



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

The Ark Community 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

The Ark Community 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. The school will maintain an enrollment of 96 students in grades K-5 throughout the term of its charter. The school is partnered with The Ark, an after-school program operating in the Taylor Public Housing projects in downtown Troy serving “at-risk” children who live in public housing. The school is housed in the former St. Paul’s School of the Roman Catholic Diocese.

The Ark Community Charter School uses small class size and multi-age classrooms with a variety of teaching methods including teaching centers, inter-disciplinary projects, cooperative learning, and large and small group instruction to improve the skills of students at-risk of academic failure. The school employs an assessment plan that provides standardized measures regarding student achievement during those years when there are no State-required assessments.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year 4,931 students enrolled in the Troy City School District: 25.9% African-American; 7.1% Hispanic; 64.7% white; and 2.4% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 48.7% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

The Ark Community Charter School reported 96 % of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 40% of students in the Troy School District failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 25% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 61% of students failed to meet state standards; 70% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 21, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the Ark Community Charter School. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, CSI
- Jeff Baker, analyst and consultant to 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 Ark Community 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 fourth-grade ELA student achievement objective, and was some distance from meeting its fourth-grade math student achievement objective. The Ark has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

Ark Community Charter School's educational design calls for multi-age classrooms where teachers use small student work groups and project-based instruction focused on multiple learning styles as the primary means of curriculum delivery. The school is organized into multi-grade classrooms: Grades K-1; Grades 2-3; and Grades 4-5. The school's model is based on the philosophy that all students can "thrive in situations where their strengths are celebrated and their needs are appropriately addressed."

Setting such a clear and purposeful school culture proved a complex and difficult task for Ark Community Charter School during its first year of operation. At the start of the 2001-02 academic year, school staff did not anticipate the level of student discipline and academic challenges presented by the student population, causing staff and administrators to review and redesign how they would implement the school planned in their charter application. While appropriate student behavior and the desired level of academic rigor in the upper grades were not in place by the end of the school's first year, Ark Community Charter School made creditable progress toward implementing the design envisioned in its charter.

Most notably, the school successfully focused on improving student order and discipline while designing lessons to provide students the knowledge and skills required to succeed in a project based curriculum. This was especially evident in the lower grades.

The site visit team observed an unusually high number of adults facilitating instruction in each classroom. This low ratio of students to adults is a feature of the Ark Community Charter School's design that allowed the school, particularly at the primary grades, to achieve greater student order and discipline throughout the school's first year. During both formal and informal visits in the 2001-02 school year, one to three adults assisted lead teachers in guiding students through their lessons. The low student-to-adult ratio allowed teachers to concentrate on students whose academic needs exceeded those of their peers, while still providing appropriately challenging exercises to other students in the classroom.

In one K-1 classroom, the lead teacher coached four students in a reading exercise. She particularly focused on two students who appeared to have difficulty recognizing and sounding out words identified by the teacher. Another adult in the classroom assisted students in a similarly styled reading lesson. Two other student groups independently completed worksheets and creative arts exercises that reinforced their knowledge of the alphabet. Students were purposeful in their tasks and their work reflected a focus on literacy and writing.

In a Grade 2-3 classroom, students were engaged by a project in which they wrote folk tales. The teacher had structured the lesson and supporting materials to assure students wrote complete paragraphs that build into sensible and often interesting stories. A review of writing in the classroom revealed that students often effectively used process writing techniques (brainstorm, rough draft, editing, re-write, conference and final document).

At the Grade 4-5 level, Institute staff and inspectors observed general improvement of student focus and attention to their assignments over the course of the school year. However, evidence of student engagement in lessons was not always verifiable. For the most part, many of the lessons observed were characterized by a lack of structure and focus and did not always reflect an awareness of the academic and educational goals established in the school's accountability plan. Many upper grade lessons observed by inspectors did not contain the academic focus and structure required for students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the Ark's academic goals. For example, although most teachers attempted to integrate computer technology into student work, it was not clear how such activities supported the academic objectives of teachers' lessons. Inspectors observed students working diligently at classroom computers performing different activities, but seldom observed teachers or aides ensuring students were engaged in work connected to the lesson. Thus the computer program had become the object of instruction rather than supporting the lesson. Some students indiscriminately began and quit several computer-based exercises without completing them. Other students randomly reviewed Internet sites void of academic focus or connection to the academic task before them.

The Ark Community Charter School relies on classroom work as one means to assess student mastery and achievement. Purposeful posted student work and the effective construction and maintenance of student journals and portfolios seemed limited to the kindergarten through third grades. In these classrooms, there was a significant amount of writing exercises and student journals on display. These student work products showed evidence of teacher comments and editing as students worked toward a final product. Although many of the initial student drafts observed lacked appropriate punctuation, they were noteworthy because some contained compound sentence structures and thus demonstrated that students were beginning to convey more complex ideas in their writings. Similarly, the school has begun to link content areas to New York State Performance Standards. For example, in a study of Hudson River School artists, students studied and reproduced paintings in the Hudson River style, examined Hudson River geography and history.

In Grades 4-5, teachers' expectations for student work were unclear. Student folders contained mixed work (math, history, and English) that was generally disorganized and uncorrected. Based on a review of journals and posted student work, inspectors did not observe teachers consistently communicating to students the expectations (e.g., rubrics, checklists, and student work at various levels of completion with teacher feedback) that would lead to the attainment of the New York State Performance Standards.

School Climate

In its first year of operation, Ark Community Charter School's staff and administration demonstrated the ability to react quickly and strategically in addressing instructional and administrative challenges. Realizing they had overestimated the skill levels of entering students, school leaders adjusted the school's academic program and hired behavioral management consultants to assist in meeting students' needs. As a result, students became more engaged and on task. Over the course of the year, student misconduct decreased.

Facility

The Ark is currently located in a former parochial school building. The classrooms are small, bright, well maintained, and capable of supporting appropriate instructional activities. However, the school's administration has expressed an interest in expanding, which will require a larger facility.

School Mission and Implementation of Charter

The Ark Community Charter School has made steady progress towards addressing the challenges faced in its first year of operation and implementing the academic program outlined in its charter. Notably, the school's charter emphasizes links to the community and during its first year of operation it has hosted local artists and authors to enrich the curriculum.

The school also has reached out to the John P. Taylor Apartments, a public housing neighborhood, in which many of the students' families reside. School staff and parents report teachers travel to students' homes to conduct parent/teacher conferences and the school holds parents' meetings focused on curriculum with emphasis on creating a literate home environment.