

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 120

EA 026 806

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 TITLE Parent Involvement Contracts in California's Charter Schools: Strategy for Educational Improvement of Method of Exclusion? Occasional Paper Series.  
 INSTITUTION Southwest Regional Lab., Los Alamitos, CA.  
 SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.  
 PUB DATE Apr 95  
 CONTRACT RP91002006  
 NOTE 34p.  
 PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Admission Criteria; Contracts; Decentralization; Elementary Education; \*Parent Participation; \*Parent Responsibility; Parent Role; \*Parent School Relationship; \*School Policy; \*Selective Admission; Social Control; Socioeconomic Status  
 IDENTIFIERS \*California; \*Charter Schools

ABSTRACT

Many deregulated public charter schools are emphasizing parental involvement. But to what extent do the initiators of these charter schools use parent involvement and parent contracts to restrict enrollment to students whose parents demonstrate the desired commitments and willingness to meet school expectations? To explore this question, this paper reports on: (1) findings from a survey of 28 charter schools and 39 comparison schools in the same California communities; and (2) an examination of parent contracts in use at 23 of the charter schools. The survey elicited response rates of 62 and 51 percent for charter schools and traditional schools, respectively. The overall tenor of the parent contracts used at most of the charter schools suggests that the contracts are viewed as a means of obtaining compliance rather than as a positive vehicle for encouraging the growth of a more inclusive school community. These contracts seem to permit schools more leverage over parents. Furthermore, a major reason charter schools have higher levels of parent involvement may be that the more school-participation-oriented families select themselves into charter-school enrollment; meanwhile, parents who lack the initial interest or circumstances conducive to participation reject the opportunity to join such a school. It is concluded that, to some extent, schools are being organized to exclude students based on a new criterion of undesirability--the criterion of having supportive and educationally involved parents. Nine tables are included.  
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O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R

ED 384 120

# Parent Involvement Contracts In California's Charter Schools

## Strategy for Educational Improvement Or Method of Exclusion?



Southwest Regional Laboratory

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The Laboratory publishes from time to time "occasional papers" that address issues relating to children who, for a variety of reasons, do not benefit from conventional schooling practices in the metropolitan Pacific Southwest. Inquiries are welcome; address them to E. Joseph Schneider, deputy executive director, who edits the series.

**Parent Involvement Contracts  
In California's Charter Schools**

**Strategy for Educational Improvement  
Or Method of Exclusion?**

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**April 1995**

This publication was prepared by the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL), with funding provided under a subcontract from Far West Laboratory (contract no. 91002006, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education). The content does not necessarily represent the views of Far West Laboratory or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by these agencies.

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## ABSTRACT

Many deregulated public charter schools are emphasizing parental involvement. Some even seem to be working from a communitarian model, trying to build an integral school community in which parents play numerous roles in the ongoing events of the school and classroom day. California charter schools are also experimenting with a variety of mechanisms for encouraging parent involvement, including having parents sign agreements or "contracts" promising a certain amount or type of involvement. But to what extent are the initiators of these charter schools using parent involvement and parent contracts to restrict enrollment to children whose parents demonstrate the desired commitments and willingness to meet school expectations?

To explore this question, this paper reports on (a) analyses of data from a survey of California's charter schools and comparison schools in the same communities and (b) an examination of parent contracts in use at the charter schools.

The overall tenor of the parent contracts used at most of the charter schools suggests that the contracts are viewed as a means of obtaining compliance rather than as a positive vehicle for encouraging the growth of a more inclusive school community. These contracts, although probably intended to encourage more involvement, actually seem to permit schools more leverage over parents.

Furthermore, a major reason charter schools have higher levels of parent involvement may be that the more school-participation-oriented families select themselves into charter school enrollment; meanwhile, parents who lack the initial interest or circumstances that would enable more substantial participation reject the opportunity to join such a school.

To some extent, the authors conclude, schools are being organized to exclude students based on a new criterion of undesirability (perhaps "least desirable to teach" or "least desirable to be around"). It is the criterion of having supportive and educationally involved parents.

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## INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners increasingly recognize that a close-knit community, linking families and schools, has important benefits for improving student commitment to schoolwork and the academic outcomes that follow. For instance, several empirical studies have found that students whose parents are involved with their learning at home have higher academic achievement, regardless of socioeconomic factors. This is particularly so when teachers orchestrate the parental involvement (findings summarized in Bryk, et al., 1990). James Coleman has suggested that when parents have functional relations with their children's schools and support the school through home- and school-based activities, "social capital" is created that produces normative support and legitimation for teachers' demands and more positive feelings on the part of children toward the school (Coleman, 1987).

In terms of school-based involvement, parents play a variety of roles, from observers to policymakers, educators to aides, clerical support to fund raisers (e.g., Fine, 1993; Gordon, 1977; Schickedanz, 1977; Slaughter & Kuehne, 1988). Joyce Epstein (1992) situates these various parent roles within six "types" of family-school interactions: basic (families meeting the primary needs of the child and the school helping families to do this), communication, volunteer, learning activities at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. These types of interactions span the different contexts of home/family, community, and school (Muller & Kerbow, 1993), thereby recognizing that families and schools may emphasize different areas of involvement and that different families will vary in the kind and context of their involvement. Epstein describes the ideal family-school relationship as a "partnership" where both school and family recognize, respect, and support each other.

However, the focus in much of the literature isn't on creating partnerships. Rather, it concentrates on how to get parents more involved and how to "change" parents to conform to school expectations (Lightfoot, 1978). In some instances, schools may ask parents to sign contracts promising a certain level and type of involvement in the educational process (e.g., volunteering at school on so many occasions or agreeing to monitor homework on a daily basis). The school, in trying to get families to support its goals and purposes, may sometimes use parent involvement as a benchmark against which the school judges parents and their children (Lareau, 1989). The use of parent involvement as a measure of selectivity has been suggested by Cobb (1992), who argued that Catholic schools may

not be selective in terms of income or academic ability, "But they are selective in requiring a sincere interest [by parents] in academic work." It seems plausible that the superior achievement levels found in Catholic schools might be partly attributable to their having been chosen disproportionately by families having a high level of parental engagement in their children's schoolwork—a factor unaccounted for by standard SES measures typically used to control for family background.

The idea of a parent involvement standard may be particularly detrimental to "non-mainstream" parents. For instance, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) suggests that Hispanic parents are often unused to the kinds of involvement schools expect; consequently, Latinos may feel alienated by "typical" kinds of parent involvement activities. Muller and Kerbow (1993) have found that African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and White parents differ in the kinds of activities they are involved in and the contexts for those activities. Asian American parents are little involved in the school context, but more involved in the home context, particularly in terms of setting restrictions for their children. In contrast, White parents are involved in the school context; home context involvement was more social, such as talking with their children about school experiences. And, with respect to social class differences, Lareau (1989) has found that middle-class parents are better able to meet school and teacher expectations for parent involvement than working-class parents.

For the past two years California school faculties (and other groups with their support) have had an option to reorganize a public school (or create a new one) independent of most state and district regulations. One purpose of the charter schools is to "increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are defined as academically low achieving" (SB1448). To increase learning opportunities, these charter schools have been free to design their own curriculum, personnel practices, and admission and suspension requirements, within certain limits. They also have more flexibility in student enrollment; although a charter school must give preference to students in their attendance area and the school's student population must reflect the district's as a whole, they may also set admissions' requirements and may accept students regardless of residence.

Parent involvement has been a surprisingly central feature of many of the proposals for new and restructured charter schools in California. State legislation mandates that parents be involved in school governance, but broader kinds of parental

involvement seem to be contemplated by those designing these new schools. In many of these schools, parent involvement is much more than simply a requirement to volunteer assistance or to help with their child's homework. Parents are seen as central adults in a more inclusive school community—participants who share time and expertise with the school's students as a whole.

For example, a majority of the first chartered schools were planning to have parents and other community members as instructors in the school building, and several expected to sponsor training in tutoring methods and parenting techniques for use at home. In fact, a survey by the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL) of 34 of the first 44 schools chartered by the state found that in more than 50% of them parents were required to sign contracts and to participate in certain activities (Dianda & Corwin, 1994).

One recently approved charter school, for example, intends to require parents "to volunteer a minimum of three hours per month at the school." Another stated in its charter: "Parents, by signing their child's registration form, commit themselves to at least 2 hours of school service per month.... Any student accepted on an above mentioned agreement will meet a prescribed written contract and will understand, if the contract is broken, said agreement will be revoked and the student will be disenrolled."

The extensive attention paid to parent involvement among the California charter schools, particularly in the use of contracts to encourage involvement, raises a question. Are these schools simply encouraging parent involvement and helping to bring it about, or are they using a requirement for parent involvement to exclude students and families who do not fit their expectations?

For instance, the use of contracts may help parents. If a parent is unsure of how to get involved, the contract can make explicit the kind of parent behaviors a school expects. Conversely, the specificity of the contracts may not acknowledge the many ways in which parents support their children differently than the "school-defined" ways. Parents who feel unable to meet the requirements may either be discouraged from enrolling their child or may be asked to transfer their child from the school. Such selectivity might be a significant form of "skimming," and may be related to factors such as SES, race, and ethnic background.

This paper reports on a follow-up investigation of California's charter schools that focuses on the role of parental involvement in the formal organization and culture of these

## **SURVEY POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

schools. The paper critically analyzes the apparent purpose of the parent involvement strategies, programs, and rules found in the charter school implementations. We attempt to distinguish the underlying priorities and attention being paid to three general goals: (a) the goal of improving student academic outcomes directly through parents' activities that support learning at home; (b) the goal of creating a closely knit school community that activates underutilized educational resources among parents; and (c) the instrumental goal of selectively excluding children for whom parent involvement cannot easily be accomplished so that greater attention can be paid to other goals, such as (a) and/or (b).

As of October 1994, 70 California schools had received approval to establish a charter school for some range of the grades K-12. A majority of these schools were existing schools that had converted to charter status through the initiative of teachers or a collaboration of teachers, building or district administrators, and parents. Some proposals approved were charters for establishing new schools; some were mechanisms for providing home-schooling for families advocating that approach; a few focused on special programs such as dropout recovery for adolescents from at-risk backgrounds; and a small number were charters for schools to be managed by existing private or nonprofit organizations.

In November 1994, all the schools were surveyed to obtain preliminary information about their situation, including the extent of their autonomy from their home district, the kinds of students they were primarily planning to serve, and the major instructional and organizational innovations they were attempting. In addition, two other important data elements were retrieved at this time: first, if the school employed parent contracts, a copy of the contract they were using was requested; second, the charter school administrator was asked to identify from one to three nearby public schools "that your students might have attended if they had not enrolled in your school."

In February 1995, more detailed survey forms were sent to 57 charter schools—all those that had begun serving students by the end of 1994 and were not solely arrangements for home-schooling. In addition to surveying the charter school administrator and a sample of teachers at each charter school, the principal of each nearby public school named by the charter school administrator was also sent a survey booklet. These nearby schools become a comparison population for examining

## **HOW UNUSUAL ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TERMS OF LEVELS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT?**

the changes in practice and policy implemented in charter schools.

This paper, a portion of a larger effort by SWRL to study autonomy and innovation in California charter schools, deals with a major subset of that surveyed population. We focus here on those charter schools serving elementary or middle-grades students, excluding those operating solely to facilitate home-schooling arrangements for parents, and excluding two schools being managed by private organizations.

Of the 45 charter schools in this group, 34 responded to the preliminary survey (76%), and 23 of them provided a copy of their parent contract. (Twenty-seven of the 34 schools [79%] reported having such a contract.) The 34 schools named a total of 77 nearby public schools that became the comparison group population in the February data collection.

The February effort yielded survey responses from 28 elementary and middle-school charter administrators (62% of the original sample of 45) and from 39 comparison schools (a 51% return rate). Much of the analysis below contrasts the group of responses from the 28 charter school administrators with the responses of 39 comparison school administrators. The alternate approach, of treating the sample as a set of paired comparisons, matching each charter school with its comparison school (or mean response, if more than one), was rejected because only 17 charter schools responding to the February survey had at least one comparison school responding as well. Further, a preliminary examination of the data suggested there was a good demographic match when the sets of schools were considered as a whole.

Despite widespread interest in having parents play active roles at school and helping their children learn at home, it is difficult for schools and teachers to accomplish as much involvement as they would prefer. Such a statement raises two questions: How much parent involvement occurs at charter schools? Do charter schools have more involvement from parents than schools serving comparable students elsewhere? We take up the second question first.

If we put aside for the moment the question of whether the students in charter schools are "different" from those attending nearby public schools (and thus have parents with different propensities for involvement), we can usefully compare the administrators' reports from the charter schools and the public schools that would have received the charter schools' students had the charter schools not existed. The comparisons provided in



the survey are limited to parent participation at school and do not include measures of parent involvement in educational activities at home. Table 1 provides the comparisons available from the survey.

**Table 1**  
*Level of Parent Involvement in Charter and Comparison Schools*

	Percent of parents* involved (% of total sample)**		Percent of schools with more than 1/4 of parents* involved		Percent of schools with more than 1/10 of parents* involved	
	Charter schools	Comparison	Charter schools	Comparison	Charter schools	Comparison
Attended evening student performance	18.5%	12.1%	21%	19%	54%	49%
Attended Saturday events for children and parents	17.7%	4.1%	18%	10%	33%	16%
Attended class for parents (ESL, computers, Spanish language, etc.)	8.4%	4.1%	14%	3%	21%	14%
Helped or taught this year in a classroom	10.4%	5.6%	29%	8%	50%	26%
Volunteered weekly as in-class aide	8.1%	3.6%	18%	0%	39%	13%
Helped in lunchroom, offices, playground	6.0%	1.9%	18%	0%	37%	5%
Worked on major committee or governing board	6.0%	1.6%	14%	0%	32%	3%
Did extensive fundraising or networking with business community	5.1%	1.0%	4%	0%	11%	5%
Had leadership role (taught unit, presented workshop, substituted several times)	2.5%	0.5%	4%	0%	18%	0%
(N of schools)	(28)	(39)	(28)	(39)	(28)	(39)

\* "Percent of parents" is defined as the ratio of the reported number of participating parents divided by the school enrollment. More accurately, it is an estimate of the percent of families participating, disregarding multiple children enrolled per family and multiple parent participants per child.

\*\* These columns contain estimates for the two samples as a whole. Each school's estimate was weighted by student enrollment.

On all nine measures—from parent attendance at school functions, special programs, and classes, to helping in the classroom or elsewhere in the building, to doing major committee work, to fundraising and other leadership roles—a higher proportion of parents in the charter schools were reported to be participants than parents in the comparison schools. For example, half-again as many were reported to have attended evening student performances (18.5% vs. 12.1%), roughly twice as many were said to have taught or helped in the classroom

(10.4% vs. 5.6%), and four times as many had done committee or governance work (6% vs. 1.6%).

One difference between charter and comparison schools might account for the greater levels of parent involvement suggested by Table 1. The charter schools, being in their first or second year of operation, tend to be smaller than the nearby public schools from which they have drawn most of their students. Some of them, in fact, are *much* smaller, with 4 charter schools studied having fewer than 100 students. Overall, the median charter school is five-sixths the size of the median comparison school. Smaller schools may themselves promote a greater sense of community and greater involvement on the part of the parents. However, even when we eliminate the charter schools with small enrollments (under 100) and examine the data in Table 1 for the remaining schools, the differences calculated between charter and comparison schools are only slightly smaller than those shown in the table. The differences in the first pair of columns, for example, are hardly affected at all.

A second possible explanation for the difference between parent involvement levels in charter and comparison schools is the fact that most charter schools have parent contracts that commit parents to spending a certain amount of time helping at school. (The nature of these contracts are discussed in detail below.) However, our tabulations (not shown in the table) found that charter schools with parent contracts had roughly the same level of parent involvement on these measures as did charter schools without such contracts.

Our initial conclusion, then, is that charter schools do have higher levels of parent involvement than found in comparable attendance-zone based and locally regulated public schools. Nevertheless, even at the charter schools, the overall level of parent involvement—particularly on those measures where more than just the parent's presence was required—was fairly low. If we ask what proportion of the charter schools got even one-quarter of their parents to help in a classroom or one-tenth to do committee work or fundraising, we see that only a small minority of such schools could do so.

In summary, parents' attendance at school events, assistance in classrooms, and other school-based participation—whether stressed through a formal parent contract or not—appear to occur more often at charter schools than at nearby regular public schools in the same communities, but these activities still involve only a minority of parents in every aspect of school life that we measured.

## WHAT DO CHARTER SCHOOLS DO TO ENCOURAGE PARENT INVOLVEMENT?

Schools can attempt to incorporate parents as participants in the educational process, both at school and at home, in several ways. These range from informational efforts (e.g., teachers sending home descriptions of their unit plans); to making the school a friendly and inviting place for parents to be (e.g., a parent lounge); to outreach efforts (e.g., a parent or a professional outreach worker making home visits or rounding up volunteers); to formal statements conveying specific expectations for parents (e.g., parent contracts, but also such things as teachers creating homework assignments requiring parental assistance, or schools requesting parents to submit logs detailing their participation). Table 2 compares the charter and comparison schools on various measures of school and teacher practices.

**Table 2**  
*School and Teacher Practices for Encouraging Parent Involvement*

	Percent of schools reporting practice	
	Charter schools	Comparison
<i>Teacher practices:</i>		
Teachers regularly discuss strategies for involving "hard-to-reach" parents	75%	58%
All teachers send information home to parents explaining school lessons	54%	24%
All teachers provide suggestions for activities parents can do at home with their child	46%	16%
3/4 or more of the teachers create homework assignments requiring parental involvement	61%	37%
<i>School practices:</i>		
School has a drop-in center or parent lounge	25%	32%
School has classes for parents—ESL, computers, Spanish language, etc.	61%	66%
A staff person is assigned to work on parent involvement	56%	58%
A parent is paid to coordinate parent volunteers	21%	18%
A family support professional makes home visits	29%	37%
Parents are asked to submit a log detailing their participation	50%	37%
School has parent contract committing parents to help at school and/or at home	71%	8%
(N of schools)	28	39



The top part of Table 2, which shows teacher-specific practices (but, in this analysis as reported by the school administrator), indicates a consistent and substantial difference between efforts by teachers in charter and comparison schools to involve parents at home. On every measure taken, charter school teachers are reported to be more active. For example, in nearly one-half of charter schools, but in only one-sixth of comparison schools, administrators report that "all" of their teachers regularly provided suggestions for activities that parents could do at home with their child. To take another example, in 61% of the charter schools, most teachers were said to create homework assignments requiring parent involvement, but this was true at only slightly more than one-third of comparison schools.

Quite in contrast, the bottom part of Table 2 shows that, *except for parent contracts* (where charter schools outnumber comparison schools by an overwhelming 71% to 8%), charter schools were not any more likely than their comparison schools to engage in a variety of activities to incorporate parents into school-related activities.

In fact, charter schools were less likely to have a drop-in center for parents, slightly less likely to have classes for parents, no more likely to assign a staff person or pay a parent to coordinate parent involvement, and less likely to have a family support professional who makes home visits.

In contrast to the teachers' activities, which relate primarily to parent involvement in education at home, these latter measures relate more toward getting parents to be involved in the life of the school. Rather than engage in various outreach efforts, charter schools have chosen to employ parent contracts as the means of gaining additional parent involvement at school. (The contracts are for the most part oriented towards school-site involvement by parents. More than three times as many [17 vs. 5] have school participation requirements than have home-participation requirements. The median time requirement specified for both home and school participation is 30 hours per year.)

## THE PARENT CONTRACTS

Contracts, "the law of voluntary exchange" (Chirelstein, 1990, p. 8), are created to specify the actions each "party" agrees to in entering into an exchange. Contracts are used so that both parties understand the expectations of the other and to "in some way provide assurance that the agreement will be honored" (Chirelstein, 1990, p. 1). One means of providing assurance is to spell out the consequences when a party fails to fulfill the contract.

In analyzing the structure, content, and underlying assumptions of the 23 "parent contracts" collected for this study, we see that most of them begin with opening clauses detailing the general reasons for the need to contract:

It is the belief of this school that the education the children will be receiving continues into the home and is supported by the home environment. For this reason a child's enrollment in the school must be supported by the parents' understanding of the educational philosophy and goals of the school. (contract I, p. 1)

These opening statements are then followed by the specific provisions that parents are asked to follow. The provisions are generally written to make explicit the school's expectations. The contracts typically end with a statement of promise, "I agree to the above . . .," and contain space for a parent signature.

The contract law principle that an agreement must "provide assurance" that it will be honored is not lost on the charter schools. By virtue of their admissions power, these schools possess the ultimate contract remedy: They may transfer a student whose parents do not fulfill the contract terms. This leads to the inclusion of more stringent clauses or statements of promise than just agreeing to the contract.

For example, one contract requires parents to sign this statement: "I understand that if any of the above conditions are not adhered to, my child may be expelled" (contract Q). Another contract asks parents to agree to the following:

I will participate in monthly meetings. If I am unable to attend, I will work four hours of additional service or pay a fine of \$20 for each such meeting. I am aware that I cannot miss more than three meetings.... If I do not meet this requirement I understand that my daughter/son will not be able to continue attending this school. (contract D)

Thirteen of the 23 parent contracts in this study contain a "fail-to-comply" term. These terms, where they are used, are applied only against the parent or student "parties."

The parent contracts used by charter schools usually do not explicitly promote the "exchange" sense of contracts; that is, they rarely specify what is being promised by the school in exchange for parent involvement. The implicit (and sometimes

explicit) “barter” on the part of the school is the child’s education in return for greater parent involvement. The failure-to-comply clauses make this most clear, as the following statement shows: “I understand that the school relies on parents to volunteer their time and if I fail to fulfill my volunteer hours my child could be removed” (contract K, p. 2).

Nevertheless, some contracts do include school requirements. Out of the 23 contracts analyzed, 3 contain clauses that specifically list school/staff duties. Of the eight that include these provisions, the required elements for the school are primarily of two kinds:

- *general educational statements*—statements about what practices or philosophy the school and staff promote in general. For instance, one contract specifies:

As a staff member, I agree to: Promote a positive school climate. Be a good role model, show respect for all, provide a safe and orderly environment, implement school rules fairly for all. (contract B, p. 2)

- *parent-directed statements*—statements about what the school staff would do for parents. For instance, “The teachers/school community will provide a list of materials needed at home in order to complete homework” or “The charter school will document problem behaviors in order to report accurately to parents.” (contract E)

A few of the contracts with school-duty clauses also include more detailed performance promised by the school, such as: “Provide supervision for crosswalks and corners (First street/Second street/Third street)” (contract E) or “Complete written assessments on progress reports concerning student’s [work] (8 progress reports per year)” (contract S, p. 3). However, the school-duty clauses overall list few specific responsibilities for schools.

Further, it is a rare contract that even requires any school representative signature. Where such a signature is called for, it is rarely preceded by a statement of promise or oath, contrary to the pledge the parent “parties” sign. In two contracts, where school representative signatures are required along with student and parent signatures, the statement simply reads: “We the undersigned agree.” Usually when school representatives are asked to sign the contract (just five of the eight contracts that

specified school-duty clauses require a school representative signature; another four contracts without such provisions require school signatures) it is usually in the role of a “witness” or approving party, as in verifying that the parent agrees to and has signed the document. In essence, the structure of the contracts is such that the school “promises” little beyond monitoring parents.

In contrast, parent-duty clauses tend to be much more specific. Parents are asked to agree to the following kinds of provisions:

- *general support of school goals and practices*—statements where parents agree to “adhere to all the principles of the charter school philosophy” (contract F, p. 2) or “support and reinforce the school’s conduct code with their children” (contract O, p. 2).
- *home/parenting practices and philosophy*—statements indicating the kind of support or parenting practices that would be adopted such as, “help our children develop feelings of self-worth and a positive attitude towards school by providing love and emotional support at home” (contract B, p. 1). In addition, some contracts also include provisions about child nutrition and clothing: “The parents/guardians will assure that students come to school rested, clean, well fed, and appropriately dressed” (contract J, p. 2) or “Children will be asked to come to school dressed neatly in clothes without cartoon or media images and with footwear appropriate for the season” (contract I, p. 2).
- *homework assistance*—many of the contracts require parents to pledge some sort of help with homework, such as “assist my child with homework and review school work with them, which includes reading to and with them a minimum of four times each week” (contract U) or “supervise and assist in the completion of homework, providing a suitable place and schedule for its completion” (contract O, p. 1).
- *school-related parent involvement*—statements indicating the amount of involvement, the kinds of activities, or how many activities the school expects parents to fulfill each year. Sometimes these provisions are general, such as, “Parents are expected to volunteer in the school. This

could mean assisting in classrooms, driving on field trips, collecting book orders, working on committees, developing parent education classes..." (contract C, p. 1). In other cases, the requirements are specific: "The parents/guardians—are required to serve a minimum six month term on the advisory council [and]... are required to attend quarterly school meetings" (contract K, p. 1).

- *student attendance*—these statements specify that parents agree to have children attend school at all times unless ill and to get their children to school on time. In a few cases this requirement is backed up by information about the amount of revenue lost due to student absences in the last year. For instance: "Tardiness and absenteeism are poor habits to develop. Not only are vital educational experiences lost, but also [they] reduced the [school] budget by \$94,000" (contract V, p. 1).

**Table 3**  
*Parent Provisions of Contracts With and Without "Fail-to-comply" Clause*

	Percent with school support provisions	Percent with parenting provisions	Percent with homework provisions	Percent with required hours provisions	Percent with attendance provisions
With Fail-to-comply Clause (n = 13)	62%	39%	62%	62%	69%
Without Fail-to-comply Clause (n = 10)	20%	30%	30%	50%	20%

The presence or absence of the "fail-to-comply" clauses suggests that some contracts are more restrictive than others in that there are potentially graver consequences for parents when failing to meet the contract provisions. Table 3 shows that contracts with the fail-to-comply clause also more frequently include the five types of parent provisions listed above. In particular, three times as many contracts with the fail-to-comply clause require parents to support school codes and rules at home (62% vs. 20%), three times as many also specify a child's attendance as a provision (69% vs. 20%), and more than twice as many specify homework support (62% vs. 30%). The "parenting" and "required hours" provisions, although included in many of the contracts without the fail-to-comply clause, are still

included by a greater number of contracts with the fail-to-comply clause. It appears that the more restrictive contracts, with the fail-to-comply clauses, might also be making it more difficult for parents to fulfill the contract by specifying more parent duties.

**Table 4**  
*Other Provisions of Contracts With and Without "Fail-to-Comply" Clause*

	Percent with "family talents" and "collaboration" terms	Percent with "school-duty" clause	Percent with school representative signature
With Fail-to-comply Clause (n = 13)	8%	46%	46%
Without Fail-to-comply Clause (n = 10)	50%	20%	30%

Table 4 reveals other contract provisions. For instance, terms that promote a sense of partnership, such as understanding "family talents" and "collaboration" are used in half of the contracts that *did not* use the fail-to-comply clause, as compared to just 8% of the other contracts. On the other hand, the contracts with fail-to-comply clauses also more often include school-duty clauses (46% vs. 20%) and school representative signatures (46% vs. 30%). To their credit, perhaps the schools with the more restrictive contracts also understand that some sense of "exchange" is needed and so include school-duty clauses.

**Table 5**  
*Characteristics of Schools Using "Fail-to-comply" Clause*

	Percent of schools using "fail-to-comply" clause
30% or more on reduced lunch plan (n = 10)	60%
Less than 30% on reduced lunch plan (n= 12)	50%
20% or more LEP (n = 8)	88%
Less than 20% LEP (n= 11)	36%
40% or more minority (n = 9)	67%
Less than 40% minority (n = 10)	50%
30% or more professional parents (n = 10)	30%
Less than 30% professional parents (n = 9)	78%
30% or more scoring below grade level (n = 10)	70%
Less than 30% scoring below grade level (n =8)	38%

What kinds of parent populations are being asked to sign the more restrictive contracts (those with the fail-to-comply clauses)? Table 5 compares schools on five different characteristics: percent of students on reduced lunch plan, percent of LEP students, percent of minority students, percent of professional parents, and percent scoring below grade level.

Schools with fewer parents in professional occupations and lower income, higher LEP, higher minority, and lower-achieving student populations are the schools more often using contracts with a fail-to-comply clause. For instance, twice as many of the schools with 30% or fewer professional parents use a fail-to-comply clause in their contract (78%) as compared to schools that have more than 30% professional parents (30%).

Although the structure and purpose of parent contracts in the charter schools suggests that these schools might be using parent involvement as a selectivity factor, we should also note that the charter schools using contracts report greater use of other strategies to encourage parent involvement.

**Table 6**  
*School and Teacher Practices for Encouraging Parent Involvement: Contract vs. Noncontract Charter Schools*

	Percent of Schools Reporting	
	With contract (n = 20)	Without contract (n = 8)
<i>Teacher Practices:</i>		
Teachers regularly discuss strategies for involving "hard-to-reach" parents	75%	75%
All teachers send information home explaining lessons	60%	38%
All teachers provide suggestions for activities parents can do at home with child	50%	38%
3/4 or more teachers create homework assignments requiring parent involvement	65%	50%
<i>School Practices:</i>		
School has a drop-in center or parent lounge	20%	38%
School has classes for parents—ESL, computers, Spanish, etc.	60%	62%
A staff person is assigned to work on parent involvement	60%	38%
A parent is paid to coordinate parent volunteers	30%	0%
A family support professional makes home visits	30%	0%
Parents are asked to submit a log detailing their participation	65%	12%



## **HOW MUCH SELECTIVITY IS OCCURRING IN CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS?**

Table 6 shows that schools using parent contracts have more teachers who send information home explaining lessons, provide suggestions for activities parents and children can do at home, and create homework assignments to involve parents. A greater number of schools using contracts also report they assign staff to focus on involvement, pay a parent to coordinate involvement activities, have a professional make home visits, and utilize a parent log than do noncontract schools. It seems that although schools using contracts require more of parents, they also provide extra support to aid parents in meeting the school expectations for involvement. But, among schools using contracts, there are no differences between those including the fail-to-comply clause and those not including the clause in terms of using the various strategies to involve parents (not reported in table).

In sum, contracts may be an indication of a commitment on the part of schools to including parents. However, many schools are not stopping with this commitment, but are using their charter freedoms to hold parents "accountable" for involvement. In particular, the more restrictive contracts are used more often in schools with lower levels of achievement and higher minority/higher LEP populations. These contracts also are the ones that have more specific duties required of parents, which might make the burden of the contract more difficult. Such contracts also suggest that the schools have a particular picture of how parents should be "involved." The lack of language that supports family-school collaboration or recognizes the unique "talents" of the family within contracts with the fail-to-comply clause further suggests a limited family-school relationship in these schools. Unfortunately, it appears that the schools where a family-school partnership would be most beneficial are the ones that have chosen to employ a more prohibitive contract.

Our previous analysis suggests that parent contracts, the major means of accomplishing parent involvement among charter schools, might be an indicator of a kind of selective enrollment, similar in impact to the way that private schools might refuse enrollment to students who they believe might not "fit" their program. What do the data show regarding both the enrollment practices of schools and their consequences for the character of their student body?

Several aspects of the survey data shed light on this question. First, we asked charter school administrators directly about student admission and withdrawal events related to parent



involvement. Survey respondents were asked how often any of the following events had happened since their school began enrolling students:

- a family being informally advised not to apply because it was felt that problems would inevitably arise over parent involvement expectations;
- a family not completing admissions because they did not agree with the school's expectations for parent involvement;
- a parent voluntarily taking their child from the school because they didn't want to fulfill expected commitments of parent involvement; and
- a student being asked to transfer out because the parent was not willing to commit himself or herself to the level of involvement expected.

Out of the 20 charter schools with parent contracts and completing the administrator's survey booklet, 9 of them admitted to one or more of these events occurring. However, these events were said to be quite rare. Only one school said that any of these occurred more than five times. Most often, any of these events occurred only once or twice, and the most common occurrence admitted to was voluntary parent withdrawal. The least common event concerning parent contract-related enrollments, according to the administrators, was expulsion, which occurred only twice, once each at two out of the 20 charter schools with contracts.

Another method of measuring selectivity due to parent unwillingness to be involved involves a question about the various factors considered when "accepting new students into your school." Normally, a public school must accept every student within its attendance area, except for students needing particular special services, such as severely handicapped individuals. However, 25% of the charter school administrators (including 35% of those in schools with parent contracts) indicated that an "essential" attribute was that the parent or guardian "will participate in requested ways." (See Table 7.) Only 54% said parent participation was "not considered" in admissions decisions; the others said it was "considered but not essential."

**Table 7**

*Factors Considered by Charter School Administrators in Accepting New Students*

	Percent of charter schools (N=28)		
	Essential	Considered	Not considered
Evidence that parent or guardian will participate in requested ways	25%	21%	54%
Residency in a specific school attendance area	18%	37%	44%
Residency in the sponsoring school district	11%	52%	37%
Absence of need for special services (learning disability, language)	0%	25%	75%
Student has ability to speak and understand English	0%	15%	85%
Student has a satisfactory record of conduct	0%	14%	86%
Student's academic performance is on grade-level or above	0%	0%	100%

Respondents were asked about other possible factors in admissions decisions, such as location of residence (in the district or in a specific attendance area), prior academic performance, having a satisfactory record of conduct, being able to speak English, or not needing special services. No other factor besides parent participation and location of residence was said to be essential by *any* charter school administrator. In fact, more respondents said that parent participation was essential than said that district residence was or specific attendance area was.

Consequently, it is not that charter school administrators are unwilling to admit to using parent involvement as a selection criterion, they simply didn't have to do so in an exclusionary way in their experience.

At least two possibilities suggest themselves: (a) The schools didn't have the information to exclude people ahead of time, and it was interpersonally difficult to do so later on; or (b) Parents not interested in the parent involvement requirement knew enough not to apply in the first place. We suspect that both elements are involved.

In addition to measuring selectivity by examining admission events or intentions, one can look at the results. If charter schools do not resemble the public schools from which they draw their students, some kind of voluntary selectivity may be occurring. Our analysis along these lines took two approaches. In one approach, we asked charter school administrators and those in comparison schools to characterize the parents at their school in terms of the kind of parent involvement they would expect *regardless of their school's*

*efforts* in that regard. Respondents were asked to compare the parents at their school vis a vis “parents you have encountered in your previous work as an educator” along four dimensions:

- whether, compared to parents at other schools, “most parents here have always read to their children, probably even before their children were old enough to attend school”;
- whether “parents here would help their children on school-related work even if teachers didn’t encourage them”;
- whether “many parents here would volunteer to spend time helping out at school even if the school didn’t require or encourage it”; and
- whether “most parents here would attend PTA meetings and come to parents’ nights even if the school didn’t encourage it.”

On all four of these items, the proportion of charter school administrators who said that the statement is “more true of their parents than parents at other schools” was higher than in comparison schools. The differences for each of the first three items was between 12% and 15%. (See Table 8.) It is possible that these differences are due to perceptual error; that school administrators are apt to think more highly of parents who have chosen their children’s school than they are to think of a captive parent population for a residentially defined school enrollment. On the other hand, their perceptions may be accurate.

The other approach we employed to examine the consequences of schools’ considering parent participation attitudes in their admission decisions was to examine the socioeconomic and student achievement makeup of the charter and comparison schools. Because the comparison schools are the ones that the charter students would have attended, differences in student characteristics and family demographics would also suggest some selectivity is occurring. Table 9 shows these comparisons, which here are based on 34 charter schools responding to the survey that contained the student characteristics and background questions.

**Table 3***Perceived Differences in Parents Between Their Own School and Others*

	Percent of administrators reporting "more true here" compared to parents at other schools	
	Charter schools	Comparison
Most parents here have always read to their children, probably even before their children were old enough to attend school.	44%	29%
Parents here would help their children on school-related work even if teachers didn't encourage them.	40%	27%
Many parents here would volunteer to spend time helping out at school even if the school didn't require or encourage it.	46%	34%
Most parents here would attend PTA meetings and come to parents' nights even if the school didn't encourage it.	31%	24%
(N)	(26)	(38)

**Table 9***Student Background and Achievement Characteristics*

	Charter schools		Comparison schools	
	Mean	(N)	Mean	(N)
Percent racial or ethnic minorities	44.9	(32)	46.1	(38)
Percent LEP	20.4	(30)	28.8	(38)
Percent eligible for free or reduced lunch	34.6	(33)	48.4	(38)
Percent qualifying for special education placement	10.8	(31)	12.1	(38)
Percent one or more years below national norms on standardized tests	34.6	(26)	43.4	(32)
Percent one or more years <i>above</i> national norms on standardized tests	26.5	(26)	25.6	(32)
Percent having parents with professional or managerial occupations	31.4	(29)	27.6	(37)

Of the seven student characteristics and background variables in Table 9, three show the charter and comparison schools to be essentially similar—percent from ethnic minority groups, percent qualifying for special education, and percent scoring above grade-level. The other four all show that comparison schools serve a somewhat more difficult-to-teach

## DISCUSSION

clientele. Comparison schools have more LEP students (29% to 20%), more students receiving subsidized school meals (48% vs. 37%), and more students below grade-level in achievement (43% vs. 35%). In addition, the comparison schools score slightly lower on our crude indicator of parental SES.

The small but noticeable differences between charter and comparison schools in student socioeconomic status and below-average achievement may or may not be indicative of selectivity on the grounds of parents' attitudes toward school-and-home participation. Still, that these SES and achievement differentials do exist lends credibility to the claim that charter schools may be enrolling a more "parent-involved" set of students.

The conscious effort of California's charter schools to incorporate parents into their instructional program more than schools usually do is clearly evident from their widespread use of parent contracts and from the greater effort made by their teachers in involving parents in educational activities.

Although charter schools are not distinctive in some of the more commonly employed approaches for involving parents (e.g., having parent lounges or holding classes for parents), this does not sway our belief that these schools place great value on having parents become an integral part of the formal educational structure. (Other data on parents' involvement in governance activities at charter schools, which we did not present here, provides further evidence for this point of view.)

Our data show that parents at charter schools are substantially more involved in the daily life of the school than are parents at district-managed public schools nearby. Ordinarily, we would be encouraged by such findings, given the research about parent involvement previously cited. However, two aspects of our analysis are extremely worrisome.

First, the overall tenor of the parent contracts used at most of the charter schools suggests that the contracts are viewed as a means of obtaining compliance rather than as a positive vehicle for encouraging the growth of a more inclusive school community. The message of many of these contracts seems to be that the parent is a consumer rather than a partner.

As a consumer the parent may choose what school his or her child attends. If the parent wants the services of the school, he/she must sign and agree to fulfill the contract provisions. The parent has little say in the provisions, but is free to choose other schools that may have different provisions for involvement. On the school's part, it may terminate the contract if the parent does

not live up to the provisions. While some of the charter school contracts include school-duty clauses, on the whole the structure and content of the contracts imply that parents are important in supporting the school but are not "equals." These contracts, although probably intended to encourage more involvement, actually seem to permit schools more leverage over parents. Ironically, although charter schools were created to allow parents greater choice in the kinds of schools their children attend, the outcome of the contracts may be to give schools greater choice in the kinds of parents they have involved.

And that leads us to our second point. One of the major reasons why charter schools have higher levels of parent involvement may be that the more school-participation-oriented families select themselves into charter school enrollment. On the other hand, parents who lack the initial interest or circumstances that would enable more substantial participation reject the opportunity to join such a school.

Of course, in one respect, that is what the idea of public-schools-of-choice is designed to do—to enable various publics with different values and priorities for schooling to identify and select schools that provide the kind of education they desire in particular for their children. On the other hand, the fact that such a large proportion of charter schools for elementary and middle-grades students has chosen to have parent contracts as a requirement for membership in the school community suggests that parent involvement is not just one of many diverse models for alternative public school models springing up.

Instead, what we perceive to be occurring to some extent, perhaps unintentionally and unconsciously, is that schools are being organized to exclude students based on a new criterion of undesirability (perhaps "least desirable to teach" or "least desirable to be around").

The criterion being chosen is not the private school's criterion of "ability to pay," nor is it based on academic ability, test score performance or record of behavior, nor on racial or ethnic membership (that is excluded according to the charter schools legislation). Instead, it is the criterion of having supportive and educationally involved parents.

It is true that the theory of parental choice in public schooling, whether through government vouchers or independently organized units granted a public charter, is that a market approach will show what models of schooling "work" by satisfying public demand. But what if the school characteristic

that the public wants most is segregation from other families who they believe would detract from a "healthy" school environment?

An emphasis on parent involvement need not be a means of discouraging or excluding potential clientele. Parent contracts need not be drawn up to be mechanisms for social control. They can both be part of an educationally valuable approach to building community and helping parents and schools to develop a improved ability to support children's academic and social growth. However, advocates of parent involvement approaches need to recognize that the way they approach and orchestrate parent involvement affects the representativeness of the community that they serve.

At the same time, charter schools represent an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with a diverse range of structures for organizing public schooling—without the legalities, the entrenched interests, and the traditional school cultures that encumber other public schools. However, it is important to closely observe the kinds of school organizations, curricula, and emphases that get established. Otherwise, the charter school innovators just might fail to identify unanticipated consequences of implementing their values, beliefs, and models.



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