



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Harbor Science and Arts Charter School

Report

2000-2001
Academic Year

History and Purpose

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of their local school district 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 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.

Allowed by Chapter 4 of the Laws of 1998, new public charter schools in New York can be authorized by the State University of New York Board of Trustees, the Board of Regents or by local Boards of Education (in conjunction with the Regents). In addition, 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 State University of New York Board of 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 created and established a cyclical visitation and inspection process for 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 comprised of 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 trueness 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 evidence obtained by the inspectors in a visit to a first-year school functions as baseline information regarding the school.

On May 18, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the school, at One East 104th Street, New York, NY. The team consisted of:

- Michael Stevens, Ph.D. , Vice President of Research and Evaluation
- Radiclan Clytus, Senior Analyst

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 with the school’s governing board, parents and the public the inspectors’ observations, findings and discussion. 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 each first year charter school faces major challenges, and that schools address them at different rates. There is no one correct time frame for successfully meeting each challenge. 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 frequently 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

Harbor Science and Arts Charter School was approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April of that year. It opened in fall 2000 and is operated by the non-profit Boys and Girls Harbor, Inc., a non-profit multi-service educational youth agency in Harlem, and the Center for Educational Innovation. The school building is in the Boys and Girls Harbor facility.

The charter called for an initial enrollment of 143 at-risk students in grades 1-6. At the end of its 5-year charter, the school plans to expand to 198 students in grades K-8. The school utilizes multi-grade classrooms, whereby students who would be in different grades in conventional schools would be in the same grade (e.g., students in grades 5 and 6 are taught together).

The school utilizes the counseling programs of its partner, Boys Harbor, Inc., an established community youth organization. Founded in 1937, Boys Harbor's mission is the empowerment of children and their families to be contributing members of society through education, the arts and social service. It achieves this mission through a variety of education programs for more than 4,000 men and women, from infancy to young adulthood, who live in the Central and East Harlem communities.

The curriculum at Harbor Science and Arts Charter School integrates concepts from the study of the arts (visual and performing) with concepts from the sciences to provide a well-rounded education. The school makes use of community resources such as the Meer Ecological Systems at the Central Park Conservancy, the Biodiversity Project at The American Museum of Natural History and The Urban Woodlands Project sponsored by The City Parks Foundation.

Harbor Science and Arts Charter School also offers an academically focused after-school program, summer program and an environmental sciences (sleep-away) camp. Additionally, parents are encouraged to work as partners in the learning process.

According to the 1999-2000 Annual School Report of the New York City Board of Education, Community School District 4 contained 13,353 students: 35.5% African-American; 60.5% Hispanic; 1.4% white; and, 2.6% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 86.5% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 80% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 69% of students in Community School District 4 did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 68% of the students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 78% of students did not meet state standards; 87% of the students did not meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Academic Data

The school has presented data from Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 administrations of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test. Baseline test data from the Fall 2000 administration, while incomplete due to lost data, shows that the school enrolled an overall population scoring in the 22nd percentile in reading skills. Growth data gleaned from the Spring 2001 administration of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test shows that students in the school increased their scores by 12 percentiles based on a same-student analysis of an incomplete sample of students.

The school has also presented scores from the fourth grade State Assessment in English Language Arts (ELA). As the Grade 4 ELA is designed to measure the sum total of a student's learning during all previous grades, and given that the school was in its first academic year, these scores are considered a measure of the status of students upon enrollment (i.e., a baseline). On the Grade 4 ELA assessment, 12.5% of students scored at Level 1, farthest from standard; 70.8% of students scored at Level 2, nearer to standard; 16.7% of students scored at Level 3, meeting standard. No students scored at Level 4. The school had not yet received data from the State Education Department on the Grade 4 Mathematics assessment.

The school has presented limited data on its students' initial skill level in math based on a Fall 2001 administration of the Wide Range Achievement Test. However, the data does not reflect the school's progress in fostering overall student growth in math or establish a baseline for subsequent growth measures. To develop growth data, the school has committed to administering the Test of New York State Standards (TONYSS) students in the 2001-02 school year, with the first growth data available in 2002-03.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

The mission of Harbor Science and Arts Charter School is to create an “intellectually stimulating environment that challenges children of all abilities.” The school’s educational philosophy, according to its charter, is flexible and “starts by trying to understand the child as an individual.” Teachers and administrators work with students and their families in order to develop customized educational plans for each student. Further, Harbor Science and Arts’ charter states that unlike classroom instruction, in which the teacher is regarded as a “dispenser of information,” a teacher at Harbor Science and Arts “is viewed as an educational facilitator.” This model of instruction is utilized in order to encourage students to become “self-directed learners.”

In most classes observed, students participated in activities that challenged them to approach complex exercises creatively and sharpen their analytical skills through logical reasoning. Moreover, teachers often strove to make the idea of scientific inquiry relevant to the everyday lives of students. For example, a poster titled “Stair Survey,” that adorned one classroom wall, revealed how a group of students made use of the scientific method to determine the number of stairs from the school’s lobby entrance to the sixth floor. In another instance, students were observed discussing amongst themselves the type of circuitry necessary to produce lighting in their classroom.

This approach toward learning and social interaction – based on inquiry and critical thinking – permeated the school’s academic program and school culture.

Although inspectors saw evidence that students read challenging materials in language arts classes and that teachers made available an assortment of literature in their classroom libraries, the school still appears to be in the process of developing and integrating its emphasis on the Humanities.

Most teachers at Harbor Science and Arts varied their instructional format in an attempt to accommodate students’ disparate skill levels. Teachers and their assistants moved among individual students and groups checking workbook exercises, independent reading assignments, etc. In one 5th and 6th grade reading class, where teachers said students ranged from 2nd to 8th grade reading comprehension levels, teachers were able to oblige each student’s specific needs with carefully chosen books. Teachers also monitored this heterogeneous reading group with running records and journals, which were organized and dutifully maintained. However, some teachers, at the time of the year-end visit, had not yet designed their running records so that the records’ contents were accessible to outside readers.

Harbor Science and Arts also utilizes the assistance of local organizations to facilitate its academic mission. Inspectors observed representatives from the New York City Department of Parks conduct an environmental science workshop on trees and foliage for 1st and 2nd grades. Students painted leaves in an exercise that taught leaf structure and key scientific observation skills. These presentations were thoroughly integrated into the teachers’ lesson plans and included follow-up questions by all of the instructors involved.

According to the school's director, all teachers and assistants are paired and trained as a team during a two-week intensive summer workshop and during the school year both attend staff development sessions. In many cases, the performance of teachers and their assistants was particularly effective. Inspectors often found it difficult to distinguish between the two during instruction.

Student work is considered by a number of evaluative methods as Harbor Science and Art attempts to strengthen its assessment tools and accountability plan. Inspectors observed homework being assigned and returned in almost every class, and tracking homework completion is a measurable benchmark in the school's accountability plan. In general, all student work displayed was graded and current and teachers appeared to be cognizant of individual student capabilities and progress.

School Climate

The school's primary method of behavioral intervention consists of sending misbehaving students into the hallway for a time out during which the student is encouraged to reflect on the misbehavior and strategize ways to improve it. This approach generally worked well with students in Kindergarten through Grade 2, but was less successful with students in grades 3 and 4.

A school psychologist is at the school twice a week and helps students evaluate behavioral options through role-play. The psychologist often requires students to write out and explain their decisions in an analytical format, i.e., students are asked to write down what they did wrong and then identify what they could have done differently. This reinforces a student's: a) writing skills, b) analytical skills and c) ability to make better decisions next time. The psychologist also monitors classrooms and student social interaction.

The school's director and assistant director were observed circulating throughout the school and engaging with students. The combination of administrator activity and teacher implementation of the discipline program created an atmosphere where students generally followed the school's rules.

Facility

The school was clean and orderly and its facilities appeared capable of accommodating an extensive range of instruction. Teachers adorned classroom walls and hallways with materials that support student work. A number of expertly crafted murals complemented the school's decidedly creative atmosphere and promoted the school's emphasis on self-direction, discovery, science, and the arts.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

In its mission statement, Harbor Science and Arts Charter Schools says students "will know how to express a problem in a way that it may be solved, will have many ways to gather information that relates to their problem, be able to evaluate that information and then to formulate a solution to the problem they are interested in." The school appears to be creating the structure to support

the school's envisioned student culture and school philosophy, and appears on its way to fulfilling its goal of helping students become problem solvers. Parents, teachers, students, and administrators seemed to appreciate the school's approach to its mission and participated accordingly. Students, in particular, displayed a willingness to embrace the school's notion of collaborative and analytical inquiry as evidenced by their sharing of test scores and answers with one another, and use of the scientific method to arrive at conclusions and test hypotheses.

Teachers used such projects as designing robots and estimating the number of squirrels in Central Park to give students the opportunity to apply skills in practical settings. This is in line with the school's stated goals to have students "participate in projects and activities that bring them in contact with the real world."