



Charter Schools Institute  

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State University of New York

South Buffalo 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**

South Buffalo Charter School was approved by the State University Trustees in January 2000 and opened in September of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 305 students in grades K-5 and plans to grow to 533 students in grades K-8 by the end of its 5-year charter. The school is housed in a former public elementary school, sharing the facility with a senior citizens center.

South Buffalo Charter School 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 have 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 has merged with another education management company, becoming Chancellor Beacon Academies of Miami. The company is the nation's second-largest educational-management firm, serving 19,000 students from pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 at 81 schools in eight states and the District of Columbia. Beacon features the Lightpoints standards and curricula, which includes Core Knowledge.

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.

South Buffalo Charter School reported that 68% 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 4<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts test; 50% 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, 76% of students failed to meet state standards; 84% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math test.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Inspection Team**

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

- James D. Merriman IV, Executive Director, CSI
- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Doug Lemov, Vice President of Accountability, 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 second-year school, the South Buffalo Charter School (SBCS) was able to report a variety of information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that its student achievement on state ELA and math tests far exceeded that of the Buffalo City District. SBSC was close to meeting its other state test objectives, but was far from meeting its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. SBSC has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

## **School Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

The South Buffalo Charter School's mission is to ensure that students meet ambitious learning goals by engaging actively in an instructional program that integrates technology, teacher presented instruction and project-based learning. Learning goals included in the school's accountability plan commit not only to students developing strong subject area knowledge and achievement but to their demonstrating such higher order skills as chronological thinking, analysis and interpretation.

At the close of its second year, the school appears to be making impressive progress towards these and other key goals. Inspectors consistently observed strong lessons focused on the mastery of specific skills and knowledge. Teachers were organized, effective, and enthusiastic and with few exceptions maintained high expectations for their students in terms of both behavior and academics. In one third grade classroom, for example, students took turns reading aloud from a novel and took notes on a chart, provided by the teacher and designed to reinforce specific concepts (problem and solution) implicit in mastery of learning standards for English Language Arts. A brief review by inspectors revealed that each student had an up-to-date and carefully prepared chart. As students read, the teacher peppered them with questions assessing their comprehension and understanding of a wide array of skills, from comprehension of specific details ("Where did the father work?") to understanding purpose ("Why did the author choose this title for the chapter?") to vocabulary ("Using context clues, tell me what 'seething' means.") to parts of speech ("The author calls the hamburger 'soft' and 'juicy'; what kinds of words are those?") Students were called on regardless of whether they had volunteered and seemed both knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Purposeful enthusiasm was evident in other classrooms as well and often seemed to be driven by students themselves. In one fourth grade classroom, students cheered when a class review indicated they had solved math problems correctly. Orderly and focused throughout the lesson, students also chuckled over their favorite passages from the book they had been reading for class. Later, when asked to bring seat work to the teacher for review, many students hurried to their seats to make corrections when their teacher pointed out misspellings and areas for improvement.

A small number of classes were not yet as effective as the majority. Generally, the administration was aware of these cases and is prepared to use the flexibility afforded it under law to make personnel decisions based on effectiveness in the classroom. Still, even in cases where teaching appeared to be inconsistent or less effective, students were often engaged, enthusiastic, motivated and attentive. As a result the school maximized the effectiveness of most of its teachers no matter what their ability.

Within these focused lessons, many teachers used a variety of approaches to ensure mastery by all students. In short, teaching was both structured and creative. Beyond developing their students' mastery of fundamental skills and knowledge, many teachers used activities that

encouraged students to develop analytical and problem solving skills as a part of their class work. In one fifth grade classroom, teacher and students lavished attention on the “problem of the day,” a mathematical word problem that the teacher asked students to solve in a variety of ways. As did many of his colleagues, the teacher relentlessly stressed the importance of thinking processes, reminding students, “I know you’ve got the answer. I want to know how you got there.” Students were asked to defend their decisions in solving problems to their peers, who challenged them admirably.

Journals and other examples of finished written work were less consistent throughout the school though in several classes they were strong. Exemplary journals in one fourth grade classroom, for example, where students wrote regularly, focused on key writing skills and ideas and were revised continually based on teacher feedback. This practice has not yet been replicated throughout the building. In several classrooms, journals and other written work were kept sporadically and lacked purposeful focus on mastering language arts standards evident in journals in the most effective classrooms. The school did not appear to have developed and implemented consistent expectations by which students recorded and processed what they had learned in most classes.

### **School Climate**

The school climate, both in classrooms and public spaces, appeared to inspectors to support consistently the school’s programs and academic goals. Transitions between activities and rooms were orderly and efficient. Students were generally attentive, positive and helpful towards teachers and one another.

In responding to a journal assignment asking what rules she would have in her ideal school, one student wrote, “My rules would be as they always are here in school.” Indeed the familiar routines, clear expectations and secure tone seemed to allow students to pursue their schooling with little distraction. Not coincidentally, relations between teachers and students seemed warm, particularly, Institute staff noted, in those classrooms where expectations were the clearest for student behavior. In short, the school’s consistent structure was, by all appearances, something that students both valued and worked to foster.

Teachers and students alike seemed to recognize the school’s unusually supportive and positive culture. “On Wednesday we’ll be going to the library,” one teacher noted to his class. “Remember to bring your manners and remember that you represent your school.” As he did so a student quietly slipped out of his seat and returned his teacher’s textbook to the chalk rack from which it had fallen. The school’s expectations are so clear and consistent that even substitute teachers were observed to hold students to high behavioral expectations.

### **Facility**

The school presently occupies space in a former public school building that also houses several community organizations. While the facility is dated, it is clean, bright and functional and the school's Board and administration continue to develop and improve it. The school has plans to purchase the building, a move that would allow the school to both expand its programs, renovate space to address specific needs (the school is particularly lacking in office space and convenient areas for counseling and related services) and to consolidate classrooms into more contiguous space.

A particularly vibrant art program has resulted in the extensive display of colorful student painting throughout much of the school as well as the painting by students and community members of a mural in one hallway. Student academic work, while also visible, was not as carefully maintained or updated in some cases.

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

Much of the school's academic program seems to be firmly in place and well established, but integration of technology is still developing.

Inspectors were unable to observe character education instruction, but did observe anecdotal evidence of a consistent upholding of values among students. That, as well as artifacts of the character education program posted throughout the school, indicate the program's general effectiveness.

The school is slated to begin the practice of "looping" (whereby students remain with the same teacher for two consecutive years instead of the traditional one year) next year. The principal described to inspectors models by which the school might adapt and implement the concept of looping, tailoring the specific structure to fit the school's design and specific needs of students. Inspectors were struck by the savvy with which the school both remained true to its original vision even while constantly managing and designing programs to meet the school's goals. This strategic approach to on-site management only underscores the promise that the school holds.

The charter also describes the intent to develop a system of lead teachers charged with the responsibility to develop the skills of their colleagues. While a relatively minor part of the charter and one the school has quite plausibly chosen to wait to implement until after it has solidified more central school elements, Institute staff noted the minority of less effective teachers in the school were lacking in specifically those areas where many of their colleagues excelled.