

Report

2001-2002
Academic Year

History and Purpose

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of local school districts 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 state 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.

The New York Charter Schools Act empowers the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York, the New York State Board of Regents, or local boards of education (in conjunction with the Regents) to authorize new public charter schools. Additionally, 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 University 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 implemented a periodic visitation and inspection process for charter 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 comprising 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, fidelity 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 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 the inspectors’ observations, findings and discussion with the school’s governing board, parents and the public. 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 charter schools face major challenges, and that schools address them at different rates. There is no one correct time frame for successfully meeting each challenge, so long as each school is prepared to make a persuasive case for renewal at the end of its 5-year charter. 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 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

Harlem Day Charter School, approved by the State University Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents that March, opened September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 50 students in grades K-1, and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to 240 students in grades K-5.

Harlem Day Charter School offers a back-to-basics academic program that weaves the New York State learning standards with the Core Knowledge curriculum, while emphasizing reading and writing skills and character development. The school is partnered with Sheltering Arms Inc., a community organization with a 178-year history of serving Harlem. Sheltering Arms makes child welfare services available to the school, as well as other support services.

According to the 2002 Annual District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 4 enrolled contained 13,543 students: 35% African-American; 60.9% Hispanic; 1.6% white; and, 2.5% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 88.8% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Harlem Day Charter School reported that 88% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 68.7% of students in Community School District 4 did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 56.7% of the students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 71.7% of students did not meet state standards; 86.4% of the students did not meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 9, 2002, an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) made a formal inspection visit to Harlem Day Charter School. The team consisted of:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, CSI

Academic Data

Charter schools authorized by SUNY are required to submit an Accountability Plan to the Charter Schools Institute for approval. The plan sets forth the school's goals for its five-year charter. Two of the major goals are student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Over the life of the charter, the school is required to show that it is making substantial progress toward meeting its goals through a variety of measurable objectives. These objectives include: 1) student performance on the state's fourth- and eighth-grade ELA and math tests; 2) student performance on these tests in comparison to similar schools; and 3) the year-to-year progress of students in ELA and math in comparison to the progress of students in a national sample.

Because of grades they serve and how recently they opened, some schools can not provide much information about student achievement. State test results are only given in the fourth and eighth grade, so that schools without these grades cannot administer the state ELA and math tests. Similarly, schools that have only been open for one year cannot report information on year-to-year progress in student performance. Furthermore, any test information (especially state tests) in the first years of a school's charter can only provide an incomplete picture of the impact of a school's program. Student achievement in these schools will be based to a great extent on what the students had learned in other schools prior to enrolling in the charter school. Despite these limitations, each charter school must begin with its first year's results to build its case for charter renewal.

As a first-year school with no fourth grade, the Harlem Day Charter School (HDCS) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided preliminary results, which lay the groundwork for evaluating its performance in future years. HDCS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

Over the course of its first year, Harlem Day Charter School made some credible progress toward creating a school, as it states in its charter, "in which children can become responsible, intelligent, productive citizens with the skills to progress to higher education competently." The school's small first year enrollment (60 students in two Kindergarten and one first grade classrooms) allowed it to face the challenges of starting a new school while serving a manageable number of children. Despite its size, the combination of starting a new school, creating shared expectations and structures for student behavior, and implementing new curriculum created numerous challenges for the school's three first year classroom teachers.

During the end of year visit, the school's previous principal, who departed Harlem Day at the conclusion of its first year of operation, correctly identified for Institute staff the following areas as in need of specific attention prior to the commencement of the second year of the school's charter:

- Inconsistent articulation and enforcement of effective classroom behavioral expectations.
- Unclear, and at times quite low, expectations for academic performance.
- Limited instructional techniques to assist students in attaining acceptable levels of academic performance.
- Greater focus on core academic areas (reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies).

Over the course of the school's first year, Institute staff observed inconsistent implementation of lessons that clearly articulated and demanded students work toward attainment of the New York State learning standards as called for in the Harlem Day charter. Some lessons, particularly those focused on mathematics, were well structured, demanding that students use manipulatives (cubes, blocks, rulers, counters, clocks, etc.) productively to solve math problems that were appropriately challenging for each grade level.

Reading lessons, structured by the use of the Waterford Early Reading Program (a computer-based program that adapts individual lessons to student needs based on computer and teacher assessment of student reading skill), appeared to reflect sufficient implementation of the reading curriculum. Throughout the year, Harlem Day Charter School's teachers reported that the software offered both benefits and limitations to classroom instruction. While pleased with the software's delivery of support for reading instruction, teachers expressed hope that the classroom computers, currently used exclusively for Waterford instruction, could be loaded with word processing software to allow teachers greater flexibility in the delivery of instruction in both reading and writing.

Instruction in writing, and student literacy levels in general, revealed greater inconsistency. The structure of writing or literacy lessons did not maximize opportunities for student writing. While students completed worksheets connecting letters with sounds, little evidence of original student generated writing throughout the year was available. A review of student work that was available (posted writing, journals, student stories, and worksheets) showed some evidence of editing for grammar and punctuation but revealed inconsistent expectations for proper letter formation, the connection of letters to sounds, composition of complete sentences, or compound thoughts in story writing.

Discussions with teachers revealed their continued enthusiasm for meeting the academic needs of their students as well as their willingness to participate in professional development opportunities that may assist the school in clearly defining and successfully implementing school-wide academic expectations.

School Climate

Harlem Day Community Charter School is a bright and energetic place where students, parents and school staff set a tone of respect for each other and an intent toward learning. While teacher and student interactions were positive and encouraging, Institute staff noted such interactions were not always productive. In positive tones reflective of the ideals stated in the school's charter, teachers made frequent requests to "settle down" or "get to work" of students who were not focused and, at times disruptive of classroom routines. While positive, the teachers'

comments did not set clear expectations for students to follow, thus thwarting the possibility students could identify, follow, and display expected behaviors.

In one classroom, the teacher asked the students to sit on the rug to listen to a story. Many of the children chose to lay down on the rug too small to accommodate students unless they sat up. Lacking direction specific direction from the teacher to sit up, cross legs, and keep hands in laps, the children were distracted by pushing next to each other, kicking each other, etc. This left the teacher unable to begin reading aloud for ten minutes while she politely negotiated with students to keep their bodies to themselves. Instead of structuring the lesson so that her young students had few opportunities for behavior related distractions, the well-meaning teacher allowed unstructured student behavior and poorly designed lesson implementation to distract students from academic pursuits.

In another classroom, the teacher had prepared three mathematics activities to reinforce single digit addition. After explaining each activity, the teacher explained that she would call on individual students to choose their first task. Once the available spaces for the tasks students found most enticing were full, other children complained loudly that they did not want to participate in the remaining task and refused to engage in productive work despite the teacher's polite requests that the student complete the available activity.

In no instance did the site visit team observe evidence that Harlem Day Charter School had designed and implemented an effective strategy for effectively constructing an environment where students had meaningful consequences associated with poor behavior that would encourage them to stay on task. While the school has implemented the "safe and caring school environment," the lack of effective discipline strategies hinders Harlem Day Charter School's ability to create "clearly articulated and demanding student achievement standards, a focus on imparting a core knowledge to all students, and a strong emphasis on reading and writing skills" as called for in its charter.

Facility

Harlem Day Charter School is located on the fourth floor of a high rise building that also houses a community college and community arts space. Security personnel, who maintain a log of visitors, monitor entrance to the building. Once on the fourth floor, security cameras and a locked door, assist school staff in monitoring all that enter and leave the school facility.

During the 2001-02 school year, the school operated in six renovated rooms located on one floor of the building. In anticipation of a student enrollment increase from 60 students in its first year to 120 students in the 2002-03 school year, Harlem Day Charter School has leased additional space and made leasehold improvements to provide six classrooms, a conference area, library and cafeteria.

School Mission and Implementation of Charter

While the school made some progress toward creating a foundation for the school described in its charter, it has yet to successfully implement a school design that “minimizes harmful distractions,” articulates clear and demanding student achievement standards and produces evidence of a “strong emphasis on reading and writing skills.”

As Harlem Day Charter School doubles size during the second year of its charter, from 60 students in 2001-02 to 120 students in 2002-03, its enthusiastic but inexperienced staff and new principal will face the challenges of implementing behavioral and academic expectations in a larger, and thus additionally complex, environment.