



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Tapestry
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 Tapestry Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2001 and by the Board of Regents in March, opened in September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 105 students in grades K-4, and plans to grow to 180 students in grades K-6 by the end of its 5-year charter.

The Tapestry Charter School offers small, multi-age classrooms where students are given many opportunities for self-directed learning. Upon arrival each day students participate in independent learning activities. Each class holds a daily Morning Meeting designed to teach social and emotional skills as well as introduce new academic material.

The school's literacy program makes balanced use of phonics and literature-based approaches. Some of the materials used in the Language Arts and Math Curricula integrate intellectual, ethical and social development. The math program focuses on developing “number sense” and collaboration skills to the mastery of core concepts, with significant use of hands-on practice and “real life” applications to make math more practical for students. Arts education, a key component to the curriculum, is offered daily. All students participate in Art, Music, Dance, Spanish and Physical Education two times a week.

Parent involvement at the school is significant and ranges from daily support in the classroom to organizing Friday afternoon clubs. The Tapestry Charter School Community Association has been formed with a parent-elected board of trustees.

According to the 2002 Annual School District Report of the New York State Education Department, for the 2000-2001 school year 43,858 students enrolled in the Buffalo City School District: 57.5% African-American; 11.4% Hispanic; 28.5% white; and 2.6% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. Additionally, 74.5% of students in the district qualified for free and reduced price lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

Charter School reported that 16% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 64% of students at district-run schools failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 50% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 76% of students failed to meet state standards; 84% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 29, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Tapestry Charter School in Buffalo, New York. The team comprised:

- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Mike Stevens, Vice President of Evaluation and Research, CSI

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, the Tapestry Charter School was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was approaching its fourth-grade student performance objectives in ELA and math and that its achievement on state tests exceeded that of the Buffalo City school district. It was too early to determine if it was meeting its objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress in ELA and math. Tapestry has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

Tapestry Charter School committed itself to a number of instructional approaches (e.g., multi-age setting, self-directed, independent learners, interdisciplinary teaching, learning styles) in its mission statement. At the end of its first year of operation, the school has done an impressive job of developing the processes and procedures necessary to support the program, while the related instructional practices are inconsistent or emerging. The multi-age classrooms are organized with a variety of instructional designs including lecture and discussion, learning centers, and small group activities among others. The success with these approaches varies from teacher to teacher and from lesson to lesson. Institute staff observed stunning, well planned, learner appropriate lessons in which all students appeared to be challenged. On the other hand, staff observed lessons whose primary focus appeared to be student interaction or socialization at the expense of academic rigor. In discussion with Institute staff, the school leadership recognized the areas in need of improvement and has planned a series of steps including staff replacement, standardizing the lesson plan format with direct links to State performance standards (including what students should know and be able to do at various benchmarks in the school experience, and staff training in portfolio assessment).

Evidence that Tapestry Charter School students are becoming self-directed, independent learners is emerging in most classrooms. However, it is sporadic in one classroom and barely evident in the other. Three issues appear to hamper achievement of these goals:

- Teachers' ability to design and deliver instruction is inconsistent.
- Student misbehavior or inattention frequently hampers student commitment to working independently, in small groups, or in learning centers.
- At times, classes lack work that challenges all learners.

Notable in many classrooms was the process teachers used to assist students in reflecting on their own work.

Tapestry initiated portfolio assessment to a small degree during its first year. The Director stated that her goal was for teachers to "start portfolios this year, keep track of a few areas ... but it (the use of portfolios) is not a priority." A random inspection of portfolios in three out of five classrooms indicated student work and teacher entries from the fall with limited if any entries for the spring. While this may be consistent with the goal for the first year of operation, substantial effort will be needed to ensure its use as a viable indicator of student achievement in the future.

The school program has vocal and instrumental music, art, and dance and movement. The goal that "students will develop creative expression in the visual and performing arts" has been achieved to an exceptional degree for a school in their first year. The arts facilities, available supplies and teacher expertise combine to deliver an exceptional program for all students.

The school leadership opened and operated the school generally as described in the charter. They have maximized funding opportunities available to them and have created a partnership with other charter schools in Buffalo. Next year, Tapestry Charter School will share staff with one of these partner charter schools. The challenge for year two and beyond will be to deliver the entire academic program as planned in the charter while developing and using an assessment system that informs classroom and school decisions.

School Climate and Discipline

Tapestry Charter School's Accountability Plan states "... students are 'often' or 'always' engaged in learning and are respectful of each other and their school environment" Along with goals in the charter that state "students will develop respect for others, responsibility, and self discipline" and "students will develop skills in conflict resolution and violence prevention," these standards set high expectations for school climate and discipline. Teacher interaction with students is consistently positive and promotes the ideals included in the school's charter.

In academic situations the school's emphasis on being open to all student comments and suggestions promotes broad student participation. Unfortunately, some students make blatantly erroneous statements or conjectures, without teacher correction or re-direction. For example, in one class a student said that a drought was a flood. The teacher responded "you are right but you probably wanted to say that a drought is the opposite of a flood." In another class, students were told "well done" and "bravo" for exceptional and poor oral reports alike. At the end of the presentations the teacher asked the class, "How did you feel about what you just did?" rather than discuss the quality of student research, the written report, and presentation.

Institute staff found during site visits and the end of year inspection that the goal of "respectful of each other and their school environment" improved throughout the year. Nevertheless, the school still has a way to go before this goal becomes part of the school's culture and is consistently applied. Institute staff observed a school wide emphasis on positive reinforcement of student behavior. However, in some classrooms, there are no consequences for students who misbehave and this misbehavior interrupts instruction.

Facility

Tapestry Charter School has an impressive facility that supports the mission of the school. Classrooms are rich environments that are amply decorated with student work and content related material. Rooms are arranged to contain desk or table space for each child as well as a group meeting area. Classes were observed to move back and forth between these settings usually without incident. Hallways were also rich in student work and professional artwork.

The dance studio and the art and music classrooms are constructed and well supplied to meet the school's creative expression goals. The dining room is bright and cheery with tablecloths on tables and other attempts to de-institutionalize group dining and promote student interaction. All areas of the school plant are neat and clean.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

Tapestry Charter School's charter outlines an ambitious set of instructional approaches. In its first year of operation, the school has taken steps to become the school envisioned in the charter. Laudable efforts have included parental involvement, classroom organization, multi-age grouping, and interdisciplinary connections. Emerging fields or areas in need of improvement are consistent student discipline and respect, consistently connecting instruction to the State performance standards, and assessment practices including portfolios. Overall, the school has remained true to the mission and charter in its first year of operation.