

Academy Charter School Site Visit
Castle Rock, Colorado

By Sam Drury and Lynn Peach

December, 1993

Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Summary	2
Formation of Academy Charter School	3
Governance and Operation	4
Educational Program	5
Student Performance	8
Parent Involvement	9
Other Information	10

Introduction

School description

The Academy Charter School is a K-6 elementary school that emphasizes high academic standards based on the Hirsch Core Knowledge curriculum. The school is operated by a unique governance structure consisting of elected parents. It is the first elementary school formed under the Charter Schools Act.

The school is located at 794 "A" South Briscoe Street, Castle Rock, CO 80104 (phone 303/660-4881). The office is open between 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. School begins at 9:00 a.m. and ends at 3:45 p.m. Child care on a self-supporting basis is available from 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. and from 3:45 to 6:00 p.m. daily at the school. The school leases store-front space.

The Academy Charter School represents a convenient opportunity to observe directly the implementation of some important public education concepts (charter school, managed by parents, and a curriculum based upon the Hirsch Core Knowledge Sequence).

Charter School documents

Background information is available in the following documents:

Senate Bill 93-183, "Charter Schools Act", June 3, 1993.

Charter Schools Information Packet, Colorado Department of Education, October, 1993.

The Academy Charter School Application, September, 1993.

Academy Charter School and Douglas County School District Re.1 contract, September, 1993.

Academy Charter School waiver requests to Colorado State Board of Education, September through November, 1993.

Site visit process

The request for a site visit by Sam Drury and Lynn Peach was well received. Preparation for the visit included review of the above charter school documents and development of visitation formats. On-site observations and discussions were on December 7 (school day) and December 13 (Governing Board evening meeting). Other discussions and information-gathering took place in December. The school officials and staff were quite helpful at all times.

Report summary

The next page highlights some of the significant findings about parent involvement, student performance, educational program, governance and operation, and other areas. Recommendations also are offered. The remainder of this report provides additional information related to the Academy Charter School site visit.

Summary

Parent involvement

Parents provide a broad base of volunteer help for the school. Their representation on the Governing Board assures parental control of policies, procedures, and practices. They stipulate the kind of curriculum they want for their children. The parents obviously respect rigorous education, pay close attention to their children's progress, and willingly give support as needed.

Student performance

The classroom goal is that each student achieve at least 85% mastery of knowledge taught in every subject area. The teachers perform continuous assessment of student-learning progress. They promptly identify any need for remediation and assure that the necessary help is obtained. The students demonstrate respect and responsibility for learning more than typical in public schools.

Educational program

The rigorous educational program includes a well-specified core knowledge curriculum, carefully-selected and highly-motivated staff, and well-informed and supportive parents. The atmosphere to facilitate learning is excellent.

Governance and operation

The Academy Charter School is governed by a Governing Board and the Dean. They are entirely responsible for running the school. The Governing Board consists of seven members: five parents of children in the program, one community member at large, and the Academy Dean. The carefully-selected, highly-motivated staff includes the Dean, school secretary, seven full-time teachers, P.E. teacher, tutor, and three aides. Many parents volunteer their time to perform tasks to support operation of the school.

Other findings

The staff and parents have a strong sense of ownership. They are eager to share information about the program. The parent/student handbook is comprehensive and well-written.

Recommendations

Add active parent volunteers in the classrooms. Create more assessments to measure student learning. Increase parental accountability for student performance. Guard against losing energy, focus, and commitment over the years.

Formation of Academy Charter School

Senate Bill 93-183, "Charter Schools Act"

The legislative declaration is "right on the mark." Applications must be carefully planned. Accountability for student performance is emphasized. Strong collaboration between teachers and parents is essential. The Act provides relative freedom from educational bureaucracy. The required semiannual review of school operation and finances assures effective monitoring of performance, any problems, and corrective actions. The Academy Charter School met the applicable prerequisites of the Act and obtained the approvals of the Douglas County Board of Education and the Colorado State Board of Education.

Mission Statement

"Strive for knowledge and truth in all you do" is the mission statement of the Academy Charter School.

Goals and objectives

Attendance. The Academy Charter School will achieve an attendance record meeting or exceeding the average elementary school within the Douglas County School District.

Retention. The Academy will strive for a voluntary retention of 100% of the student population in years two through five of the charter.

Discipline. The instances of second referrals for discipline problems will account for 3% or less of the entire student population.

Community Involvement. Parent support is greatly encouraged. The Academy has set a goal of parental and community involvement equal to 20% or more of the entire staffing hours budgeted each year.

Student performance. The baseline for the Academy Charter School program will be the average scores in each subject area for the standardized tests currently used by the School District. Each spring all Academy students will take the CTBS (and possibly other standardized) tests. They will average a 10% increase over baseline each year until achieving the final goal of an 85% average in all subjects for all students, grade appropriate.

Governance and Operation

Parent and community support

The Academy Charter School application detailed extensive support for the program. There were many letters of support from parents and others who are familiar with the public education system in the community. All of the 119 students were enrolled by the choice of their parents, who were aware of how the school would operate differently. Corporations and individuals in the community also have pledged significant contributions.

Governing Board

The Academy Charter School is governed by a Governing Board and the Dean. They are entirely responsible for running the school. The Governing Board consists of seven members: five parents of children in the program, one community member at large (who may or may not be a parent), and the Academy Dean.

Each Governing Board member has specific duties to the Academy: Staff Selection and Review (two members), Discipline and Dress Code, Student Advocate, and Community Building Team (two members).

The Governing Board also has committees consisting of parents and teachers working in the following areas: accountability, facilities, budget, curriculum, dean selection, and staff evaluation.

The Governing Board meets at least once a month to discuss Academy operations and hear reports and updates from each board member, consider and adopt policy, change policy, and consider requests from parents, students, and teachers.

Contract with Douglas County School District Re.1

The charter was approved by the Douglas County Board of Education on August 31, 1993, for a term through June 30, 1996 (with option for renewal). It includes semiannual review of operations and finances in addition to monthly and quarterly reports.

The Academy has been granted certain waivers from Board-approved policies and/or regulations and, where appropriate, has obtained waivers from certain state laws from the State Board of Education.

Educational Program

Environment

The Academy Charter School provides a very warm and comfortable, yet serious and strict, environment in which the students learn. It is apparent that the parents and teachers are ever encouraging and demanding a high standard of academic education for their children. The students seem to be responding to the demands and desires of the school. For the most part, the students take their education seriously. We found all students to be quietly and dutifully on task. We noted a favorable comparison with the LPS "Environment for Excellence" goals: encourages thoughtful inquiry, stimulates excitement about growth and learning, and fosters innovation. We also observed caring interaction and collaboration among students, educators, parents, and other members of the community.

Teachers

There are seven certified teachers ("classroom instructors") on staff, although they may not be Colorado certified, nor do they need to be by law. There is one classroom for each grade K-6 at present. In each classroom we found the teacher to have great classroom management skills. The teachers use assertive discipline. The teachers were generous and open with regard to our visit. We appreciated the time they took to answer all our questions on curriculum, texts, and process.

Curriculum

The school is using E. D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Sequence as its guide for instruction. This decision was made by the Governing Board, curriculum proposal leader Laurel Iakovakis, and parents. Each teacher has a Core Knowledge Sequence manual and a single copy of the book by Hirsch for that particular grade level (e.g., *What Your 1st Grader Needs to Know*). Curriculum centers around the ideas promoted by Hirsch but blends with the ideas of performance-based education. It seems to make for a happy compromise and is working well for students, teachers, and parents. In fact, there is much evidence of integrated curriculum and instruction across disciplines. The school's approach seems consistent with all seven of the LPS Integrated Learning Outcomes. However, there is a de-emphasis on self-esteem programs as a major focus. Careful attention is being paid to administer what they have determined to be an appropriately strong and intensive curriculum. Hopefully, it will be a curriculum whereby all children learn and succeed if the student is serious and interested, the teacher is astute and purposeful, and the parents are watchful and involved. It will be of great interest to see if the Core Knowledge curriculum used in the schools that have chosen to do so makes any significant academic difference with regard to intelligence and future success of the students.

Core Knowledge Sequence

The Hirsch manual states that collaboration is the key and must incorporate shared decision-making. Some topics appear in more than one grade level, and this repetition is intentional. The Core Knowledge Sequence incorporates multiculturalism, including significant knowledge of diverse peoples and cultures. Hirsch just expanded the curriculum to include grades five and six this year. The Core Knowledge Sequence is intended to serve as a basis for about 50% of a school's total curriculum. It is simply a "guide to coherent content from grade to grade, designed to encourage integrated instruction in the classroom." The teacher seeks material from outside sources to expand and complete the curriculum. It leaves "ample room for local requirements and a variety of teaching approaches. Schools teaching Core Knowledge have welcomed its ready accommodation to skills-instruction..." Hirsch does not provide a curriculum for kindergarten. The curriculum for grades 1-6 covers: Language Arts, American Civilization, World Civilization, Geography, Fine Arts, Visual Arts and Architecture, Mathematics, Life Sciences and Physical Sciences. There are no recommendations for reading, in-depth grammar, or spelling instruction. It is said that Core Knowledge promotes excellence (i.e., high standards) and fairness. Excellence is necessary in the primary grades to create a solid foundation for future learning. Fairness alludes to the disadvantaged youth. Core Knowledge guarantees equal access to a specific knowledge base that "defines a common heritage, and makes up the common ground for communication and cooperation in society." This curriculum should help cut across class differences and provide equal support and growth for all children to succeed in our society. Knowledge should not be limited to only the advantaged or elite.

Classroom Texts

We examined classroom texts. Some of the literature material is in abridged form of original literature. Current child and adolescent literature is on bookshelves in the classrooms. Third grade has shadow box book reports on display. All the texts in literature, science, and math are beautiful and have the latest copyright dates (1991-1994). The literature book for fourth grade also has a practice workbook. In addition, there is a teacher unit guide for integrated performance assessment. The kindergarten class can use a math workbook, *Exploring Mathematics Problem Solving and Critical Thinking*. The math books for grade four (1994) do have chapters on geometry and statistics and do have pages at the end of each chapter with titles of critical thinking and problem solving. These problems are designed for students to apply math principles taught in the chapter and previous chapters. The teachers use math manipulatives to aid learning. Every grade has a classroom set of phonics and/or spelling workbooks, depending on grade level. The teachers stated that they remain conscious of phonics instruction the entire day.

Instruction

The classrooms are colorful, warm, and inviting for the children. The classroom size is kept at 17 students. The entire school follows the same schedule. The day begins with the pledge of allegiance and patriotic songs. There is no team teaching. There is no multiage grouping. There is some achievement grouping *per se*. For example, there are some fourth grade students going to the sixth grade classroom for math instruction (since the entire school follows the same schedule, the school can accommodate this structure). There is cooperative learning. There are no peer tutoring groups. Academic competition between students is kept low key. There is also a dress code to eliminate social class competition. As yet there is no library or computer lab. There is no assigned homework for kindergarten and first grade. The first grade teacher feels the day is so long for the student that it is not appropriate to assign homework. There is evidence of performance-based and hands-on instruction.

Student performance

The present goal for student performance is mandated to be 85% on CTBS tests and is considered mastery of a subject. If a student falls below the 85% measure, he/she immediately begins remediation with a school in-house tutor. The classroom goal is that the entire class be at 85% of knowledge taught. This allows the teacher to measure a transfer of learning and also provides teacher accountability.

The school is still so very new and is just getting settled. It is too soon to give any statistical or measurable results. However, they are aware that the standardized, norm-referenced CTBS tests will not adequately be measuring what is being taught. They are beginning to develop their own assessments to best measure success or proficiency of students in the Academy Charter School academic program. It will be interesting to follow the school's progress as that system grows and matures.

Parental responsibility

Final comments reflect parental responsibility. The Governing Board did interview and hire the classroom teachers. The parents were apprised of the process. The parents stipulated the kind of curriculum they want for their children. It is important to remember that this is a school of only 119 students and 79 families. The families are a somewhat select group of parent education activists. Their combined goal for a strict academic curriculum is focused, determined, and somewhat narrowed by what they wish to accomplish. These parents are striving for a sound but broad-based content curriculum. The parents receive a curriculum guide for each child's grade level. This informs parents of the knowledge their child should be mastering throughout that year.

Student Performance

Standardized tests

Baseline data. The initial baseline evaluation will come from the CTBS standardized test methods currently in use by the Douglas County School District. All of the Academy students will be tested annually in the spring (most of them were not given CTBS tests in their previous schools last year). The School District assumes all costs associated with testing, and it retains individual copies of test results as is the practice with other public school systems.

Annual report. An evaluation report will be submitted to the School Board each September. The evaluation will include a comparative analysis of goals established and goals achieved.

Subject attainment levels

Evaluation plan. A minimum attainment level of 85% for all subjects will be required of all Academy students. Attainment may be demonstrated by oral examinations, video production, computer work stored individually on floppy disk, written examinations, writing samples, audio recordings, artistic renderings, or any combination of these examples. Teachers are in the process of developing multiple assessments. Every student will eventually have an individualized instruction plan.

Corrective action. Each three-week period the instructional staff will review attainment levels. If a student is having difficulty meeting attainment, a plan will be devised to provide that student with additional time via aides, tutors, parental volunteers, labs, at-home or after-school work, or any combination of the above as determined by the Lead Teacher.

Supplementary work. If attainment is met before the end of the three-week unit, the Lead Teacher may assign additional separate work to further challenge that student.

Definitions (per Colorado Department of Education)

Student achievement is an expected or anticipated knowledge, skill, attitude or behavior resulting from a planned instructional program, the attainment of which can be demonstrated through discernible or measurable outcomes.

Educational accountability is holding ourselves (students, parents, educators, and community members) responsible for assuring that students meet identified content standards through a continuous cycle of planning, evaluation, and reporting.

Parent Involvement

School governance

Their representation on the Governing Board assures parental control of policies, procedures, and practices. They stipulate the kind of curriculum they want for their children. The parents obviously respect rigorous education, pay close attention to their children's progress, and willingly give support as needed.

Relationships with teachers

The parental and Governing Board trust in the professionals they hired is genuine, honest, and candid. These parents support their teachers and, in turn, express this trust and respect for the teacher to their children. Teachers perform a three-week review and assessment of each student's work and academic growth. Remediation, if necessary, begins immediately. Pupil progress reports and/or parent/teacher conference notes are issued at the end of each quarter (nine weeks). Formal parent/teacher conferences are scheduled during the first and third quarters. Arrangements for additional conferences may be made at any time.

Accountability for student performance

The parents guarantee to help their children learn and succeed to their full potential. They accept the teacher's recommendations. Homework is seen as a continuation of classroom instruction and as an opportunity for parents to actively contribute to and monitor the progress of the education of their children. Parents are always welcome visitors at school anytime.

Volunteer help

Parents provide a broad base of volunteer help for the school. Their involvement, support, and close attention to their children is demonstrated in a wide variety of ways. However, parents do not seem to have much direct influence on classroom procedure and instructional approach and delivery. The transfer of knowledge in the classroom is left to the professional teacher.

Other Information

Economic plan

Enrollment. Total school enrollment is planned at 119 students (17 students in each grade, kindergarten through sixth).

Staffing. The work schedule totals 483 staffing hours per week for eight full-time and six part-time positions. Teachers report for work at 8:00 a.m. and leave at 5:00 p.m.

Revenue. Per-pupil funding from the School District is set at \$3,639 for the first year. Subsequent years will be funded at not less than 80% of the School District's per-pupil operating revenues as defined by C.R.S. 22-53-103(6). Since a full-day program is provided for children in kindergarten, parents are asked to make up the half-day funding shortfall by paying tuition. Corporate sponsorships and donations may be earmarked for the charter school. The School District also directs to the Academy the proportionate share of state and federal moneys for disabilities and other categorical aid programs as appropriate.

Expenditures. A financially-sound budget has been prepared for the school year 1993-94. The major expenditures are salaries (about \$246,000), benefits (about \$28,000), PERA (about \$29,000), rent (about \$40,000), supplies (about \$16,000), space buildout (about \$15,000), and books/software (about \$14,000). The total first-year budget is about \$452,000.

Employee agreements

All Academy Charter School teachers and other employees are selected by the Governing Board under terms and conditions specified in ACS documents. Teachers will be evaluated by a Teacher Review Committee of the Governing Board. The members will be trained in the teacher evaluation process by the Douglas County School District Personnel Office. Employee compensation, evaluation, and discipline are administered by the Governing Board. All employees are working at Academy Charter School by choice and are considered "at-will" employees.

Other information

Refer to the documents listed on the first page of this report.

About the authors

Sam Drury:

Sam has a BSEE in Electronics from the University of Illinois and an MBA in Management from the University of Denver.

His professional employment experience totals 12 years in engineering and 21 years in management.

All four of his children have attended Littleton Public Schools for K-12 (the youngest is in Grade 12 at Heritage High School). Sam has involved himself as an active LPS parent for 30 years.

Sam chairs the Heritage High School Accountability Committee and the Heritage High School PTA Legislative Committee. He serves on the Heritage High School Central Committee, the Heritage High School Curriculum Council, the LPS Coordinating Council for School Improvement, and the state Accountability Task Force for implementing standards-based education (HB 93-1313).

He has lived and worked in the LPS district since 1962. Sam served on the LPS Board of Education from 1983 to 1989. He has held leadership positions on local boards of directors, and he also has been very involved in many other volunteer activities.

Sam lives at 210 East Sterne Blvd., Littleton, Colorado 80122. His home telephone number is (303) 795-1535.

Lynn Peach:

Lynn has a BA in English (Secondary Education) and MA in Language Communication, both from the University of Pittsburgh.

Her professional educator experience from 1972 to 1983 includes high school English teacher, English tutor, inner-city reading program, substitute teacher, and librarian.

All five of her children attend Littleton Public Schools for K-12 (Grades K, 3, 5, 9, and 12).

Lynn serves on the LPS Curriculum Evaluation Process Steering Committee, Heritage High School Curriculum Council, and Whitman Elementary School Advisory Council for School Improvement.

She chairs the Whitman Elementary School S.T.R.A.W.S. (Students Telling, Reading, and Writing Stories) Publishing Lab. She also is PTO Secretary and frequently volunteers for classroom support and other responsibilities at Whitman.

Lynn also serves as Girl Scout Leader (since 1983), Girl Scout Organizer/Facilitator for Mile Hi Council (since 1984), and Junior Great Books Leader/Facilitator (since 1984).

She has involved herself in many other activities as an active LPS parent and volunteer since moving to Littleton in 1983.

Lynn lives at 7949 South Cedar Circle, Littleton, Colorado 80120. Her home telephone number is (303) 794-2471.