



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Family Life Academy Charter School

Report

2002-2003
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: the academic success of the school including teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment); the effectiveness and viability of the school as an organization including such items as board operations, student order and discipline, and physical facility; and the fiscal soundness of the school. 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, interviews of staff, students and board members, in addition to reviewing 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 (FLACS), approved by the State University Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents in March of that year, opened in September 2001, and is completing its second year. The enrollment, at the time of the visit, was 148 Kindergarten through second grade students. The school is partnered with the Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC), a community organization with a ten-year history of providing social services in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. In addition to housing Family Life Academy Charter School, LPAC hosts active community organizations and an after-school program which charter school students are eligible to attend.

The Family Life Academy Charter School offers an educational model of its own design, English/Spanish Immersion. In the English/Spanish Immersion model, the level of instruction in an English-language classroom gradually increases while simultaneously retaining Spanish as a subject area for specific instruction. The school has an extended school year with 200 instructional days that begin at 8:30 a.m. and end at 3:30 p.m.

The school will not have a 4th grade until the 2004-05 school year, and therefore will not participate in the New York State assessments until that time. Until then, the school obtains student performance information by administering the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS), the Terra Nova, Running Records and student portfolios.

According to the 2001-02 Annual School District Report of the New York City Department of Education for the 2001-02 school year, Community School District 9 enrolled 29,456 students: 34.5% African American; 63.4% Hispanic; 1.6% Asian/Other; and 0.5% White. Additionally, 93.9% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

For the same year, the Family Life Academy Charter School enrolled a total of 99 students: 22.2% African American and 77.8% Hispanic. The school reported that 87.9% of its students for the 2001-02 school year qualified for free or reduced-price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

Based on observations during the visit, there was no visible sign indicating that the Family Life Academy Charter School is housed in the building. Inspectors mentioned this to the Administrative Director who responded that the school had recently been awarded a grant to use for capital improvements, and that they had engaged an individual to design a logo for the school.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 22, 2003, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute (CSI) visited the Family Life Academy Charter School (FLACS). The team comprised:

- Jennifer G. Sneed, Ph.D., Vice President for Applications, Charter Schools Institute
- Ronald C. Miller, Ph. D., Vice President for Accountability, Charter Schools Institute
- Evan Rudall, Outside Inspector/Consultant to Charter Schools Institute, Previous Co-Director of Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts

Is the School an Academic Success?

Academic Data

Measures of student achievement indicating the success of FLACS's academic program will be available in its 2002-03 Accountability Plan Progress Report, to be submitted during summer 2003. Since FLACS in 2002-03 only had grades K-2, the data in the Progress Report will not include state assessments.¹

Student Work Products

Although classrooms at FLACS are considered "family" and "community" environments, Institute visitors noted little evidence that they were also academically rigorous places. There were limited displays of written work produced by students. Posted student work consisted of drawings without words or sentences that connect literacy to art in a way that leads to achievement of academic standards. When questioned about the lack of student writing on display, the school's staff reported that much of the students' work is contained in portfolios. Upon inspection of student portfolios, Institute visitors found the student work included does not reflect growth in student knowledge and skills over the course of the school year. For example, the 2nd-grade portfolios do not provide much evidence that students are gaining knowledge and skills at the level or rate necessary for students to attain the academic goals set forth in the school's charter and accountability plan. In fact, the portfolios communicated the opposite—a lack of rigor, low expectations, and poor-quality work. One teacher's comments on student work included in the portfolio contain numerous spelling mistakes. The teacher's assessment of

¹ FLACS's Accountability Progress Report will be posted on the Charter Schools Institute's website, <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/>.

student work based on the portfolio checklist was questionable, thus emphasizing the need for outside evaluators to confirm or refute the schools claims regarding student achievement.

Further review of student work products reveals inconsistencies in the time intervals between reviews, inconsistencies in the amount of mistakes teachers correct, and inconsistencies in the suggestions for improvement teachers provide to students. When comments are provided they are often limited and do not reflect the type of achievement required at each grade. In response to this observation, the Education Director indicated that few teacher comments exist as the school does not have procedures in place that provide for consistent feedback to the students

Is the School an Effective, Viable Organization?

Improving Teaching and Learning

The Family Life Academy Charter School has six classrooms (two Kindergartens, two 1st grades, and two 2nd grades) and employs 14 teachers. Two full time teachers are assigned to teach each classroom. The FLACS Board of Trustees, according to the school's Administrative Director, plans to continue this level of staffing in each classroom. As such, in 2003-2004 when the school grows to include a 3rd grade, two full time teachers will staff both 3rd grade classrooms. Based on the information provided on the teacher roster, it appears that up to half [7 out of 14] of the teaching staff is currently uncertified.

The Education Director is very visible throughout the school, and instructional staff look to her for direction and guidance. She is clearly a regular visitor to classrooms. Teachers, however, indicated that they would like more specific and substantive feedback regarding their pedagogical practices.

Since FLACS will not have a 4th grade until the 2004-05 school year, it has yet to participate in the New York State assessments. The school uses multiple assessments to determine students' academic performance. At the time of the end-of-year visit, the school indicated that ECLAS, Terra Nova, Running Records and student portfolios are used to gauge student academic achievement. However, Institute visitors found the assessment data are not used as a basis for discussion among teachers and the administration in analyzing the effectiveness of the instructional program. While teachers are mindful of the relationship between assessments and standards, the assessments are not benchmarked to grade-level performance. As such, teachers' understanding of the level of rigor required in student work products at each level is severely limited and prevents the students from understanding the kind and level of work required in achieving the state standards. This is particularly true in English, writing, and mathematics.

Although many of the classrooms are small for the amount of materials and resources in them, classroom space was organized and materials were easily accessible by students. Teachers indicate that they are quite pleased with the quantity and quality of resources provided for instruction. The school space was clean throughout the day with no litter visible. In fact, custodians and other staff picked up debris at various times throughout the day.

Implementing the Instructional Program

Educational Leadership

The school's Education Director fills the educational leadership role. The teaching staff and the school's Administrative Director defer to her regarding educational matters. Based on teacher comments, the Education Director is well respected and her guidance valued. The Education Director instituted a professional development program this school year that included a 5-day writing workshop in August and another 5-day reading workshop, both through Teachers College at Columbia University. The reading workshop has been followed with monthly onsite training for individual teachers in their classrooms, while the writing workshop follow-up has been provided once every two to three months. In addition, she encourages teachers to seek and participate in outside courses/workshops to hone their pedagogical skills. The Education Director also ensures that grade level, cross-grade level and monthly staff meetings occur.

While noting the plethora of professional development opportunities and the quantity of courses and workshops completed by instructional staff, Institute visitors found that the young, inexperienced instructional staff experience difficulty in weaving the volume of information and great variety of techniques together to create a sound educational program for students.

Staff Quality

As at many schools, FLACS' teachers reflect a range of teaching abilities. Unlike the staff in many traditional public schools, however, the majority of teachers at FLACS have fewer than five years of teaching experience. Given the young professional staff, emphasis on providing FLACS' teachers the tools and supports needed to successfully integrate new knowledge in teaching reading, writing, and mathematics is critical to the school's success. Teachers' abilities to articulate exactly what the curriculum includes, why, and how it is to be delivered will determine the extent to which the school can meet the goals in its accountability plan. Currently, teachers do not possess the ability to meet this challenge.

No mechanism exists to ensure alignment of teachers' lessons to the school's curriculum as well as with the State standards. The Educational Director does not routinely check lesson plans. The school relies on consultants' feedback to the teachers for affirmation that the lessons are appropriate and focused on student needs. When questioned, the teachers could not adequately provide the rationale for why they teach what they teach, or how the lessons are selected.

At-Risk Students

The school's two special education teachers indicate they have had a somewhat confusing year, and that it has taken some time to "figure out" what they are supposed to do. It is their understanding that all students with special needs are to receive their services within the classroom as part of the school's commitment to being an "inclusion" program.

Both teachers expressed some frustration with the somewhat dogmatic approach to providing special education. Both indicated that they did not believe the students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), especially, were able to gain the most within the classroom due to the many distractions.

The special education staff are not included in the grade-level or cross-grade-level meetings. They are only included in the full staff meetings. They communicate with classroom teachers either prior to school or during the after school planning time.

Students also receive speech and occupational therapy. The school also has a full-time nurse.

Establishing the Structure

Board of Trustees

The school's Board of Trustees speaks with one voice regarding its commitment to the community and the school. Board members clearly understand their responsibility for the school and the weight of the public's trust in providing education to the community's children every day. Board members emphasized the importance of the "family" and "community" environment at school over the need for a school that inspires and requires all students to achieve academically. Members of the school's Board of Trustees struggle to provide specific answers regarding student performance. Members did indicate that the Board of Trustees was planning a retreat to become more proficient regarding academic assessment. As the academic success of students is central to the intention of the school's charter and a critical component should the Board of Trustees hope to seek renewal of their charter, a strong focus on the academic achievement of FLACS students must become central to the work of the Board.

The Administrative Director and the Education Director have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities regarding the school. Generally speaking, the Administrative Director attends to all administrative matters, such as fundraising, reporting to the Board of Trustees, etc., and the Education Director handles matters related to curriculum, assessment and instruction, special programs and services. Both play a role in the recruitment and hiring of instructional staff, as well as in their evaluation.

Student Order and Discipline

FLACS students understand the general rules of behavior and cooperation expected of them in each classroom. However, students frequently ignore instructional tasks assigned by the teacher and were distracted by wandering thoughts, classmates, or both. Learning center time seems to pose a particular challenge. Frequently, teachers offered idle threats to curtail misbehavior, but failed to speak plainly and directly to students regarding the behavior that needed to stop and the purposeful behavior students should display. For example, in one second grade classroom during a social studies lesson to prepare for a trip to the local police precinct, the teacher threatened to add tally marks to the class total on the board. However, despite the fact that students continued to misbehave, no tally marks were placed on the board and the teacher offered no consequences when students elected to engage in poor behavior.

The effective deployment of two full time teachers in each FLACS classroom varies widely across the school. In some cases, the teacher not conducting the lesson supported her co-teacher by guiding and supervising student attention and behavior. In others, the teacher not delivering instruction focused on preparing instructional materials. The school may benefit from analyzing the effectiveness of these strategies and focus on how to use both teachers to improve instructional effectiveness and enhance the management of student behavior. One of the aims of the school is to make students “independent learners” which is an admirable goal; the students are not there yet and require both guidance and supervision.

Is the School Fiscally Sound?

Fiscal Standing as of May 2003

The Family Life Academy Charter School currently has a surplus fund balance and expects to end the fiscal year with a surplus. The school has consistently maintained adequate cash flows for operating purposes. The school had no financial issues from the prior year audit.

The Institute has had problems with the school meeting report deadlines and often is recorded as filing required documents months late. Overall, however, the Institute views the school to be in a fiscally sound position.