



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Community Partnership
Charter School

Report

2000-2001
Academic Year

History and Purpose

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of their local school district 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 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.

Allowed by Chapter 4 of the Laws of 1998, new public charter schools in New York can be authorized by the State University of New York Board of Trustees, the Board of Regents or by local Boards of Education (in conjunction with the Regents). In addition, 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 State University of New York Board of 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 created and established a cyclical visitation and inspection process for 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 comprised of 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 trueness 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 evidence obtained by the inspectors in a visit to a first-year school functions as baseline information regarding the school.

On May 21, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter School Institute visited the school. The team was comprised of:

- Michael J. Stevens, Vice President of Evaluation and Research
- Douglas Lemov, Vice President for Accountability
- Radiclan Clytus, Senior Analyst

The inspection visit included meeting with the 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 with the school's governing board, parents and the public the inspectors' observations, findings and discussion. 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 each first year charter school faces major challenges, and that schools address them at different rates. There is no one correct time frame for successfully meeting each challenge. 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 frequently 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 Community Partnership Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. It opened in the fall of 2000 in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn (NYC Community School District 13), at 171 Clermont Avenue. Initial enrollment was 100 students, grades K-1. During its five-year charter, the school plans to grow to serve 450 students in grades K-6. The school is located in the carriage house of a refurbished state armory that also contains housing. It is in a neighborhood that includes residences and small businesses.

The school is operated in partnership with the Beginning with Children Foundation, a New York-based philanthropy founded by Joe and Carol Reich to advance educational opportunities for children. The school's founders consist of Brooklyn parents who were seeking a public school alternative to the existing public schools. The lead applicant for the school was Laura Taylor Swain, a parent and federal judge. Ms. Swain is chair of the school's Board of Trustees. The school's director is Ellen Rice.

Community Partnership Charter School is an attempt to replicate the successful Beginning with Children School, an alternative public elementary school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn that has been run by the Foundation in conjunction with the NYC Board of Education. That school converted to charter school status in fall 2001. Community Partnership Charter School plans to incorporate the best practices gleaned from the Williamsburg school, which, in 1997, was designated by the NYC Board of Education as among the "most improved" elementary schools in New York City.

Community Partnership Charter School's mission is to create a strong academic base, involving families, educators and community members, in which students learn to read, write and perform mathematically at levels that exceed citywide averages. This will be undertaken in an environment that values kindness and respect.

According to the 1999-00 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, Community School District 13 enrolled 115,878 students: 80.6% African-American; 15.4% Hispanic; Asian, American Indian, Alaskan and Pacific Islander, 2.5%; and, white, 1.6%. Additionally, 84% of students in the district are eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2000, 64% of students in Community School District 13 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 65% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 81% of students failed to meet state standards; 85% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Academic Data

The school has presented data from Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 administrations of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (Revised). Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration shows that the school enrolled an overall population with a mean NCE score of 59.4 (approximately the 67th national percentile) in reading comprehension, and a mean NCE score of 43.6 (approximately the 38th national percentile) in math. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the same test shows that in reading comprehension, student scores decreased by an average of 1 NCE over the course of the year. In math, students increased their scores by an average of 3.5 NCE over the course of the year.

The school also presented data from an on-site assessment of its own students using the Fox in the Box early childhood language arts survey, a diagnostic assessment of literacy readiness. The school reported that in its Spring 2001 administration of Fox in the Box 69% of students scored at or above grade level in the area of phonemic awareness, 35.2% of students scored at or above grade level in the area of phonics, 48.5% of students scored at or above grade level in the area of reading and oral expression and 52.4% of students scored at or above grade level in the area of Listening and Writing.

The school has presented data on student progress on an internally developed and self-assessed Report Card measuring literacy skills among those students who perform below competency levels on a pre-test in particular. The school reported that 11 students performing below competency level ("stage 2") in reading skills on the pre-test improved their scores by an average .5 stages on the post test. The school reported that 6 students performing below competency level ("stage 2") in "understanding literature" skills improved their scores by an average .4 stages. The school reported that 12 students performing below competency level ("stage 2") in written mechanics and usage improved their scores by an average 1.5 stages.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

At the end of its first year of operation, Community Partnership Charter School's progress in achieving full implementation of the ambitious program and goals outlined in its charter appeared to be inconsistent. Areas of relative strength include the strong support and involvement of parents, the partnership with the Beginning with Children Foundation and a committed, dedicated school administration, faculty and staff. Areas of challenge included uneven delivery of the academic program and difficulties with behavior management.

In the course of informal Institute visits during the 2000-01 school year and during the year-end inspection, however, the administration demonstrated a consistently strong ability to identify and address challenges that developed as the school implemented its program. With a level of candor that was typical of the school's tone of demanding self-scrutiny, the director observed that "CPCS struggled during the year with children whose behaviors tended to disrupt their own classrooms and the school as a whole." At the same time, inspectors believed that while it remained an issue throughout the year, overall student order and discipline showed signs of potential improvement thanks to interventions at the close of the year.

Based upon discussions with staff and administration, the teachers in Community Partnership Charter School were fully involved and committed to the students and the mission of the school. Charter Schools Institute observations of staff's interactions with students and the administration's description of the long hours teachers put in well after students had left for the day evidenced this. An innovative program involving the creation of "learning families" within each classroom effectively reduced student/teacher ratios and allowed instruction to be more readily tailored to individual student needs. Teaching was grounded in primary level pedagogy and the faculty's content knowledge base was considered satisfactory.

Raising the level of instructional practice is a top priority of the school director. Observations by Institute staff suggested that this prioritization was appropriate. In addition to improving teachers' methods in the classroom, the school continues to place a high importance on the development of effective lesson plans and curricular units. To that end the director developed a plan to provide two weeks of intensive curricular training for all teachers before the start of the second school year. She stated that for the 2001-02 academic year all teachers' assistants will be majoring in or have a degree in education or a related field. Additionally the school was pursuing to an ongoing staff development relationship with a post-secondary institution.

This school has ample technological resources and a well-outfitted computer classroom. Students clearly were "exposed" to computers. However, observation suggested that the school had not yet developed effective methods of teaching and assessing student knowledge of specific technology skills.

During the first year, the school administration attempted to maximize classroom instructional practice with the development of the "Extended Learning Family" model to deal with unacceptable student behavior. The director noted that "we found at times the overwhelming nature of student behaviors forced teacher attention away from valuable instructional time. CPCS learned the school had a number of students with special needs who presented educational as

well as social and emotional challenges.” In this model, a small number of students (usually three to five) are pulled out of their classes and taught in a separate classroom until they prove ready to return to the previous environment. The school director stated that the model’s goal is to have misbehaving students “become excited about their learning,” thereby reducing or eliminating poor behavior. This model appears to be consistent with the school’s mission and program and to the degree that it is able to reinforce high behavioral and academic expectations seems likely to provide strong support to students.

Community Partnership Charter School has in place a substantial battery of diagnostic assessments for all students in their first year or upon entering the school. This includes the Peabody Individual Achievement Test, Rhode Island Test of Language Skills, Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning and Fox in the Box. In the schools’ Accountability Plan, the director indicates the assessments are intended a) to identify children in need so that curriculum delivery and staff development activities can be better directed toward them, and b) to identify high-achieving children so their programs can be accelerated. In addition, student work displayed in classrooms and hallways showed evidence of on-going teacher assessment of student work using traditional assessment methods (comments, numerical grades, check mark systems, etc.).

School Climate

The school’s charter describes a program where “parents, educators, community members and children work together to create an atmosphere of joyous learning which prepares students for academic excellence.” In its first year, the school made inconsistent progress in implementing this aspect of its program. Establishing consistently high expectations for student participation and behavior was a particular challenge and some staff members worked exhaustively but not always effectively to engage students in learning.

During the first year, the staff used an approach that stressed, in the words of the director, “rewarding students for doing the right thing” and using “whole class rewards.” Teachers confronted with poor behavior focused on praising and reinforcing alternative, positive behaviors rather than responding directly to negative behaviors. In all classrooms staff used similar techniques to establish order (e.g., counting backward, rhythmic clapping, “if you can hear my voice touch your ears,” turning on and off the lights, etc). However, the techniques used were not generally observed to have the desired effect and inspectors observed instances of teachers reinforcing behavior that did not appear to be worthy of praise in order to indirectly censure negative behaviors. Perhaps as a result, disruptions of the learning environment and a climate characterized by low behavioral standards were sometimes observed.

To its credit, the school recognized this issue quickly, solicited input and guidance from a variety of sources and took advantage of the freedoms and flexibility offered it as a charter school to begin adjusting its program to improve the learning climate. Interventions based on increased staff training, clarification of expectations and standardization of procedures appeared to have begun improving climate even before the end of the year and also appeared to hold significant promise for the coming year.

Facility

The school facility is excellent. It is secure and inviting and featured exemplary displays of colorful student art work that placed a clear emphasis on the value of individual expression within the school community. Classrooms are bright and large enough to accommodate the curricular needs of primary level students and teachers. The classrooms are well equipped with age and grade-level appropriate equipment, furniture and supplies and are often structured in such a way as to support the school's use of 'learning families' to divide students for instruction in small groups. The school has a well-outfitted computer lab and makes extensive use of a local park for activities and recess.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The charter describes the school's commitment to building a rigorous curriculum, creating learning opportunities in partnership with local institutions and meeting the unique needs of each child.

The structure of the school's program and the teaching methods employed are aptly designed to meet the individual needs of students at the school, however, more consistent and effective teaching and behavioral reinforcement will need to be developed in the next year in order to effectively put this design into practice.

Based on observations and conversations, inspectors believe the school has fostered a strong relationship with local businesses and institutions. Members of the community are frequently present in the school and were observed to help escort students to the park and to serve as volunteer instructional aides in various classrooms. School staff also report that parents are supportive of the school. Finally, the school received 255 applications for 39 openings at its spring enrollment lottery, a fact that provides further evidence of strong community support.

The school director described the first year of operation as one in which "CPCS had the daunting responsibility of bringing the Charter to life while confronting and handling not only the typical difficulties faced by any start-up venture but also having to respond . . . to unforeseen factors and situations. CPCS faced difficulties in its first year that we believe we are more fully prepared to address in our second year." Inspectors too believe that the school has engaged in continuing and effective self-critique and has used its freedoms and flexibility under law to prepare itself for significant growth in the second year.