



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Merrick Academy-Queens
Public 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 22, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the school. The team was comprised of:

- Michael Stevens, Ph.D. , Vice President of Research and Evaluation
- Radiclani Clytus, Senior Analyst

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 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

Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in May of that year. It opened in the fall of 2000 with 125 students enrolled in grades K-2 and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to 400 students in grades K-6.

Queens faces a projected a shortage of more than 58,000 classroom seats by 2007. Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School provides much-needed classroom space in an overburdened school district. The school opened in temporary space in Springfield Gardens, but for the 2001-02 school year will be in a newly refurbished facility in Queens Village.

The Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School’s mission is to become a mode of excellence that will be replicated in disadvantaged neighborhoods nationwide. The school has contracted with Victory Schools, Inc. for its management. Victory Schools seeks to improve public education by assisting in the start-up and management of public charter schools of outstanding quality, particularly those created to serve at-risk students. Built on the premise that all children can learn, Victory Schools uses an educational program that employs Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge and an extended school day schedule featuring a strong enrichment component based on thematic curricula.

According to the 1999-2000 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, in 2000 Community School District 27 contained 34,034 students: 35.2% African-American; 32.5% Hispanic; 13.7% white; and, 18.6% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 73.5% of students in the district are eligible for free lunch, under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 75% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 60% of students in Community School District 27 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 51% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 73% of students failed to meet state standards; 86% of the 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 Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration shows that the school enrolled an overall population scoring in the 26th percentile in reading comprehension, and the 37th percentile in math, on average. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the same tests shows that in reading comprehension, student scores increased by an average of 2.9 NCE nationally, based on a same-student analysis. In math, students increased their scores by an average of 2.8 NCE nationally, based on a same-student analysis. In language skills student scores increased by an average of 10.5 NCE nationally, based on a same-student analysis.

School Curriculum and Instruction

The interaction between students and teachers at Merrick Academy – Queens Public Charter School suggests a solid academic environment, where achievement and class participation are valued. In its charter, the school commits itself to developing an academic program in which Direct Instruction in reading and math is augmented by a content rich Core Knowledge program designed “to teach children the substance of history, science, geography, literature, and fine arts at a high academic level.”

Teachers and their assistants appeared comfortable with the academic program and sometimes varied their instructional methods in an attempt to reach individual learners. In many classes, inspectors observed small groups of students working independently while teachers lectured. On other occasions, teachers competed against their students in math exercises which generated student interest and helped to achieve teaching goals.

During Direct Instruction exercises, which require uniform verbal responses, students answered in a concise and enthusiastic cadence that teachers consistently enforced. It was also clear to inspectors that many teachers used Direct Instruction to help facilitate a notion of structure, standards and consistency among students. For example, students were often expected to assume a scholarly position (sit squarely, pencils down, etc.) and focus attentively on their lessons.

Evidence that Merrick Academy was effectively implementing Core Knowledge as part of its curriculum was apparent in student work posted throughout the school. Thematic explorations into earth science issues were represented by completed handouts which showed students’ understanding of natural habitats and animal classification. Students were also observed preparing for a worksheet and a guided lesson on Native American culture and 19th Century

American political history. During this instructional period, they were required to read, write, and orally respond. Although inspectors did not see a wide variety of student assessments in place, school leaders reported that teachers regularly assigned and graded student homework and administered random quizzes. Institute inspectors did observe curriculum consultants administering placement tests throughout the day.

School Climate

The school's Disciplinary Code states that "The most important way to help children develop self-control and discipline and to care for one another is to create an environment where they are expected to behave and to care." Most teachers were able to ensure the success of this approach by consistently correcting behavior that took away from the academic program.

In general, teachers assertively policed minor infractions. Prohibitions against talking in class appeared to be consistently enforced, as were expectations regarding appropriate student/teacher interactions. Classroom management consisted of effective non-verbal communication (tactical moments of silence and eye contact), stern reproaches, and time outs. It was evident to inspectors that most teachers, as stated by one instructor, wanted "to make rules and expectations as clear and consistent as possible so that children know what is expected of them." As such, inspectors observed very little evidence of disruptive student behavior in classrooms and hallways. Merrick Academy's students tended to be well behaved and many of them worked on task without the need of reinforcement. Besides the orderly nature of most classrooms, further evidence of the school's success with implementing policy can be seen in students' (and parents') 100 % compliance to the uniform code.

By and large, students at Merrick Academy appeared to have internalized the school's culture of academic achievement. It was not uncommon to see students assisting one another and sharing ideas while they were engaged in work at their desks. During a class break, students eagerly showed off their multiplication skills to an inspector and also enjoyed challenging each other in arithmetic. Students appeared interested in their assigned work throughout the site visit and were mindful of treating teachers with respect. Inspectors found the strong culture of learning even more impressive given the school's less-than-ideal facility for the 2000-01 academic year.

Facility

Merrick Academy operated during its initial year in temporary facilities that were not conducive to ultimate fulfillment of the school's mission and charter. Classrooms were created by subdividing large assembly rooms with mobile barriers. Sound was a problem. In some instances, visitors were barely able to hear the lesson being conducted and could not always gauge student responses. The first-year facility also lacked a common area for school events, a gym or playing field area for physical education, and very little wall space to display student work. The school has since left the temporary space and is now operating in a newly refurbished facility on a major thoroughfare in Queens Village.

Despite such obstacles, the school's students and teachers clearly adapted to their limited surroundings. It was clear to inspectors that despite the noise, students were concentrating on

their work. Teachers appeared to have fostered in their students a strong culture of learning, expectation, and mutual purpose, and this, in turn, keeps students focused and on task.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

Founder and School Principal Alma Alston focuses staff, parents and student on teaching and learning. She has set high academic and behavioral expectations for school staff and students. School administration and faculty both appeared vested in the philosophical tenet that “all children can learn” and attempt to provide all students with a challenging educational program. Besides effectively implementing Direct Instruction to cultivate strong basic skills in its students, Merrick Academy’s administration was exploring more rigorous curricula to meet the needs of students who excel beyond the scope of the school’s standard academic program. Other signs of the school’s leadership and growth include a strong parent organization and the assistance of community seniors in the serving of breakfast each morning. According to Merrick Academy’s principal, the parent organization was responsible for identifying the school’s new facility.