



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

International Charter School Of Schenectady

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: 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 International Charter School of Schenectady, approved by the State University Board of Trustees for an original opening in the fall of 2000, faced facilities access issues that forced a delayed opening. Opening its doors to students for the first time in the fall of 2002, the third year of its five-year charter. The school enrolled 267 students in 2002-2003 from Kindergarten through grade 4. The school's board of trustees employs Sabis Education Systems as its management partner. As such, the school's curriculum is based on the Sabis curriculum which emphasizes a highly structured, internationally oriented curriculum in the core subjects of English, math, science, and world languages, designed to prepare all students for college study. Each subject is broken down into skills and knowledge, which in turn are broken down into "essential concepts" which all students must master.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2001-2002 school year 8,338 students enrolled in the Schenectady School District: 31% African-American; 9.8% Hispanic; 55% white; and 4.3% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 55.8% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty. Demographic and enrollment data for International Charter School of Schenectady during the 2002-2003 school year is provided in the school's August 1, 2003 Accountability Plan Progress Report. This report will be available on the Charter School's Institute web site at www.newyorkcharters.org in the fall of 2003.

Inspection Team

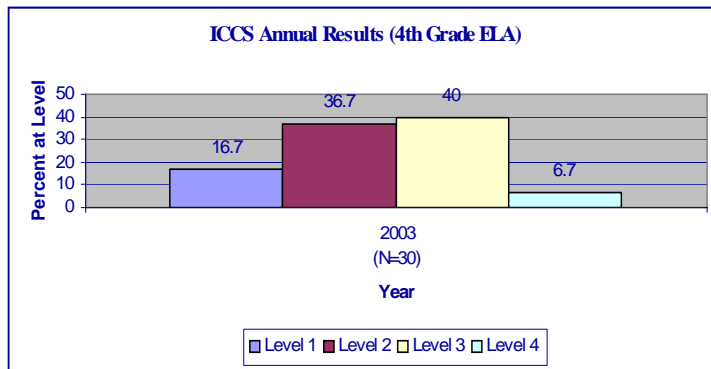
On June 6, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited The International Charter School of Schenectady (ICSS). The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President and Senior Fellow, Charter Schools Institute
- Jennifer Sneed, Ph.D., Vice President for Applications, Charter Schools Institute
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Charter Schools Institute
- Darry Strickland, Educational Consultant to the Charter Schools Institute

Is the School’s Academic Program a Success?

Academic Data

In 2003, the International Charter School of Schenectady administered the fourth-grade state ELA and math tests for the first time. The ELA results have been made available and appear below.



- Since the ELA test is administered after five months of the school year, these results are baseline, attributable to a great extent to student learning prior to entering ICSS.
- Almost half the students scored at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards).
- A few students scored at Level 1 (seriously deficient).

ICCS Comparative Results	
School /District	Percent at Levels 3 & 4 2003
ICCS	46.7
Van Corlaer	51.9
Pleasant Valley	28.0
Hamilton	34.5
Lincoln	41.7
SCHENECTADY CITY DISTRICT	47.4

- The percentage of students at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards) was similar to that of the Schenectady City School District.

Additional measures of student achievement, indicating the success of ICSS's academic program, will be available in its 2002-03 Accountability Plan Progress Report, to be submitted during summer 2003.¹

Student Work Products

While there was a dearth of student work posted in classrooms and hallways, in some classrooms, Institute visitors had the opportunity to review teachers' files of student work collected throughout the year. Student work products reviewed reveal that students understand the focus is on learning skills and applying them correctly in lessons, essays, and most importantly on the Sabis Educational Systems' frequent assessments. A majority of student work reviewed during the visit consisted of worksheet and workbook activities. As the educational program calls for teacher led instruction, students were observed engaging in lessons then recording or applying the skills taught through completion of prepared exercise pages. Work reflected the school's expectations that students' written exercises be complete, organized, and neat.

Student essays reviewed in third and fourth grade classrooms were well written, included the use of proper capitalization and punctuation, and most included the use of interesting adjectives that reflected students' growing abilities as authors. As this was the first year of the school's instructional program (the school's opening was delayed due to facilities issues), teachers have done admirable work in learning and implementing the Sabis instructional design. Teachers did, however, discuss with Institute visitors their plans to require more student generated writing in future years to ensure students can attain the standards called for in the New York State English Language Arts assessments.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

The administration and faculty at the International Charter School of Schenectady demonstrate a clear commitment to student achievement. All have done an admirable job in learning the Sabis Educational System instructional design and reflect a strong focus on providing students the skills and knowledge required to meet rigorous academic standards.

The school's twenty teachers (11 classroom teachers, 1.5 intensive classroom teachers, 1.5 special education teachers, two Spanish teachers, and teachers of music, gym, art, and computer) are supported by the principal, the Academic Quality Coordinator, a student management supervisor, a full time nurse and social worker, and support staff. The Academic Quality Coordinator is responsible for

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

assisting teachers in implementing the Sabis educational design as well as working directly with Sabis Educational Systems regarding assessment data, curriculum and instruction and communication with parents.

This year, teachers received professional development in learning the Sabis Educational System as well as classroom management and safety. Teachers make professional development requests to the school's Academic Quality Coordinator who attempts to determine the school wide impact and need for particular development opportunities and then assists in providing or arranging development opportunities for teachers. Teachers report that professional development during the course of the year focused mainly on learning to implement the Sabis instructional design. Both teachers and the Academic Quality Coordinator identified the need to strengthen the school's writing instruction as well as using literature to supplement the school's reading program as areas for focus in the upcoming school year.

While English and mathematics are the core of the curriculum in grades K-4, teachers are also responsible for instruction in Spanish, science, and history that is designed to prepare all children for college study. Each subject is broken down into sub-categories, which in turn are broken down into "essential concepts" which all students must master. Much of the school's curriculum design and instructional delivery focuses on the basic implementation of the Sabis program.

Classroom observations show that teachers are comfortable with the educational design, but have yet to refine instruction in a way that maximizes all learning opportunities. This is especially true in writing. The Sabis educational design provides teachers with lessons aligned with the curriculum, which in turn link to academic standards that define what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. The next step in implementing an effective school design is for ICSS to provide teachers the training and resources necessary to ensure that every lesson is rigorous and that students have greater opportunity to apply the skills learned in their writing and in mathematics.

As nine new staff members will join the ICSS teaching staff in the 2003-2004 school year, the school's principal plans an increase in the professional development provided at the school. She has determined that teachers need more support in refining instructional practices, the opportunity to learn from instructional experts, and to hone classroom management techniques.

Classrooms at the school are orderly, with student desks arranged in rows in the upper grades. A variety of bright posters and bulletin boards adorn classroom walls. The postings include teacher made and prefabricated materials such as number lines, alphabet sets, etc. Examples of student work are rare, as are literature books and other instructional resources. The school's library houses its lab of 30 networked computers, but there are no books on the shelves. Unless provided by individual teachers, classrooms lack reading material such as library books, student-produced books, age and developmentally appropriate journals or newspapers. This lack of material translates into unproductive down time between lessons as students lack access to rigorous and engaging material where they can apply the skills they are learning in reading.

Use of Assessment Data

The International Charter School of Schenectady measures student progress through the use of weekly tests that are provided as a component of the Sabis Educational System. These tests are standardized and require students to work through problems or identify concepts and skills then record the correct response in a multiple-choice format that can be machine scored. Scoring and data collection occurs at the school (with results also reported to Sabis Educational Systems) allowing teachers to make frequent and timely evaluations as to student progress on achieving particular levels of skills and knowledge.

The school's Academic Quality Coordinator compiles data on student progress and meets with individual teachers and grade levels to discuss instruction and plan for student progress through the essential concepts students are to learn. When students fall behind in English or mathematics, the Academic Quality Coordinator, along with classroom and intensive teachers, place students in intensive classrooms. While there, students receive twice the instructional time of regular classes in order to focus on the attainment of specific skills identified as in need of improvement through the weekly tests. As students demonstrate learning the essential English or mathematical concepts required, they are rotated out of the English or mathematics intensive classes and return to instruction in their regular classroom.

Teachers report the frequent tests allow for accurate monitoring as students learn and provide clear opportunities for students to focus on learning the necessary mathematics and English skills. The opportunity to discuss student progress with peers and the Academic Quality Coordinator is a solid step in this, the school's first year. To maximize the benefit of the school's assessment structure, teachers require additional support in understanding how to analyze the assessment information and design and deliver lessons to address areas of student academic need.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

The principal at ICCS is an experienced educator who is respected by staff, students, and the school's board of trustees. She has a clear vision for the school, a concrete understanding of the school's mission, and works diligently to ensure that the school's resources are appropriately focused on teaching. Much of the day to day instructional support and assessment analysis comes from the school's Academic Quality Coordinator who consults with the principal.

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students

Students who fall significantly behind in English or mathematics are placed in intensive program classes (called "intensives") where they receive twice the instructional time of regular classes in order to catch up and rejoin their peers. Movement into and out of intensive classes is determined by teacher evaluation and student performance on skill based tests provided in the Sabis instructional design. Instruction in intensive classrooms is well delivered and clearly focused on student acquisition of the skills students need as identified through the Sabis testing system. What is less clear is the program's

success in returning students to their regularly assigned classroom. Institute visitors were unable to determine how frequently students progress successfully out of the intensive classroom or if largely the same set of students remain in intensive classrooms throughout the year.

Of the 267 students enrolled at ICSS, there are 10 students with disabilities. These students receive resource or other services, such as occupational and speech therapies, as required by their Individualized Education Programs. The resource or other services are provided in either the school's resource room or speech therapy area that are supplied with adequate materials to support the special needs of the students. In addition, the principal reported that all staff are appropriately certified to provide such instruction.

Establishing the Structure

Board of Trustees Operation & Responsibilities

The ICSS Board of Trustees provides oversight for the school and clearly understands its role as the policy-making entity for the school. Members receive reports from the principal at each of their meetings. The Board monitors the school's academic progress toward producing "young men and women who are prepared intellectually, morally, and socially to succeed in college" through reports on academic achievement provided by the principal. Board members are highly knowledgeable regarding the school's financial progress and have a clear sense of the Board's responsibilities to appropriately manage the public trust. Board members support the school through attending community meetings as well as representing the school and the charter school initiative to various local and state audiences.

The Board continues to seek a permanent home that will house the school should it achieve charter renewal and grow to become a Kindergarten through 12th grade school. While the school's current facility will expand next year to include portable classrooms, it will not accommodate the growth envisioned in the school's original charter application.

Student Order and Discipline

Students at ICSS are well behaved both in the classroom and traveling between rooms in the building. Students appear generally attentive and cooperate in class. Institute visitors did observe small numbers of students who were not engaged in teacher directed lessons. These students were not disruptive to the lesson, but had developed some stealth ways to pass notes, communicate with and distract students near them, or simply to mentally check out of the lesson. Teachers' abilities to identify students who were not engaged and to focus them on the skills and lessons at hand varied but were strongest in those teachers with more years of classroom experience.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

The International Charter School of Schenectady has a surplus fund balance and expects to end the fiscal year with a surplus. The School has consistently maintained adequate cash flows for operating purposes.

Summary

The International Charter School of Schenectady successfully established the educational design called for in its charter during the 2002-2003 school year. The school's Board of Trustees, principal and staff worked diligently to create a bright instructional environment that is focused on student academic progress. As the school deepens and refines its instructional program, a focus on increasing literacy (especially writing), providing additional literary resources, and equipping teachers with the instructional knowledge to maximize student learning will further strengthen its ability to meet the rigorous goals set forth in the school's accountability plan.