



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

King Center 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 24, 2001 an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the school. The team was comprised of:

- Michael Stevens, Ph.D. , Vice President of Research and Evaluation
- Douglas Lemov, Vice President for Accountability
- 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

The King Center Charter School, named after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 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 August 2000 with 80 children in grades K-3. It added a 4th Grade in the 2001-02 school year, putting the school at its full size of K-4, 100 students. The school plans no further growth. The school is located on Buffalo's economically distressed East Side, which was designated a federal Enterprise Zone Community in 1994. The school was founded by Dr. Claity Massey, an early childhood educator affiliated with the King Urban Life Center, a social service and community organization that grew out of an effort to save the former St. Mary of Sorrows Church from demolition in the mid 1980s. The school is located in the former church, at 938 Genesee Street, Buffalo, which is now an historic landmark.

King Center Charter School uses a holistic model for early childhood development based on Howard Gardner's principles of Multiple Intelligences, with multi-age classrooms and individualized programs for students. Relying on research that shows students lose ground over prolonged school breaks, the school utilizes year-round teaching, with no break longer than three weeks.

According to the 1999-2000 New York State Education Department district-wide report card of the Buffalo City School District, 44,679 students were enrolled: 56.8% African-American; 10.9% Hispanic; 29.5% white; and 2.8% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 77.3% of the students qualified for free and reduced price lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 87% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 67% failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 57% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 77% of students failed to meet state standards; 80% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Academic Data

The school has not presented externally verified, objective data on the school's progress in fostering overall student growth. Summary data on students' initial skill levels, as measured by a Spring 2001 administration of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills has been presented by the school for students in the second and third grades. The data suggests that the school enrolled a population scoring on average at the 21st national percentile in reading, the 28th national percentile in language and the 22nd national percentile in math.

The school has also presented data on student performance from the Woodcock-Johnson Reading Test, however, the data has not been verified by the submission of supporting information. The school has presented additional data on student performance from the Brigance Reading Screen, however, the data has not been verified by the submission of supporting information.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

King Center Charter School's design is one of "academic rigor and holistic development of children, concurrently." The school's principal, Dr. Claity Massey, said that during the school's first year, social goals for students had often taken priority over academic goals and the need for higher academic expectations for students. This emphasis on social goals over academic goals was apparent during the Institute's multiple visits to the school and from the formal year-end inspection.

The school bases instructional practice on individualization and multiple intelligence theory and its curriculum includes Scholastic's Literacy Place reading program. For 2001-02, the school is using *Second Step*, a program that includes non-violence, manners and parent training. An additional goal of the principal's for 2001-01 is to measure teacher effectiveness through student academic performance.

In general, students at King Center Charter School appeared engaged and attentive. Consistent with Dr. Massey's description of the school's first-year emphasis, inspectors noted a lack of rigor in the academic program. Inspectors noted on several occasions that content was presented in a slow, precise and sometimes repetitive manner, even when it was clear that students had mastered the material.

Dr. Massey said she thought the school, even at the end of the first year, was at the beginning stages of tailoring instruction to meet the needs of all students. Institute staff acknowledged that the level of student attentiveness had increased noticeably during the year and that even during

informal or impromptu moments, the majority of students remained focused and polite, even without supervision. Disruptive students were addressed promptly by the teachers, while students who were simply off task were generally allowed to continue without being brought back to the lesson.

During this school year the school was granted permission by the State University Board of Trustees and the New York State Board of Regents to add fourth grade (the original charter called for a K-3 school). This was undertaken by the school administration as a commitment of academic accountability. By adding a 4th grade, King Center Charter School will be able to track student progress through the first administration of statewide testing (the first state-mandated assessments are given in 4th Grade, in Math and English Language Arts).

Formal diagnostic assessment and regular collection and archiving of work (e.g., multimedia portfolios) are strong. The school uses a wide variety of diagnostic tools, formal and informal, to track student work. The school's recent addition of the Woodcock-Johnson assessment as an academic measurement for all students has strengthened its knowledge about individual abilities and dramatically strengthens the school's Accountability Plan negotiated with the Institute.

For portions of classroom time, King Center rotates students through small-group, independent learning activities that are designed to allow students opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills through independent and small group practice. However, when teachers review the work, they allow students to give group responses instead of requiring individual students to answer direct questions. This creates a missed opportunity to assess students individually, and use that information to inform instruction.

Dr. Massey reported that the school attracted far more poor children than anticipated. The school had anticipated enrolling 70% of children in poverty; the actual number was 87%. Dr. Massey also said that as a public charter school, she was seeking ways to "keep our intact families happy and figure out how to deal with non-responsive families."

School Climate

As noted earlier, King Center Charter School has a strong emphasis on social development skills, designed to support academics. Particularly indicative of this dynamic was the use of a paid parent liaison (called the Home Connection Program Coordinator), who worked to bridge the socioeconomic and cultural gaps that might arise when educating an at-risk population.

Other key points:

- Parent involvement in parent teacher conferences rose from 70% to 90% during the 2000-01 school year.
- Creative strategies such as a \$20 grocery giveaway were used to entice parent participation in parent teacher conferences.
- The school produced a newsletter that provided information for parents regarding classroom activities and highlighted model students in academics and attendance.
- AmeriCorps volunteers and teachers ate with students at lunchtime to provide students with a family meal experience during the day and to also promote table manners.

With the tremendous emphasis on appropriate social interaction (e.g., non-violence, manners), the school was orderly. The biggest problem the school seemed to face was handling minor infractions, particularly students who leave their seats during class and wander around the classroom.

Facility

King Center Charter School is a very well equipped school, with state-of-the-art technology (classroom computers, a computer lab and a distance learning facility with links to four post-secondary institutions in the area) and the support of several thousand dollars in foundation and private support. The school's sponsor, The King Urban Life Center, this past summer constructed a community playground in a vacant lot across the street from the school. The playground was built largely with volunteer labor and was designed based on "our children's ideas and dreams of what they would like to have on a much-needed playground," according to Dr. Massey.

King Center Charter School's facilities are superior. With the addition of a fourth grade class in 2001-02, the present school facility will be at capacity. The principal has begun to develop scenarios to deal with continued growth/expansion in the event the school's board of trustees would like to pursue this in the future.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school is "committed to improve student learning and achievement of students who are at-risk of academic failure by providing a holistic model for development during the early childhood years." The Institute continues to see evidence that the school has moved decisively to follow through on these aspects of its mission, even as the extent of the challenge and needs of the local population become apparent. Every aspect of the school's mission as articulated in the charter is underway at King Center Charter School. The school makes changes as needed, for example, adjusting staffing ratio models to improve reading instruction and providing role models for students.

Looking forward, King Center Charter School will need to ensure that its emphasis on social development – a laudable goal particularly given the school's population – supports and does not supercede academic rigor.