



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Family Life 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

The Family Life Academy Charter School, approved by the State University Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents that March, opened September 2001. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 99 students in grades K-1, and plans to expand by the end of its 5-year charter to 255 students in grades K-5. The school is located in Community School District 9, in an area where a large percentage of students live in poverty and many have limited English language proficiency.

The Family Life Academy Charter School offers an educational model of its own design, English/Spanish Immersion, which will gradually increase the level of instruction in an English-language classroom while simultaneously retaining Spanish as a subject area for specific instruction. The English language program will offer a mix of phonics- and literature-based instruction and assumes full immersion in English instruction by second grade, with an additional hour per day of instruction in Spanish language arts.

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.

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 16, 2002 an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) visited Family Life Academy Charter School. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President and Senior Fellow, 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 first-year school with no fourth grade, the Family Life Academy Charter School (FLACS) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided preliminary results, which lay the groundwork for evaluating its performance in future years. FLACS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The founders of the Family Life Academy Charter School envisioned a rigorous curriculum in English, Spanish, mathematics, science, and social studies based on the New York State performance standards and a school community built on seven core values (responsibility, integrity, love, celebration of differences, respect, community and unlimited possibility). As the school was intended to serve a predominantly Latino community in the South Bronx, its design included a Kindergarten through Grade 5 and a Spanish language immersion program in some classrooms. At the end of its first year of operation, Family Life Academy Charter School had yet to effectively put in place the foundational program necessary to build the school outlined by the founders.

As a first year charter school, Family Life Academy Charter School encountered challenges typical of start-up charter schools across the nation. Teachers in the school, many of them

enthusiastic yet often inexperienced, struggled to manage student behavior while designing and delivering instruction to support to the school's academic goals. A new interim director was hired in the middle of the school year due to the departure of the school's founding director. At the time of the Institute's formal spring visit, the school's interim director conveyed an understanding of the tasks necessary to implement the academic program including such areas as the dual language immersion and special education programs contained in the school's charter.

Classroom instruction observed in visits throughout the year varied in purposefulness and effectiveness. In an effective Kindergarten classroom, both the teacher and assistant teacher worked together to deliver well-orchestrated language arts instruction. After examining a picture of a park and discussing its attributes as a class, the assistant teacher lead the whole class through a writing lesson where the class generated example sentences about the picture ("There are three trees in the park. There are four ducks in the park. There are five people in the park," etc.). Students then moved to their tables during a well-executed classroom transition showing students had internalized not only purposeful work routines but also their understanding of responsibility to the learning task, and individually wrote sentences about their observations. Collaborating effectively, both teacher and assistant teacher moved from student to student, checking work, correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar, and encouraging students to read their work aloud. Most students in the class produced five to ten complete and grammatically correct sentences and were able to read their work aloud with sufficient pace and understanding. Students were enthusiastic about completing their tasks and showed great interest in reading their completed work to classmates. Additional lessons observed in this classroom throughout the 2001-02 school year provide evidence that these students receive lessons that are challenging, well structured and direct, and that promote student responsibility for acquiring knowledge and skills.

Similarly, lessons observed in one first grade classroom provided evidence that the teacher and assistant teacher work together to deliver instruction and monitor student work. Mathematics lessons in this room were constructed so that students could see the task modeled by both teachers, use manipulatives (counting cubes, tape measures, rulers, etc.) properly and productively, and record their work accurately. However, this sort of intentional, effective, well-implemented instruction was rarely observed throughout the school. In particular, the school's bilingual classroom seemed to be the least purposeful in instruction and its implementation of standards-based teaching.

In the schools less effective classrooms, teaching was not adequately focused on reinforcing knowledge and skills in core subject areas. For example, while students were asked to write, teachers did not demand student writing meet standards of mechanical and grammatical correctness. Teachers did not appear to know what they wanted students to know and be able to do as a result of their lessons. Some classrooms were disorderly, prone to student interruptions and suffered from wasted valuable learning time.

These characteristics were particularly evident in the school's bilingual classroom, a fact that inspectors noted with particular concern given the additional challenges faced by students who are not native English speakers. Instruction in this class, observed on several occasions throughout the school year, often failed to focus on reinforcing or achieving mastery of skills. Neither the teacher nor assistant teacher were observed discussing with students the effectiveness

or clarity of their writing, testing for comprehension of written work or methodically addressing inaccurate word use and sentence construction. Similarly, students were not provided with models or structures to use in assigned writing tasks. Time was wasted in transition from one activity to the next, students displayed little focus on the task at hand, and teachers often failed to redirect students in clear, plain language. By the end of many lessons students still appeared to be misapplying or misunderstanding concepts in mathematics, reading, and writing whether instruction was delivered in Spanish or English.

A review of written work in half the school's classrooms revealed writing that was of consistently poor quality, lacking the content, vocabulary, punctuation and grammar necessary to demonstrate adequate writing skills. Written work was commonly unedited and contained few teacher comments other than notations such as "good, awesome, excellent." Students in half the classes could not describe how teachers judged their work. Students were not provided templates, examples, models or criteria to assist in their understanding and production of work consistent with a stated academic goal or standard.

School Climate

Teachers, administrators, and staff at Family Life Academy Charter School strive to interact with students in a manner that is guided by the school's core value design. In some classrooms it was the norm for students and adults to speak with each other in a caring manner. The reinforcement of these values did not appear to further the schools' effectiveness in achieving its other goals. Teachers were often caring but less often held students to high expectations for academics and behavior. While the school had put in place a discipline program in the fall, little evidence was observed that it was implemented consistently or effectively in classrooms. The school's interim director is keenly aware of the teaching staff's need for greater skill in classroom management. In addition to refining the system of discipline begun in the fall, the school has provided staff training and coaching on, in the words of the director, "redirecting children's behavior" in ways that promote academic achievement. Family Life Academy Charter School is rightly providing staff development this summer for teachers to continue to build a school culture that promotes attention to academic tasks.

Improvement in the instructional effectiveness of the school's teacher/assistant teacher teams observed by Institute staff and inspectors during the 2001-02 school year is attributable to training on effective use of teaching pairs organized by the school's interim director. The school's director has also begun to provide teachers with training in increasing the rigor of the academic program.

Facility

Family Life Academy Charter School is located in a facility owned by its partner, the Latino Pastoral Action Center. In addition to housing Family Life Academy Charter School, the center hosts active community organizations and an after-school program which Family Life Academy Charter School students are eligible to attend. Housed on the first floor and basement of the building, the school's classrooms are clean, bright and appear adequately resourced.

The current facility is adequate to meet the school's enrollment goals; as more children are enrolled and the school adds grade levels, classrooms on the building's second floor will be utilized.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school has implemented a number of initiatives to address its core value design. The school started a children's Aikido class to fulfill its mission of inculcating responsibility, integrity and respect in the lives of its students. In addition, a joint service-learning project between students and the New York City Parks Department to plant and maintain a nearby park was instituted.

According to the school's interim director, the school is refining its Spanish instruction design to include one unit taught in Spanish in social studies, science, writing and music throughout the school year. While the school has one Spanish/English bilingual classroom, where instruction in each language occurs on alternating days, it has chosen to adapt the bilingual program outlined in its charter in an attempt to meet the needs of the children enrolled. Despite the interim director's efforts to identify and address areas of need, the school has yet to establish programs, behavioral expectations, and instructional and assessment strategies likely to ensure consistent student achievement.

During its first year of operation, Family Life Academy Charter School has started school in newly renovated space, enjoyed full enrollment and made the beginning steps of implementing the school envisioned in its charter. To achieve success in its second year and beyond, Family Life Academy Charter School must find effective solutions to the behavioral and academic challenges it faces.