



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Eugenio Maria de Hostos
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

Eugenio Maria De Hostos Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. Sponsored by the Ibero American Action League, Inc., the Rochester school opened in September 2000 in a former Roman Catholic elementary school. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 160 students in grades K-3, and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to 280 students in grades K-6.

Based on the performance-oriented America's Choice design, the school has a longer school day that runs from 8:30 am to 5 p.m., with an additional one-hour tutoring program for those who need extra help.

The goal of the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School is to create an environment where Spanish-dominant students are more quickly and smoothly immersed in English, while exposing English-dominant students to Spanish immersion. While the school originally anticipated a majority of students to be Spanish-dominant, the majority of students are English-dominant; the school has adapted its educational program to meet the needs of the students it serves.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year the Rochester City School District enrolled 35,435 students: 76.6% African-American; 18.9% Hispanic; 16.1% white; and 2.2% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 76.6% of the students in the district received free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Eugenio Maria De Hostos Charter School reported that 91% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 58% of students in the Rochester City School District failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 52% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 75% of students failed to meet state standards; 89% 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 Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School in Rochester, New York. The team comprised:

- Dr. Michael Stevens, Vice President of Research and Evaluation, CSI
- Doug Lemov, Vice President of Accountability, 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 second-year school with no fourth grade, the Eugenio Maria De Hostos Charter School (EMHCS) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was some distance from meeting its ELA objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress, and was far from meeting its math objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. It met its Developmental Reading Assessment objective but was far from meeting its writing rubric objective. EMHCS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

During the second year of its charter, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School continues strong progress toward becoming the school envisioned in its charter. Content is effectively introduced and reinforced in both English and Spanish. Students who previously had little or no exposure to Spanish were observed during both formal and informal visits during the year to work in Spanish and to respond to Spanish language instruction in a manner that was productive and effective. The school staff and leadership are fully aware that “academic language proficiency” takes between 5-6 years to develop. Native English language students in the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School appear to be at the conversational fluency stage in second language acquisition. For example, a first grade teacher used pattern blocks to introduce the idea of fractions to her students. She spoke in Spanish but used extensive visual clues to help non-speakers follow her words. By the end of the lesson, students were able to answer questions about fractions in Spanish and to apply their knowledge of fractions to new problems and in a combination of Spanish and English.

Instructional practice appeared to be highly effective in most classrooms. Lessons were engaging and combined active student involvement with an intensive focus on mastery of key skills. Students wrote almost constantly to record and process ideas with little time wasted either during or in transitions between lessons.

A standards-driven approach to teaching was consistently observed with lessons, practically without exception, focused clearly and often explicitly on the mastery of specific skill or content areas. Teachers instructed their students with an eye towards the expected outcome of each lesson, in some cases with the standard overtly displayed in class. As a result, students were able to describe the day’s learning goal.

Teachers used multiple teaching strategies and to give students the opportunity to learn and use new knowledge and skills. An unmistakable focus on literacy permeated the school and students produced consistent evidence in folders and journals of strong, logical, grammatical writing at all grade levels. Additionally, the book of the month, chosen by the principal, is taught in every classroom in the school. In math, teachers often were able to effectively implement the principal’s vision of a math program that taught students to apply conceptual understanding in a variety of ways. Though not yet as developed as the schools exemplary literacy program, the math program appears to be effective and standards focused.

A typical lesson involved the introduction of an idea in a mini-lesson and then seat work or an activity designed to reinforce and/or allow students to explore an idea in a hands-on manner. Often, this was followed by a group report back and time for students to process and record information learned through writing (math journals, reading journals, etc). This was observed in a highly effective second grade classroom in which the literacy lesson included a writing response, an “author’s chair” activity in which students had to read and defend their writing, and a “reader’s workshop.”

Teachers at the school were observed to use a variety of well-implemented methods for collecting, reviewing and assessing student work, particularly in the area of language arts, where well-maintained folders and journals of written work were kept. These assignments were consistently assessed using rubrics describing the skills each piece of work should demonstrate. These rubrics allowed teachers to compile a record of student mastery in key instructional areas (for example, capitalization) throughout the year. Writing folders also showed consistent evidence not only of written work of high quality but of work by the great majority of students demonstrating the ability to write sustained, organized narrative or exposition using complete sentences starting in the first grade.

Written work archived in folders also showed consistent evidence that students continually correct and revise their written work, often repeatedly. Students did so with a clear sense that the level of quality expected of finished work in the school was high. One teacher said students return to their writing “until they perfect it.” A student’s verbal comment in one class (he asked as the students began a second draft, “Are we going to publish today?”) reinforced the idea that students understood that writing was done for different purposes. Further, revisions observed in folders of student writing not only showed that students recognized and corrected mechanical errors in their writing but that many revised their writing for clarity and precision of meaning as well. One second grade student’s work included several drafts of an autobiography, in which he wrote, for example, “I was born on ____ and learned to drink from a cup. This sentence was crossed out and the revision, “and my mother taught me to drink from a cup” added. This change and other changes throughout his and other students’ writing suggests that students in the school are developing not only a strong knowledge of punctuation, capitalization and grammar but that many are developing an interest in describing their ideas with greater precision.

In one third grade classroom students reviewed essays they had written on the previous day. The assignment asked students to use specific details from a book they’d read and to describe the beginning, middle and end of the story. The teacher read one student’s work and discussed the strengths and weaknesses in his use of detail and then sent students to their desks to revise their essays, explicitly challenging them to make better use of detail in their writing as they revised the essays. “I want to challenge you to use more specific details,” she noted, and the expectation she set – that work from her students should demonstrate mastery and would be redone until the whole class exhibited excellence – was endemic throughout the building. Excellence was observed to be the expectation in lesson after lesson.

Teachers and administrators used other forms of assessment as well. Ongoing assessments of reading ability appeared to be well implemented and several teachers, as well as the principal, used evidence gleaned from those assessments to explain particular circumstances or methods used in the classrooms. Teachers also referred to other diagnostic assessments in discussing their work with particular students. Institute visitors observed clear evidence that information from ongoing assessment informed instruction, such as when a teacher told a group of five students with whom she was reading a book in a small group, “I chose this book because each of you is struggling with the long ‘o’ sound. I want you to look for it and practice it while we’re reading.”

The school’s rapid and impressive development appeared to be the result of both strong and decisive leadership and a committed, focused faculty of effective professionals. The

organizational culture has from the beginning set standards for faculty that were as rigorous, if not more so, than those for students. For example, all staff wear the same uniform that students do, and the principal has consistently held the staff to high performance standards and has made often-difficult personnel decisions as a result. This culture of professionalism, high expectation and relentless self-scrutiny appear to originate with the school's principal.

School Climate and Discipline

Classrooms in the school were quiet, orderly and focused. Students in almost all classrooms at the school were engaged in their work, energetic and generally enthusiastic about learning and achievement. In one second grade classroom when the teacher announced that writing time was up "but we will keep working on these," a few students said "yay!" There was an unusual degree of consistency in behavioral expectations, from teacher to teacher, room to room and lesson to lesson. Though lessons varied in style, tone and approach, teachers were consistent and clear in providing students with reminders to allow them to understand and meet behavioral expectations. This is an area in which the school has made dramatic progress and where the principal's leadership appears to have been particularly strong. Despite the orderly and industrious feel to classrooms, the tone is warm and at times even playful. Genuine affection appears to exist between teachers and students. In short, high behavioral expectation both by teachers for students and, increasingly by students for themselves and their peers are a consistent element of the school's program in core academic classes and provide exceptionally strong support for the schools academic expectations. In many classrooms that Institute staff observed students were on-task during entire lessons almost without exception.

Facility

Classroom space was slightly cramped but teachers had done an effective job of making physical space support the schools academic goals. Classrooms were print-rich environments amply decorated with exemplary student work (of high quality) and content related material. Rooms were constructed to contain desk or table space for each child as well as a group meeting area. Classes were observed to move back and forth between these settings quickly and effectively.

Hallways were also rich in exemplary student work. Such work consistently demonstrated high academic standards and direct links to learning standards. The school also posts its accountability goals and its progress against them in the main hall outside the principal's office.

All areas of the school plant are neat and clean with ample space on the second floor for scheduled expansion over the life of the charter.

School Mission and Charter

The school appears to be an accurate and effective model of the plan described in the charter. The dual language aspects of the program have been effectively implemented and appear to be reaching goals for all students, even and perhaps especially those who are not native speakers. While true to its mission and vision, school leadership has done an exemplary job of prioritizing

its work, choosing key areas to emphasize in sequence to ensure that the most important things are done first and done well before other projects are tackled. The school's initial focus on literacy and on building a positive school culture appear to be yielding dramatic results and the school has identified math as the next area for focus. That program as well seems likely to provide excellent instruction for students enrolled in the school.

The school principal described a series of struggles to implement the end-of-day enrichment and tutoring programs effectively and in a manner that meets the schools high expectations. While by her own admission those struggles continue, she appears to have consistently used her own managerial flexibility and attempt solutions.