

Charter Oak Primary School, located in Peoria, Illinois, enrolls 405 kindergarten through fourth grade students. The student population is both economically and racially diverse: nearly half of Charter Oak's students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. About half the students are white and just under 39% of students are African American (remaining students are of other ethnicities). One in five students has been identified as having special needs. According to its mission statement, Charter Oak is ". . . dedicated to providing a solid foundation for life-long educational and social success to a diverse population of learners."

A unique mix of students

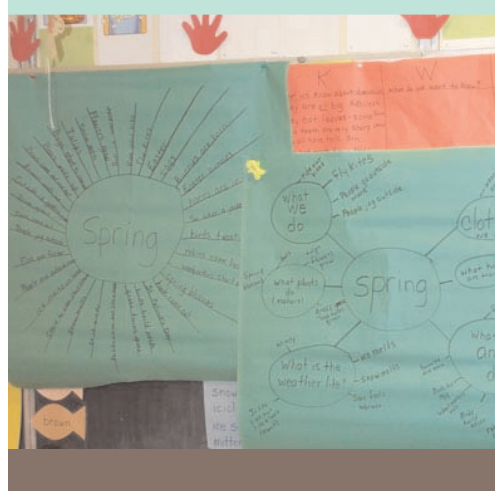
The Charter Oak neighborhood is experiencing growth in both housing and commercial construction. Most students are bused to school from nearby subdivisions, some low-income and others upper middle class. For the past twenty years, one busload of students from a housing project located in inner city Peoria attends Charter Oak. This unique situation challenges parents from the inner city to connect and support the school, and challenges teachers to meet the needs of a wide range of student achievement levels in the same classroom.

Charter Oak has demonstrated it can overcome these challenges. In 2003, 79 % of grade 3 students met or exceeded the state standards in reading and 91% met or exceeded state standards in math (compared with 62% and 76%, respectively, of grade 3 students statewide). Within the 2003 third grade group, 72% of low-income students met or exceeded standards in reading (compared with only 41% statewide) and 42% of students with disabilities met or exceeded state standards in reading (compared to 33 % statewide). Ninety-one per cent of low income students in 2003 met or exceeded state standards in math (compared to 58% statewide) and 78% of students with disabilities met or exceeded state standards in math (compared to 55% statewide). Test scores were similar for the preceding three years.



Teaching

The teaching staff is highly qualified and turnover is low. Most teachers have both master's degrees and additional coursework and averaged 20 years in education and 8 years at Charter Oak. All are certified in the areas in which they teach. A reading coach provides diagnostic assistance, coaching, and staff development, and a fulltime speech pathologist provides diagnostic and direct therapy. A cadre of volunteer tutors tailors instruction for students needing academic support.



The teachers at Charter Oak have one of the area's highest levels of participation at district professional development workshops. Through the district's Professional Academies, they can earn 15 hours of credit and receive salary enhancements. This is in addition to professional development activities directly related to district initiatives such as training in the *PRIME* math program, and the new literacy program, *Open Court*.



With three or four classrooms per grade and a required 45 minute preparation period for each teacher, it was not possible to schedule common planning times. Strategically, the administration structured four 30 minute lunch periods, one for each grade level. All the grade level teachers eat in the teachers' lunchroom, where they plan and talk about student work. The principal intentionally joins in the conversations and models a "learning conversation." The collegiality and professionalism during the common lunch planning time was notable. One teacher commented, "Some kids may be dealing with baggage at home but we find ways to adapt to help the student. The principal expects us to do our job, we see results on the ISAT, and then know what to do and do it."

Charter Oak invites parents and community volunteers into the school and puts them to work helping students succeed. On any given day, the hallways hum with activity, as students and volunteers cluster around the crescent-shaped tutoring tables.

The reading coach, who leads the volunteer recruitment and training effort, says that Charter Oak's volunteers come to her with "talent." While retired teachers and others with teaching backgrounds are especially comfortable as tutors, she trains all volunteers and assigns them to classroom teachers. The teachers give the tutors additional guidance so that each learning session targets students' instructional needs. For example, tutors are given kits containing high interest materials that reinforce academic skills. As one teacher commented, "We don't want tutoring to be 'hit or miss.'" After each session, tutors jot notes in the student's log, giving the teacher important feedback on the student's performance.

Leadership sets the tone

When Thom Simpson arrived at Charter Oak ten years ago, he noticed notable achievement gaps affecting two groups of students: those with disabilities (at that time in self-contained classrooms) and those from low income families. Mr. Simpson, whose background is in social work and special education, said he was introduced to the benefits of inclusion at a conference in Italy: "I really wanted to try it," he said. "It took a great deal of effort on behalf of the teachers," he noted of the carefully chosen teachers who first co-taught in the inclusion classrooms. A few parents initially complained, but as parents saw the benefits of inclusion for all children, complaints stopped, he said. Given the school demographics, the school qualified for four full time special education teachers for several years. Inclusion has had a profound effect on the whole school.



Now retired and serving a temporary position in the district office, Mr. Simpson identified the most critical element of building the culture of high expectations for all students as "solid and experienced teachers. I rarely hired a new, inexperienced teacher." He groomed his teaching staff carefully, describing how he learned each teacher's strengths and how to make him or her important—"just like you would know the students in your classroom," he said.

Based on this knowledge, he assigned co-teachers in the inclusion classrooms to create a positive learning climate, and took equal care in selecting grade level representatives on the school improvement team as well as teachers to attend workshops and return as "turn-key" trainers in the building. He also invited feedback. As one teacher noted, "He

had high expectations for himself, was doing his best, and set the example. He was a professional and he treated you like one.”

He worked to give teachers all the professional development and support they needed to zero in on academic gains, paying special attention to analyzing and disaggregating test data. “Teachers need to know the difference between perception and reality,” he observed. Teachers learned how to align curriculum to standards and create performance targets, and use end-of-unit tests and other teacher-made assessments to guide instruction.

Individualized instruction helps all students

As one teacher said, “Dr. Simpson raised the bar for all students, including those with IEPs. The diversity of kids in the building is our strength.” Another added, “He was always harping on individual learning plans for every student. Individual learning plans are good because they make sure that we are accountable to get kids to grade level expectations.” At the root of Charter Oak’s success is the differentiated instructional philosophy drawn from the inclusion model, adapted in classrooms at every grade in the building.



The teachers agreed that integrating students with disabilities has resulted in better academic performance and social skills for students with special needs without jeopardizing the success of other students in the class. They attribute their success to several factors: leadership, staffing, high expectations, differentiated instruction and a focus on data. For several years, all grades have had one classroom taught by two teachers; one certified in elementary education and the other in special education. (This year, a reduction in staff eliminated one inclusion classroom.)

To make inclusion work, teachers had to learn to customize instruction and to focus data “like a laser.” Over time, teamed teachers began to work together like “well-oiled machines.” For example, in a 2nd grade reading comprehension lesson, one teacher was leading a whole group lesson while her co-teacher was stationed with a small group. The small

group instructor quietly supplied more explanation to some students and prompted their responses. At the same time, she monitored the entire room and offered assistance and encouragement to other students.

Led by their former principal, teachers transferred the high expectations they held for their typical students to high expectations for all. With true inclusion, rather than a pull-out model, teachers saw that students with disabilities “began to talk more like their peers and think more like peers.” Teachers now expect them to try harder, move faster, and “rise to the occasion.”

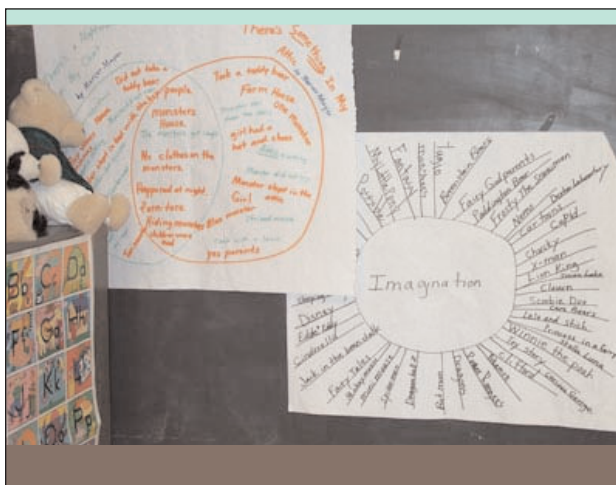
While students rarely know which teacher is the “special ed” one, all of the students thrive from having “two different ways of explaining things and two more eyes and two more hands to instruct and support.” One parent referred to teachers in the inclusion rooms as “the dream teams.” She explained, “Everybody here wants their children to get the dream teams. My children have been lucky so far in that they have both been in inclusion classes. Neither one has a learning problem but they get so much out of all the different ways that things are taught – the projects, the skits, lots of group work. It really has helped them succeed.”



Staying aligned

Two years ago, the district provided training on item analysis of district mandated assessments: the fall and spring Peoria Assessment Program, ISAT, and ITBS, and aligned the results of the data with curriculum objectives and performance indicators for each grade, providing, as a teacher noted, “a roadmap.” Because Charter Oak teachers had already integrated these data into individualized instruction in the classroom and were discussing curriculum adaptations among themselves and at the school improvement meetings, they were well-positioned to meet district mandates.

A School Improvement Team (S-Team) of teachers, parents, and administrators thoroughly analyzes and compares the results of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) to previous years. The team charts each grade by subject and



item for all students and subgroups and shares data with the entire faculty to determine instructional strategies, materials, and staff development activities necessary to improve student achievement for the next year.

Parents are encouraged to go online to experience the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and help their children take practice tests. A revised school report card gives parents grade level

expectations along with information about remediation and enrichment.

The whole school, not just the 3rd and 4th grade teachers, has a stake in Charter Oak’s students’ success on the ISATs. The teaching staff has analyzed foundational concepts by grade, often during summer planning time, and strengthened instruction, beginning at kindergarten. During the weeks before the actual ISAT test in early spring, each lower grade class adopts a 3rd or 4th grade class and brings in treats, hangs supporting posters in the hallways—celebrating the event and results with the whole school community.

Meeting the needs of struggling students

When Charter Oak’s students struggle to meet learning, behavior, or attendance goals, the Student Assistance Team (SAT) designs interventions tailored to individual needs. The SAT team is made up of 5 members with certification in regular and special education and “specialty” areas. This year’s team



meets twice weekly and includes the physical education teacher and the speech and language therapist. In partnership

with a student's classroom teacher and parents, the team's charge is to analyze the student's strengths and needs and brainstorm promising strategies for the classroom and the home. Team members emphasized that most students do not "end up in special education." Examples of typical interventions are smaller group learning, more hands-on projects, more time to finish assignments, or tutoring sessions. Student progress over time is monitored by team members assigned as "case managers." The team documents the steps it takes in the student's records. When needed, the team draws resources from community agencies. A team member said, "We pride ourselves in always finding a solution, whatever the area. We will try lots of different strategies until we see results."

One academic intervention for students who are struggling to meet ISAT benchmarks is the extended day program. Staffed by both regular and special education faculty, this district initiative supports one hour of focused small group academic instruction 4 days a week, especially targeted to 3rd and 4th graders. Students who need additional remediation are encouraged to attend the district's summer learning program.

While the district provides the curriculum, extended day teachers dig deep into their instructional bag of motivations to reach reluctant learners at the end of a long school day. Teachers encourage students to stay focused and give lots of positive feedback for on-task behavior and partially correct responses. In one lively lesson, the teacher used tangible classroom materials—floor tiles, yard sticks, poster boards—to deepen student understanding of math measurement concepts. Through hands-on experiences, students gained the understanding that let them tackle math word problems.

Parent engagement

Charter Oak principal, administrators, and staff identified support from parents as a contributing factor that helps students meet high standards. Teachers said that families value academic achievement and set clear expectations for their children. When learning or discipline problems arise, parents respond to teachers' request for assistance. One teacher said, "Here, when I have a problem with a student, I know I can call home. I have learned that parents will come in, will sit down with you and we are able to work things out together."

One parent characterized the Charter Oak climate this way: "This school is run like a tight ship, but in a loving and nurturing way. The teachers care about the kids, all of the kids. And the kids respect the teachers. We don't have discipline problems here, big ones, anyway. These teachers are seasoned and can handle anything that comes up."

While other teachers affirmed how parents support their efforts by volunteering, fundraising and staff recognition activities, parent leaders described how teachers keep them “in the know.” Teachers and students produce class newsletters that describe what children are working on and suggest activities that families can do to extend the learning, such as projects to tackle, books to read or TV shows to view. To promote reading habits, children bring home library books each week that are selected to match their independent reading level. A parent of children in two different grades said, “Teachers here work hard. They keep up on homework and monitor it. We have to sign it and it is checked daily. Teachers return papers on a tight schedule, too. You get things back the next day, not the next week.”

Parents gave teachers credit for “talking up” the monthly events that the Parent Teacher Club (PTC) offers and for “coming out in force” themselves to support fundraising events and information evenings, such as how to prepare your child for the ISAT. Most parents come to all PTC activities, including the parents of children bussed from the inner city. In six years, a parent spokesperson could not recall a single PTC event that “had flopped” because of low parent attendance. PTC funds have underwritten costs of computers and software, playground equipment, duplication and tutoring stations. As one teacher put it, “Our parents make sure we have what we need to do our jobs well.”

