



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Carl C. Icahn
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 Carl C. Icahn Charter School, approved by the State University Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents that March, opened September 2001. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 108 students in grades K-2. The school will expand by the third year of its 5-year charter to 180 students in grades K-4. It is located in Community School District 9, and is housed in a new facility built especially for the school.

The school seeks to serve at-risk students in the South Bronx, including students residing at the Icahn House shelter for homeless women and their families. It uses the Core Knowledge curriculum in an intimate environment featuring small classes (18 students per class) in a small school. With an extended school year of 209 days and an extended school day, the school has more time for instruction and reduces the loss of academic skills that occurs over long, school vacations.

The school employs a variety of real life applications and hands-on learning opportunities to make the curriculum “immediate” for children. It seeks to maintain high standards for instruction through on-going and professional development. The school stresses the importance of parental involvement (including parent meetings to bolster their capacity to promote education at home) to support the curriculum.

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 9 enrolled 31,013 students: 34.8% African-American; 63.1% Hispanic; American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander, 1.6%; and, 0.6% white. Additionally, 93.3% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

The Carl C. Icahn Charter School reported that 94% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 76.5% of students in Community School District 9 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 67.5% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 86.3% of students failed to meet state standards; 92.4% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 29, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the Carl C. Icahn Charter School in Bronx, New York. The team comprised:

- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Michael Stevens, Vice President of Evaluation and Research, CSI
- James Merriman IV, Executive Director, CSI

Academic Data

The Carl C. Icahn Charter School's annual Progress Report contains information on 2001-02 student achievement, based on the academic goals the school set for itself in its Accountability Plan. The two major goals are in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In the Progress Report, Icahn provides 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 objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly (i.e., spring-to-spring) progress in ELA and math. Icahn met its ELA objective in early childhood reading proficiency. Other objectives were not reported because the school has yet to enroll fourth-grade students who take a variety of state tests. With these data, Icahn has begun to present the evidence, which will build its case for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The Carl C. Icahn Charter School's charter lists academic excellence as its first priority. In its first year of operation, the school had put in place a foundation upon which the educational program outlined in its charter can grow. Icahn's founders, board, administration, and staff are focused on, as stated in the school's charter, "breaking the cycle of poverty" in New York's South Bronx community by "leveling the academic divide" between its low income students and students whose economic advantages have traditionally allowed for better educational advantages. Icahn Charter School believes all students deserve to be challenged by a rigorous academic program that enables them to "learn more and increase their capacity to learn." The school's educational goals strive to exceed the New York State Board of Regents performance standards through the use of small class size, an extended day, and longer calendar year than schools in the surrounding area. Carl C. Icahn Charter School's successes in its first year were clear as the school successfully began implementation of the demanding educational design outlined in its charter. The school's continued commitment to refining instructional delivery, assessment, and classroom management.

In most classrooms, inspectors observed teachers implementing effective instructional practices. Such lessons were often marked by an exceptional degree of focus on the academic objectives at hand. In one Kindergarten lesson, the teacher engaged students in an intensive exercise that promoted both language recognition and recall skills, a key building block as students work toward increase literacy. The lesson was grounded in the school's standards, delivered well by the teacher, and clearly engaging for the students. In another class, students displayed success at identifying letters and producing complex letter – sound connections that indicated these children were acquiring a solid foundation as their reading skills emerged.

A similar degree of effectiveness was observed during a spelling review in a second grade classroom. In addition to a standard list of spelling words, students worked on a list of “challenge” words that linked directly to the school's standards based literature, history and science curriculum. To combine recall ability with higher order thinking skills, students were responsible for using their words in complete sentences that demonstrated vocabulary mastery. The teacher methodically circulated from child to child offering students phonics-based context clues and assisted them in creation of high quality sentences. The teacher's actions as well as the student work produced exemplified the high standard of academic achievement outlined in Icahn's charter.

Inspectors also found some variation from such well designed and delivered lessons. When inconsistencies in instruction were observed, they seemed due to a lack of certainty about the concept or task at hand. At times this was due to disruptive student behavior. At other times, inconsistencies centered on the delivery of Core Knowledge lessons. Core Knowledge is a series of rich historical, scientific, literature, and the arts subjects that serves as the curriculum for the Carl C. Icahn Charter School. As is the case with many schools beginning the implementation of Core Knowledge content, teachers are challenged to master historical and scientific content that was not available as a part of their teacher preparation studies at university. As such, the school's enthusiastic and youthful staff must design effective Core Knowledge instruction and assessment while at the same time working to refine their knowledge of subject matter that includes rigorous concepts in physics, chemistry, world civilization, history and the like.

The school implemented both journals and writing portfolios during the first year of its charter and continues to refine these strategies and increase the consistent use of both across classrooms. Student journals, used at the start of each homeroom session, include warm-up or review exercises that test students' knowledge regarding the previous day's lessons. Portfolios, which are primarily maintained by teachers and consist of student class projects, homework assignments, writing samples, and tests have yet to include the type of rigorous structure and oversight necessary to provide the evidence of student success called for in the school's accountability plan. While some teachers shared with inspectors useful documentation of students' progress, the school has yet to align the collection of student work with rubrics or check lists that assess student academic performance against the performance goals Icahn has set.

Inspectors observed the following initiatives to serve students at risk of academic failure:

- The school's administration had begun compiling research on the student body that will allow for the comparison of student achievement with the goals outlined in the school's charter.
- Three days per week, a one-hour after school tutoring session was available to all students.
- One day per week a math clinic was provided by a neighborhood teacher
- During normal school hours, the Target Program provides students extra instruction to diminish a child's chance of falling behind in his or her studies.

School Climate and Discipline

At the close of its first year, Carl C. Icahn Charter School teachers were frequently supported by adult assistants as they worked with students to set in place a behavioral code that infused ever increasing levels of order and discipline.

At times inspectors observed inconsistent classroom management routines. Some teachers deftly delivered instruction and discipline in a productive and thoughtful manner; one that promoted student learning. In other classes, inspectors observed students wandering the room and ignoring pleas from the teacher to productively participate in lessons. At times, this led to confrontations between wandering students and other children effected by the distracting behavior.

Facility

Carl C. Icahn Charter School is located in a brand new facility that is clean, orderly, and bright. Classroom floor plan and square footage adequately provide for the numbers of students in each class. Classrooms are stocked with supporting educational materials. There is a cafeteria that serves as a multi-purpose gathering space and several multi-purpose rooms that are used by teachers for small groups, storage, and planning activities. The school boasts a new playground that enables constructive plan and a host of physical fitness routines.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

At the close of its first year, the Carl C. Icahn Charter School had made progress toward implementing the educational model described in its charter. The school hired a dedicated staff, encouraged the use of assessment tools and progress reports, and made credible attempts to address the needs of students at risk of academic failure. At the same time, the school's administration looked forward to providing teachers additional professional development and additional instructional resources to create a school that "will make children proud to be a part of a school in which high academic standards are the norm." The principal had correctly determined that additional assistance for teachers was needed in the areas of refining instruction, particularly in subjects from the Core Knowledge curriculum, additional subject matter materials, and classroom management techniques. A focus on these things, combined with the continued commitment to challenge students and help them succeed academically should serve the Carl C. Icahn Charter School well as it begins the second year of its charter.

