



Charter Schools Institute

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State University of New York

# Eugenio Maria de Hostos 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 31, 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**

Eugenio Maria De Hostos 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. Sponsored by the Ibero American Action League, Inc., the Rochester school opened in September 2000 in a former Roman Catholic elementary school. The charter called for an initial enrollment of 120 students in grades K-2, with enrollment projected to increase to 160 students in grades K-6 by the end of the school's 5-year charter.

The goal of the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School is to create an environment where Spanish-dominant students are more quickly and smoothly immersed in English, while exposing English-dominant students to Spanish immersion. Based on the performance-oriented America's Choice design, the school has a longer school day that runs from 8:30 am to 5 p.m., with an additional one-hour tutoring program for those that need extra help.

The school is named for a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Latin American philosopher, sociologist, writer and reformer who founded the first normal school in Puerto Rico. While in Chile, de Hostos is credited with helping woman gain admission to the university.

According to the 1999-2000 New York State Education Department district-wide report card of the Rochester City School District, 36,784 students enrolled: 62.6% African-American; 18.3% Hispanic; 16.7% white; and 2.4% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander. 83.5 % of the students in the district received free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

The school reported that 91% of its students in the 2000-01 academic year qualified for the federally subsidized lunch program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2000, 63% of students in the Rochester City School District failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 62% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade Math test. On the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test, 73% of students failed to meet state standards; 88% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> 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 Stanford Achievement Test suggests that the school enrolled a population scoring on average at the 45<sup>th</sup> national percentile in reading and the 43<sup>rd</sup> national percentile in math.

The school presented data on the progress of kindergarten students the self-assessed Marie Clay Observation Study, which measures reading readiness. The school reported that in the Fall of 2000, 100% of kindergarten students were able to recognize fewer than 24 specific letters and sounds but that in the Spring 2001 administration of the assessment, 20% of kindergarten students recognized 49 or more specific letters and sounds and 67.5% of kindergarten students recognized 25-48 specific letters and sounds. The school reported that 12.5% of kindergarten students recognized fewer than 24 specific letters and sounds in the Spring 2001 assessment.

The school presented data on the progress of first and second grade students the self-assessed Reading Running Records program, which measures literacy skills by rating students on a seven level scale, from "emergent" to "extending" readers. The school reported that 98.75% of students moved at least one reading stage on this continuum during the academic year.

The school also presented data on student progress on an internally developed and self-assessed narrative writing assessment. School-developed rubrics were used to measure whether students' narrative writing met school standards. The school reported that while no students met the school's standards in the Fall of 2000, 42.5% of kindergarten students, 50% of first grade students and 55% of second grade students met or exceeded grade level standards on the Spring 2001 assessment.

### **School Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

In its inaugural year, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School achieved mixed success and staff worked to implement a culture of high expectations. Execution of the school's curriculum and dual-language approach was uneven. Institute staff, during multiple informal visits and the formal year-end visit, observed some instructors conducting purposeful lessons that required students to be actively engaged and on task, while others were not as successful at challenging students or creating a culture of academic challenge, order and high expectation.

The school administration emphasized standards-driven teaching and assessment. “We no longer accept a star or ‘wonderful’ written on a piece of schoolwork. That’s meaningless,” said Principal Miriam Vasquez. “Students need more specific feedback and it has to relate to the [New York State learning] standards. Teachers need to tell students what they did well and what part of the standards they’ve improved on.”

Evidence that the school had seriously embraced this instructional approach was reflected by the bulletin board, “Working Towards Standards,” which contained student work and color-coded tags representing mastery of each standard. Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School uses the *America’s Choice* (their academic partner) standards, which have been aligned with the New York State learning standards. Many, but not all, classrooms showed evidence of this academic rigor and culture of high expectation. Institutionalizing this practice throughout the building is a challenge for this school in year two and beyond.

According to the school’s mission statement, “If a child cannot learn the way that we usually teach, then we must learn to teach the way that child can learn.” Such a student-centered approach was apparent throughout most classrooms. Teachers tended to use learning centers that made varied or differentiated modes of instruction available to students. However, effective execution of this teaching technique was uneven.

School leadership did a commendable job during the 2000-01 school year in promoting literacy and dual-language immersion. The school made literacy a clear priority in that students were provided with one hour per day reading workshop, one hour per day writing workshop, 15 minutes per day “Drop Everything And Read” (DEAR) time and 15 minutes per day for reflective journal writing. The school supported this priority with the hiring of a literacy coordinator, who is a trainer and consultant for teachers.

The school’s unique design – alternating between instruction in Spanish one day and in English the next – was thrown a curve ball because the school attracted a much more English-dominant student body than first anticipated. While the school anticipated enrolling students who were evenly split between Spanish-dominant and English-dominant speakers, only 2% of the school’s 2000-01 students were Spanish-dominant speakers. Additionally, some 85% of the student body was African-American. This severely challenged the original program design (yet demonstrates that the school was true to its legal obligation to enroll any child who applied and not pick and choose students who would fit the school’s intended program). The school administration has engaged a local college professor to help the school continue to deliver its envisioned program despite its unexpected enrollment.

There were clear signs of rigorous assessment of student work.

### **School Climate**

During the Institute’s informal visits and on the day of the year-end formal inspection, the school appeared orderly and secure. The principal has been instrumental in trying to refine the school-wide discipline policy and procedures. Such refinements included requiring the entire staff to read and discuss the book *Setting Limits in the Classroom* and requiring in many instances parent

meetings before seriously misbehaving students can return to the classroom. These changes appeared to effectively address much disruptive student misbehavior. However, smaller incidents continued to undermine instruction in some classrooms.

During the Charter School Institute's inspection on May 31, 2001, Institute staff observed these procedures first hand while a primary level student was disciplined. While the principal and her staff are to be commended for attacking larger disciplinary concerns, more attention needs to be paid to how best to handle smaller infractions within the classroom.

The school was clean, bright and orderly. Student work was on display in classrooms and in public spaces. The school has its own food service program that serves appetizing lunches (based on student comments) for students. The office is inviting for parents, with information for parents on a wide variety of topics, meetings and resources.

### **Facility**

This building was originally used as a parochial elementary school and has undergone extensive rehabilitation to reflect modern day needs of energy conservation, access for the handicapped and telecommunications. The classrooms are relatively small but well organized with storage and teacher needs well thought out. The layout of the building affords room for expansion of the school population using the second floor, during the five years of the charter.

The school has been consistently clean and orderly during visitations and this inspection. The principal said she fired two cleaning services this year before deciding to hire new employees responsible for school maintenance. This demonstrated utilization of the managerial flexibility afforded by the Charter School Law.

### **School Mission and Charter Implementation**

Evidence from informal visits, the year-end inspection and correspondence and conversations with school officials suggest the school is faithfully adhering to the instructional model in its charter. The current curriculum and instructional models are consistent with the school's quest to produce students who will "be able to think in all situations, ask relevant questions when confronted with new situations, [...creatively solve problems], and communicate in (speaking, reading and writing) in both English and Spanish." Making the school's program work with its unanticipated population will be a challenge for the school in year two and beyond. However, the school has taken appropriate steps to address the issue thus far.