



Renewal Case Study – Charles River Charter School¹

Setting the Stage

Riverton, a mid-sized urban district serving 47,000 students, has been utilizing charter schools as a part of a larger School Portfolio Management strategy for the past seven years. In 1998, under the previous superintendent, senior District administrators created a plan to address the needs of all the students in the community, utilizing traditional public schools as well as a mix of newer public choice models that had been gaining national popularity. The District established a number of specialized magnet schools focused on math and science; strengthened its partnerships with the local parochial and private schools; and created Board of Education policy to authorize and oversee charter schools. A Charter School Office was opened and staffed. This School Portfolio Management strategy has continued under the current superintendent, and the district now authorizes fifteen charter schools.

In Riverton, charter school oversight is guided by three key questions:

1. Is the school's academic program a success?
2. Is the school a viable organization?
3. Has the school implemented the terms of the original charter and its corresponding contract?

All charters awarded by the Board of Education in Riverton are for five year terms. The Board considers renewal of a school's charter in the fall of the school's fifth year of operation.

School Background

Charles River Charter School (CRCS) was founded by a group of six prominent Riverton residents who were originally connected through a community volunteer organization. The founders represented a range of diverse professions – law, business, real estate, and medicine – and saw the opportunity to start a school as a way to give back to the community in a significant way. In addition, three of the founders have school-aged children and had recently become very interested in the quality and diversity of choice options offered by Riverton Public Schools. The original application met all of the technical requirements set out by the Riverton Charter School Office (CSO). CSO staff, however, were concerned that the founding group lacked expertise in the area of K-12 education, and felt that the group needed some additional time before opening to identify a strong instructional leader to implement the full academic program, including a comprehensive, portfolio-based assessment system that was outlined in the charter application.

The founding group was awarded a charter with an 18 month planning term, during which they contracted with the state's Charter School Association to provide technical assistance in a variety

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of school start-up areas. The Board of Trustees applied for and holds a charter for a middle school, grades 5 through 8, with a maximum enrollment of 160 students. CRCS is currently in its fifth year of operation.

The mission of Charles River Charter School, as stated in its original charter application is as follows:

Charles River Charter School educates its students to become independent thinkers and lifelong learners. The school does this through inquiry, active and experiential learning opportunities and a project-based, standards-driven curriculum that encourages community and honors diversity. The school's students receive the education they will need to meet the academic and social challenges of Riverton's best high schools and thrive in today's world.

Growth pattern and demographics:

School Year	Grade Levels	Chartered Enrollment	Total Student Enrollment
First Year	5	40	40
Second Year	5, 6	80	78
Third Year	5, 6, 7	120	116
Fourth Year	5, 6, 7, 8	160	150
Fifth Year	5, 6, 7, 8	160	152

Race/Ethnicity	First Year		Second Year		Third Year		Fourth Year		Fifth Year	
	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District
American Indian or Alaska Native	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Black or African American	66 %	64 %	67 %	65 %	59 %	63 %	58 %	65 %	55 %	63 %
Hispanic	33 %	33 %	33 %	33 %	40 %	34 %	41 %	33 %	43 %	34 %
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0 %	2 %	0 %	1 %	1 %	2 %	1 %	1 %	1 %	2 %
White	1 %	1 %	0 %	1 %	0 %	1 %	0 %	1 %	1 %	1 %

Special Populations	First Year		Second Year		Third Year		Fourth Year		Fifth Year	
	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District	% of Enroll. CRCS	% of Enroll. District
Students with Disabilities	5 %	N/A	5 %	N/A	7 %	N/A	7 %	14 %	8 %	15 %
Limited English Proficient	0 %	10 %	0 %	10 %	0 %	11 %	0 %	11 %	1 %	12 %

The First Five Years

Charles River Charter School has partnered with the Riverton Charter School Office on all aspects of oversight and accountability. The school received a site visit from the CSO in the second and third year of the charter term, as well as a renewal site visit inspection in the fall of its fifth year. These visits were guided by the three oversight questions listed above and the CSO generated comprehensive site visit reports after each visit. In addition, under state law, the school was required to submit an Annual Report each fall that summarized student academic performance and major policy decisions made by the Board during the previous school year. The school's audited financial statements were submitted to the CSO each January. Riverton Public School's Title I office conducted a compliance visit in the Spring of Year 3 and issued a report of its findings.

A summary of the major findings from the school's first four years of operation:

Academic Program

At the beginning of the charter term the school developed and adopted an Accountability Plan that set academic goals in the key subjects of English language arts and mathematics, as well as science and social studies. For each goal, specific outcome measures define the level of performance necessary to meet that goal. These outcome measures include the following three types: 1) the absolute level of student performance on state examinations; 2) the comparative level of student performance on state examinations; and 3) individual student growth based on year-to-year comparisons of grade level cohorts. District policies also allow schools to elect to include additional optional measures for these goals in their Accountability Plan.

During the charter term, Charles River Charter School has had difficulty meeting the key academic goals in English language arts and mathematics it set for itself in its Accountability Plan. The majority of students have not attained proficiency on the state assessments in those subjects. In particular, in its fourth year of operation less than one-third of the Grade 7 students were proficient on the English language arts assessment, indicating that most of them had not been prepared "*to meet the academic and social challenges of Riverton's best high schools and thrive in today's world,*" as promised in the school's mission statement. Further, the school has generally performed far worse than predicted when compared with demographically-similar schools state-wide in English language arts and mathematics. However, CRCS has met or come close to meeting its Accountability Plan goals in science and social studies.

A more detailed analysis of the school's performance in relation to its Accountability Plan goals is available in Appendix A.

During its second and third year site visits, the Riverton Charter School Office found that the school was relying on its teachers to create the school's project-based curriculum. Teachers generally appreciated this approach, and reported that this allowed them to incorporate current events and the interests of their students, as well as provided them with a sense of professional autonomy which they had not previously found at other schools. Reviewers from the Charter School Office noted in their reports, however, that the school had not documented the curriculum's alignment with state performance standards. The extent to which the curriculum was aligned from grade-to-grade was also unclear to reviewers, though teachers indicated that they were aware of what students had learned in previous grades because of the small size of the

school and the friendly relationships and collaboration between the teachers. Some teachers indicated that they routinely engaged in informal conversations in the faculty room to discuss possible cross-curricular projects for their students.

During classroom observations, the site visitors noted that the founding group's vision of project-based learning was not yet in place during years two and three. In fact, inspectors observed instruction that was primarily directed at the whole-class, and teacher-led. One reviewer's observation that the "majority of the school's classrooms resembled traditional middle school classrooms in other schools across the Riverton City School District" was quoted in the second year site visit report.

Partly as a result of the feedback from the site visits, the Board of Trustees chose not to renew the contract of its founding school principal in the school's second year of operation. The new principal, who was hired just prior to the start of the school's third year, has taken significant steps toward implementing the educational program envisioned in the original charter application by the founding board. Over the past two years she has established priorities in line with this vision, and at the time of the renewal review the faculty was clearly aware of her initiatives, which included implementing the project-based curriculum and a portfolio assessment system. Although she has been in this position for approximately two years, only results from the previous year's administration of the state's assessment program have been attributed to changes in the school initiated by her new leadership, due to the timing of the administration of the state's tests.²

To support teachers in making changes to the way they deliver the school's educational program (namely moving from a teacher-led model of whole-class instruction to a student-focused model of project-based learning), the school principal has created a schoolwide professional development plan. Once a month a consultant comes to schoolwide faculty meetings to facilitate workshops on project-based learning, and creating cross-curricular units. The principal has also reconfigured the school's daily schedule to allow for more common planning time among grade-level teachers. However, the principal does not regularly monitor teachers' unit or lesson planning, give feedback to teachers on their plans for instruction, or model instruction for them. Site visitors have documented some evidence of informal observations and subsequent feedback to teachers, however.

Charles River Charter School has built a safe environment in which learning can occur. Site visitors routinely noted the high frequency with which they observed respectful interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students. The school, since its inception, has invested significant time in community building at the beginning of each school year. CRCS makes its behavioral expectations clear to teachers new to the school and reinforces them prior to each school year. During site visits the school's faculty praised both of the school principals for

² The state assessments in science and social studies are given in October and November of each academic year, so student achievement data resulting from the school's third year of operation – the year in which the new principal was hired – cannot fairly be attributed to her leadership. The same argument could be made for the administrations of English language arts and mathematics state assessments, as the administrations of those exams take place in mid-January and early March, respectively. As of the date of the renewal review, the school has not received official results from the state's assessment system.

consistently reinforcing the school's behavioral expectations and consequences for students who have violated the school's code of conduct.

Organizational/Operational/Fiscal

The original founding board of six transitioned to become the full governing Board of the school after the charter was awarded. The Board quickly got to work, with the help of the state's Charter School Association, looking for a founding principal and locating a facility for the school. The Board identified and hired a founding principal who was hired during the 18 month planning process. The principal's initial contract was for two years, and he was charged with building the staff; implementing the project-based curriculum, passage and exit standards, and corresponding portfolio assessment system; and providing instructional leadership to the staff.

Midway through the second year of the principal's contract, the Board considered renewing the principal's contract during a particularly contentious Board meeting. By a four-to-two vote, the Board decided not to renew the contract, based primarily on initial feedback from the Riverton CSO that primary key design elements from the school's charter application (namely the project-based curriculum and portfolio assessment system) had not been implemented. After the vote, the school board activated a search committee to look for the school's second principal. The school's third year opened with a new leader. That year, the site visit team found that the new principal had begun to define and implement the curriculum and assessment system planned in the charter application, however, at its current stage of implementation, the school's internal assessment system was not yet generating data for teachers and administrators to use in making ongoing decisions regarding curriculum and instruction.

Though the school has had two principals in the first five years of operation, the teaching staff has remained relatively stable. Approximately 85% of staff has returned at the end of each summer – the few that have left have cited family and personal reasons, not job dissatisfaction, as the reasons for leaving the school.

The Board has been focused almost entirely on securing a permanent facility for the school. After five years of planning, searching, negotiations and fundraising, the school is still housed in portable classrooms in an industrial park. This focus on facilities has meant that the Board has let some key aspects of policy and oversight slip past them – two of the required audits were submitted late to the Charter School Office; the Board secretary has often forgot to publically post notice of Board meetings in advance to stay in compliance with Open Meeting Law; and the Board has historically set budgets without input from the principal as to the needs of the academic program.

Further, since hiring the second principal two years ago, the Board has not conducted a performance evaluation, nor set time to review or renew her contract. Monthly Board agendas are static, and contain a time for the "Principal's Report." The most recent site visit team's review of the Board meeting minutes revealed that the "Principal's Report" contains a description of events happening on campus – bake sales, student work exhibitions, open houses – but does not include a report of the school's progress toward meeting any of its student achievement goals or key elements of its mission statement. The school Board's oversight of the academic program has been lacking. School reviewers from the Riverton CSO found that majority of the school board members were unaware of the school's Accountability Plan goals.

It is unclear to the Charter School Office how the Board members track or monitor the academic performance of the school on an ongoing basis.

Results of the annual parent survey show that the families of Charles River Charter School are generally satisfied with the education and social opportunities that their children are receiving. The typical classroom at CRCS has approximately 18 students who work collaboratively on cross-curricular projects. This unique approach to teaching and learning (Riverton Public Schools has a more “traditional” approach in its schools) was something rated highly on the survey. Families rated the opportunities for community service as a “highly desirable” attribute of the school. The visit teams heard nothing but positive reviews of the teachers, curriculum, students, and learning opportunities during the interviews with parents and family members. Many family and community members wrote letters of support for the school that the Board included with the Application for Renewal.

The school has operated with a balanced budget each year. In addition, the school has received an unqualified audit for each year it has been in operation and has responded in a timely manner to the few findings in the auditor’s management letter (signatory authority on checks and separation of duties). The Board has utilized short term lines of credit, known as “bridge loans,” to meet financial cash-flow needs at times. This is primarily due to the discrepancy between the first quarter payments based on high pre-enrollment numbers reported in the Spring and the actual reported numbers in the Fall in each year of operation – the school has had to “recover” from the first quarter overpayment and re-balance its cash-flow for the rest of the school year.

Terms of the Original Charter and Contract

As with all schools chartered by the Riverton Board of Education, the founding Board of Charles River Charter School was awarded a charter with material terms under a binding legal contract that defined its operation as a public school in the city of Riverton. The CRCS Board has met the material terms of its original charter – operating as a middle school within the city limits, for no more than 160 students. Over the past four years, however, the Board has struggled to meet some of the global programmatic and operational “promises” outlined in its original charter application.

In its original charter application, the school’s mission stated that CRCS would educate “*its students to become independent thinkers and lifelong learners. The school does this through inquiry, active and experiential learning opportunities and a project-based, standards-driven curriculum that encourages community and honors diversity. The school’s students receive the education they will need to meet the academic and social challenges of Riverton’s best high schools and thrive in today’s world.*” As noted in the site visit reports issued by the CSO, CRCS has had difficulty implementing a project-based curriculum. In the fall of Year 5 the school is just beginning to launch aspects of the portfolio-based assessment system that was outlined in the charter application.

Student enrollment has been slightly below projections in each of the past four years and the school taken up the practice of continuously enrolling students throughout the year to fill open seats.

Appendix A

Analysis of School Performance in Relation to Accountability Plan Goals³

English Language Arts

Accountability Plan Goal: *All students at Charles River Charter School will become proficient readers and writers of the English language.*

Accountability Plan Measures: The school has not achieved its English language arts goal. In absolute terms, 45, 33, 37 and 29 percent of students were proficient in the school’s first, second, third, and fourth year of operation, respectively. In comparison to demographically similar schools statewide, the school performed far worse than predicted in all four years.

In terms of year-to-year growth, none of the school’s cohorts achieved their target in the last four years;⁴ while there was growth overall, less than half of the students achieved proficiency.

	Goals	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Fifth Year
Absolute	Each year 75% of students will perform at or above level 3 on the state exam.	45 %	33 %	37 %	40 %	N/A
Comparative	Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the state exam by at least a small effect size (at least 0.3), based on the free lunch rate.	-.089 Far Worse than Predicted	-1.05 Far Worse than Predicted	-1.16 Far Worse than Predicted	-0.98 Far Worse than Predicted	N/A
Value Added	Each grade level cohort will reduce the gap between the previous year’s baseline and 75% proficient on the state exam by one half.	N/A	0 of 1	0 of 2	0 of 3	N/A

³ Student achievement data for the school’s fifth year of operation was not available at the time of the renewal review.

⁴ There was only one cohort in the school’s first year of operation.

Mathematics

Accountability Plan Goal: *All students at Charles River Charter School will demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of mathematical computation and problem-solving.*

Accountability Plan Measures: The school has not achieved its mathematics goal. In absolute terms, 50, 38, 37 and 40 percent of students were proficient in the school’s first, second, third, and fourth year of operation, respectively. In comparison to demographically similar schools statewide, the school has performed far worse than predicted.

In terms of growth, in each of the last four years only one of the school’s existing cohorts achieved their target. While there was growth overall, less than half of the students achieved proficiency.

	Goals	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Fifth Year
Absolute	Each year 75% of students will perform at or above level 3 on the state exam.	50 %	38 %	37 %	40 %	N/A
Comparative	Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the state exam by at least a small effect size (at least 0.3), based on the free lunch rate.	-0.32 Far Worse than Predicted	-1.23 Far Worse than Predicted	-1.17 Far Worse than Predicted	-0.55 Far Worse than Predicted	N/A
Value Added	Each grade level cohort will reduce the gap between the previous year’s baseline and 75% proficient on the state exam by one half.	N/A	1 of 1	1 of 2	1 of 3	N/A

Science

Accountability Plan Goal: *All students at Charles River Charter School will demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of scientific reasoning and problem-solving.*

Accountability Plan Measures: The school has met its science goal. The fourth year of operation was the first year the school had a state testing grade in science. That year 84 percent of students scored at the proficient level on the Grade 8 state assessment. Comparison data for the demographically similar state schools are not available.

	Goals	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Fifth Year
Absolute	Each year 75% of students will perform at or above level 3 on the state exam.	N/A	N/A	N/A	84 %	N/A
Comparative	Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the state exam by at least a small effect size (at least 0.3), based on the free lunch rate.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Social Studies

Accountability Plan Goal: *All students at Charles River Charter School will demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of social, geographical, civic, and world studies.*

Accountability Plan Measures: The school has come close to meeting its social studies goal. The school’s fourth year was the first that the school had a state testing grade in this subject. That year 73 percent of students scored at the proficient level on the Grade 8 state assessment. Comparison data for the demographically similar schools statewide are not available.

	Goals	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Fifth Year
Absolute	Each year 75% of students will perform at or above level 3 on the state exam.	N/A	N/A	N/A	73 %	N/A
Comparative	Each year the school will exceed its expected level of performance on the state exam by at least a small effect size (at least 0.3), based on the free lunch rate.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

NCLB

In addition to meeting its specific subject area goals, the school is expected under No Child Left Behind to made adequate yearly progress towards enabling all students to score at the proficient level on the state English language arts and mathematics assessments. In holding charter schools to the same standards as other public schools, the state issues an annual school accountability report that indicates the school’s status each year.

Accountability Plan Measures: In the school’s fourth year of operation the state deemed the school “In Need of Improvement – Year 1” because it failed to make adequate year progress in Elementary –Middle Level Mathematics. As a result, the school did not meet this goal.