



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Community Partnership 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 Community Partnership 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. It opened in the fall of 2000 in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 150 students in grades K-2. By the end of its 5-year charter the school plans to enroll 300 students in grades K-5. The school is located in a refurbished armory that also houses an apartment complex.

The Community Partnership Charter School's mission is to create a strong academic base, involving families, educators and community members, in which students learn to read, write and perform mathematically at levels that exceed citywide averages. This will be undertaken in an environment that values kindness and respect. The school is operated in partnership with the Beginning with Children Foundation, a New York-based philanthropy founded by Joe and Carol Reich to advance educational opportunities for children.

According to the 2002 Annual District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 13 enrolled 14,687 students: 78.9% African-American; 17.3% Hispanic; Asian, American Indian, Alaskan and Pacific Islander, 2.4%; and, white, 1.5%. Additionally, 83.6% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

The Community Partnership Charter School reported that 70% of its students for the 2001-2002 school year qualified for free or reduced lunches under the Federal School Lunch Program.

In 2001, 62.5% of students in Community School District 13 failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 57.7% of students failed to meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 77.1% of students failed to meet state standards; 84.8% of students failed to meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On May 17, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Community Partnership Charter School. The team comprised:

- Susan Miller Barker, Senior Vice President, CSI
- Ivan Hageman, Principal, East Harlem School

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 with no fourth grade, the Community Partnership Charter School (CPCS) was able to report limited information on student achievement in the 2001-02 school year. The school provided data to show that it was far from meeting its ELA objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress; however, it came to close to meeting its math objective of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. It also met its early childhood language arts objective. CPCS has begun to present the evidence necessary for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

During the second year of its charter, Community Partnership Charter School (CPCS) made significant progress toward fulfilling the academic promise for children envisioned in its charter. The school raised the level of academic rigor and instructional practice in classrooms and in student work while solidifying a culture where students' behavior is purposeful and attentive to learning.

At informal and formal visits throughout the school year, Institute staff and inspectors noted the high expectations most teachers held for students. Last summer, after the close of the school's first year and continuing through its second year, CPCS's director, staff, and partner, the Beginning with Children Foundation, worked diligently to augment and refine the school's curriculum. Instituting a structured approach to improving both curriculum design and instructional delivery, staff worked with curriculum developers to gain content expertise in language arts and mathematics. In addition, staff worked diligently to advance the quality of teaching in each lesson.

Using innovative and traditional strategies, Community Partnership Charter School communicates to students, parents and visitors that literacy and learning are its primary focus. Each week, Friday morning begins with twenty minutes of *Family Reading Time*. On the day of the Institute's formal inspection, classes were filled with as many as a dozen parents each reading aloud with children. At the end of *Family Reading Time* in one Kindergarten classroom, students gathered on the class rug to begin the morning lesson. Led by a student with assistance from the teacher, the class read a morning message, identified missing vowels and consonants, identified the day and date on the calendar and read a detailed schedule of the day's learning activities. Most of the students appeared comfortable reading sight words and sounds displaying a literacy level often found in higher grades.

Teachers maximized instructional time by using simple yet academically focused strategies to assist students in transition from lesson to lesson. At the end of a whole group lesson in one Kindergarten classroom, the teacher asked students to think of a rhyming word for "goat." As students quietly and eagerly raised their hands, the teacher called on them one by one, dismissing those whose first answer was correct. While the teacher worked briskly and productively with the few students who could not correctly provide a rhyming word, the other students moved purposefully to tables, gathered materials and set about accomplishing the next task. Similarly, a third grade teacher asked students questions about the novel they were studying to dismiss them one by one to prepare for lunch.

Inspectors noted that students in all classrooms displayed reading fluency that was appropriate and at times advanced for their grades. Community Partnership Charter School identifies its approach to reading as one component of its "balanced literacy" strategy. Students read from a variety of textbooks, novels and other print media. Based on an analysis of student progress in reading during its first year, the school added the use of Orton Gillingham to its reading curriculum. Orton Gillingham is a phonics-based program that provides structured lessons to support students who, in the words of the school's director, "require a more intensive reading program." Teachers were trained in the approach during a ten-day summer institute prior to the

start of the 2001-02 school year and, through the resources of the Beginning with Children Foundation, received additional professional development throughout the school year. To further refine teachers' literacy instruction ability, professional development will continue over the summer and through the next school year.

A similar analysis of the Everyday Mathematics curriculum used in the school's first year confirmed teachers' concerns that students were not receiving the skills and content necessary to meet the New York State Performance Standards. Working with a consultant, the school changed to the McGraw-Hill Mathematics program and reports it "has been effectively used in classrooms" this year. As with continued professional development in literacy, teachers will continue to receive assistance in delivering mathematics instruction from the school's consultant over the summer and during the next school year.

The Beginning with Children Foundation staff, partnering with teachers at the school, conduct ongoing assessments of student achievement. This assessment informs individual teachers about the academic strengths and weaknesses of each child and is used to inform individual student instruction as well as to design professional development activities for teachers. The school's director characterizes this process as one that allows "for meaningful discussion and changes" to occur and attributes the school's improved behavioral and academic environment to this work.

Demonstrating a keen ability to analyze and communicate challenges in need of solutions, the school's leader concurred with the site visit team that much has been accomplished during the second year of operation and the task of refining instruction continues. The school's focus on literacy was evident in the quantity of student work posted in hallways, student books, class books, journals, and sometimes available in portfolios. Students at Community Partnership Charter School wrote frequently, yet, were not consistent in the use of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and capitalization. Student work in some classrooms provided evidence that teachers held students to high standards and required drafting and editing. In other classes, student work posted on the walls contained mechanical and grammatical errors left uncorrected, yet also included positive comments written by teachers ("Good Work!" "Great!" etc.). As such, expected levels of student performance at each grade level were difficult to discern by a review of student work.

The reports that its policy is not to post only edited "published" works of the students. Teachers post works in multiple phases of the writing process, it is not a sign of lower expectations, rather the incomplete, unfinished pieces are encouraged and praised as part of the learning process.

Mathematics lessons observed by the site visit team revealed improved instruction and student performance over that observed during the school's first year. Students at lower grades used manipulatives (counting cubes, tape measures, etc.) productively to solve problems on mathematics worksheets. At upper grades, inspectors observed lessons that were less concrete and more conceptual in nature. Student work product reviewed by staff did not allow for reliable analysis of student acquisition of mathematics skills.

School Climate

Teachers, students, parents, and volunteers set a tone of intellectual curiosity, analysis and academic success throughout the school. In addition to the teacher and assistant teacher charged with the success of students in each classroom, students benefit from a variety of instructional staff. The school director, music teacher, art teacher, special education teacher, physical education/movement instructor and Beginning with Children Foundation staff assist in classrooms. Volunteers are frequently found assisting in literacy or mathematics instruction or in providing instruction that links various content areas into thematic studies. Responding to clear and well-implemented behavioral expectations, children are generally purposeful in academic tasks.

Facility

Community Partnership Charter School has a fine facility that promotes learning and achievement. Student work that reflects the academic rigor demanded of students is displayed in bright and inviting hallways. Classrooms are appropriately sized and allow for a wide assortment of learning resources. A computer lab is available for whole class and small group instruction and the school is located near a community park that is used for intellectual and physical pursuits. Over the next two years, CPCS enrollment will fill the existing facility to capacity. The CPCS board of trustees continues to seek a larger home for the school.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

During its second year, Community Partnership Charter School made laudable progress toward becoming the school envisioned in its charter. Supported by a strong partnership with the Beginning with Children Foundation, the school's board of trustees, director and teachers initiated behavioral structures that support and promote academic achievement for all of its students. Evidence of the school's increased academic rigor is found in the quantity of student writing and the improved quality with which students perform learning tasks.