



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Child Development Center
of the Hamptons
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 Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees and by the Board of Regents in July 2000. It opened in Wainscott in January 2001, with a focus on serving severe special needs students residing in eastern Long Island. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 47 students in K-4, and plans to expand to 72 students in grades K-5 by the end of its 5-year charter.

The school provides an inclusive alternative for children from eastern Long Island many of whom faced a lengthy round trip to a BOCES program that was disconnected from the communities where the children and their families live. The school enrolls students from seven different school districts located throughout eastern Long Island. For the 2001-2002 school year none of its students qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

CDCH offers a community-based setting stressing parental involvement and benefits from access to such local resources as artists and business owners. It employs a multi-grade approach to instruction, which places students in classes based on ability levels and promotes the integration of special needs children with children in the mainstream. A theme-based curriculum designed with Modern Red Schoolhouse is used to meet all New York State Learning Standards.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 15, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School. The team comprised:

- Jennifer Sneed, Vice President for Applications, CSI
- Michael Stevens, Vice President of Research and Evaluation, CSI
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, 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. On the other hand, 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 Child Development Center of the Hamptons (CDCH) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it met its state math test objective, but was far from meeting its state ELA objective. It was also some distance from meeting its student-centered-plan objectives. CDCH has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

Opened in January of 2001, the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School (CDCH) completed its first full year of operation in June 2002. The school provides a K-4 educational program to 46 students of which 25, or 54%, are students with disabilities. In addition to many one-to-one aides for students with disabilities, the school has an admirable cadre of two certified teachers for each classroom, and one of the teachers is often certified in special education. In fact, most classroom teachers are dually certified in both regular and special education. The rich classroom staffing is also complemented by at least one teacher's assistant per classroom.

Classroom instruction is varied with whole group, small group, and one-on one activity. Even with the high level of professional expertise, it is frequently difficult for staff to engage all students in learning due to the wide variance in educational experience, cognitive functioning, and appropriate social skills. This is especially true for students who are progressing normally

and high ability students who occasionally do not appear to be exposed to a challenging academic program. However, the staff at the school does an exceptional job integrating special education students into the academic program.

During classroom instruction regular and special education students are generally attentive and engaged. Teachers tend to have hands on activities to reinforce topics under study. For example, in a Kindergarten class studying habitats, the students built a functioning terrarium. In the grade 1-2 class, mathematics instruction included the use of geoboards, and in the 4th grade American Sign Language (ASL) class students were working on game boards that demonstrated their knowledge of ASL. All students at CDCH benefit from the special services of occupation and physical therapists, speech and language therapists, sign language teacher and the social worker regardless of their classification as regular or special education students.

The professional staff at CDCH is highly committed to the mission of the school. This was evidenced by the interaction of staff as they deftly “handed off” difficult students to avoid burnout. Teachers were well prepared for classes. Through conversations with the teachers and the principal, it is clear that they are intimately aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the students. They speak at length of past interventions and future plans for each student’s academic progress.

The school has created and maintains “student centered plans” (SCPs) for each student. These plans, which resemble Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) developed for special education students, are re-evaluated annually. Institute staff were impressed at the thoroughness and usefulness of each of the plans reviewed. SCPs for students with disabilities incorporate the IEP information, as well as related service requirements. Day-to-day class work is assessed in a traditional A, B, C or numerical manner, and a great deal of student work is displayed in classrooms and the public areas of the school. Class work on display tended to be graded, while larger projects were not.

The school’s leadership consists of an executive director and principal. The executive director is primarily concerned with fund raising, development of a permanent school facility, and government/school district relations. The principal supports the work of the executive director and manages the school’s instructional program. The principal capitalizes on the small size of the school by knowing each student and his or her academic /social needs. It is not uncommon while meeting with the principal for him to cock his head to one side, listen to a student, and excuse himself to deal with a problem.

School Climate

Based on observations of students and staff, as well as conversations with the principal, staff and students, it was obvious that staff demonstrated a commitment to the school and held high expectations for student behavior. The staff placed a high premium on a positive school climate. In addition, each time Institute staff has visited the school, staff members have been positive and upbeat and projected a “can do” attitude to their students. In all areas of the school program there is a heavy emphasis on decency and respect in interactions with everyone.

As was mentioned earlier in this report, the school may wish to focus on the perceived lack of challenge for high ability students. This will assist efforts in establishing a positive school climate for all students.

Student order and discipline is situational. Given that approximately half of the student body is identified as in need of special education services and a number of these students require close behavioral monitoring due to the nature of their disability, the school is orderly. However, when a student or students with behavioral issues act out, it can affect the classroom and even the majority of the school due to the open-air nature of the classrooms on the upper level of the facility. This is the reality that the staff and students of this school must deal with on a regular basis.

Facility

The K-3 classrooms, the kitchen, and the health and school offices are located on the upper level of the building, while the grade 4 classroom, space used for physical education and art, and support staff offices are located on the lower level of the school. The upper level is bright and spacious, due to the vaulted ceiling, large windows and low dividers between classrooms. The lower level does not have windows and the 4th grade classroom is not as spacious as the classrooms on the upper level. When the weather permits, students are taken outside on a playing field for physical education and/or recess activities. Because the present facility includes sufficient space to add another classroom on the lower level, it will be appropriate in size through fifth grade (2002-03). Beginning with the 2002-03 school year, however, the school will use space in the “bubble” (year-round tennis court) adjacent to the school for physical education activities. A fifth grade classroom will be added on the lower level.

Generally the facility supports effective instruction. However, as delineated in the “school climate and discipline” section of this report, there are occasions when the open-air nature of the facility may interfere with teaching and learning.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

In its second year of operation the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School continues to implement the mission and charter granted by the Trustees of the State University of New York. The mission refers to “expand[ing] school choice” and “build[ing] upon each student’s unique strengths.” With students with disabilities comprising half of the school’s student population, it appears that the school is true to “expand[ing] school choice, and “build[ing] upon each student’s unique strengths.” However, the mission also commits the school to “promot[ing] educational excellence and personal growth in all children.” This aspect of the mission appears to be unmet for students who are progressing normally or who may be high ability learners.

The attainment of the educational principles enumerated in the charter appears to be underway at the end of year two. Especially noteworthy are:

- the development of Student Centered Plans (SCP’s);

- the development of support services for children who require special accommodations to be successful in traditional classrooms; and
- small structured classes with strong instructional support.

Educational principles that are still emerging at the end of year two are:

- comprehensive, the me-based instructional approach; and
- providing access to new technologies, and incorporating their use into the daily structure of the classroom.