



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

South Buffalo 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 25, 2001, an inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited the school. The team consisted 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

South Buffalo Charter School was approved by the State University Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in March 2000. The school opened in September of that year. Its charter called for an initial enrollment of 234 students in grades K-4. The school plans to grow to 650 students in grades K-8 by the end of its 5-year charter. The school is housed in a former public elementary school at 2219 South Park Avenue in Buffalo, and shares the facility with a senior citizens center.

South Buffalo Charter School's application resulted from a desire by local residents to create public school choice and increase educational opportunities in the City of Buffalo. The city's magnet schools had waiting lists of five students for each available seat, demonstrating a citywide desire for additional public school opportunities.

The school's mission is to educate each child in a challenging learning environment that links character education with an individualized learning plan and technology. To oversee its management the school contracted with Beacon Education Management, Inc., which currently runs 31 schools in five states and the District of Columbia. Beacon features the Lightpoints standards and curricula, which includes Core Knowledge. The program also utilizes the concept of looping whereby teachers continue with a class of students for more than one academic year.

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.

South Buffalo Charter School reported that 70% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 67% of Buffalo City School District students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 57% of students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 77% of students did not meet state standards; 80% of students did not 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. Statistically valid data summarizing initial student skill levels as measured by the Fall 2000 administration of the Stanford Achievement Test has also been presented by the school.

The school has presented data from fourth grade State Assessments in English Language Arts and Math. The Institute considers these tests, designed to measure the sum total of a student's learning during all previous grades and given in the first year of a charter school's operations, to be a measure of the status of students upon enrollment. On the grade 4 English Language Arts assessment, 13% of students scored at level one, farthest from the standard; 30.4% of students scored at level two, nearer but still below standard; 43.5% of students scored at level three, above standard; and 13% of students scored at level 4, well above standard. On the grade 4 Mathematics Arts assessment, 13.6% of students scored at level one, farthest from the standard. 40.9% of students scored at level two nearer to the standard. 31.8% of students scored at level three, above standard. 13.6% of students scored at level 4, well above standard.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Over the course of several informal visits to the school and during the Institute's formal, year-end site visit, inspectors observed consistent evidence of routines and procedures that encouraged students to succeed academically and promoted a school-wide culture of high expectations. Teachers required students to redo substandard efforts and typically engaged them in analysis and inquiry-driven exercises and assignments.

Most of the classroom instruction observed began with teachers guiding students through lessons in textbooks or other materials. This format appeared to be effective in the 3rd and 4th grades where teachers produced rigorous lessons that included a variety of instructional methods. In language arts classes, teachers often began with a vocabulary warm-up that required students to create sentences using vocabulary words. Students also recited poems and were encouraged to perfect their oratory skills. Some instructors even challenged students with complex questions using the Socratic method. Math and science sessions were equally demanding with most teachers utilizing well organized, focused and often fast-paced exercises. However, this level of engagement was not always evident in grades K—2. In the lower academy, the goals of some lessons were not always recognizable and there seemed to be less evidence of teacher effectiveness at engaging students.

A variety of strategies are used to evaluate student achievement at South Buffalo. For language arts classes, teachers explained how they used daily journals, free-write exercises, and the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, proofreading, and publishing) to help reinforce and monitor student composition skills. As well, inspectors observed several instances in which homework materials were reviewed and collected during class periods, suggesting it is used as a primary diagnostic tool.

One teacher effectively utilized a system that enabled her to monitor student homework completion. At the end of each class period, students were required to copy their assignment list into their notebooks, whereupon it was stamped by the teacher. This homework, upon completion, needed to be signed or initialed by the student's parent(s). Student progress was then tracked on a board in the front of the classroom.

Most teachers appeared committed to the success of South Buffalo Charter School's academic program. A significant percentage of teachers exhibited mastery of several subject areas. For the most part, teachers said they were both satisfied and comfortable with the curriculum. Throughout the inspection, teachers were observed working during their lunch hours and accommodating students at recess and other times to ensure that those who were having difficulties received further academic help.

There were signs at South Buffalo that students had begun to internalize the school's academic culture. In many classes, as much as 75% of students responded to teachers' questions with raised hands and eager expressions. There were few instances of student misconduct and inspectors noted an inverse relationship between solid teaching and disorderly student behavior. Most frequently, students were seen engaged with work at their desk or enthusiastically focused on materials on the board. In general, incorrect speech and disorderliness were corrected and good behavior was reinforced by incentives and brief compliments.

Throughout the year there was evidence that the school administration was effectively responding to concerns of parents and other stakeholders. The South Buffalo Board of Trustees responded to parent concerns about orderliness in common areas by hiring an assistant principal whose primary responsibility was school order and discipline. The new assistant principal appeared to successfully clarify expectations for student behavior and design solutions to the areas of concern raised by parents.

Facility

South Buffalo Charter School, located in a former district-run public school, is a well maintained and ordered facility. Hallways and classrooms were meticulously clean. Class sizes can reasonably accommodate all instructional activities and the surrounding outfitted grounds enable students to engage in most physical education and recreational activities that require significant space. The school creatively adapted a former locker-room into an art room. The school also used the building's gymnasium.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

South Buffalo, after its first year, was well on its way toward implementing the vision described in its charter. In many classes, the school provided “equitable opportunities for all students to acquire an education that links character education with rigorous academics, technology and careers.” The goal of the academic community at South Buffalo is to consistently challenge and inspire students to excel beyond mediocrity. And, in most cases, inspectors observed teachers carefully planning their lessons and communicating with students in a manner that facilitates the serious scholarly exchanges necessary for such success. Teachers regularly used laptop computers as a planning tool and used classroom technology as a teaching tool, as described in the charter.

As described in the charter, the school has implemented a character education program that emphasized core values of integrity, diligence, perseverance, fairness, kindness, self-respect and friendship.