



Charter Schools Institute  

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State University of New York

Central New York Charter  
Charter School for Math &  
Science

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 Central New York Charter School for Math and Science 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 September 2000. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 480 students in grades K-7. By the end of its 5-year charter the school plans to enroll 660 students in grades K-6. The school year at CNYCS lasts 195 days with an instructional day lasting from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.

To oversee its management, the school contracted with Beacon Education Management, Inc., which has merged with another education management company, becoming Chancellor Beacon Academies of Miami. The company is the nation's second-largest educational-management firm, serving 19,000 students from pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 at 81 schools in eight states and the District of Columbia. The school is employing Beacon's Lightpoints standards and curriculum with particular emphasis on math and science. It is also using the Education By Design teaching model that emphasizes problem solving and team building. The school received one of the 10 waivers from collective bargaining requirements provided the State University in the Charter Schools Act of 1998.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year 23,009 students enrolled in the Syracuse City School District: 45.6% African American; 6.3% Hispanic; 45.5% white; and, 2.7% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander. Additionally 65% of students in the district received free or reduced cost lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

The Central New York Charter School for Math and Science reported that 75% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 62% of students the Syracuse City School District in failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 51% 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, 77% 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 20, 2002, an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Central New York Charter School for Math and Science. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Doug Lemov, Vice President for Accountability, CSI
- Jennifer Sneed, Vice President for Applications, CSI
- Rebecca Holmes, Director of Research & Finance, Massachusetts Department of Education Charter School Office

### **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 Central New York Charter School for Math and Science (CNYCS) 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 was far from meeting its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. It was also far from meeting its fourth-grade ELA student achievement objectives; and some distance from meeting its fourth-grade math student achievement objectives. CNYCS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

## **School Curriculum and Instructional Practice**

In its second year of operation Central New York Charter School for Math and Science (CNYCS) experienced two leadership turnovers. In April 2002, the CNYCS Board of Trustees selected a permanent school director with a clear sense of instructional goals and priorities. Under the new leadership, and with the support of a newly focused Board of Trustees, CNYCS has begun to implement the foundations of the school envisioned in its charter. While the new school leadership seems purposeful, focused and capable of implementing the school's academic program, the school will have to address the effective implementation of this program with a sense of urgency. This is particularly important given the school's inability to implement this program over the first year and a half of its charter.

CNYCS, housed in two buildings next to each other on the same campus, is also divided in terms of the effectiveness of its academic program. The school's Kindergarten to Grade 3 program holds the promise of becoming a strong instructional program yet requires greater constancy. In Grades 4 through 6, the program remains disorganized and suggests low expectations for student behavior and academic progress. Lack of rigorous instruction based on New York State performance standards and effective classroom management continues to pose a significant challenge at the end of the school's second year of its charter.

While instruction at Kindergarten through Grade 3 was inconsistent, students in these grades generally displayed behavior conducive to learning. For example, the site visit team noted one Kindergarten class where children used correct letter formation, capitalization and punctuation to copy and complete sentences, summarizing the morning lesson. The teacher moved through the room checking work and asking the generally attentive and engaged students to read and correct. In one first grade classroom, students worked independently and brought their work to the teacher for her review. The teacher consistently set high expectations for student work, insisting that students review their own work and make corrections until it was correct.

Also in Kindergarten, a teacher made exemplary use of journals. Students received a new journal for each month with a specific page for each day. They wrote a word to describe a given picture and wrote a sentence using the word. The school's ability to disseminate such intentional and standards-based practices will be critical to its success.

Review of student writing in Grades 1 through 3 showed that students wrote most days, if not every day. Writing samples showed some evidence of drafting, consultation with the teacher, editing and rewriting. Writing at Grades 1 and 2 appeared sufficient to ensure students' skills progressed toward school standards. Grade 3 writing samples showed growth in skill or concept over writing in Grades 1 and 2. Student work posted in some classrooms and hallways showed additional evidence that students were actively engaged by writing instruction intentionally designed to assist them in reaching academic goals.

Such promising observations in Kindergarten through Grade 3 were balanced by classroom observations that revealed the need for greater instructional refinement at those grades. In one Grade 3 class, for example, a lesson on graphing numbers of jelly beans generated enthusiasm about the jelly beans, but the graphs students produced were facile and more appropriate for first

grade. In a second grade classroom, reading instruction was marred by poor preparation of materials, vague direction from the teacher to students and a lack of clear instructions for the writing product students were to create after reading the story. Again, achieving greater consistency and higher standards is critical in the Kindergarten and Grade 1 program.

Instruction in Grades 4 through 6 appeared to Institute staff and inspectors at informal and formal visits throughout the 2001-02 school year to be unconnected to the learning standards described in the CNYCS charter. Even curriculum materials that, if they had been delivered through intentional, standards-driven instruction, offered promise, were brought to the lowest common denominator by poor classroom behavior or poor instructional practices.

For example, a fourth grade teacher introduced a history project focused on New York State history and geography. She asked students to plan a trip to historically significant sites around the state. In the implementation of the lesson, the teacher encouraged dilution of the rigor of the assignment by discussing as legitimate student's plans to go to the mall, amusement parks and other locations with dubious, if any, historical significance in New York State. The endorsement of such projects, instead of those focused on historically significant sites as originally assigned, detached the lesson from the learning standards the school has set. Further undermining what might have been a cross-curricular lesson in English/language arts and history, the teacher set low expectations for the student work product by stating, "I don't need paragraphs, I just need 4 sentence fragments for what you'd do on your trip."

Similarly, in a sixth grade classroom where students read aloud from a novel, the teacher was unable to assess the correctness and effectiveness of their reading because she did not have the book open herself. Students read aloud to the class for as long as they were inclined to. When done, students signified that someone else should read by saying "popcorn," wherein another child, if so inclined, was to continue reading where the first child had stopped. With 12 minutes remaining in the class, no students wished to read and no further teaching or academic work took place during this class period with the full approval and awareness of the teacher.

The school's deployment of resources, particularly time, does not reflect student achievement as its first and foremost goal. Teachers waste an inordinate amount of time on ineffective attempts at classroom management. Instruction time is lost not only to attempts at controlling student behavior but also in transitions that, particularly at upper grades, should be routine and or easily executed. At 10:30 a.m. a teacher informed an inspector that her classroom was getting ready for lunch (scheduled for 10:50) and students spent several minutes packing up before using the restroom. While organizing materials and using the restroom before lunch are productive activities, the languid pace toward either task, combined with the lack of organization in the classroom indicated the teacher did not strive to maximize instructional time.

In a Kindergarten classroom, two teachers and 16 students were engaged in a strong lesson about attributes of squares of cloth (soft, scratchy, silky, etc.). Teachers introduced the various attribute words and explained to students that they would each reach their hand into the attribute box, select a square of cloth without looking, and apply the proper attribute to their choice. Students were highly engaged at first, but only one box was available for the activity, and students became restless as they waited for all the other students to take a turn. Had teachers

created two boxes and divided the class into two parts, students would have had increased individualized attention in a smaller amount of time maximizing the use of time as a resource.

The school's new director has stated that the school must find a way to replicate the best practices and strongest classrooms in Kindergarten through Grade 3 to all classrooms at all grade levels. The site visit team agreed that solving behavioral challenges and increasing academic rigor in all lessons must be the priority for CNYCS, and that the school's future lies in question unless it can do so.

### **School Climate**

CNYCS has accomplished a positive change in student behavior at the upper grades. Much of this work is credited to the Assistant Director who is adept at assisting students in good behavioral practices and who provides a dramatic level of support for teachers. The Assistant Director links good behavior to the promotion of a good academic environment.

CNYCS' challenges in creating effective, academically oriented classroom environments remain largely unsolved. Though discipline plans were posted clearly in most classrooms, they were followed infrequently. One fourth grade teacher made repeated reminders to students in an attempt to gain order in the classroom, finally intoning "Stop. Now. Please," a request that students continued to ignore. Despite the fact that behavior was preventing her from teaching, the teacher chose not to use the discipline system, signaling to students that rules and standards meant little in the face of their defiance. Institute staff and inspectors observed no standard implementation of a schoolwide discipline plan.

The school's administration, under the leadership of the director, holds a coordinating meeting each Monday morning to address topics that range from progress toward implementing the school's charter to addressing the academic needs of individual students. The effectiveness of this meeting is evident in the resulting streamlined school's improved security system, facility and maintenance, the opening of the library, and increased attention to academics and behavior school wide. The challenges of identifying and implementing successful solutions to teacher management of student behavior at the upper grades and increasing purposeful delivery of instruction at all grade levels remain.

### **Facility**

CNYCS' facility consists of two buildings situated next to each other on a small campus in downtown Syracuse. Under the leadership of the new director, the building is much improved, no longer in the state of neglect apparent during the first year and a half of the school's charter. Now, in common spaces and hallways a pride of ownership is evident. Bright new paint with the strength to stay fresh in a school environment and the school's new library have contributed in setting a positive new direction for the school.

The primary building, housing students in Kindergarten through Grade 3, has classrooms that are clean and orderly enough as to not distract from learning, and has a small amount of student

work posted in the hallways. This is not the case in the building that houses Grades 4 through 6. Classroom environments are disorderly, at times, dirty, with textbooks, backpacks, clothing, paper, and other resources strewn about. Hallways and classrooms suffer from a lack of posted student work and in some classes, completed student projects are stacked haphazardly instead of displayed as a proud example of what students know and are able to do. It is, in short, a disorderly environment that underscores the disarray of the instructional program.

After examining the challenges facing the school, CNYCS has amended its charter to enroll students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 instead of Kindergarten through Grade 8 as originally planned. While Institute staff and inspectors agree such changes are targeted at remedying the urgent instructional needs at the school, the true test of the success of such design changes must be measured by increased rigor and accuracy of what students know and are able to produce in all academic areas.

The administration has done yeoman's work to reshape the school climate and increase behavioral expectations. The new director, supported by the assistant director and the Board of Trustees, has clear vision for what curriculum should be and for what teacher's instructional practice could be. At the close of the second year of operation, CNYCS is a much stronger organization than it was as the start of the school year. What remains is an urgent need to become a much stronger school.