

Connecticut Charter Schools Best Practices Summary Report

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Overview

This report represents a summary of the “best practices” self-reported by charter schools in annual reports submitted to the Connecticut Department of Education. The information provided by schools is required by the Connecticut General Assembly and provides a summary of best practices currently employed by charter schools throughout the state.

Background

The purposes of Connecticut charter schools are to: “(1) improve academic achievement; (2) provide for educational innovation; (3) provide a vehicle for the reduction of racial, ethnic and economic isolation; and (4) provide a choice of public education programs for students and parents.”¹ To accomplish these directives, charter schools are expected to develop, implement and sustain innovative practices and procedures. The freedoms afforded to charter schools theoretically result in the development of new practices that, in turn, can be shared with other public schools.

A 2005 statutory amendment, C.G.S. 10-66cc, requires Connecticut charter schools to identify “best practices” in annual reports submitted to the Commissioner of Education and to the local or regional board of education for the school district in which the charter school is located. The “best practices” are those employed by the school that “contribute significantly to the academic success of students.” The amendment further requires the Department of Education to publish an annual summary report on all of the best practices reported by governing councils of charter schools. A copy of this report is to be distributed to each public school superintendent and the governing council of each charter school.

2004-2005 Annual Reports

The best practices included in the annual report are self-reported by each charter school’s governing council.² They represent practices and policies that school personnel believe to be the most innovative and effective at improving academic achievement. These data were included in the “Best Practices” section of the annual report, which asked the school to “provide best practices employed by the school that contribute significantly to the academic success of students.” The open-ended nature of the request

¹ *Public School Choice in Connecticut: A Guide for Students and Their Families, 2006-2007*. Connecticut State Department of Education

² Charter school directors or their designee typically complete this task.

produced a range of responses.³ As a result, the self-reported data varied with regard to the number and nature of the practices reported, as well as with the methods used to validate their efficacy. Within this variability, however, there were also similarities. It is clear from the annual reports that the school's mission influences the best practices and that these practices are not limited to the classroom and the curriculum.

2004-2005 Best Practices

The data reported for best practices varied among the 13 charter schools reporting information. Some schools reported practices in great detail while others listed a quick overview in a few paragraphs or a bulleted list. Overall the practices could be sorted into categories such as: Curricular/Academic, Social Outcomes, Learning Community, Governance/General School Policy. Specific best practices may fit into more than one category and it is important to note that the following list is a compilation of the data provided by all schools and all of the following practices are not present in every school. A more detailed, school-by-school summary is provided in the Appendix.

Curricular/Academic

- curriculum based on students' individual needs
- student-created goals
- peer mentoring
- smaller class sizes
- focus on standards-based curriculum (aligned with Connecticut and national standards)
- ongoing classroom assessments inform student needs and curricular modifications
- classes are ability-based and students may switch classes as they progress
- programs are geared toward inquiry-based, hands-on learning
- cross-grade projects based on students' own interests
- a variety of enrichment classes offered before, during and after school

Social Outcomes

- strong parent-school partnership
- classes take place outside of the school building in the community
- a variety of social programs highlighting important social skills such as respect, consideration and tolerance
- behavioral management plans create a safe learning environment
- school uniforms create unity and decrease competition
- counseling offered to students in need

³ In response, CSDE officials worked with the evaluators to refine the data collection protocol for subsequent annual reports.

Learning Community

- continuous feedback given to students regarding academic progress
- weekly professional development for teachers
- weekly meetings with Director of Curriculum to bolster professional development and teacher support/sharing
- new teachers involved in an induction program

Governance/General School Policy

- extended day and year for additional academic opportunities
- academic growth monitored through “Must Pass Policy,” as one example, to prevent social promotion
- great teachers are recruited

2005-2006 Data Collection: New Format

The intent of collecting and disseminating best practices information is to foster the diffusion of charter school best practices into other public schools. Review of the data collection template resulted in modifications to the 2005-06 form requesting this information. The new template asks the schools to describe two or three of their most effective best practices. This narrowed focus is intended to encourage schools to highlight those practices they believe to have shown results over time. In addition, five new questions were added to the 2005-06 template. For example, one question asks charter schools to identify the primary issue that each best practice is designed to address or target (e.g., student outcomes, faculty learning). Another question asks about any modifications that were made to best practices throughout the year. This additional guidance should help charter schools identify and elaborate upon a focused set of best practices.

Appendix. Summaries of Self-Reported Best Practices by Charter School, 2004-05

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
269	The Bridge Academy Opened: 1997 Grades: 7-12	Bridgeport	<p>Best practices are listed as “policies worth duplicating in other districts”: "Must Pass Policy," Reading Program, Math Final Exam. All policies are score-based. Students must pass a class/reading comprehension test/final to be considered successful.</p> <p><i>“...provides a college preparatory education designed to overcome the problems presently found in the inner city. This charter school is small, and run by a caring group of teachers, parents, teacher aides, and dedicated community leaders. Our program includes intense classes in Reading, Writing, and Math to counter the learning deficits currently illustrated by Bridgeport Mastery and CAPT scores. The college preparatory curriculum focuses on continually increasing standards for students and teachers. Small, focused schools have proven more successful in urban America, and our school is a leader in this new educational movement in Connecticut. The traditional high schools are large and complex, thus our school’s small size and simplicity is unique to the community. Students meet once a month with mentors in the business community. The mentors and school personnel push the students to reach a level of maturity and learning needed for success in the working world. The [name] seeks to end the racial isolation of our students. This is done through recruitment of students outside of Bridgeport, field trips, community events, and inter-district projects that foster cooperation between diverse groups of people. In addition, the school provides the students with as many excursions into the adult community as possible, through community service, field trips, Internet conversations, and guest lectures. Therefore, upon graduation our students have the maturity, the academic training and the exposure to successful adults necessary to make successful choices in their future lives.”</i></p>
280	New Beginnings Family Academy Opened: 2002 Grades: K-7	Bridgeport	<p>Best practices are broken down into academic and social practices that target increased student achievement in a supportive and positive learning environment. School uniforms create unity and decrease competition. (T.H.I.N.K. is the school motto.) An extended day and school year provide additional academic opportunities for both enrichment and support. Morning meetings add to a community atmosphere and highlight positive reinforcement and outstanding classroom behavior.</p> <p><i>“...is a public charter school that fosters a safe and respectful environment where learners become high academic achievers capable of making sound, ethical judgments.”</i></p>

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
277	Highville Mustard Seed Charter School Opened: 1998 Grades: PK-8	Hamden	Students are grouped by ability with extended day/year for those below grade level. Classes are flexible as students can move to a new ability-grouped class as they progress and there are annual school based assessments (grades, observation, progress reports, etc.) as well as the CMT that prevent social promotion and inform correct/appropriate student placement. Best practices also include weekly professional development and a focus on student-created goals.
			<i>“...an enterprising and caring community with strong parent and community involvement, prepares and instills a desire for all learners to confidently use technology, think globally, develop globally-conscious citizenship, utilize world languages, and the study of various world cultures as the basis for launching learners on their voyage as responsible navigators, to discover their potential and chart their course through an ever-changing, interdependent and global future. Such a globally-conscious citizen will be values-oriented, wellness-conscious, career-directed, competent in communications and problem-solving, skillful in creative and critical thinking, culturally sophisticated, and acutely aware of global interdependence.” Synopsis from Annual Report, page 5.</i>
263	Odyssey Community School Opened: 1997 Grades: 4-8	Manchester	Best practices are broad programs that address curriculum, order and discipline. The curriculum is aligned with the Connecticut Framework with CMT objectives. Lessons and instruction are modified based on curriculum assessment results every six weeks. A school-wide organization protocol provides more time for instruction and Behavioral Management Plans create a safe learning environment, both emotionally and physically. Students receive consequences/rewards based on a Progressive Discipline Plan.
			<i>“...provides a positive intermediate elementary and middle school experience that emphasizes academic excellence, the ability to communicate effectively using traditional and technological media and the development of strong character and self-confidence. The unique mind and heart of each child is nurtured as students are taught to internalize the CIRCLE values (Courage, Integrity, Respect, Curiosity, Leadership and Excellence) and to become productive members of their community.”</i>

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
279	Amistad Academy Opened: 1999 Grades: K-1, 5-10	New Haven	Best Practices are part of an Achievement First program (same as #281). These practices focus on student achievement which is routinely measured and used to inform teaching in a school community heavily focused on time-on-task, discipline, and achievement and a standards-based curriculum. Great teachers are sought after (new teachers are involved in an induction program) and nurtured through professional development and an administration (who also receive focused leadership training) that is involved and invested in quality teaching and teacher growth. School also fosters a relationship with parents and the community to make sure no students "fall through the crack."
			<p><i>"...three overarching goals:</i></p> <p><i>Academic Excellence: To accelerate the learning of our students so that they achieve academic breakthroughs in the skills that are essential for success in high school, college and life – especially reading, writing, math, and public speaking.</i></p> <p><i>Public Citizenship: To develop students who take responsibility for themselves, their school and their community by living up to the school's REACH values (Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship, and Hard Work).</i></p> <p><i>Partners in Public School Reform: To develop and share an instructional model that consistently produces dramatic growth in student achievement and to work with others to further excellence in public education."</i></p>
268	Common Ground High School Opened: 1997 Grades: 9-12	New Haven	Academic and social programs target all achievement levels with time built in for those in need. The students are given constant feedback regarding attendance and work quality and quantity. Positive reinforcement highlights schools POWER traits and students who exemplify them.
			<p><i>"...will graduate students with the knowledge, skills and motivation to live healthy, productive and sustainable lives. We will do so through authentic learning that develops ecological literacy, academic accomplishment, strong character, and commitment to community. [Name] is based on the fundamental concept of ecology: all living and non-living things on the earth are connected and interdependent. The study of natural systems reveals simple yet powerful concepts that help us understand human systems as well. An ecological framework goes beyond science: the study of nature includes human nature."</i></p>

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
281	Elm City College Preparatory School Opened: 2004 Grades: 4-8	New Haven	Best Practices are part of an Achievement First program (same as #279). These practices focus on student achievement which is routinely measured and used to inform teaching in a school community heavily focused on time-on-task, discipline, and achievement and a standards-based curriculum. Great teachers are sought after (new teachers are involved in an induction program) and nurtured through professional development and an administration (who also receive focused leadership training) that is involved and invested in quality teaching and teacher growth. School also fosters a relationship with parents and the community to make sure no students "fall through the crack."
			<i>"...will strengthen the academic and character skills necessary for all students to excel in the top tier of high schools and colleges, to achieve success in a competitive world, and to serve the next generation of leaders in their communities."</i>
265	ISAAC School Opened: 1997 Grades: 6-8	New London	Academic and enrichment programs (in-school daily and Grade 8 Opera program) are geared towards inquiry-based, hands-on learning. Both the students and teachers are responsible for lesson reflection and assessments. Lessons are based on individual need and interest [Columbia Readers and Writers Workshops, Orbitals (independent research projects and presentations)] and the school as a learning community is fostered through portfolios, multiage classes and orbitals.
			<i>"...dedicated to being an experiential learning community where students, families, and teachers are challenged to discover and express the best in themselves and each other while valuing the diversity in our school, our community and the world."</i>

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
264	The Integrated Day Charter School Opened: 1997 Grades: PK-8	Norwich	Best practices include high standards for all students which are facilitated, initiated and supported through differentiated instruction, student-led learning, extremely visible/sought after parent-school partnership/communication, and community building within the school. The importance of art is stressed throughout the classrooms, school and studio.
			<i>“...to provide flexible and academically challenging atmosphere, which allows for the individual difference of the learners. Parents, students and instructors will work together to establish a developmentally appropriate program for each student. Character development and direct instruction in a social curriculum are an integral part of the program. A commitment to and involvement in the school community, as well as the larger Norwich community, are fostered.”</i>
282	Stamford Academy Opened: 2004 Grades: 9-12	Stamford	Best practices are broken down into academic and social practices. Academic practices target teacher support. This support includes appropriate certification, weekly meetings to discuss issues and provide peer support, professional development, and mentoring by the Director of Curriculum. A student-centered practice is school-wide projects graded "cross-curricularly." Social practices involve daily assessment of the child's social status, weekly meetings with the child and monthly meetings with the family. The school also requires group counseling for all students and students in need are given weekly, individual counseling.
			<i>“...to regenerate and reinvigorate students’ interest in learning by providing a caring, nurturing and supportive environment The students who enter [name] do so primarily because they have been unsuccessful in their prior educational environments. Our school was founded to meet the needs of these children. That said, we pride ourselves on our ability and willingness to reach out to students and their families. Our family advocacy model has helped to foster a trust and bond between our families and our school that begins to break down the previous learning barriers. It is this blend of educational and social/emotional focus that sets this school apart. Students formerly reluctant to attend school and participate in the normal school and extra-curricular activities are being revitalized and reenergized. Our goals are academic and social. We strive for the emotional success of the students and assist them in preparing for college or the world of work</i>

School #	School Name	Location	Best Practices - <i>Mission</i>
278	Trailblazer's Academy Opened: 1999 Grades: 6-8	Stamford	Best practices are separated into academic and social practices. Academic practices include peer mentoring and weekly meetings with Director of Curriculum to bolster professional development and teacher support/advice sharing. Individual needs/academic achievement/interests are met with Reader's Workshop and school-wide projects that are cross grade and ability level. Social practices include a modified Morning Meeting called Circle of Power and Respect. This helps create a positive learning community focused on respect, acknowledgement and sharing.
			<i>"...create a safe, supportive, and structured school community. Together we will enable students to identify and develop their abilities and interests as they meet high academic standards. At [name] we are often confronted with students who have struggled in traditional schools. Indeed, our school was founded to offer such students the opportunity to attend an academic institution that addresses those struggles in the pursuit of academic excellence. A large part of that effort involves assessing and providing for the social and emotional needs of our students. Our staff members, but particularly our family advocates, are dedicated to mending the social and emotional ills of our students so that they are able to achieve academically. This blend of education and social/emotional support is the driving force behind our school. Our goal is the academic, social and emotional success of each child, and we pursue this goal each and every day."</i>
272	Explorations Opened: 1997 Grades: 10-12	Winsted	School focuses on small class sizes to meet the individual needs (enrichment, modifications, etc) of the students and to form a supportive learning community. A Physical Education program creates trust, team spirit and individual accomplishment between students and teachers. Parent involvement is considered necessary and is fostered through four annual meetings, monthly progress reports and e-mail.
			<i>"...to provide a public school that cultivates a positive attitude toward life-long learning in an experiential, non-traditional educational setting. [Name] provides an environment that models interdependence as the foundation of society. The program emphasizes activities which foster the acceptance of responsibility, development of positive decision making and problem solving skills; and encourages students to develop a healthy attitude toward their school, community, work, family, and most importantly, toward themselves. Family and community involvement at [name] demonstrates how each of us takes ownership in contributing to a better future for each other."</i>