



Charter Schools Institute  
State University of New York

# Merrick Academy – Queens Public 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**

Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in May of that year. The school opened in fall 2000. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 169 students in grades K-3, and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to 750 students in grades K-10, helping to relieve a projected shortage of more than 58,000 classroom seats in Queens by 2007. Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School provides much-needed classroom space.

The school has contracted with Victory Schools, Inc. for its management. Victory Schools seeks to improve public education by assisting in the start-up and management of public charter schools of outstanding quality, particularly those created to serve at-risk students. Based on the premise that all children can learn, Victory Schools uses an educational program that employs Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge and an extended school day schedule featuring a strong enrichment component based on thematic curricula.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 29 enrolled 26,912 students: 74.7% African-American; 12.1% Hispanic; 1.4% white; and, 11.7% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 64.7% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School reported that 66% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 57.4% of students in Community School District 29 failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 49.6% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade Math test. On the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test, 75.4% of students failed to meet state standards; 89.1% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math test.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Inspection Team**

On May 13, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School in Queens Village, New York. The team comprised:

- Dr. Michael Stevens, Vice President of Research and Evaluation, CSI
- Doug Lemov, Vice President for Accountability
- Ivan Hageman, Principal East Harlem School

### **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 second-year school with no fourth grade, the Merrick Charter School was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was far from meeting its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. Merrick has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

### **School Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

At the close of the second year of its charter, the Merrick Academy-Queens Public Charter is developing an academic program characterized by intentional standards-based instruction. Per its charter, the program includes the use of both Direct Instruction in reading and math and the Core Knowledge Curriculum in other subject areas.

Each classroom is staffed by a teacher and at least one assistant. This structure is consistently used to break students into groups according to their skill levels and to provide students with small group instruction. In most classes, one group of students worked with an instructor to master specific reading or math skills in a call-and-response type lesson in one part of the room while another group of students completed seat work or wrote assignments in journals in another part of the room. The efficacy of such a set-up is based on the effectiveness of teachers in engaging students in effective instruction and keeping them on task. In most classes this was the case. In a minority of classes teachers were unable to keep students on task and engaged in effective learning.

In the majority of lessons, teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of the skills or knowledge they were seeking to reinforce and had a clear conception of the desired outcome of each day's lessons. In at least one classroom, however, student work was only tangentially connected to learning standards. In the school's strongest classrooms, lessons were effectively planned and implemented and often followed by careful assessment that emphasized strong writing skills. In several classes the quality of student writing demonstrated in journals was exemplary. The school has several particularly effective teachers, but not all teachers meet the same standard of performance. Given the school's anticipated growth, the school may need to pay special attention over the next 12 months to consistency of teacher quality.

The quality and methods of assessment were also generally strong, if inconsistent. In several classrooms teachers effectively used reading response journals to reinforce specific writing skills and areas of knowledge such as setting and characterization. In these journals, students copied model paragraphs written by the group or worked through structured and directed writing projects independently. Many teachers reviewed journals regularly and provided students with clear feedback. In those classrooms evidence of student correction and revision of writing were frequently evident, as was evidence that teachers held and students understood standards for finished work. In one first grade classroom, for example, students maintained a detailed log of books the class had read in their journals. Each entry identified the author, the characters, the setting and often summarized the plot or conflict in well-formed complete sentences. Similarly, a Kindergarten teacher asked her students to write several sentences summarizing a story they had read aloud as a class. She wrote several difficult words on the board to help students but set high and clear expectations for their writing ("I want a capital letter for the first word of each sentence and a period at the end. If it's not right I'm going to tell you to do it over."). Most students demonstrated they were capable of meeting these expectations.

Other teachers appeared to use journals to assign but not assess and correct written work. One teacher acknowledged that she rarely reviewed them. As the effectiveness of the school's strongest teachers in reinforcing writing is an area of strength, the school may wish to consider disseminating the practices of its best teachers more fully into all classrooms.

Examples of student academic work were posted with some frequency. However, their quality was not consistent. A bulletin board in the main hallway featured student writing demonstrating mastery of the following standard posted along side the work: "Each student can identify major figures and events in American History and can show a basic understanding of their significance." While the school deserves praise for tying posted work directly to learning standards, posted work did not appear, in this case, to demonstrate mastery of the standard. "George Washington was a president. He fell in love. He found a wife. He got married. He lived in the White House," wrote one student. "We learned about George Washington's family. He got married. I forgot who he got married to. We learned this in school. George Washington [sic] father dies when he was 11," wrote another. Similarly, maps of Italy in a third grade classroom bore little resemblance to the actual nation and often failed to demonstrate mastery of such map-making skills as orienting the top of the page to North.

### **School Climate**

Setting high behavioral expectations to support academic expectations has been a strength of the school throughout its two years of existence and the dominant culture in the school appears to remain one that values and reinforces achievement. A sense of purpose pervaded the school and students were generally eager to learn and participate. At the same time, several teachers struggled to ensure that their students upheld the schools' academic and behavioral standards consistently. Thus while students generally were engaged and attentive during class instruction – impressively so in some cases – inspectors observed more than one classroom where students were not engaged and where teachers did not set high academic or behavioral expectations. As a result, a number of students in these rooms were not paying attention and were occasionally disruptive.

### **Facility**

The school presently occupies space in a newly renovated building that seems well-designed and supports the school's academic mission. Public spaces appear to be secure and carefully monitored. Classrooms are bright and arrayed with adequate teaching and learning resources. Classroom space is also adequate if not expansive, and when teacher reinforcement of behavioral expectations is consistent, the space supports the school's method of running multiple classroom activities at once. Next year, the school will roughly double in size and expand to the second floor of the same facility.

The broader physical environment was arranged to reinforce achievement, self-worth and expression. In particular, the school was decorated with an unusually extensive collection of professional and student artwork. The principal noted that her intent was to encourage each student to think that his or her artwork was as important as that in any museum, a notion reinforced by the meticulous presentation of artwork throughout the school.

### **School Mission and Charter Implementation**

The school continues to effectively implement its academic program consisting of Direct Instruction for reading and mathematics instruction and Core Knowledge as a framework for other academic areas. While the purposefulness and level effectiveness in the implementation of the academic program were inconsistent, they were effective overall. The school's principal seemed aware of the relative effectiveness of her teachers.

The school's leadership has fostered a strong focus on core academics throughout the school (as described in the charter) and a shared definition of priorities among her staff. Perhaps because of this level of commitment, the school enjoys strong parent support, both through its active parent association and through a generally stable enrollment.

As the school enters its third year, maintaining its admirable focus on core academic areas, increasing the consistency of instruction, and further disseminating, within the school the effective practices of its strongest teachers will be critical issues. Doubling the size of the facility, faculty, and student body while seeking to ensure greater consistency will pose new challenges to the school and its leadership.