



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Stepping Stone Academy
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

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 300 students in grades K-5, and plans to grow to 900 students in grades K-8 by the end of its 5-year charter. The school is housed in a facility that once served as a neighborhood supermarket.

Stepping Stone Academy Charter School was established for students at-risk of academic failure in Buffalo. The school has contracted for management services with Edison Schools, Inc., which has implemented its school design in 136 public schools, including many charter schools, with more than 75,000 students. The Edison model employs separate school academies using a curriculum that includes Direct Instruction, project-based learning, cooperative learning, and other features.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year 43,858 students enrolled in the Buffalo City School District: 57.5% African-American; 11.4% Hispanic; 28.5% white; and 2.6% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 74.5% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Stepping Stone Charter School reported that 82% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 64% of students at district-run schools failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 50% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 76% of students failed to meet state standards; 84% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Enrollment, demographic and school performance data was not available at the time this report was created. This information will be included in the school's August 1, 2003, Accountability Plan Progress Report which will be posted on the Charter Schools Institute web site at www.newyorkcharters.org.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 14, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Stepping Stone Academy Charter School. The team comprised:

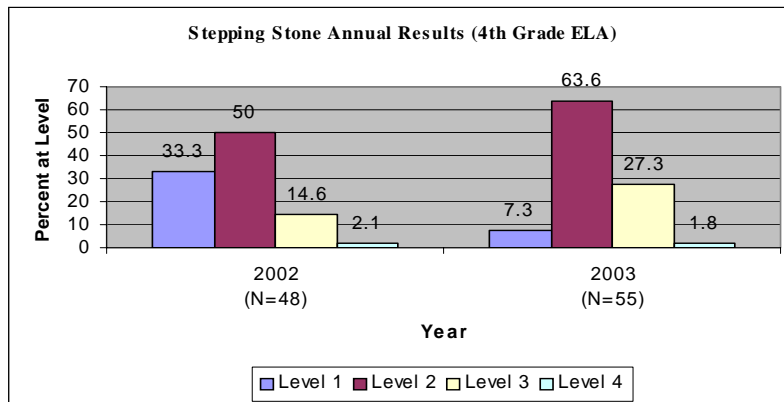
- James Merriman, Executive Director, Charter Schools Institute
- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President/Senior Fellow, Charter Schools Institute.
- Michael Stevens, Ph.D., Vice President for Research and Evaluation, Charter Schools Institute
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Charter Schools Institute.
- Radiclan Clytus, doctoral candidate, Yale University, independent consultant.

Is the School an Academic Success?

Is the School's Academic Program a Success?

Academic Data

In 2003, Stepping Stone administered the fourth-grade state ELA and math tests for the second time. The ELA results have been made available and appear below.



- Stepping Stone has had a fourth grade since its first year of operation.
- The percentage of students scoring at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards) increased from 16.7 percentage in 2002 to 29.1 percent in 2003.
- The percentage of students scoring at Level 1 (serious academic deficiency) substantially decreased from 33.3 percent in 2002 to 7.3 percent in 2003.

Stepping Stone Comparative Results			
School / District	Percent Levels 3 & 4		
	2002	2003	Gains
Stepping Stone	16.7	29.1	12.4
BUFFALO CITY DISTRICT	33.9	33.9	0.0

In 2003, Stepping Stone had a smaller percentage of students at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards) than that of the Buffalo City School District. Since Stepping Stone made substantial gains from 2002 to 2003 in the percentage at Levels 3 & 4 while the Buffalo City School District has shown no gain.

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

This is the second year of operation for the Stepping Stone Academy Charter School (“the school”). While student performance on State assessments continues to substantially lag behind schools in the city of Buffalo and New York State, it appears to be on an upward trajectory with an 12.4% increase this year, compared to last, in the number of students meeting State standards on the grade 4 English Language Arts assessment. The fall 2001 to spring 2002 Terra Nova assessments showed similar slight increases. The analysis of the year-to-year growth (2002-2003), which is a stronger gauge of student performance, will be another indicator of the direction of assessment results of keen interest to the Institute.

Student Work Products

Institute visitors found student work on display in classrooms or hallways was outdated and in limited supply. The most current piece of student work in the Elementary Academy was dated March 14, 2003. The student work reviewed in classrooms (papers, journals, worksheets) indicated student engagement of short duration (e.g., a spelling test or a worksheet), and was neither rigorous nor demanding.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

The school’s closed circuit television system is used at the beginning of the day for Harambee, a school wide broadcast purportedly used to set out the purpose of the day. Beamed to each class television on a closed circuit network, students read school announcements, welcome visitors and lead the whole school in reciting what the school calls “meditations.” These meditations include asking students to “close your eyes and think about how you’re going to have a good day. Roll your head to the left, breathe....” Following this, students on the monitor leads the

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

school in a recitation stating that Stepping Stone Academy students are the best, good, powerful, etc. “I came to school to learn.... I will be a problem solver and not a problem maker....” During this time, some teachers participate with students while others sit at desks and miss opportunities to see that only some students actually participate in Harambee. Other students remained quietly in their seats, but did not repeat the inspirational recitations. During earlier visits to the school, Institute staff observed a better rate of participation in the large group version where all students were in a room participating in Harambee as opposed to the closed circuit broadcast. It is questionable whether the Harambee period, which engages approximately 50 hours per year, is the best use of instructional time. It currently smacks of empty sloganeering.

Teachers indicate they have little interaction with the school’s administration. A number of the teachers report they would like to have a master teacher with whom they could consult for effective teaching strategies. Inspectors asked a number of teachers where they went for guidance and they replied “to us” or “to the other grade level teacher.” This is in direct opposition to the Edison model in which lead teachers and/or academy directors fill this role.

Except for a few classrooms, instructional delivery is uninspired, potentially below grade level, and teachers repeatedly miss opportunities to underscore the myriad of possible details that would make language arts and mathematics instruction thorough and appropriate to student needs.

A review of student folders or notebooks in one 3rd grade class indicates few students retain written work and those who do have no clear organizational scheme with none apparently required by their teacher. However, one second grade teacher does an excellent job of providing students an organizational scheme. The students’ work in this classroom shows progress from the beginning to the end of the assignment. Writing assignments include a graphic organizer, a first draft that students write with the teacher, written teacher comments and suggestions, and the final product. Student writing in this room is mechanically and grammatically correct and contains interesting sentences. Institute staff found this organizational scheme and student work exemplary.

Classrooms are minimally equipped, with textbooks and worksheets being the primary teaching tools. There is no evidence of common morning calendar lessons and other sequencing and organizational practices across classrooms, which indicates that the school is missing an opportunity to instill the important details of date/time relationship, patterns, etc. that are critical for students to understand in order to be literate and numerate.

Classrooms vary in terms of orderliness. Some classrooms are well organized, while others are messy, and in some cases dirty, with the few manipulatives, charts, or other instructional materials haphazardly scattered around the room. According to students in one room, the teacher occasionally uses manipulatives and other learning materials in presenting lessons but students are not encouraged to use the resources to reinforce learning on a regular basis.

On the whole, the school was much cleaner than an earlier Institute visit in March. Nevertheless, the walls in hallways, bathrooms, and in some classrooms are marked and scuffed. This may

indicate a lack of student respect for school property, inadequate student supervision, inadequate maintenance of the plant, or any combination of the three. Noticeable during Institute visits to the school over the course of the last year is the lingering pipe/water issues and the resulting mold/mildew odor in the administrative suite of offices.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

The two members of the school's Board of Trustees indicated that the strategic planning committee of the Board began discussing student achievement and teacher efficacy with the school principal earlier this school year. However, that principal resigned on February 7, 2003 and the committee has not met since. The Board has hired a new principal who will begin work on June 9, 2003. The board has indicated to the new principal that increasing student achievement and improving teacher effectiveness is imperative.

Because of the interim vacancy there has been little, if any, discussion between the board, administration and teachers regarding the instructional program. For example, no one was able to state where the proposed student achievement goals came from on the multicolored bar graphs in hallways indicating actual and proposed student achievement on state assessments.

Staff Quality

In classrooms, the evidence pointing to a successful academic program is mixed. Teachers are implementing the baseline instructional program as outlined in the charter. However, student work is not held to a consistently high standard. For example, no consequence existed for students who do not return the assigned homework. Institute visitors rarely saw students challenged to demonstrate higher level thinking skills (e.g., synthesis and evaluation of ideas). Teachers' lessons observed by Institute visitors were commercially prepared worksheets requiring low level skills, such as basic mathematical operations or finding directly stated facts in text. Teachers' pedagogical expertise varies widely across the school. There is a deep and urgent need to train, monitor, and re-teach basic principles of effective teaching to experienced and inexperienced staff.

The school's Academy Director stated that teachers who joined the faculty after the start of school did not have the "Edison Academy" training that usually takes place during the summer. During the year lead teachers provide support for inexperienced teachers. However, Stepping Stone Academy Board members "do not believe staff development has hit the mark," and teacher interviews indicate a need to "get everyone on the same wavelength, be a team."

Prior to the day-long visit to Stepping Stone Academy, Institute visitors reviewed the school's Accountability Plan. Interviews with teachers and academy heads revealed that the school's instructional staff cannot ascertain the relationship between the Accountability Plan and curriculum, instruction, assessment, and planning as found in high performing schools.

According to discussions with teachers, students are administered tests that are analyzed by the Success for All (“SFA”) administrator. Upon completion of this analysis, the administrator creates the new SFA groups. This happens approximately 6 times a year. In mathematics, teachers stated that in order for the Everyday Math program to be effective, the teacher must do preplanning. However, teachers stated that most of the time, it is not done. The school administration stated that the Edison benchmarks are aligned with State standards. Conversely, other Edison schools authorized by the Institute indicate that there are gaps in meeting state standards in the Edison model that need to be addressed by local curriculum development. Inspectors did not see evidence of these activities at the school during this or previous visits.

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students

During the full day visit to the school, Charter Schools Institute visitors observed evidence of a functioning system to meet the needs of at-risk students (e.g., small group and one-on-one instruction, “push in” and “push out” instruction etc.). Institute inspectors were unable to have in-depth discussions regarding the program because the special education coordinator was out of the state on a school-sponsored trip. This is an area for Institute staff to examine in the future.

Establishing the Structure

Board of Trustees Operation & Responsibilities

During the site visit, various groups were asked, “what is the mission of the school?” and each used similar language such as “providing a world class education” and a variation of “every child succeeds” or “high performing students.” However, Stepping Stone Academy Charter School appears to have three mission statements. One mission statement is found in the charter, one on the wall in the entrance foyer of the school and another in the school’s strategic plan. This indicates that there is not a clear, focused and shared understanding of the mission or vision of the school.

The *Stepping Stone Academy Strategic Plan* that Board members shared with Institute visitors is an attempt to address these issues. The Institute commends the Board for their recognition of the shortcomings of the school and encourages the Board to immediately engage their new principal in the resolution of these issues. In addition, the Board is engaged in refining its policies and procedures to strengthen its oversight of the school. Focusing on these issues is critical as the school looks forward the possibility of charter renewal when the term of the school’s current charter expires.

Student Order and Discipline

In prior visits to the school, Institute visitors made note of class management problems and that such problems made instruction difficult in many classrooms. This is no longer the case in the Primary Academy. However the Elementary Academy still has pockets of inappropriate student behavior. In orderly classrooms, teachers display a wide range of classroom management tools, from positive re-enforcement to group jingles, claps and chants to keep the group on task. Multi- or small group management continues to present more of a challenge. In one instance a teacher ignored groups of students who should have been working on mathematics problems but were

instead playing. One teacher had a superb mathematics lesson plagued by disruptive students and her inability to deal with their behavior. When asked about this during an interview she readily admitted a lack of skill in this area and stated that she desperately needed a principal to lead by example and provide training and ongoing modeling of discipline strategies that work.

In the School Fiscally Sound?

As of May 2003, the school 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. The school had some internal control issues that the annual audit identified which require a corrective action plan. The school needs to strengthen their internal control policies in the areas of cash disbursements and establish a petty cash policy. The schools' accounting firm, as well as the Institute, is assisting with the development and implementation of the policies and procedures. The school is currently implementing a corrective action plan, which is being monitored by the Institute.