



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Our World Neighborhood 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

Our World Neighborhood Charter School combines a back-to-basics morning program of skills development in math, spelling and phonics with the Paragon curriculum in the afternoon. Paragon, developed by the school's management partner, Mosaica, is an interdisciplinary, thematic-based program of science, geography, literature, music, the arts and history. The combination will advance student achievement by balancing (and supporting) enrichment with core skills.

The school monitors student progress through the use of State assessments and nationally normed standardized tests and creates achievement profiles for each student that permit the school to track each student's progress during the course of the academic year.

The charter school is an outgrowth of the Astoria Parents Network, which was formed by parents concerned about overcrowding in the local public schools and who were discouraged by lack of opportunities for meaningful parent involvement in the local schools.

The school occupies three of the four floors at 36-12 35th Avenue in Astoria Queens. The building is well maintained and custodial staff was observed working during the school inspection. The interior wall colors are brightly painted and there are a plethora of windows in exterior rooms. There is room for the school to expand with two vacant rooms, rooms occupied by special area teachers and the fourth floor.

The former front door of the school is now used as an emergency exit and the main entrance is on the side of the school off the former parking lot. This entrance is secure and monitored by security personnel when the school is in operation. During recess times the gate to the former parking lot is closed and students use the area for recess.

Inspection Team

On May 28, 2003 an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Our World Neighborhood Charter School ("OWN"). The team comprised:

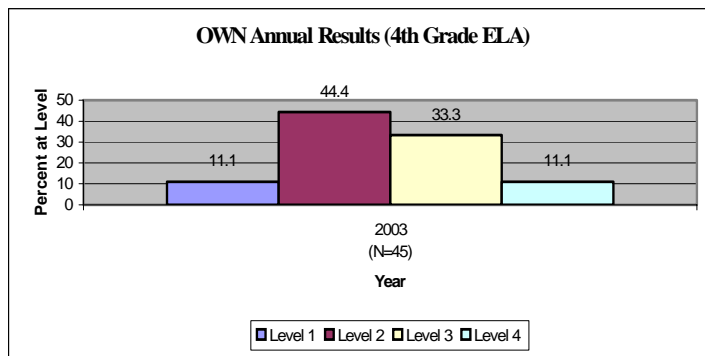
- Michael J. Stevens, Ph.D., Vice President of Evaluation and Research, Charter Schools Institute.
- Jennifer G. Sneed, Ph.D., Vice President for Applications, Charter Schools Institute.

Discussion of Findings

Is the School an Academic Success?

Academic Data

In 2003, OWN 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 OWN.
- Almost half the students scored at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards).
- An equal percentage scored at Level 2 (partially meeting the standards).
- Very few students scored at Level 1 (seriously deficient).

OWN Comparative Results	
School /District	Percent at Levels 3 & 4 2003
OWN	44.4
COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 30	57.9

- OWN had a smaller percentage of students at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards) than that of Community School District 30.

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

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

Student Work Products

This is the first year of operation for OWN but the second year of its charter. The first year of the charter was taken as a planning year. As this is the school's first year of operation all assessment results are baseline and the focus is on opening the school, building a culture, and beginning the implementation of the instructional program.

The majority of the student works displayed at the school appear to be at grade level. It is unclear how, or if, student work is reviewed and/or graded by teachers prior to its display, what the acceptable standard of achievement is, and whether or not students are making adequate progress in the instructional program. At the time of the Institute visit, not one piece of student work on display in the hallways or classrooms included teacher comments or grades. The principal indicated to visitors that there really is no criterion for which student work is displayed. It is a decision the classroom teacher makes after considering the amount of student effort that went into the piece. This explains why many papers contained a number of spelling errors even though the product was neat. On a positive note, one teacher did provide exemplars for students to indicate the minimum level of competency on assignments in that classroom.

Almost every piece of student work either included or was accompanied by some type of artwork – drawing, painting, or sculpture. When Institute staff asked the Regional Vice President from Mosaica Education, Inc., (“MEI”) the school's management partner, why this is the case, he explained that the students do a substantial amount of artwork for the Paragon social studies program and this carries over to their everyday work. This area should be monitored during future Institute visits to determine if this emphasis on artwork is drawing valuable time away from the academic components instructional program.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

Classrooms appear to have adequate resources to provide instruction. Each classroom is wired to the computer network of the school with at least four computers and a printer for student use along with a laptop computer for teacher use. There are enough textbooks and workbooks for each student. Each classroom has an area with coat hooks and a ledge for student belongings. The space is adequate for springtime apparel but must be overflowing with garments during the wintertime.

The only space that appeared to lack resources is the special education room. It stands in stark contrast with the other classrooms. The room has one round table in the middle of the room with desk space for a few students around half of the perimeter of the room. One computer is available for students. A large, lockable cabinet contains student records, and folders lay on a large rectangular table with student classroom work.

During this first year of operation the school leadership negotiated an Accountability Plan with the Institute. The agreement was finalized during this end of the year visit. In future visits to the school, Institute staff will look for evidence that the school is achieving its goals and using achievement information for school improvement.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

The school's Chief Academic Officer ("CAO") or principal, provides educational leadership in the school. The school's teachers and Chief Academic Officer rely on the school's Program Facilitator for professional development and curriculum needs. The school's Board of Trustees view this position as critical to the mission of the school and will have two Program Facilitators on staff for the next academic year. Teachers speak positively about the professional development they received from MEI prior to the opening of school and during the school year. Members of the school's Board of Trustees stated that they have a good relationship with MEI, which is "mixed with trust and skepticism."

Staff Quality

The majority of OWN's teachers are in their first few years of teaching. The school provided teachers a substantial amount of training during this academic year. Teachers speak highly about the training provided by the program facilitator and MEI during the summer and throughout the year. Teachers appreciate the expertise and give and take attitude of the trainers.

Teachers indicate that the MEI curriculum (Open Court reading, SRA mathematics, and science along with MEI's proprietary Paragon program for social studies) is "aligned to state standards" and by teaching the curriculum, instruction meets state standards. During classroom visits Institute staff observed teachers using the MEI curriculum materials described above. Institute staff indicated to the school's CAO that no commercially prepared curriculum is perfectly aligned to the state standards and local curriculum development will need to take place. Examples of areas that may need development are listening or reading to a prose selection, then developing a graphic organizer, and finally writing a paragraph or essay, explaining in writing solutions to mathematics problems etc.

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students

There are approximately 12 students with disabilities in the school. There is a resource room where students to receive services as outlined in their IEPs. The teacher providing instruction in the resource room is the school's fourth special education teacher this year. Most have not lasted long due to the demands of the position; one was there only two days.

The CAO stated that initially the school did not have a special education teacher, and therefore all students remained in classrooms full time. This resulted in classroom teachers devoting

significant amounts of time and attention to these students, in addition to not meeting the requirements of the student's individualized education plan ("IEP").

The current resource room does not provide much more than a supplementary tutoring service with multiple students from different grades concurrently in the room. The CAO recognizes that the school cannot meet the mandated IEP required programs/services for most of the students with disabilities. He indicated that most of the special education students IEP's mandate 12:1, 12:1:1 or 8:1 placements for the students. The parents of students with disabilities want them to remain at OWN, and are therefore challenging the committee on special education ("CSE") recommendations. Meanwhile, the school is engaged in the special education due process procedures with the school districts where each child resides. The school is working with the Institute's General Counsel throughout this process.

Establishing the Structure

Board of Trustees

The nine-member Board of Trustees at OWN meet monthly and presently has one vacancy. The Board monitors the academic program of the school by reviewing results on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills ("ITBS), the New York State elementary assessments, and by through a curriculum committee of the board to oversee how teachers have implemented the curriculum, especially the Paragon program.

OWN's administration comprises the CAO, an administrative assistant; secretary; one program facilitator (professional development); school nurse; social worker; 17 classroom teachers; one teacher in each of the following areas: special education teacher; Spanish, English as a Second Language, music and physical education; and nine assistant teachers. The CAO indicated that MEI is neither as available nor as supportive of the school program as he would like. Board members agreed with this assessment. Both Board members and the CAO stated that they would continue to press MEI to provide the services needed by the school and the staff.

Student Order and Discipline

The school has a full-time social worker on staff. Since the principal deals with behavioral issues, the social worker assists him with students from 3rd through 5th grade. The Board of Trustees is aware of this practice, and they would like the social worker to address more traditional social work exigencies. To assist with behavior management the Board will have a behavior improvement specialist on staff for 2003-04. They also recognize that classroom teachers need more classroom management training.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

As of May, 2003, Our World Neighborhood Charter School had a surplus fund balance and expected to end the fiscal year with a surplus. The school has consistently maintained and

adequate cash flows for operating purposes. As this is the school's first year of operation no prior year audits are available for review. Overall, the Institute views the school to be in a fiscally sound position.