



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Carl C. Icahn
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 Institute visitors 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, and 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 Institute visitors' 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 Carl C. Icahn Charter School, approved by the State University Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents that March, opened September 2001. For the 2002-2003 school year it enrolled 144 students in grades K-3. The school will expand by the third year of its 5-year charter to 180 students in grades K-4. It is located in Community School District 9, and is housed in a new facility built especially for the school.

The school seeks to serve at-risk students in the South Bronx, including students residing at the Icahn House shelter for homeless women and their families. It uses the Core Knowledge curriculum in an intimate environment featuring small classes (18 students per class) in a small school. With an extended school year of 209 days and an extended school day, the school has more time for instruction and reduces the loss of academic skills that occurs over long, school vacations.

The school employs a variety of real life applications and hands-on learning opportunities to make the curriculum “immediate” for children. It seeks to maintain high standards for instruction through on-going professional development. The school stresses the importance of parental involvement (including parent meetings to bolster their capacity to promote education at home) to support the curriculum.

According to the 2003 Annual School District Report of the New York City Department of Education, for the 2001-2002 school year Community School District 9 enrolled 29,456 students: 34.5% African-American; 63.4% Hispanic; American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander, 1.6%; and, 0.5% white. Additionally, 94.1% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

The Carl C. Icahn Charter School reported that 94% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program. Enrollment, demographic, and school performance data for the 2002-2003 school year 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.

Inspection Team

On May 19, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Carl C. Icahn Charter School. The team comprised:

- Ron Miller, Ph.D., Vice President for Accountability, Charter Schools Institute
- Susan Seymour, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Charter Schools Institute
- Evelyn Kalibala, education administrator, consultant to the Charter Schools Institute
- Adam Aberman, education program developer, consultant to the Charter Schools Institute

Is the School's Academic Program a Success?

Academic Data

Icahn 3 rd Grade City Test Results		
Subject	School /District	Percent at Levels 3 & 4 2003
Reading	Icahn	25.7
	Community School District 9	27.6
Mathematics	Icahn	51.4
	Community School District 9	36.9

In 2003, Icahn administered the third-grade New York City Department of Education tests for the first time. The percent of students at Levels 3 & 4 (proficient and advanced) on the reading test was close to that of Community School District 9. The percent of students at Levels 3 & 4 (proficient and advanced) on the mathematics test was substantially greater than that of Community School District 9.

Additional measures of student achievement, indicating the success of Icahn's academic program, will be available in its 2002-03 Accountability Plan Progress Report, to be submitted during summer 2003. Since Icahn only had grades K-3 during the 2002-2003 school year, the data in the Progress Report will not include state assessments,¹ which are administered to students in the fourth, fifth, and eighth grades.

Student Work Products

Teachers are proactive in monitoring student work in progress, but there is little evidence that student work is systematically reviewed, since student folders contain collections of undated work products. A review system tied to grade-level standards is not apparent. Institute visitors examined folders of student work in a number of classes, where they found that the folders contain progress reports for October, November, February and May, and a student portfolio with

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

art work, math ditto sheets, language arts, book reports, vocabulary etc. The work in the folders has limited grading and few comments or suggestions for improvement or for how to move the work toward standards. Institute visitors observed teachers continually reviewing students' reading skills during scheduled classroom reading activity, but did not see teachers evaluating student math and especially writing *products*. Little evidence was available to determine if students write drafts, edit them with teacher assistance, and receive substantive feedback from teachers on final drafts. It was also difficult to determine the rigor of expectations teachers hold for student writing. Only one teacher reported developing a writing rubric for her class, but it is only used in her class.

In most of the classrooms, the predominant wall postings are teacher work or reproduced work sheets requiring students to fill in blanks or provide simple sentence answers. The sparse amount of student work on display was undated and not focused on specific skills or knowledge. Expectations of quality student products were not explicitly in evidence through posting rubrics or quality attributes of student work.

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

During classroom observations, Institute visitors found most students engaged in work and learning. Classes were orderly and transitions from lesson to lesson, and movement from classroom to classroom, were effective. Teachers use a balanced mix of whole class instruction, group and independent work. Teachers observe student work while students are producing it. They were actively engaged in lessons or actively working with a student or a small group. Teachers successfully incorporate most of their students into class discussions. Although students were attentive and responsive, they were not readily challenged. Teachers did not sustain posing probing, thought-provoking, grade-appropriate questions. For example, a first-grade teacher asked students in a lesson on transportation how long it would take to drive across the country; in a second-grade class, the teacher led a discussion about the meaning of aphorisms without giving students an opportunity to analyze the metaphoric content of the cliches.

Two observations are illustrative of the Institute visitors' findings on student engagement in instructional activities.

The language arts period of a first-grade class provided an excellent example of students' knowing what to do. The teacher, the only adult in the room, was working with four students reading *Little Trees Grow Up*. Students were encouraged to sound out words. The story line and details were frequently discussed, keeping all students involved in the reading activity. Not once did the teacher have to stop and speak to any child in the class regarding their behavior. Four students were in the library corner, two reading a book together. Six students were working at their desk doing a variety of activities all on ditto sheets, some doing book reports, others coloring vowels, and several working on other phonic sheets. The remaining students were working on the computerized Waterford Early Reading Program. As one student completed her work she informed the next student scheduled to use the PC with a light tap on the shoulder and then found her assigned ditto pages.

A second grade class was reviewing measurements that reflect the math standards and the school syllabus. The teachers used rulers and a yardstick to review inches, feet, and yards, then moved

onto ounces and pounds. The students were engaged and challenged during the lesson. Estimates of the weight of objects in the classroom were given, then measured. The students were asked to recall an activity they had done with liquid measurements. The students used basic ways of estimating and measuring the size of books and objects in the classroom including length, width and perimeter. After the review, students were given a page in their workbook to complete. The teacher moved about the class assisting students, checking work, reinforcing points, and asking questions to enhance learning. Two students were working on the Waterford computer program during this lesson. One student wanted to use the printer; he got paper for the printer, inserted the paper in printer, turned it on, and pulled out the paper extension, all this with the utmost care.

In general, Institute visitors found that reading instruction and skill development are appropriate for the age and grade level of the children. Mathematics instruction in other classrooms observed by Institute visitors relied largely on workbooks and the completion of mathematics worksheets.

Institute visitors determined, as they had during an October visit to the school, that the writing program at the school has yet reach its full potential in terms of rigor and expectations for student work products. In discussing writing process with the Institute visitors, teachers repeatedly referred back to students' journals, generally the first lesson every morning. For their morning journal, students usually had a daily oral language task where they were asked to look at three sentences posted on the chalkboard, find errors in writing mechanics made purposefully by the teacher and then to write the sentence using the correct grammar and mechanics. Teachers wrote little feedback to the students in their journals and few examples of teacher comments as to what students had done correctly and/or incorrectly were available. Book reports and essays were generally derived from ditto sheets or workbooks. While the school's McGraw-Hill reading/language arts program provides a writing exercise after each story and a grading rubric for correction, it does not appear to provide a foundation for writing instruction.

Use of Assessment Data

Teachers log results of spelling, reading, and math tests into teacher grade-books. Teachers review the entries regularly to develop student Progress Reports, providing parents with information on their child's school performance. For monitoring students, they use scores from the Waterford Early Reading Program, which provides individualized self-paced computer instruction and McGraw Reading and Language Arts Comprehension unit tests. They are aware of student Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS, a norm-referenced, standardized test) scores from the previous year. The principal and teachers also review some of the student performance data to make promotional decisions. Teacher review of unit test results is only to track individual students and to generate progress reports for parents. Teachers do not review such data in order to ascertain the effectiveness of instruction in enabling students to reach standards. Assessments of higher-order thinking skills (math problem-solving or writing assessments) are not used.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

The principal is an experienced school administrator who effectively oversees the operation of the school. His time is divided between the compelling administrative tasks demanded by running a charter school and interactions with students, staff, and parent. The principal monitors

instruction by reviewing weekly lesson plans and printouts from the Waterford Early Reading Program; however, the teachers reported that they do not usually receive feedback from the principal on the plans or the printouts. Teachers report an ongoing desire for additional opportunities to hone their instructional skills and reported looking for educational guidance from a second-grade teacher who is only in her second year of teaching. Teachers indicated that the principal provides support in acquiring educational materials but does not often model teaching methods. Several teachers indicated that the principal has brought a good deal of professional development to the school and encourages teachers to pursue particular professional development opportunities outside of school. While the professional development opportunities are appreciated, teachers expressed the desire to have an onsite mentor/master teacher. The school has correctly identified this need. The principal reports that Icahn is hiring a regular staff developer to provide more immediate, ongoing instructional support for the teachers.

Staff Quality

The teaching staff is inexperienced but very eager to learn and improve their teaching skills. They turn to one another for information and techniques to enhance their pedagogy. At the teachers' request they have been sent by the administration to workshops at Bank Street College of Education in order to improve their practices in the classroom. One teacher spoke about changing the methods used in the classroom as a result of a workshop on cooperative learning. All teachers spoke about the value of the workshops held at the school on guided reading and math. Three teachers mentioned their need for assistance in teaching writing and their requests for writing workshops. The staff did not demonstrate in-depth knowledge of learning standards, and there was no evidence of linking the standards, curriculum and assessment to instruction, or to planning instructional programs to meet the needs of individual students.

Because of a culture of collaboration among teachers, they are aware of the practices in the other classroom in their grade and the curriculum in the adjacent grades. Teachers have copies of the learning standards and can readily point to where those copies are. Yet teachers are not intimately familiar with them. Teachers meet informally and often with their fellow grade-level teachers to plan instruction. Institute visitors witnessed the same lesson being taught in different classes in the same grade. Lessons appeared to build on each other in a logical way from week to week and month to month, probably as the result of joint teacher planning.

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students

At the beginning of the year, the principal meets with the first, second, and third-grade teachers, as well as the reading/math specialist (targeted assistance teacher) to identify students as low performing based on the ITBS test and the previous year's classroom achievement. The core group of at-risk students has remained largely steady throughout the year, though some students have been added and removed at the discretion of the classroom teacher and the reading specialist. These students receive additional instruction in language arts during the school day from the reading/math specialist in pullout, small group, skill-based instruction for 30 minutes every day. There are never more than seven students during an instructional period. The at-risk students also take part in an academically focused after-school program. The reading/math specialist works with the teachers on tracking student progress during unscheduled informal meetings.

In observing the reading/math specialist conducting a reading comprehension lesson, Institute visitors found that, though she is an uncertified teacher, she challenges the students to fully understand and critically analyze the text and that the students generally meet her challenge. During an observation, she applied various strategies to build reading comprehension and interpretation, using different methods of cueing including phonic/s and context clues. She takes notes on every student while they are reading as an assessment tool. Also, she periodically reviews the school-wide comprehension tests. Because she is also the permanent substitute teacher, she cannot always carry out her regular reading program responsibilities.

Notwithstanding the status of the reading/math specialist, the Targeted Assistance Program (or "T.A.P." which provides remedial support to at-risk students) is identified as a core feature of the charter school with almost half the students participating in either the school-day or after-school programs. An additional component of the school's design for supporting at-risk students has not been implemented. While providing individualized education plans are presented as a special feature of the school's program in its charter, the principal has determined that developing such plans is not feasible with such an inexperienced staff.

Establishing the Structure

Overall, the school structure is well established. The Board of Trustees provides focused oversight and effective monitoring of the accountability plan. Classroom resources generally help the school meet its mission. The school is clean, in good repair and uses space appropriately. Students are well disciplined and respectful of each other and their teachers.

Board of Trustees Operation & Responsibilities

The Board of Trustees has instilled a common school vision with a focus on student achievement. The principal and board members reported reviewing student achievement data as a regular agenda item at board meetings. The principal presents student outcome data to the board, raises issues to be addressed and proposes plans of action in response. The board in turn sets policy, leaving the day-to-day operation of the school to the principal.

Student Order and Discipline

Students are well disciplined and respectful of each other and their teachers. Every teacher has his/her own discipline system by which the students abide. Students are fully aware of the class rules and the consequences for not following them. Transitions between lessons, between classrooms, and when changing classroom activities are orderly. Students in the second-grade classes exchange classes for reading and math. Students collect their instructional materials and move to the other class in a well-organized manner. Students assist each other to find the correct page for an assignment, and neighbors help one another with math problems.

Instructional materials are adequate. There was no expressed need for more supplies, textbooks, etc. Computers are available in every classroom. Institute visitors observed computers used only when other student work was complete. Classrooms are welcoming, learning environments. One teacher did lament that there is no Internet access at the school.

Summary

The school structure is well established and well functioning. One of the school's biggest challenges at the end of the second year of its charter is increasing the instructional abilities of its inexperienced staff. While a variety of professional development opportunities are available, the school has rightly identified that teachers would benefit from more day-to-day modeling and direct support. The school's plan to provide a staff developer during the 2003-04 school year with a regular on-site schedule is a step toward addressing this need. The reading program is well organized; however, writing instruction appears to be inadequate. Teachers do not use student achievement data for planning group instruction, limiting the information mostly to tracking individual performance for monitoring at-risk-student interventions and reporting to parents. The staff is more focused on celebrating individual progress than on ensuring that students are moving closer to the state learning standards. Student work products found in folders are often undated making it difficult to evaluate individual student growth.

Third-grade city test results showed some strength in mathematics performance and were weaker in reading performance. Both sets of results should provide a baseline for future gains in student performance and establish a useful benchmark for the same students taking the fourth-grade state tests next year. These city test data also provide an opportunity for making a comparison to Icahn's ITBS results, thereby using the ITBS information to help predict how students may perform on city and state tests in future years.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

The Carl C. Icahn Charter School currently 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, had no financial issues from the prior year audit, and is found to be fiscally sound based on a review of financial document submitted to the Institute.