



Charter Schools Institute  

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State University of New York

Stepping Stone 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**

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 300 students in grades K-5, and plans to grow to 900 students in grades K-8 by the end of its 5-year charter. The school is housed in a facility that once served as a neighborhood supermarket.

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School was established for students at-risk of academic failure in Buffalo. The school has contracted for management services with Edison Schools, Inc., which has implemented its school design in 136 public schools, including many charter schools, with more than 75,000 students. The Edison model employs separate school academies using a curriculum that includes Direct Instruction, project-based learning, cooperative learning, and other features.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year 43,858 students enrolled in the Buffalo City School District: 57.5% African-American; 11.4% Hispanic; 28.5% white; and 2.6% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 74.5% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Stepping Stone Charter School reported that 82% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 64% of students at district-run schools failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 50% of 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, 76% of students failed to meet state standards; 84% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math test.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Inspection Team**

On May 30, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Stepping Stone Academy Charter School. The team comprised:

- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Michael Stevens, Vice President for Research and Evaluation, 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, the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School (SSACS) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that students made substantial progress from fall to spring in ELA and math. As a first-year school, it was too early to determine if it was meeting its objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly (i.e., spring-to-spring) progress. The school was far from meeting its fourth-grade student achievement objectives in ELA and math. SSACS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

### **School Curriculum and Instructional Practice**

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School operates "with the conviction that every child possesses the ability to learn, to experience success in the learning process, and to value self and others as intrinsic to that experience." In its charter, the school has thus outlined its purpose as follows: "to promote interested, accomplished, literate, active learning and learners; to establish an environment that is caring, structured, disciplined, and expectant; to hold administration, teachers, students, and parents accountable for the performance of their respective and mutual obligations; to offer community-based assistance and support to the children and families at risk

of failure; to extend and blur the boundaries of the classroom (and the School); and to create and sustain an institution that is, in itself, capable of self-assessment, renewal, and growth.”

After its first year of operation, it is clear to Institute staff that those administrators and faculty who work with an awareness of the school’s laudable goals have set high standards for student performance with regards to learning and behavior. It was commonplace for Institute staff to enter specific classrooms throughout the 2001-02 academic year, and during the end of year inspection, and observe students engaged in challenging work and responding positively to discipline routines and procedures. On the other hand, Institute staff also continued to notice a select number of teachers failing to model the high standards described in the school’s charter. As a result, the quality of instruction observed appeared uneven in scope, varying across grade levels and from teacher to teacher.

In classes where teachers implemented instruction effectively, lessons were delivered with an intention consistent with the school’s standards-based curriculum. These teachers characteristically emphasized higher order thinking skills and steered students toward the “mastery of the basic skills of communication, computation, reading and reasoning essential for [their] successful advancement to succeeding levels of education.” In one first grade lesson regarding the solar system, a teacher promoted student comprehension beyond the level of recall by probing with questions that both reinforced their content area knowledge and critical thinking skills. After reading a short passage, as a group, titled “The Solar System,” students were asked: “How many planets are in our solar system?” “How are some of the planets different?” “What is the sun, a star or planet? Why?” Similarly, in a fifth grade social studies class, the use of the Socratic method could be discerned as the lead teacher reviewed a worksheet exercise completed by her students. During the review session students were required to defend their answers with additional evidence not provided on their handout and to consider other possible alternatives.

Institute staff also observed that some promising and effective teachers made efficient use of class time through classroom management techniques that emphasized time on task. These teachers methodically counted down “five, four, three, two, one” after instructional commands in order to ensure purposeful student behavior and maximize periods of transition time between lessons. Others often spoke the plain language of good behavior with success, sometimes reminding students of their obligation to not shame themselves or their family members (For example, one teacher queried a student, “What will your mother say when I explain to her what you have just done?”).

In classrooms where Institute staff did not observe effective instruction, a lack of teacher direction and focus, and student misconduct typically challenged classroom culture. Teachers’ lessons were often truncated and/or derailed by students who refused to participate accordingly or remain seated while their peers performed their assigned tasks. During a Success For All literacy period, one teacher needed to repeatedly ask students to reread exercises because several students did not read aloud with their classmates. Other areas regarding teacher instructional deficiencies involved some teachers’ lack of expertise in subject area knowledge. For example, Institute staff observed one teacher struggle to provide students with concise examples demonstrating the difference between physical and chemical changes in properties of matter. Because the teacher failed to provide students with an appropriate definition of each concept,

students were consistently unable to construct their own examples of physical and chemical property changes when asked by the teacher.

The school's administrators and instructional leaders are aware of the teaching discrepancies outlined above and have committed themselves to alleviate these concerns through the continued professional development of its staff. According to the elementary Lead Teacher, the school will continue to implement model teaching and observation sessions with its teachers, and is currently considering the possibility of block teaching at certain grade levels to maximize staff expertise. Through block teaching, faculty members will be restricted to teaching specific subject areas only. Additionally, the elementary Lead Teacher, along with the primary coordinator and the school's achievement director, are in the process of developing an intensive summer staff development seminar. The primary purpose of this tutorial will be to map the school's curriculum and resolve inconsistencies between Edison's curriculum and New York State Standards.

### **School Climate**

School climate and student culture was similarly uneven. Teachers who were organized effectively implemented their lessons and typically had better behaved classrooms. Teachers who lacked organization and content knowledge struggled to achieve instructional goals and to adequately govern student behavior. At the fifth grade level, Institute staff determined that many students undermined the authority of those teachers who were inconsistent in their discipline routines. This was especially evident for one class of students who tended to be disruptive in their science class but were model students in a social studies class with a different teacher. The elementary coordinator suggested that such teachers neglected to apply consistently the school's discipline procedures. Institute staff concurred with this finding and also noticed that throughout the year and during the end of year inspection that three teachers were inconsistent in meting out consequences or reward. For example, after one fifth grade class had behaved exceptionally poorly while transitioning to its library period, the teacher revoked the class's library privilege. This same teacher recanted the punishment without explanation and allowed the students to go. As such, the greatest discipline challenge now facing the school is the successful school-wide implementation of its behavior policy.

### **Facility**

The Stepping Stone Academy Charter school is located in a newly remodeled structure that is bright, open and well maintained. In general, the facility supports effective instruction. Hallways are adorned with student work that is reflective of the school's academic program. Additionally, special colored tiles help to provide students and teachers with an efficient classroom transition routine.

The school shares the facility space with the True Bethel Baptist Church. The school itself is physically separated from the church although they both share a common entrance and both organizations' administrative offices are housed on the same wing.

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

Institute staff have observed progress, adequate for a first year charter school, in the following objectives outlined in the Stepping Stones Academy charter:

- Student mastery of basic skills of communication, computation, reading and reasoning that are essential for successful advancement to succeeding levels of education and personal growth.
- Student development and demonstration of leadership skills.
- Student competence in the process of developing, understanding, and demonstrating values.
- Student knowledge of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences at increasingly complex levels.
- Student understanding and demonstration of effective citizenship.
- Student respect of and for the environment.
- Student participation in a community of school and family.

However, much of this progress is the result of the dedication of a select group of teachers as opposed to a pervasive school culture where effective instructional practice and student order and discipline are sustained. That said, Institute staff believes that the school's administration and board of trustees are committed to taking the necessary steps to ensure that its mission is accomplished in the time allotted by its charter. The administration has not renewed the contracts of four teachers and will closely monitor the progress of three teachers during the next school year under the flexibility afforded by the charter school law. Additionally, the increased focus on teacher professional development for year two, and more recently the board's decision to limit the school's growth to 100 more students for the 2002-03 academic year, reflects the board's commitment to providing the rigorous education outlined in the Stepping Stone charter application.