



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Roosevelt Children's Academy
Charter School

Report

2001-2002
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

Roosevelt Children's Academy Charter School was approved by the State University Trustees in January 2000 and opened in September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 191 students in grades 1-3, and plans to expand to 347 students in grades K-6 by the end of its 5-year charter.

Members of the Roosevelt community felt a great need for a public education alternative to the Roosevelt School District, which state laws have placed under special supervision of the State Education Department.

The school contracted with Victory Schools, Inc. for its management. The Victory Schools' curriculum is built on the principle that all children can learn and integrates the Core Knowledge academic program with Direct Instruction, and state standards.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year Roosevelt Union Free School District enrolled 3,142 students: 89.1% African-American; 10.8% Hispanic; 0.1% white; and 0.0% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 68.3% of the students in the district received free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Charter School reported that 63% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 27% of students in district-run schools did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 19% of students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 83% of students did not meet state standards; 91% of students did not meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 20, 2002, an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute made a formal end of the year visit to Roosevelt Academy Charter School. The team comprised:

- Dr. Michael Stevens, Vice President of Evaluation and Research, CSI
- Paul O'Neill, Chief Counsel, CSI
- Radiclan Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI

Academic Data

Charter schools authorized by SUNY are required to submit an Accountability Plan to the Charter Schools Institute for approval. The plan sets forth the school's goals for its five-year charter. Two of the major goals are student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Over the life of the charter, the school is required to show that it is making substantial progress toward meeting its goals through a variety of measurable objectives. These objectives include: 1) student performance on the state's fourth- and eighth-grade ELA and math tests; 2) student performance on these tests in comparison to similar schools; and 3) the year-to-year progress of students in ELA and math in comparison to the progress of students in a national sample.

Because of grades they serve and how recently they opened, some schools can not provide much information about student achievement. State test results are only given in the fourth and eighth grade, so that schools without these grades cannot administer the state ELA and math tests. Similarly, schools that have only been open for one year cannot report information on year-to-year progress in student performance. Furthermore, any test information (especially state tests) in the first years of a school's charter can only provide an incomplete picture of the impact of a school's program. Student achievement in these schools will be based to a great extent on what the students had learned in other schools prior to enrolling in the charter school. Despite these limitations, each charter school must begin with its first year's results to build its case for charter renewal.

As a second-year school with no fourth grade, the Roosevelt Charter School was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was far from meeting its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. Roosevelt has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Roosevelt Academy Charter School is in its second year of operation. The school had two informal visits along with the end of year visit during the 2001-02 academic year. During those visits Institute staff observed a range of teacher expectations for student achievement. The expectations ranged from high to minimal, with staff in Kindergarten and third grade providing an academic experience that consistently challenged students.

The school's institutional partner, Victory Schools, uses Direct Instruction for mathematics and reading instruction and Core Knowledge as the curriculum sequence for science and social studies. Implementation of the Direct Instruction model varied from classroom to classroom and within the classroom from teacher to cooperating teacher. For example, in one classroom the teacher introduced subtracting fractions with like denominators with one group while the cooperating teacher monitored seat work with another group. At a set time, the two instructors seamlessly switched groups without loss of instructional time and student engagement. However, in another class it took the teacher almost ten minutes to get her students' attention for a sharing of work in journals.

The execution of the Core Knowledge sequence appears to be less formalized than Direct Instruction, even though the principal described a process of receiving Core Knowledge instructional units from Victory Schools on computer diskette and copying them for teacher use. In one classroom Institute staff reviewed excellent bulletin boards regarding the "Harlem Renaissance" and "Pompeii Buried Alive" that contained student writing which had been assessed by the teacher. However, in another social studies class about the United States the teacher referred to New Hampshire's geographical location as "really up there" as opposed to northeast, without using supplies such as print materials or maps. In general, the two or three teachers who conspicuously followed the Direct Instruction curriculum and the Core Knowledge sequence tended to have safe and orderly classrooms, student work posted and graded, students who were engaged and attentive, and a high degree of student achievement.

Through classroom observations and interviews with teachers and the principal, Institute staff determined that the staff at Roosevelt Academy Charter School needs staff training and development in all aspects of the school's academic program and student order and discipline. During visits to schools associated with Victory Schools this year, Institute staff have not encountered the Direct Instruction trainer as we frequently did last year. When Victory's regional director was asked about this he stated that there was the same level of training as last year, although the trainer spends one day a week out of state this year.

The leadership from the principal at Roosevelt appears to be custodial, having limited contact with the classrooms and deferring to Victory Schools on all matters involving the school.

School Climate and Discipline

In the two or three classrooms where teachers had discipline procedures and consistently enforced them, Institute staff found orderly classrooms with substantial student time on task. These classes had smooth transitions when they were scheduled to leave the classroom (e.g., recess) and students followed teachers' directions without failure. However, in the majority of classrooms, students regularly left their seats and moved around the room, sometimes leaving the room, without comment from the teacher. Inappropriate student chatter was a constant problem and most of these teachers had to raise their voices in order to deliver their lessons and directives. Transitions between classes in these rooms were, as a rule, loud and somewhat unruly.

Institute inspectors were unable to discern a school-wide commitment to the development of a positive, challenging environment for learning and teaching in Roosevelt Academy Charter School. Inspectors were also unable to determine if there were supervisory structures to build school culture and to ensure compliance with the school's academic and educational goals.

Facility

The school is presently in two locations. The Kindergarten classes are located in the basement of a church at 230 Brookside Ave. in Roosevelt while grades 1-3 are located in a modular constructed building at 105 Pleasant Ave. in Roosevelt. The Kindergarten facility is spacious, well lit, and properly outfitted with supplies and materials to support instruction.

The Pleasant Avenue facility is cramped with no room for confidential meetings or space to isolate a sick child. Lunch is eaten in classrooms. Students that qualify for federal Title I class assistance receive instruction in the hallway, and physical education takes place in the parking lot of the school, the space for which will be reduced if the school adds two classrooms as the leadership has verbally indicated to the Institute. Classroom space is adequate and the rooms are suitably outfitted with teaching and learning supplies.

School Mission and Charter

Part of the mission of the Roosevelt Academy Charter School is "to become one of the finest public schools in America and to produce students who meet or exceed the New York State standards." Based upon the Institute's visits and inspections, this school has demonstrated limited evidence of meeting that laudable goal. Implementation of the curriculum model, student order and discipline, energetic teacher training and supervision, effective school leadership, and high expectations for student achievement all need to be brought together into a cohesive, focused effort if the mission is to be achieved.