



Charter Schools Institute  
State University of New York

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# Harlem Day Charter School

## Report

2002-2003  
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: the academic success of the school including teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment); the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization including such items as board operations, student order and discipline, and physical facility; and the fiscal soundness of the school. 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, interviews of staff, students and board members, in addition to reviewing 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 Harlem Day Charter School, approved by the State University Trustee in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents in March of that year opened in September 2001, and is completing its second year of operation. The school's design sets forth a growth pattern of adding a grade each year with two classes of forty students. The actual enrollment, at the time of the visit, was 120 Kindergarten through second grade students. The school is partnered with Sheltering Arms Inc., a community organization with a 179-year history of serving Harlem. Sheltering Arms makes child welfare services available to the school, as well as other support.

Harlem Day Charter School offers an academic program that weaves the New York State learning standards with the Core Knowledge curriculum, while emphasizing reading through the Waterford Early Reading Program, writing skills and character development through the Heartwood Program. Spanish is also taught at each grade level in the school each day. The school has 180 instructional days per year. Each school day begins at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 3:15 p.m. The school conducts a voluntary Extended Day Program that operates from 3:15 p.m. until 5:45 p.m., and is attended by approximately 88% of the students at the school. The Extended Day Program provides tutoring, arts and crafts and other extra-curricular activities.

The school will not have a 4<sup>th</sup> grade until the 2004-05 school and will not participate in the New York State assessments until that time. Until then, the school obtains student performance information by administering the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Waterford Early Reading Program assessments. In addition, the school intends to institute the use of the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS) throughout the school during the 2003-04 school year.

According to the 2001-02 Annual School District Report of the New York City Department of Education, for the 2001-02 school year Community School District 4 enrolled 13, 913 students: 34.3% African American; 61.6% Hispanic; 2.4% Asian/Other; and 1.7% White. Additionally, 89.3% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

For the same school year, the Harlem Day Charter School enrolled a total of 50 students: 84% African American and 16% Hispanic. The school reported that 88% of its students for the 2001-02 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The Harlem Day Charter school is housed on the fourth floor of a high rise building that also houses a community college and community arts space. Security personnel, who maintain a log of visitors, monitor entrance to the building. Once on the fourth floor, security cameras and a locked door assist school staff in monitoring all that enter and leave the school facility. The school facility is a clean, safe, well-lit educational environment. There was no evidence of student vandalism or defacement of the property. In fact, based on observations, great pride was taken in the maintenance of the school. The school was clean throughout the day.

The school should note that sound from the music room is quite audible in the classrooms on either side. It appears that students have acclimated to the sound. It could be distracting for some students. The school may want to re-consider the location of the music room, if possible, in the future.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Inspection Team**

On May 9, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) visited Charter School. The team comprised:

- Jennifer G. Sneed, Ph.D., Vice President for Applications, Charter Schools Institute
- Radi Clytus, Outside Inspector/Consultant, Previous Senior Analyst, Charter Schools Institute
- Evelyn Kalibala, Independent Consultant to the Institute

### **Is the School an Academic Success?**

Measures of student achievement, indicating the success of Harlem Day's academic program, will be available in its 2002-03 Accountability Plan Progress Report, to be submitted during summer 2003. Since Harlem Day in 2002-03 only had grades K-2, the data in the Progress Report will not include state assessments.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Student Work Product**

Student work is displayed throughout the school. Student work products observed indicate a reasonable expectation for academic growth. Each classroom teacher determines which, and how much, student work will be displayed in the classroom, and the standards by which the work is judged. They school may want to consider creating consistent criteria for posting student work as the school grows through fifth grade to further inculcate standards for student performance. In

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<sup>1</sup> Harlem Day's Accountability Progress Report will be posted on the Charter Schools Institute's website, <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/>.

Harlem Day's Kindergarten and first grade classrooms significantly less student work is displayed than in other classrooms. The school's plans for next year include professional development that will augment teachers' abilities to generate and celebrate student work products that reflect academic growth and achievement.

## **Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?**

### **Improving Teaching & Learning**

The mission of Harlem Day Charter School is "...to create a strong academic organization in which students learn skills in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and Spanish at levels that exceed the New York State standards. Students will be expected to achieve these high levels in an environment that values respect, compassion, critical thinking, and problem-solving."

Though the mission statement is not quoted verbatim by most teachers in the school, each class is focused on imparting knowledge and skills related to the core mission of the school – the teaching and learning of language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts and Spanish. In a Kindergarten classroom, students worked on math skills related to basic mathematical functions: grouping, measuring, adding and subtracting. The class was divided into four groups, and each group was involved in a different activity for a designated period of time. At the end of the allotted time, the groups rotated. By the end of the period, each student had the opportunity to work with the various materials and to learn the various skills.

During the 2002-2003 school year, Harlem Day Charter School benefited from having a principal that has a strong professional development background. In addition to the curriculum crosswalk required of all charters schools authorized through the Institute, the principal worked with instructional staff to ensure that each teacher was clear about the relationship between lessons and New York State standards and school standards. All teachers comfortably discussed the standards of student achievement required at the school. The visibility of posted standards stating what level of work is expected of students is one piece of evidence that the school's curriculum is aligned with standards and expectations for student performance. Regardless of subject area, each teacher tied together language arts, social studies, Spanish and math.

The school's goals include the expectation that students demonstrate values such as respect, responsibility, citizenship, trustworthiness, caring and fairness. The values are instilled using the Heartwood Ethics Program that focuses on a particular value each month. The specific value is identified in bright colors and patterns on a large bulletin board seen in route to the two school cafeterias. Whatever the monthly value is, that value is also emphasized in the classroom activities and through teacher, staff and student behavior.

The school has resources adequate to provide and support instruction with, at least, four computers and a printer for students in each classroom. Each classroom also had designated areas for math, and language arts, with a classroom library.

Most of the classroom spaces are equipped with ample supporting instructional resources. Teachers typically have much of the same generic supplies when it came to visual aids, but 2<sup>nd</sup> year teachers appeared to have invested more of their individual income into other areas. These include complete reading series libraries, manipulatives, and reference materials. Student work posted in these classrooms displayed greater rigor.

### **Use of Assessment Data**

Teachers at Harlem Day Charter School collect and review student work according to their individual preferences. The second grade teacher stated that she reviews everything her students complete, while in other classrooms there are different standards for teacher review.

In addition, with the concentration on the New York State standards, all teachers demonstrate the ability to make the connection between individual lessons and the achievement of specific standards. A certain unity of focus on instruction is apparent when visiting classrooms. Such unity of focus on the goals (which link to the school's accountability plan and progress report) will serve the school well as it looks to charter renewal in 2005-2006.

The principal of Harlem Day understands student data and its use in designing instruction to address student areas of deficiency. All teachers use the Waterford Early Reading Program as one component of the literacy curriculum. The Waterford program provides ongoing individual student and full classroom assessment information that the teachers review in the classroom daily, that the principal and teachers review weekly at Grade Level meetings, and that is, at times, discussed at monthly full staff meetings.

The school administers the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) as its value-added measurement of student progress each year. A disparity exists, however between the Waterford data and the ITBS scores. Therefore, the school should be aware that the extent to which the school can rely on the Waterford results to predict student performance on the ITBS is limited. The school can, however, continue to use the Waterford assessment data to guide the focus of instruction.

One class at the school had recently administered the ECLAS, Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System. At the time of the visit, there was only one ECLAS kit in the building. The principal indicated that there are plans to use it school-wide in the 2003-04 year, and that she is anticipating the arrival of additional kits. The information/data obtained through the ECLAS assessment will add a more comprehensive dimension to the available student assessment information.

The principal presents student performance data to both the school's Board of Trustees and to parents. The Board expects to be kept apprised of student progress or lack thereof. Parents are informed of student progress by classroom teachers, and by the principal's presentations at the Parent Association meetings.

### **Implementing the Instructional Program**

## **Educational Leadership**

Based on comments from board members and staff, the principal is clearly the leader of the school. Board members defer to her regarding instructional concerns and direction, supervision of staff, and school operations. The school also benefits from the efforts of a strong and effective administrative assistant. Board members indicated that the school's organizational partner, Sheltering Arms, continues to provide back-office support to the school, i.e. accounting, personnel administration, etc. Board members who were interviewed stated that they understand the appropriate role of the board and that they do not micromanage the school. They trust and respect the principal to provide accurate information about the school and its program, as well as for the principal to seek counsel and direction from the board as appropriate.

Harlem Day's teachers and classroom aides look to the principal for instructional leadership and professional development. Teachers look forward to the principal's visits, which often occur on a daily basis, as she offers feedback and models quality teaching and instructional techniques. Each week, the principal meets with teachers and a professional development committee to conduct grade level meetings and discuss student progress. In particular, the principal analyzes individual student reading progress each week with the assistance of teachers and data from the Waterford Early Reading Program. She consistently observes teachers on a rotating basis from month to month and collects weekly lesson plans to ensure that teachers are applying the New York State standards and Core Knowledge curriculum when outlining their course objectives. Admiration for the principal's knowledge and skills is evident among the teaching staff.

## **Staff Quality**

The experience level of instructional staff ranges from one to ten years. As with any staff, pedagogical expertise varies among teachers. For the most part, teachers display strong content knowledge. Differences in teacher quality exist, however, regarding the ability of individual teachers to manage student behavior, differentiate instruction, and best utilize the assistance of a classroom aide.

## **Meeting the Needs of Students at Risk**

A full-time student support teacher, certified in special education, provides service to students with disabilities within the regular education classroom to the extent possible. When it is not appropriate, students are provided services in the support teacher's classroom [which is shared with the Spanish/Health/PE teacher]. All staff are trained in modifying instruction and materials to address the needs of at-risk students; identifying students possibly in need of evaluation for special education services; functional behavioral assessments; behavioral management plan development; and the special education process. The school also has a part-time speech therapist who works with students individually and in small groups on Tuesdays and Fridays.

## **Board of Trustees**

Through its actions as a policy making entity, frequent and appropriate visits to the school, and extensive support provided to both teachers and principal, the Harlem Day Charter School's Board of Trustees continue to provide the leadership necessary to implement the school's design. The board receives updates from the principal at each of its meeting that include financial, facility, and student academic performance information.

### **Student Order & Discipline**

Student conduct at Harlem Day Charter School is generally acceptable. Students are typically purposeful in accomplishing assignments within designated time frames and were orderly throughout the day. Toward the end of the Institute's visit, it became obvious that although students were quiet there was some degree of covert misbehavior, especially during time devoted to activity center work which is not directly supervised by the teacher or classroom aide. Students use of allotted time for the Waterford reading program included opportunities to chat amongst themselves, talk with children nearby, or simply be off task. Teachers may want to consider where they stand in relation to computer workstations in order to assure students focus on the assigned work.

To address deficiencies in student behavior, which the school's progress report claimed to be central to the lack of student performance on the ITBS, the principal requires the teachers to focus on class rules, and practice uniform and consistent classroom management techniques. At the start of this school year, teachers attended three or four individual and group workshops on increasing student order and discipline. However, Institute visitors observed little uniformity in the management of students' classroom behavior. The school has a new, recently completed discipline policy, and all teachers have received training to orient them to the policy and its implementation. Teachers' aides are brought in to each classroom to promote positive student order and discipline. However, most classroom aides do not necessarily support instructional delivery, an area where teachers could use further assistance.

### **Is the School Fiscally Sound?**

As of May 2003, The Harlem Day Charter School currently has a surplus fund balance and expects to end the fiscal year with a surplus. The School has consistently maintained an adequate cash flow for operating purposes and has no issues from its prior year audit. The school has, however, consistently missed financial reporting deadlines filing 2002-2003 reports a month or more after reminders from the Institute. Despite these reporting issues, the Institute views the school's fiscal position as sound.

