



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Rochester Leadership
Academy
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

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. The school opened in fall 2000. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 340 students in grades K-8, and plans to expand to 648 students by the end of its 5-year charter. It occupies the first three floors of an office building in downtown Rochester, sharing the building with professional tenants.

Based on a belief that a child's self-esteem is developed through diligence and achievement, the school's founders sought to create a school that provides an orderly environment with high academic and social expectations, and in which parents play a key role in helping the school to achieve its mission.

The school has contracted with National Heritage Academies to oversee its management. National Heritage Academies, which has a network of 28 schools in Michigan, North Carolina and New York educating 13,940 students, uses a well-known and highly regarded curriculum, including Core Knowledge, Open Court, and Saxon Math, as well as a character development component. The school's governance structure includes a School Leadership team consisting of parent chairs of nine school committees who report to the school's board of trustees.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year the Rochester City School District enrolled 35,435 students: 76.6% African-American; 18.9% Hispanic; 16.1% white; and 2.2% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 76.6% of the students in the district received free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School reported that 62% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 58% of students in the Rochester City School District failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 52% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 75% of students failed to meet state standards; 89% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 22, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the Rochester Leadership Charter School in Rochester, New York. The team comprised:

- Dr. Michael Stevens, Vice President of Research and Evaluation
- Dr. Jennifer Sneed, Vice President for Applications
- Doug Lemov, Vice President of Accountability

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, the Rochester Leadership Academy (RLA) was able to report a variety of information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it met its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. The school was some distance from meeting its fourth-grade student achievement objectives in ELA and math. It was far from meeting its eighth-grade student achievement objectives in ELA and math. RLA has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

In its charter, Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School commits to building a strong academic program by ensuring:

- A safe orderly environment.
- Strong instructional leadership.
- High expectations for student achievement.
- Increased time on task.
- Frequent monitoring of student progress.
- Strong home-school relations.

In its second year, the school appears to have made steady if gradual headway in the developing such a program. High expectations for student achievement; attentive, focused students; and effective, standard-driven instruction were consistently observed in most classrooms at the primary (K-2) grade levels. These characteristics were observed with less consistency in grades 3-5 and still less frequency at the middle school grades.

Typical classes in grades K-2 were, with perhaps a single exception, orderly, productive and standards-driven. During a typical math lesson in a first grade classroom, a teacher set high expectations for student participation as she reviewed student work problem-by-problem in a lesson on currency and addition. As students explained solutions verbally, the teacher noted steps and solutions on a poster-sized version of the worksheet taped to the board. Thus while she demonstrated the correct mathematical methods for solving problems, she also modeled the recording of information in writing. For their part, students were motivated and focused. In a second grade classroom, students read and corrected a series of poorly constructed sentences. Students were consistently able to correct sentences and explain why originals had been incorrect regardless of whether they had raised their hand or been chosen by the teacher to participate. Further, students seemed enthused by their own achievements, often gesturing energetically in response to getting a problem correct.

Classes in third through fifth grades were of inconsistent quality in terms of expectations for student achievement and the effectiveness of the learning environment. One fourth grade teacher was exemplary in her high standards for student work and behavior and in her ability to maximize the amount of focused learning in every lesson. However, other teachers in these grades had little control over the classroom environment or were enthusiastic but ineffective. To help share practices used in effective classrooms with less effective teachers, the principal has created three lead teacher positions for next year. Lead teachers, one each in the primary, elementary and middle school levels, will be responsible for classroom observations, team meetings, and staff development. Such an approach seems both promising and necessary as it draws on some of the schools strongest teachers to address what is perhaps the most important issue in the school's continued improvement.

While many teachers in sixth through eighth grades made instruction of reasonable quality available to those students who were inclined to actively pursue it, most had not developed strong enough lessons, expectations or management skills to consistently engage all students and

create a culture of learning. A significant number of students in these grades were observed to opt-out of involvement in classes – that is, while not acting out, students put their heads down on desks, whispered among themselves, or perused non-academic material during lessons, a fact that affected the overall level of expectation.

As with the previous year, the principal has described plans not to renew the contracts of ineffective teachers, a decision that harnesses the flexibility provided to charter schools under law to focus all key decisions on the goal of student achievement. Inspectors were impressed with the principal's acuity in identifying teachers whose effectiveness was cause for concern and the clarity of her criteria for evaluating them. Inspectors also feel strongly that increasing the ratio of strong teachers to less effective ones is perhaps the most pressing issue for the school as it enters the third year of its charter.

While the ultimate proof of any school's effectiveness lies in its demonstration of student achievement, the administration's addition of a corrective reading program for students in fourth through eighth grades, and an intensive writing program in all grades for the coming school year indicates that the school continues to focus its attention and effort on the areas of greatest importance.

School Climate

The school has continued, in its second year, to make positive, respectful behavior among students a priority, both to support effective learning in classrooms and as a goal in its own right. Several initiatives underscored the importance of this goal, including the institution this year of a "Student Creed" posted in many rooms and repeated by students in several classrooms observed in the morning:

We are Rochester Leadership students.
We strive to achieve academic excellence.
We exemplify high moral character.
We strive to realize our potential.
We work diligently to prepare for our future.

In public spaces and the majority of classrooms, most students were orderly and civil; many also worked diligently and strove for excellence. In fact while a few teachers' classrooms represented clear exceptions to the school's standards for student behavior, in most cases, even students who appeared unmotivated to succeed seemed more inclined to opt-out of instruction than to disrupt it, particularly in the older grades, where students were often observed to spend class time with their heads on desks or chatting quietly with friends.

The school added a behavioral coordinator to its administrative team this year. Her work was praised by teachers and fellow administrators who credited her with the improvement in quality of the school environment observed by Institute staff over the course of the year. In the opinion of Institute staff, the school has created the structures and policies that support teachers in setting high behavioral expectations in the classroom. Some teachers, however, were unable or unwilling to consistently reinforce expectations in their classrooms. Students seemed generally

willing to meet (or in some cases take advantage of) the level of demands set by their teachers for behavior in the classroom.

Institute staff also agree with the principal's observation that a key factor in improving behavior will be the school's ability to improve instructional quality and consistency and thus to engage students in the work of school. As is the case with the academic program generally, a critical issue for the school will be its ability to help teachers set and maintain clear standards in the classroom and to increase the ratio of effective to ineffective teachers in this regard. The school is fortunate to have several exemplary practitioners of classroom management techniques on whom to draw in helping less effective teachers improve. This issue is especially relevant since teachers who do not uphold behavioral expectation make more difficult the jobs of those who do, a fact which was emphasized in the observation of a particularly effective second grade classroom. The biggest hurdle observed to be facing the motivated and hard-working students was the din of noise emerging from the neighboring classroom.

Facility

The school operates out of a facility located on three floors of an office building in downtown Rochester. The present facility includes a small physical education space, a library, and a multi-purpose space as well as rooms for music and art. The school intends to expand by several classrooms into neighboring space for the 2002-2003 school year. Generally, classrooms support the school's instructional program. Many upstairs classrooms in the building are bright and airy, with high ceilings and floor to ceiling windows. Basement classrooms are spacious but lack windows.

This year, the administration moved primary grade students into the basement area and moved older students upstairs – a switch that reflected an effort to improve the learning environment among older students. Inspectors noted a dramatic contrast in the physical environments of the upper and lower schools. While the environment in most primary grade classrooms was relatively cheery and bright, even without windows, a lack of organization of physical space was evident in many classrooms in fifth grade and above. In these classrooms desks were arranged in a disorderly manner and with books, papers and other items often strewn on the floor. The environment of upper grade classrooms and hallways was stark as well. Inspectors noted little if any posted student work in and near sixth to eighth grade classrooms. Curricular materials were similarly lacking from wall space. In short, in the upper grades a physical environment existed that was not consistent with the school's goals and practices implied disorderliness and low expectations. The physical environment in younger grades was generally bright, orderly and more content-rich, though again, little posted student work was observed.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

At the close of its second year of operation, the school appears to be striking a balance between the need to maintain flexibility and adaptability and the necessity of remaining true to the principles outlined in its charter.

The school is making adequate progress toward the implementation of its charter. It has increased its efforts to communicate and collaborate with parents about student progress. It has gradually, if slowly, increased the use of technology. It has consistently emphasized the importance of moral teaching and moral behavior. Its commitment to the frequent monitoring of student work is harder to judge, both because of inconsistencies in methods and follow-through among various teachers (particularly with regards to keeping records of student writing) and because the school does not yet appear to have standardized its expectations of teachers in this area yet.

As a strong instructional program is the single most important tenet of the charter, the school appears to be meeting its commitments in this regard. The school's leadership has consistently focused on core academics as the most important aspect of its program and has been proactive in finding solutions and managing for results. This consistent emphasis on preparing students to achieve and succeed also represents evidence that the school has developed strong, effective instructional leadership, another aspect of school operations specifically committed to in the charter. While evidence of student achievement will ultimately determine the school's success, its efforts and priorities appear to be well-aligned with that end.