



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

The Ark Community 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: 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 Ark Community 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. The school will maintain an enrollment of 96 students in grades K-5 throughout the term of its charter. The school is partnered with The Ark, an after-school program operating in the Taylor Public Housing projects in downtown Troy serving “at-risk” children who live in public housing. The school is housed in the former St. Paul’s School of the Roman Catholic Diocese.

The Ark Community Charter School uses small class size and multi-age classrooms with a variety of teaching methods including teaching centers, inter-disciplinary projects, cooperative learning, and large and small group instruction to improve the skills of students at-risk of academic failure. The school employs an assessment plan that provides standardized measures regarding student achievement during those years when there are no State-required assessments.

According to the 2003 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2001-2002 school year 4,795 students enrolled in the Troy City School District: 26.2% African-American; 7.2% Hispanic; 64.1% white; and 2.4% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 58.1% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty. The Ark Community Charter School reported 97 % of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The Ark Community Charter School’s data on enrollment and demographics for the 2002-2003 school year is reported in the school’s annual report due on August 1, 2003. This report will be posted on the Charter Schools Institute web site at www.newyorkcharters.org.

Inspection Team

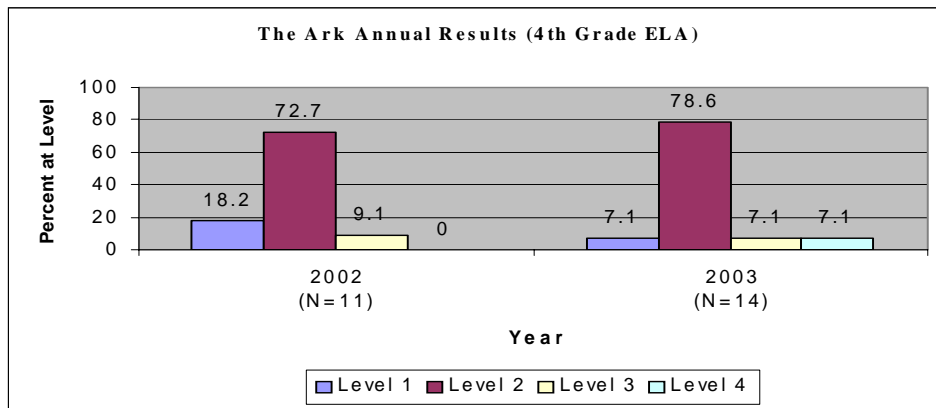
On June 6, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited The Ark Community Charter School. The team comprised:

- Ron Miller, Ph.D., Vice President for Accountability, Charter Schools Institute
- Evelyn Kalibala, education administrator, consultant to the Charter Schools Institute
- Evan Rudall, education administrator, consultant to the Charter Schools Institute

Is the School’s Academic Program a Success?

Academic Data

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



- The Ark Charter School has had a fourth grade since its first year of operation.
- The vast majority of students scored at Level 2 (partially meeting the standards) in both 2002 and 2003.
- One student scored at Levels 3 & 4 (meeting and exceeding the standards) in 2002; two students scored in this range in 2003.
- The percentage of students scoring at Level 1 (seriously deficient) declined from 2002 to 2003.

The Ark Comparative Results			
School / District	Percent Levels 3 & 4		
	2002	2003	Gains
The Ark Charter School	9	14	5.0
TROY CITY DISTRICT	63.6	53.2	(10.4)

- In 2003, The Ark Charter School had a much smaller percentage of students at Levels 3 & 4 than that of the Troy City School District.
- While the percentage of students scoring at Levels 3 & 4 increased at The Ark Charter School and decreased in the Troy City School District, a large performance gap remains.

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

Student Work Products

Although Ark's classrooms have much writing and language posted on the walls and other surfaces, very few documents are student work products. One classroom included a display of stories created by students posted on the wall. A review of students' work in writing notebooks reveals student writing that is full of errors, uncorrected, and void of teacher comment. Several science notebooks contain diagrams without labels or other notations that would assist students in using the diagrams for future study or review. Throughout the school, staff discusses the need to celebrate student work and recognize students' progress and success. While such a supportive attitude is useful for building self-esteem, the low level of work produced by many students indicates the Ark's staff does not focus on assisting students in attaining work that leads to academic success on the New York State performance standards.

In one first grade class, an Institute visitor discusses a book created by a student. The book has a lovely laminated cover with a drawing of a zebra. Inside the book contains more drawings and a printed page with information on the zebra. The student experiences difficulty reading most of the words and indicates that his teacher had prepared that page for him from his notes. When asked to read what his notes contained, the student struggled to read his own handwriting. "I copied these notes from a page my teacher gave me," he explains.

Students at the Ark Community Charter School are engaged in an ongoing writing process in which they transcribed handwritten work into typed text. In the fourth/fifth grade classes in particular, student writing is incorporated into a formal procedure by which teachers work with students to review, edit, and rewrite their reports, and in which writing rubrics were displayed on the classroom wall. Despite these efforts, however, daily journal entries and writing worksheet tasks are not reviewed and corrected. While these activities encouraged students to write by having them focus on engaging topics, students have yet to internalize the level and rigor of work required to succeed in the areas identified in the class's writing rubrics. In one class, students report that they are told to type up their handwritten work without review. Such work indicates a lack of understanding of writing mechanics, including spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

In almost all of the lessons observed by Institute visitors, instruction was teacher-directed with little elicitation of student responses. Where teachers followed a question-and-answer format, one-word answers were accepted. Teachers did not challenge students to elaborate on their answers or explain their responses. While there was sufficient order in classes to enable teachers to carry through on

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

instruction, in the case of lessons comprised of small-group instruction, a number of students were often off-task. In one class for example the teacher worked with individual students while others were supposed to work independently. However, the vast majority of students was unfocused and off-task. The teacher occasionally responded by reprimanding the entire class to be quiet, which was ineffective.

Math instruction at the school is uneven. In one math class, students were converting metric measure into decimals. Half the class was actively engaged in the lesson, the other half was not on task. The lesson was teacher directed with questions calling for only the correct answer. A teacher assistant was in the room, remaining in his chair except to sharpen pencils. The lesson was ostensibly a review, yet there was no review of concepts. By contrast, in another math class the teacher took time to review the concepts of patterns and fractional parts, asking questions to be sure most of the students understood the concept before giving the class the unit assessment. The teacher and her assistant moved around the room making sure all children were on task. The assistant gave students directions in Spanish when needed.

In yet another math lesson, the class was orderly and attentive, while the teacher introduced an assignment on a workbook page. In the lesson on using a clock to understand equivalent fractions, the teacher did not include any review of concepts before providing a quick explanation of the task and directing students to examples on a workbook page. Without eliciting many responses to questions, the teacher pushed through the first few problems. *No* student answered the first few problems correctly. Many quickly wrote something in their workbooks to give the impression of understanding, when in fact they just guessed. After these student attempts, the teacher, suggested a strategy for addressing the workbook problems. During this second phase in which additional problems were assigned, two students applied the right method, while the rest floundered. Throughout the lesson, the assistant teacher provided arbitrary support to students. During the course of the lesson, one girl volunteered that “I think I got them all wrong. Do you want to know why?” While such expression suggests that the school provides a setting where students can be reflective and feel comfortable about sharing their difficulties, a stronger instructional program would include a review of previous lessons, obviating the possibility of getting them all wrong.

The administration and teachers have developed scope and sequence of lessons and instruction, but lesson plans are not reviewed or analyzed to assure they maximize learning opportunities. One teacher stated that the principal is made aware of instruction through ongoing conversation and without having to review lesson plans.

Teachers at the same grade levels plan together on major projects, as well as reading and writing lessons. The science and art teacher are included in this planning, providing an integrated instructional program. Each grade cluster (i.e., classes with grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5) develops integrated themes, such as studying US military leaders, incorporating mapping, biographical research, computer use, art projects, and report writing. Teachers plan these themes together in May for the following year. Annual themes were discussed with all staff members so they would not be repeated by other grades. Some teachers mentioned the desire for the full staff to have increased opportunities to share curriculum and instructional strategies, rather than sharing them only with their respective grade clusters.

Use of Assessment Data

The Ark has introduced an informal assessment system for tracking student progress against grade-level expectations. It links reading levels associated with Rigby Guided Reading Books and reading rubrics from the New York State Literacy Profile to grade-level equivalents. While teachers reported using the Rigby's teacher-administered, diagnostic assessment check lists at the beginning of the school year to identify students for special intervention by the reading teacher and to place students into reading groups, the end-of-year post-test is limited to students who participate in remedial reading. Teachers evaluate student reading ability by giving students literature selections to read as the teacher makes notes on student-reading proficiency. These "running records" are not reliable indicators of grade-level performance. It is unclear if the grade-level equivalents of the Rigby are aligned with generally recognized expectations of grade-level work or with those of standardized tests.

The Ark has not evaluated student performance on the informal assessments with those of the Stanford-9 test, the standardized test, chosen to measure annual student progress in reading and mathematics. The Stanford-9 test has only been used for accountability purposes. It has not been used as a benchmark to validate the informal assessments or as a strategic tool for determining the effectiveness of the instructional program by identifying patterns of student performance within a grade-level. The school would benefit from this type of item analysis by identifying which skills at-risk students may need strengthening.

One teacher suggested that the grade 4 ELA results (see above) were disappointing, but did correlate with relative expectations; that is, higher performing students scored higher on the test. An administrator and two teachers served as graders for the ELA exam to learn about how the test is scored. However, the staff has also not conducted an in-depth assessment of the Stanford 9 and 4th grade state ELA exam to identify the skills Ark's students need to master.

Implementing the Instructional Program

The school's three administrators see their responsibility as improving instruction and enabling students to succeed on the state examinations. They acknowledged that their emphasis was on discipline last year and that they have focused on instruction during the 2002-2003 school year. Teachers are now working together to develop an alignment of curriculum and instruction from grade to grade, by developing performance standards and rubrics for each grade and subject area. The administrators are supportive of teachers attending workshops to improve instruction, but appear to spend little time in classrooms observing teaching and learning, and providing feedback on program implementation. Aside from the observations of a professor from Russell Sage College, teachers reported no ongoing in-service professional development intended to advance teachers' conceptual knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Educational Leadership

The teachers felt fortunate to be teaching in this small caring school. One teacher expressed the following sentiments, apparently shared by her colleagues: "I feel valued as a teacher because of the administration. They are there for me, sharing my successes and providing coverage for a few minutes when I need it. Someone is always available. The administration is very teacher focused." While the administration makes teachers feel appreciated and cared for, they do not play the role of critical friend. Teachers reported that they can attend as many professional development workshops

as they choose to, but that they would like to receive more formal and informal feedback from the administration.

Teachers provided inconsistent responses when asked to describe the instructional support they receive. One claimed that the principal was the lead and provided feedback “all the time.” Another indicated that two of the administrators were joint academic leaders. Yet another said that most of the feedback had come from a board member. One teacher indicated that although teachers initially could do as they pleased instructionally, there is now a push to get everyone on the same page. This lack of role definition appears to have undermined opportunities for consolidating classroom management procedures and improving the instructional program. The school’s administration and board of trustees have recently identified this issue and made an organizational change that creates one “head of school”. This school leader will hold the ultimate responsibility for instructional practices, assigning the two remaining administrators to roles that support teachers but leave all final school decisions up to the head.

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students

Teachers identified the most academically at-risk students with assessments given at the beginning of the school year. They used the Marie Clay Observation Survey, which provides a system for scoring early childhood literacy behavior and the Rigby assessment tools, as well as teacher assessments and observations. There is a pull-out program for students needing extra help with reading specialists for grades K-1 and grades 2-5. The reading teachers are given classroom lessons, which they modify for the individual students. The reading teachers’ work is well coordinated with that of the classroom teachers. Each class tended to have a few students with Individual Education Plans calling for special education services. A special education teacher from the Troy school district provides pull-out instruction in reading and math. While there is some coordination with classroom teachers, the teacher is only marginally involved with the day-to-day instructional program.

The assistant teachers, who had received some instructional training from the reading specialists, worked with students on an *ad hoc* basis. Their interventions were not particularly deliberate. Insofar as few assistants have been assigned specific students, they did not support differentiated instruction for low-performing students. Generally, they represent a personnel resource which has not been effectively used.

Establishing the Structure

The structure of the Ark Community Charter School contributes to its viability. The administrators and staff all reflect the vision of the school as helping students overcome the weakness they had when they first enrolled in the school.

Classrooms are organized into pairs of grades K-1, 2-3 and 4-5. Teachers like this configuration, as it allows students and teachers to work together for two years, enabling them to get to know the students well. The physical facility is adequate for the present population. The administrators and counselors share space in an open office, conference room, and lunchroom area. The halls and rooms are attractively decorated and clean.

The school had ample classroom resources to meet the instructional needs of the students. The classrooms have four computers, a TV and VCR, audio players with headsets, a math center, a library

with leveled books reflecting the diversity of the student population, a science center, theme center and class discussion area with rug. The K-1 classes also have a wooden gym and block area. The 4-5 classes also have eight laptops for student use. Based on the visit team's observations, teachers have used the web to collect material for student research. In a 4-5 class students scanned pictures from the web for their theme projects and were learning how to use Power Point presentations.

Board of Trustees Operation & Responsibilities

The school's Board of Trustees did not articulate a sense of urgency about the academic issues facing the school. Both the Board and the school's administration have a keen sense of the Board's policy making role, but it is unclear how the Board determines the educational effectiveness of the program it oversees and how it holds the administration accountable to report credible evidence of student academic gains.

While members of the Board assert that the school is attempting to enable students to reach grade-level standards and that younger students are more likely to be at grade level, it is unclear what evidence the Board uses to draw these conclusions, given the paucity of assessment data. At the request of the administration, the Board has rightly chosen to deploy resources toward the intervention of educational consultants to develop a comprehensive strategy to address planning issues.

The Board expresses active support for the development of a teacher performance review conducted by the administration but have yet to create a corresponding evaluation of the administrators. Rather, the board indicates that they have engaged in ongoing discussion about how to support the administration.

Student Order and Discipline

The Ark's staff reports that student order and discipline has improved in the second year of the charter. They note that the school was extremely chaotic in the first year and that, in this second year, the school increased capacity to make changes and improve the academic program. However, teachers feel that the school's discipline policy was not practiced uniformly and consistently. One teacher said that the school is reluctant to take tougher stances with students "because we know so much about their lives. They are going through a lot."

Teachers articulated a need for more support for individual and classroom behavior problems and saw the need for a revised discipline plan for next year. The movement of students during transitions between lessons in the classrooms and in the hallways was not always orderly. Even late in the school year, some students had to be reminded they were to move to the next class for grade level instruction.

Summary

The Ark Community Charter School's administration is very receptive to feedback. They freely acknowledge the school's shortcomings and recognize that they must now translate words into action and results. They seem to understand the urgency of the school's academic needs. The school has made strides in strengthening the academic program and systems during the past year. In working

with educational consultants under a consolidated leadership structure, the administration has set the stage for facing the challenge of enabling students to read, write, and do mathematics with great proficiency, as demonstrated by valid and reliable academic outcome measures.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

The Ark Community Charter 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. In its most recent audit, the School's auditors offered suggestions to strengthen internal controls and operating efficiency. The School addressed these issues through stricter reconciliation of accounts to the general ledger and implementing a new accounting system. Accounts are both reconciled and reviewed monthly by the School's management and Board of Trustees. Overall, the Institute believes the school to be in a financially sound position at this time.

The School was awarded a federal School Renovation, IDEA, and Technology Grant and is looking to purchase and renovate a new facility.