

King Center 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 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. It opened in the fall of that year. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 101 students in grades K-4 and will remain at that enrollment for the remainder of the charter. 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, 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 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.

The King Center Charter School reported that 86% 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 Buffalo City School District students 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 April 29, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited King Center Charter School in Buffalo, New York. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President and Senior Fellow, 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 King Center Charter School (KCCS) was able to report a variety of information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was some distance from meeting its ELA objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. It was far from meeting its fourth-grade student achievement objectives in ELA and math. As a second-year school, KCCS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practices

At the close of its second year of operation, King Center Charter School continued to implement and refine an instructional design that focused on "academic rigor and holistic development of

children." The school's design includes extensive focus on the provision of social services and on ensuring students' readiness to learn by meeting a broader array of needs than schools have traditionally addressed. The school provides direct social services, healthy meals, a year round calendar, and cultural enrichment during inter-sessions. A parent coordinator maintains regular contact with parents and helps them to support their children's learning at home and access those social services not provided directly by the school. The school has also used its broader mandate as an impetus to develop innovative programs such as the admission of some Kindergarten students up to two years before their actual enrollment in order to offer those students an optional, free school readiness program run by a separate entity but specifically designed to prepare them to succeed upon enrollment at King Center Charter School.

While the school has made strong headway in addressing its students' social needs, Institute staff believe that its students require greater academic rigor, intellectual stimulation and clearer behavioral structures likely to promote learning. While instruction was effective and intentional in several classrooms, other classrooms did not appear to be effective. Those classrooms did not always appear to organize instruction around clear learning goals and were often undercut by permissiveness towards disruptive students who detracted from the learning environment and interfered with other students' ability to learn.

Though school climate and student behavior are discussed separately below, it is difficult to extricate those issues from a discussion of instructional practice since even teachers who had otherwise strong skills were often hamstrung in their work by student misbehavior. Still, inspectors also observed examples of purposeful and effective instruction, especially in the Kindergarten and fourth grade.

In a characteristic fourth grade lesson, a teacher provided worksheets on which students were asked to take notes from her presentation on the concept she was introducing. The note-taking sheets allowed the teacher to ensure that students recorded the key points from her presentation. The structure also allowed her to build students' note-taking skills by giving them progressively more open-ended forms on which to take notes and by gradually increasing their own responsibility for recording information. The purposeful nature of the lesson was supported by clear expectations for what students should be doing to participate. The teacher told students exactly what would be expected of them before an activity and then held them to that expectation with simple, fair consequences and plain language. The result was a highly effective lesson that allowed students to learn key information quickly and to reinforce their knowledge with an orderly, hands-on activity at their desks.

Teachers in other classrooms had not consistently established such a climate of expectation and clarity about behavior, nor had they established a clear, purposeful and consistent link between instruction and standards. In one classroom, students were asked to decide from among several choices as they included various sentences and clauses in a piece of writing they were authoring as a group. The criteria for choosing words, phrases and sentences for inclusion were unclear and unrelated to any specific aspect of effective writing. Rather than choosing to include language because it was grammatically correct, clearer or more descriptive, for example, students were asked to vote for which sentence they "liked better." Their choice was not mediated or discussed according to any criteria by the teacher. Further, while the teacher

recorded chosen phrases on the board, students were not asked to record or process the lesson in writing and the lesson ended without a review of any specific skill or knowledge reinforced. Lessons such as this one were often conducted in a behavioral climate that did not support effective instruction or the sorts of independent and hands-on activities that are central to the school's model.

Approaches to students writing were also inconsistent. While journals in some classes demonstrated that students often corrected and revised work to produce polished writing; journals in other classes did not. And while some teachers had clearly reinforced standards of quality and completion for finished work, such standards did not appear to be used consistently throughout the school. While some teachers assigned written work that consistently focused on developing and demonstrating mastery of skills and learning standards such as summarizing, drawing conclusions, or understanding characterization, others did not.

Thus, while teachers in the school employed a variety of promising and effective practices in teaching and assessment, the school could not yet be said to do so consistently.

School Climate

Observations of classes in all grade levels at King Center revealed a lack of consistent behavioral expectations. In several classrooms, disruptive students repeatedly detracted from the learning environment and from other students' ability to learn. In at least some cases behavioral issues appeared to be made worse by a reluctance on the part of teachers to state behavioral expectations clearly and directly to children. For example, one teacher wasted several minutes of instructional time telling her students "I'll wait," while students continued to wander around the room. In some classrooms, reminders and requests by teachers were consistently repeated three and even four times, often without an adequate response. In other instances, teachers described students' misbehavior back to them but did not take any action to prevent or attach consequences to it. As when a first grade teacher informed her class, "I need to stop, I have three children talking very loudly about something we're not talking about." At times this strategy merely drew attention to the fact that students failed to participate or disrupted others' participation with impunity.

The school's principal acknowledged that the school had identified behavior as an ongoing concern and had refined and augmented disciplinary procedures to more clearly define acceptable behavior and to create a consistent school-wide system of reinforcement. This system, implemented a few weeks prior to the end-of-year visit, includes added consequences that lead to intervention by the principal. Inspectors were able to corroborate the principal's assertion that most classrooms had improved with the new system. Several teachers were observed to use elements of the enhanced and augmented system effectively, particularly a substitute teacher covering one of the classrooms. In fact, under her guidance, the classroom appeared to be more orderly than it had been on previous occasions, a fact that underscores the direct influence of the intentional use of methods and policies on behavior.

While acknowledging that re-shaping behavioral expectations is challenging and long-term work, Institute staff also emphasize the need for continued improvement. Two teachers in the school were often effective in building strong and supportive learning climates in their classrooms not only by responding directly to negative behavior but by setting expectations in advance for how students should behave during classroom activities. Thus the school is not without internal resources and expertise to draw upon in finding solutions. Nonetheless, incidents in which teachers were observed to tolerate students' open defiance of their explicit requests undercut the authority of all adults in the building and established a tone of impunity and permissiveness that even effective teachers worked actively to diffuse. Given the importance of the task and its connection to the level of academic expectation, the administration's decision to address the issue decisively seems clearly justified.

Facility

The school operates in a striking facility located in a renovated church where clean, bright, colorful classroom space is augmented by a growing array of other physical resources. The school boasts a state-of-the-art computer lab, a new playground (constructed by parents, teachers and community volunteers) and, this year, a newly renovated library. Well stocked with printrich materials, and overlooking the classrooms from a balcony (the former church's choir loft), the library is both a functional and a strikingly appealing space.

Classrooms also featured an effective array of resources; students in one classroom were observed to write and revise stories using laptop computers. Classroom space felt open and fluid as a result of a lack of full walls between rooms. This lack of hard divisions in physical space also allowed for the use of intermediate space by tutors and support staff. At the same time, excess noise flowing from one room to another was sometimes a distraction and a significant hurdle to effective instruction. At least one teacher described ways in which she altered intended lesson plans in response to noise and in another instance, inspectors observing a class struggled to hear teacher or student comments.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

The school is progressing toward the part of its mission that calls for providing "a holistic model of development during the early childhood years." The school provides resources and solutions to address a wide array of student needs. In the opinion of inspectors, the school now should intensify its focus on the academic aspect of its mission.

As described in the King Center charter, a significant degree of individualized instruction was also observed. Students worked individually or in small groups with tutors, teacher assistants and/or social service providers and used technology to assess their skills and abilities using off-site experts and consultation. The school has also committed to using a yearly assessment (the Woodcock Johnson) that is particularly effective in generating information about individual student needs. An improvement in the behavioral climate may free teachers and teacher assistants from the necessity of responding to misbehavior and will allow them to focus more on the individualization of instruction.