



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Amber 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

The Amber Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in the fall of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 120 students in grades K-2. The school plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to educate 280 students in grades K-5. The Amber Charter School is located on the second floor of a building at 125th St. and Lenox Ave. in Harlem, which also houses retail and office facilities.

The Amber Charter School uses a project-based, dual language curriculum to achieve New York State standards and enable all students, both Spanish-dominant and English-dominant, to attain fluency in both languages. The school is partnered with the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans, which has a strong community service history and education experience through its extensive role in development and operation of the Twenty-first Century Academy for Community Leadership (P.S. 210), a New York City public school.

According to the 2002 Annual District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 5 enrolled 11,528 students: 76.3% African-American; 21.9% Hispanic; 0.7% white; and, 1.0% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 86.4% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Amber Charter School reported that 81% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 75.9% of students in Community School District 5 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 71.4% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade ELA test, 81.2% of students failed to meet state standards; 92.8% of the students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 16, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Amber Charter School. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Doug Lemov, Vice President of Accountability, CSI
- Ivan Hageman, Principal, East Harlem School

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 Amber Charter School was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided limited data to show that it was approaching its early childhood literacy objectives.

The school has begun gathering student work as part of a portfolio assessment system. Though the school has presented no portfolio related data, analysis of student portfolios by CSI inspectors during Spring 2002 formal and informal visits reveal that students' portfolios exist as a random collection of work, generally lacking comment, review or analysis by teachers, and also without rubrics, checklists, descriptors or other standards for judging the academic progress or accomplishment of students.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

At the close of its second year of operation, Amber continued to struggle to implement the program described in its charter, according to Institute staff and external inspectors who have visited the school. Inspectors identified two areas of particular concern. First, a pervasive lack of academic rigor characterizes instructional delivery and student work product. Second, at the close of its second year of operation, the school has gathered little evidence of student progress nor does it appear to have developed the structures to do so in a thorough and compelling manner in the future. Without such systems, the school may struggle to build an effective case for charter renewal in year five.

Teachers and administrators report they have established school-wide themes of instruction for the year. At the time of the Institute's formal visit in May 2002, many classrooms were engaged in the study of metamorphosis of caterpillars to butterflies. This theme, according to staff members, was chosen because the students had enjoyed a similar study in Spring 2001. However, the choice was not explicitly linked to mastery of particular skills and learning standards. Further, observations during informal visits throughout the 2001-02 school year indicate that instruction was often not intentionally linked to acquisition and mastery of specific skills on the part of students. Student work products produced during the study of metamorphosis showed a low level of recall knowledge. Available student work did not reflect the infusion of analysis and synthesis of information called for in curriculum that presents the rigor demanded to meet the New York State Performance Standards and assessments as outlined in Amber's charter.

Review and analysis of student journals, writing folders and mathematics folders did not show consistent application of writing or calculative standards sufficient for attainment of the goals for student achievement outlined in Amber Charter School's application or accountability plan. Student work products in both second grade classrooms showed limited evidence that students drafted, edited, revised and corrected written work and were required to use correct grammar and punctuation. Such evidence was insubstantial in second grade and wholly inadequate in other grades. In fact, much of the posted student work in classrooms and hallways lacked correction, comment, or evaluation by teachers.

Examples of appropriate writing for each grade level (for example, the correct formation and practice of letters and words at Kindergarten, words and sentences in first grade, sentences and paragraphs in second grade) could be found in fewer than half of the journals examined by the site visit team. Writing in journals lacked writing of merit, purpose, or strategy. Journals were

consistently undated, reflected no apparent structure and often contained poorly formed letters or words written haphazardly amidst doodles and scribbled drawings. As journal writing can be a viable tool for students to use in acquiring critical literacy skills, Institute staff and external inspectors found expectations for student work unreasonably low and without clear intent.

Writing and mathematics folders were often collections of infrequently dated assignments without connection to rubrics or standards for evaluating the work product. Such folders often consisted of poorly completed worksheets that were simplistic and in various states of completion with inconsistent corrections noted by the teacher and little, if any, correction of work by students. Such work and lack of consistent teacher feedback is surprising given the school's focus on authentic assessment¹ and the rich fluid learning of the sort that the school feels is not easily taught or measured by standardized tools. When authentic writing pieces were included in folders they reflected quality far below levels that would be considered adequate for students' grade levels. Such work was rife with errors, with severely limited evidence of revision or correction by students or teachers. This resulted in students in the same classroom including widely differing work in their folders, making Amber's commitment to assessment of student progress over time difficult.

Institute staff and external inspectors, in both formal and informal visits throughout the 2001-02 school year noted that most classrooms, particularly Kindergarten and first grade, were staffed by both a teacher and assistant teacher. At times, additional adults (volunteers and special area teachers) also participated in classrooms. Despite the number of adults in each classroom, lessons observed were poorly run. In those classrooms where all students engaged in the same teacher led activity, lessons rarely maximized student learning by including active participation in the learning process. They did not require students to record what they had learned or to create individual work products based on the lesson. In cases where students participated in small group activities, work was poorly supervised, students were off task and the quality of work was low. In the opinion of Institute staff and external inspectors, the school does not yet take full advantage of its admirable student teacher ratio.

In the first year of its charter, and continuing through year two, Amber Charter School has administered an on-site assessment of its own students using the Early Childhood Language Arts Survey (ECLAS), a diagnostic assessment of literacy readiness. Inspectors' reviews of ECLAS test booklets and score sheets raised questions about the consistency and thoroughness of the ECLAS administration. Scoring procedures were incompletely and inconsistently followed, leading inspectors to question reliability of the school-wide ECLAS student performance data. In order to strengthen the reliability, validity and objectivity of Amber's data, Amber's school leaders report they plan to provide additional training for teachers in the administration of the ECLAS, to videotape a random sample of administrations, and invite experts from the New York City Board of Education to observe the administration of the test. The Institute believes these steps, and possibly others, are necessary to present credible data of student achievement.

¹ Authentic assessment (at times referred to as performance assessment) provides a basis for teachers to evaluate both the effectiveness of the process or procedure used by students and the resulting student work. (Linn & Gronlund, 2000, page 260)

At the close of the school's second year, classroom observations, reviews of student journals and work folders at Amber Charter School raise urgent concerns that many students in the school demonstrate limited literacy in either English or Spanish. Further, the school's assessment of student work, combined with ineffective classroom instructional practices observed on both informal and formal visits to the school, lead to the conclusion that the school itself is unable to substantiate, by consistent record keeping or verifiable data, indications of student progress toward standards of reasonable or adequate academic performance. Lack of such information may undercut Amber's ability to present a compelling case that the school has met the goals set forth in its accountability plan; vital criteria in building a case for renewal.

School Climate

The school's administration has made effective progress toward addressing behavioral issues that significantly undercut instruction during the school's first year. Student behavior no longer imposes an immediate barrier to instruction. As some teachers in the school appeared to tolerate a lack of student engagement and participation in learning, the school should continue to emphasize the connection between behavioral and academic standards.

The school continues to operate in a building that offers a physically secure environment for children. All visitors, staff, parents, and students enter through a single door equipped with a video and audio security system. A full time staff person monitors the entrance and maintains a visitor log.

Facility

During year two of its charter, Amber Charter School continued to operate in a second story space located on Lenox Avenue between 125th and 126th streets in Harlem. The Board of Directors of the school rented this space. While the school's original design called for it to find a permanent home in Washington Heights in order to enable the school to serve the Dominican population targeted in the design of the school, acquisition of a viable facility in Washington Heights remained a challenge.

The Lenox Avenue facility which housed Amber Charter School during its second year had classrooms that were well lit and appropriately supplied. The site did not allow for dedicated space for physical education or recess; a park two blocks away was used for these activities, weather permitting. During its second year, the school struggled to face the challenge of balancing the need for physical activity with the cost to instructional time of traveling the distance where space adequate for physical activity was available.

In August of 2002, Amber Charter School's board of trustees entered into an agreement to move the school to a former school facility located at 220 East 106th Street in New York City. The Amber Charter School board of trustees feel confident this facility will enhance the delivery of its instructional program by providing additional instructional space and the school's planned enrollment growth. At the time of this report, the school was seeking assurance in writing from

the Department of Buildings of the City of New York that the facility can be used legally as a school.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school reports that it is weighing additional structural changes to improve the implementation and applicability of its dual language program. The school remains committed to its dual language (Spanish and English) design intended to foster “full fluency” in both languages among all students and has continued to alternate full-day instruction in both languages. However, the unanticipated enrollment of a limited number of Spanish-speaking students continues to present the school with challenges in adapting the program envisioned in the charter. As noted in the Institute’s 2000-01 Annual Site Visit Report, the school’s inability to find a suitable facility in its intended heavily Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights and subsequent decision to locate in Harlem led to enrollment of fewer native Spanish speakers and more native English speaking children.

The school has pledged to provide “academic excellence and high standards,” to “increase learning opportunities for all students, with a special emphasis on expanded learning opportunities for children at risk of academic failure,” and to implement “different and innovative teaching methods.” At the conclusion of its second year, as in its first year of operation, the school had yet to implement a rigorous, systemic school-wide organization of activities, lessons, student work, and assessments that is likely to produce students who are able to achieve academic excellence and high standards.

As the school begins the third year of its charter, it has worked with Institute staff to craft a corrective action plan focused on improving the design and delivery of many of the assessments called for in its accountability plan. Specifically, administrators and teachers have committed to developing and implementing school wide assessments of student work in reading, writing, and mathematics with a focus on using the assessments as a means to strengthen classroom instruction.