Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Tapestry 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 Tapestry 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 105 students in grades K-4, and plans to grow to 180 students in grades K-6 by the end of its 5-year charter.

The Tapestry Charter School offers small, multi-age classrooms where students are given many opportunities for self-directed learning. Upon arrival each day students participate in independent learning activities. Each class holds a daily Morning Meeting designed to teach social and emotional skills as well as introduce new academic material.

The school's literacy program makes balanced use of phonics and literature-based approaches. Some of the materials used in the Language Arts and Math Curricula integrate intellectual, ethical and social development. The math program focuses on developing “number sense” and collaboration skills to the mastery of core concepts, with significant use of hands-on practice and “real life” applications to make math more practical for students. Arts education, a key component to the curriculum, is offered daily. All students participate in Art, Music, Dance, Spanish and Physical Education two times a week.

Parent involvement at the school is significant and ranges from daily support in the classroom to organizing Friday afternoon clubs. The Tapestry Charter School Community Association has been formed with a parent-elected board of trustees.

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.

Charter School reported that 18% 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.

Demographic and enrollment data for Tapestry Charter School 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.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

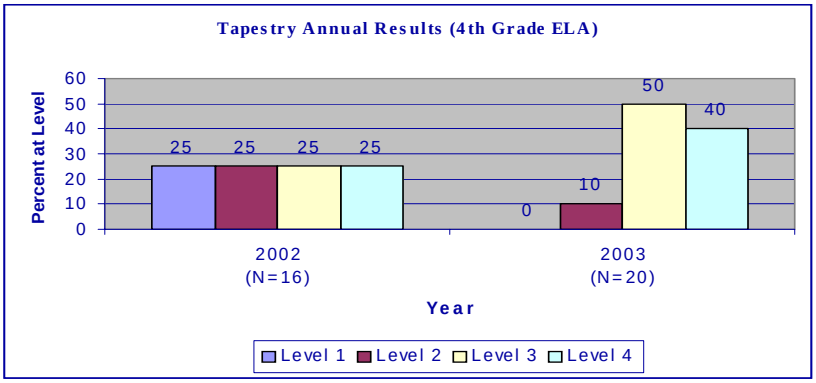
On May 15, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) visited Charter School. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President & Senior, Charter Schools Institute
- Radi Clytus, Outside Inspector/Consultant, Former Senior Analyst, Charter Schools Institute

Is the School an Academic Success?

Academic Data

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



- Tapestry 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 substantially from 2002 to 2003.
- Almost all students scored at Levels 3 & 4.
- No students scored at Level 1 (seriously deficient).

Tapestry Comparative Results			
School / District	Percent Levels 3 & 4		
	2002	2003	Gains
Tapestry	50.0	90.0	40.0
BUFFALO CITY DISTRICT	33.9	33.9	0.0

- In 2003, Tapestry had a much higher percentage of students at Levels 3 & 4 than that of the Buffalo City School District.
- Tapestry showed large gains in the percentage at Levels 3 & 4 while the performance of the Buffalo City School District remained unchanged.

Additional measures of student achievement, indicating the success of Tapestry's academic program, will be available in its 2002-03 Accountability Plan Progress Report, to be submitted during summer 2003.[1]

Student Work Products

Volumes of student work on display in the school's hallways, in class books written by students, and in individual work folders provide concrete examples of all students' rigorous application of what they are learning. In a classroom that includes both second and third grades, students work through writing stages that begin with a writing idea, progress to a "sloppy copy," or draft, that is edited in conjunction with the teacher. A final writing product is produced that indicates the teacher's demand for and the students understanding of high quality writing. Several examples of this writing process exist to show each student's growth in writing skill throughout the school year. Second grade journals are a beguiling collection of interesting stories that incorporate rich vocabulary, facility with compound sentences, and a strong use of language mechanics (capitals, punctuation, grammar, etc.). Students not only employ interesting adjectives and verbs to make the action lively in their stories, but frequently use character dialogue, properly set off by quotation marks and commas, to engage the reader.

In a fourth/fifth grade classroom, student journals reflect a strong, advanced level of work that parallels that observed in lower grades. Posted student work includes a vocabulary wall where student work that creatively defines and illustrates new vocabulary work is posted." Beverage, " "glimpsed," "gesture," "combine," "cluster," "grim," "jostled," "abolished," "burly," "translate," "obedient," and "foreshadowing" are a few examples of words students illustrated and used in sentences to convey each word's meaning. A particularly fine example was one student's "My brother is gigantic and I am puny." All posted work was correctly spelled, neatly crafted, and reflected the strong attention to detail that is one hallmark of Tapestry's success in English Language arts.

[1] Tapestry's Accountability Progress Report will be posted on the Charter Schools Institute's website, http://www.newyorkcharters.org/.

Also indicative of Tapestry's strong English Language Arts program are the "Readers Notebooks" used in the upper grades. These spiral bound notebooks serve as a literature logbook as well as a place for in-depth written dialogue between student and teacher as they jointly analyze literary selections and engage in written discussions about literature. Each child is assigned a certain number of books per literary genre (biography, historical fiction, humor, etc.) that they must read throughout the year. Students use the notebooks to keep lists of the books they want to read, books others have suggested to them, and to conduct a written analysis of each book they read in the form of a "friendly letter" to the teacher. The teacher then responds back to the student, modeling good writing skills and asking thought provoking questions about the literature. The thoughtful written dialogues between students and teacher over the course of the school year shows students' growing sophistication with literary analysis and writing ability that is exemplary.

In primary grade mathematics, students use a variety of objects (beans, counting cubes, etc.) to construct and solve math problems, which are then recorded and checked by the teacher. A review of student work sheets show a strong understanding of addition, subtraction, measurement and other mathematical concepts demanded at grades K, 1, 2. In one primary class, students are playing a game titled "Equivalent Fraction Bingo." When asked to explain what the word meant, one child responded, "Equivalent is a big word that means equal." While not always deft at this relatively new concept, most students knew ½ and how to reduce 4/8 or 2/4 or 10/20 to its lowest form.

In upper grade mathematics, student work reflects understanding and application of more abstract algorithmic concepts such as working with fractions, multiplication, division, and requisite mathematical skills outlined in the New York State Mathematics Performance Standards.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching & Learning

The mission of Tapestry Charter School is "to provide a learning center that offers challenging educational opportunities in a multi-age setting."

The school's curriculum addresses traditional subject matter as called for by the New York State standards. Using strategies learned from The Responsive Classroom project, teachers inspire and demand both academic and social excellence from each child.

Each lesson, piece of student work, and conversation with teachers reviewed by Institute visitors showed a robust commitment to this vision. Most impressive were teachers' attention to countless instructional details that cumulatively teach and reinforce learning for all students.

In one classroom first and second grade students work on a literature review requiring them to read various works by children's author Patricia Polacco. (Rechenka's Eggs, Babushka, Meteor, The Bee Tree, Mr. Lincoln's Way, The Butterfly, The Keeping Quilt, The Picnic Cat, I Can Hear The Sun, are a few examples of Ms. Polacco's work.) Students were divided into groups whose table names (Valley of the Kings, Nubia, Thebes, The Nile) were clearly labeled, used by the teacher to identify each group, and reinforced the world civilization topic this class was also studying. Valley of the Kings met with the teacher to discuss the author's work. Both students and teacher discussed and asked questions about characters that appear in some of the author's work and then fade, with other characters appearing in work written in another period of the author's career. "Is the grandmother character in her later works?" asked the teacher. "No," a child responds, "She's replaced by the girl with the red hair for some books, then she disappears as well." The Nile group has five or six of Ms. Polacco's books spread about in front of them and completes a worksheet asking them to compare and contrast the selections. Thebes reads quietly to each other from another selection, while Nubia engages in similar activities nearby. Students are purposeful in their work and display a high level of interest in the lesson.

In literature circles observed in grades three, four, and five, students reading books like Holes, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, and The Book of Three, have individual assignments for each group. One child is the Discussion Director whose job it is to read the assigned section of the book and come to the group prepared with a series of well formulated written questions and use them to lead the discussion. The Word Wizard selects and defines unfamiliar language or chooses words and lead a discussion as to why the author selected those words to relay a particular idea or image. The Connector's job is to relate a part of the reading to real life. Other literature circle jobs include the Artful Artist and the Passage Picker. Each child in each literature group is assigned such a role and is expected to arrive at group prepared by having read and produced written and oral contribution to the discussion.

Teachers have organized the day so that during the last half hour classroom assistants take charge to manage planning with students for the next day, homework reminders, and dismissal activities. This frees teachers to conduct thirty minute one on one or small group tutoring sessions.

Tapestry Charter School uses a multi-age looping structure as students progress through the grades at the school. For example, students in both first and second grade are in the same classroom, encountering some of the same content area in subjects like world civilization, American history, and science. In reading, language, and mathematics teachers vary instruction to appropriately challenge each student. This is sometimes accomplished through small group, half class, or individual instruction. Teachers also group children across classrooms when instructionally appropriate. Students frequently stay with the same teacher for a period of two years allowing a rich understanding of each child's instructional needs and the ability to focus on improving achievement.

Teacher interviews served to underscore the high expectations and commitment to detail that is the hallmark of Tapestry teachers. Teachers meet in formal staff meetings and informally throughout the school day and year to share curriculum materials, and assessment practices. As one teacher stated, "Tapestry is a community that depends on each other for success." The

school's founder and principal models a commitment to high standards and works with the school's board to ensure teachers are supported by and dedicated to excellence.

The school has resources adequate to provide and support instruction. Administrative leadership and teachers at Tapestry Charter School plan curriculum according to a school wide curriculum plan. In addition to the literature books, mathematics materials, history, science and art materials, as well as and technology materials available for students, the imagination and commitment of all teachers, including classroom, art, music, and dance teachers combine to provide solid instructional resources in every subject and every level.

Throughout the year, students work with music, dance, and classroom teachers to stage grand performances that feature works of literature, science topics, or the study of history. Students dance, sing, relay facts and understanding even writing their own biography for the "playbill" distributed for the production.

Use of Assessment Data

Teachers at Tapestry Charter School use assessment information about students' progress to plan instruction, create fluid groups of students based on instructional needs, and assure that new concepts and skills are presented in a way that builds upon prior learning. Assessment tools utilized include traditional standardized assessments, student work portfolios, student presentations and demonstration of skills as well as running reading records for individual students. Tapestry teachers clearly articulated the connection between lessons, assigned student work, high expectations, and student performance demanded in the New York State standards and consistently use assessment tools to determine student progress toward those standards.

Teachers assess student progress using the Work Sampling system. The school's literature describes this as a performance-based assessment tool used to measure student achievement. It provides authentic daily assessment and gives a clear documentation of students' knowledge and achievement in seven curriculum areas: personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development. It gives teachers clear perspectives on how children learn, it helps them plan instruction that is responsive to children's individual needs, and it gives them a vehicle for sharing specific and detailed information with families. Work Sampling tools help children create portfolios that enable them to recognize and reflect on their own learning, describe their progress, and set personal goals. It provides meaningful information to parents because it helps them understand what kind of learners their children are, and helps them gain a clear understanding of the teachers' goals. Student work products and school wide assessments show that Tapestry teachers make good use of this system in leading children toward high academic accomplishment.

Tapestry's principal presents student performance data to both the board of trustees and to parents. The board expects to be kept apprised of student progress or lack thereof. Parents learn about students' academic progress from classroom teachers, through individual student reports, and by the principal's presentations and comments at student performances.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

Based on comments from board members and staff, the principal provides clear, strong educational leadership at Tapestry Charter School. As many board members were also founding members of the school, their vision for Tapestry is clear and they articulate a clear understanding of the policy making role of the board. At each board meeting, Tapestry's principal reports to the board on the school's progress toward all academic and non-academic goals addressed in Tapestry's accountability plan. Both the Board of Trustees and the teaching staff evaluate the principal yearly.

Tapestry's principal and administrative team create positive professional interdependence between all teachers and staff at Tapestry Charter School. The principal supports teachers by focusing resources on the school's vision of providing academic success for all students and supporting a learning environment where teachers constantly seek to improve instructional skills. Finding, learning, creating stronger, solid, and more engaging lessons is the focus of professional development.

Staff Quality

Tapestry Charter School has an experienced staff as exemplified both by years of service and the teaching skills they exhibit in the classroom. The staff collaborates by meeting to discuss grade specific issues as well as to discuss vertical instructional planning to ensure that the level of instruction and the expectations for student performance are strong and consistent from year to year and grade to grade. The teaching staff also reported frequent opportunities to meet and discuss the academic progress of individual students with other teachers and the school's principal.

Meeting the Needs of Students at Risk

The school has a full-time student support teacher who is certified in special education. The student support teacher 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.

Board of Trustees

Through its actions as a policy making entity, frequent and appropriate visits to the school, and support provided to both teachers and principal, the Tapestry Charter School's Board of Trustees continues to provide the leadership necessary to implement the school's design. The board receives updates from the principal at each of its meetings. These reports include updates on financial standing, facility issues, and student academic performance.

Student Order & Discipline

The high level of student order and discipline at Tapestry Charter School is evident in classrooms, in hallways, and in the interactions between every member of the school. Students are typically purposeful in their work, use both time and learning resources appropriately, and are considerate, positive, and helpful to each other.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

As of May 2003, The Tapestry 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 consistently met financial reporting deadlines. The Institute views the school's fiscal position as sound.