



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Bronx Preparatory 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

Bronx Preparatory Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000, and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in August of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 150 students in grades 5-7. By the end of its 5-year charter, the school plans to enroll 300 students in grades 5-10. Currently located in a former Roman Catholic school in the South Bronx, Bronx Preparatory Charter School is constructing a new facility in the same neighborhood.

Bronx Prep emphasizes reading and math skills instruction in the middle school years, while preparing students to think critically and creatively as they approach high school. The school has a 200-day academic year, and is in session from 8 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. to provide additional time for student learning. It also offers a summer tutorial program for children who struggle with lagging reading skills.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 9 enrolled 31,013 students: 34.8% African-American; 63.1% Hispanic; American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander, 1.6%; and, 0.6% white. Additionally, 93.3% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Bronx Preparatory Charter School reported that 95% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 76.5% of students in Community School District 9 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 67.5% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 86.3% of students failed to meet state standards; 92.4% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 7, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) visited Bronx Preparatory Charter School. The team comprised:

- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Ivan Hageman, Principal, East Harlem School and consultant to CSI

- Paul O'Neill, General Counsel, 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 gains 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 or eighth grade, the Bronx Preparatory Charter School is able to report limited information on student achievement for the 2001-02 school year. The school was able to show that student achievement on the fifth and sixth-grade city tests far exceeded that of the local community school district. Bronx Prep has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

Through its use of classical college preparatory curriculum, Bronx Preparatory Charter School continues to make strong progress towards its goal of developing students into creative, critical thinkers who use intellectual tools to communicate ideas and engage in meaningful work. At the end of the school's second year of operation, classes remain well organized and focused, and lessons regularly rely upon a combination of teaching outlined in the Bronx Prep charter including Socratic teaching, didactic instruction, and hands on learning activities.

In general, the majority of teaching observed by the site visit team was of high quality and consistent with the high level of expectations set for student academic achievement since the school opened in August 2000. For the most part, teachers were meticulous in their attention to the process of teaching and typically delivered lessons in carefully staged, discrete steps. Teachers also began each period by writing their learning agenda on blackboards to ensure that

every child would be aware of the skills and content to be mastered for that class. In most instances, students responded to academic challenges with enthusiasm and generally remained on task and purposeful throughout each class session.

The majority of student work observed by Institute staff over the course of several informal visits throughout the year and the site visit team on the year-end visit reflected attention to detail, a high level of quality and completeness, and consistent teacher feedback. In the school's best classrooms, teachers constructed lessons worthy of the school's objective of being a college preparatory program. For example, in one fifth grade reading lesson, after reading a literature selection, students analyzed characters, extracted main ideas and discussed facts and details in determining the genre from which the passage was drawn. Students were able to accurately identify elements of the literary genre and used details from their reading and analysis to support their statements.

In some classrooms lessons were not as intentional and analytically focused, particularly in content-intensive subjects such as science and history. History lessons were generally not as tightly structured and lacked the clarity and insight that inspectors observed in math and English classes. In the context of the school's college preparatory design, and the necessity of students passing Regents Examinations, the inspectors note the importance of Bronx Prep ensuring a level of rigor in all subjects equal to that already apparent in mathematics and English.

In order to meet the needs of at least 60 new students for the 2002-03 academic year and confront the challenge of faculty restructuring (at least 2 teachers may not be returning, while others may acquire different teaching responsibilities), Bronx Preparatory is in the process of hiring four new teachers (2 science, 1 math, and 1 history). The school appears to be rigorous in its teacher selection; before being a hired, a candidate must submit to multiple interviews, visit the school and prepare and execute a model teaching session. Daily visits to each classroom by the school's principal and monthly evaluations from the school's curriculum consultant and professional development leader seem likely to provide its faculty with the type of instructional oversight and support to meet the school's high academic standards.

School Climate

A culture of civility, caring, high academic expectation and success continues to permeate the school. Both students and teachers seemed to be well prepared for class and all seemed eager to work. The school continues to regiment student social behavior through orderly hallway lines, student recitation of behavior codes, etc. Despite the drill-oriented nature of these routines, many allow for significant student interaction and self-expression. Most if not all of the many motivational and mnemonic chants (used to assist learning in retaining knowledge and skills) and ready to learn songs are composed by students and are regularly used throughout classroom sessions in response student success or fatigue.

Because of consistent application of rules in most of the classes and in the hallways, civility and hard work seemed unforced and a natural part of the school's routine and ethos. During a brief impromptu interview, students spoke enthusiastically with inspectors about the care and concern shown them by their teachers and the quality of education offered by their school. Many said

that they appreciated the fact that they “learn easier ways to learn new things at Bronx Prep.” All of the students had college and career dreams and expressed excitement over a scheduled summer visit to Colgate University that had been arranged by the school’s guidance counselor.

Facility

The school continues to make the most of facilities that are sometimes cramped and do not advance the school’s academic program. For the 2001-2002 academic year, the school acquired two new modular units for science, music, and orchestra instruction. These trailers are located in the back of Bronx Preparatory’s main building and are maintained with the same level of care and orderliness.

The lack of physical space has forced the school to improvise its physical education program. Like many of its facilities concerns, including unresolved handicap accessibility issues, these concerns will be rectified once the school’s new building has been constructed. The school’s board of trustees expects to break ground on this project as early as the fall 2002.

School Mission and Implementation of Charter

The school’s overall mission, as described in its charter, is to “prepare under-served middle and high school students for higher education, civic involvement and lifelong success through a structured, caring, environment of high academic expectations.” Considerable progress has been made towards graduating students who, as envisioned in the school’s charter “1) think critically and creatively; 2) have attained strong skills in mathematics, language, literature, history, technology and the arts; and 3) are committed to a lifetime of learning and civic involvement.” The one exception to the consistency of this finding is in the area of science, where due to the departure of its science teacher, the school suspended its instruction of science in late March. The school is hiring a new science teacher for the 2002-2003 school year to implement the envisioned science program.

Students at Bronx Preparatory appear to have accepted the challenge of the school’s rigorous curriculum and behavioral standards. They were observed to thrive in a student culture that is both orderly and demands exceptional academic performance.