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AUTHOR Vanourek, Gregg; And Others  
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ABSTRACT

Although charter schools have provoked much interest, there has not been a systematic nationwide effort to ask the clients and teachers of charter schools what they think about them. During the 1996-97 school year, Hudson Institute's Charter Schools in Action Project gathered quantitative data that describe 50 charter schools enrolling approximately 16,000 students in 10 states. The data were gathered through a survey of 4,954 students (fifth grade and older) attending 39 schools; 2,978 parents of students attending 30 schools; and 521 teachers in 36 schools. Findings indicate that: (1) charter schools are havens for children who had bad educational experiences elsewhere; (2) charter schools are very popular with their primary constituents; (3) families and teachers are seeking out charter schools primarily for educational reasons; (4) satisfaction levels are highest for all three groups when it comes to educational matters; and (5) the teachers in charter schools feel empowered. Nineteen tables are included. (Contains 16 endnotes.) (LMI)

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A Hudson Institute Project

June 1997

Final Report, Part 1

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By Gregg Vanourek, Bruno V. Manno, Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Louann A. Bierlein

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## Charter Schools As Seen by Those Who Know Them Best: Students, Teachers, and Parents

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### Executive Summary

**(1) Charter schools are havens for children who had bad educational experiences elsewhere**—low-income children, “at-risk” children, minority children, children with learning disabilities and behavior problems, etc. They (and their parents) report that they’re doing better than in their previous schools (if they were in school at all). These improvements are reported across the board: for children of all ages, races, and genders; for children from public, private, and “home” schools; for children with learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, and other special needs; and children from families in all income brackets.

- Among students performing “poorly” in their previous school (as judged by their parents), nearly half are now doing “excellent” or “above average” work.
- The number of students doing “excellent” or “good” work rose 23.4% for African-Americans and 21.8% for Hispanics after enrolling in charter schools. Similar gains were made by low-income students of all races.

**(2) Charter schools are very popular with their primary constituents:** their students, parents, and teachers. Pupils are interested in their school work, pleased with their teachers, and likely to return next year. Their parents are satisfied and engaged. Their teachers prize what the school is doing, like working in it, and believe it is succeeding.

- Three-fifths of students report that their charter school teachers are better than their previous schools’ teachers.
- Over two-thirds of parents say their charter school is better than their child’s previous school with respect to class size, school size, and individual attention from teachers. Over three-fifths say it is better with respect to teaching quality, parental involvement, curriculum, extra help for students, academic standards, accessibility and openness, and discipline.

**(3) Families and teachers are seeking out charter schools primarily for educational reasons:** high academic standards,

small classes, a focus on teaching and learning, educational philosophies that are closer to their own, and innovative approaches to instruction.

- When asked why they chose charter schools, the top answers from parents are: small size (53.0%), higher standards (45.9%), educational philosophy (44.0%), greater opportunities for parental involvement (43.0%), and better teachers (41.9%).
- The top reasons for teachers are educational philosophy (76.8%), wanting a new school (64.8%), like-minded colleagues (62.9%), good administrators (54.6%), and class size (54.2%).

**(4) Satisfaction levels are highest for all three groups when it comes to educational matters** (curriculum, teaching, class size, etc.) and lowest when it comes to non-educational matters (food, facility, sports, etc.), indicating that charters are deploying their limited resources on “the basics.”

- When students were asked what they like about their charter school, the most frequent answers were: “good teachers” (58.6%), “they teach it until I learn it” (51.3%), and “they don’t let me fall behind” (38.5%).
- Two-thirds of parents thought their charter school has a more satisfactory class size, more individual attention, better teaching, and a stronger curriculum than their child’s previous school, compared to just 2-3% who thought these were worse.

**(5) The teachers feel empowered.** Charter school teachers are a diverse lot, but nearly all are finding personal fulfillment and professional reward.

- Over 90% of teachers are “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with their charter school’s educational philosophy, size, fellow teachers, and students; over three-quarters are satisfied with their school’s administrators, level of teacher decision-making, and the challenge of starting a new school.
- Only 2.7% of charter school teachers say they “hope to be elsewhere” next year.

**Charter Schools As Seen by Those Who Know Them Best: Students, Teachers, and Parents**

Given today's appetite for education reform among American citizens and the explosive growth of charter schools nationally, scores of analysts and agencies are scrambling to learn about their enrollment patterns, demographics, and educational characteristics. Yet nobody, to our knowledge, has engaged in a systematic nationwide effort to ask the clients and teachers of charter schools what they think of these new educational providers. So we did.

During the 1996-97 school year, Hudson Institute's Charter Schools in Action Project gathered four sets of quantitative data that yield a revealing portrait of 50 charter schools enrolling some 16,000 students in 10 states. The primary topics we probed were satisfaction levels among the schools' essential constituents, comparisons between charter schools and schools that students would otherwise be attending (or had previously attended), reasons for choosing charter schools, and basic demographics.

What is offered here, then, is not just an echo of others' work—such as the excellent new Department of Education charter school study, various state-level reports, or even our own report from last year<sup>1</sup>—but a new and distinctive body of information intended to supply policymakers, educators, journalists, and fellow analysts with early feedback from the “constituents” of charter schools. We begin with their foremost constituents: the students.

**How Students Grade Their Charter Schools**

Nearly 5,000 charter school students in grades five and above completed survey forms. They were asked what they liked (15 options were provided) and disliked (17 options) about

**Table 1. Students' Likes and Dislikes About Charter School\***

| Students' "Likes"                        | Students' "Dislikes"                    |
|--|---|
| Good teachers ..... 58.6%                | Poor sports program ..... 29.4%         |
| Teach it until I learn it ..... 51.3%    | Not enough other activities ..... 29.4% |
| Don't let me fall behind ..... 38.5%     | Food ..... 28.6%                        |
| Computers & Technology ..... 35.7%       | Too much homework ..... 28.5%           |
| Nice people running the school. 34.9%    | Boring ..... 23.4%                      |
| Teacher's attention ..... 33.9%          | Not enough                              |
| Class size ..... 33.9%                   | computers/technology ..... 21.8%        |
| Curriculum ..... 33.3%                   | Too strict ..... 19.7%                  |
| Safety ..... 27.5%                       | Difficult commute ..... 14.5%           |
| School size ..... 25.4%                  | Poor facilities ..... 12.1%             |
| Other out-of-school activities ... 19.8% | I could be learning more ..... 11.7%    |
| A lot is expected of me ..... 19.7%      | Bad teachers ..... 9.1%                 |
| Opportunities for                        | School too big or too small ..... 7.5%  |
| parent participation ..... 15.9%         | Not enough homework ..... 6.9%          |
| Sports program ..... 15.8%               | Classes too big or too small ..... 6.7% |
| Food ..... 12.0%                         | Too tough academically ..... 6.7%       |
|  | Not safe enough ..... 6.3%              |
|  | Not strict enough ..... 6.0%            |

\* "Sample A" student survey respondents from 39 charter schools across 10 states; N = 4,954 (February 1997).

**Table 2. Students' Comparison With Previous School\***

|                          | My Teachers |                |       | My Interest in School Work |                |       |
|--------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------------|-------|
|                          | Better      | About the Same | Worse | Better                     | About the Same | Worse |
| All Students .....       | 60.7%       | 27.0%          | 4.8%  | 49.9%                      | 35.4%          | 7.7%  |
| Prior Public             |             |                |       |                            |                |       |
| School Students .....    | 65.2%       | 24.7%          | 5.5%  | 52.4%                      | 34.4%          | 8.4%  |
| Prior Private            |             |                |       |                            |                |       |
| School Students .....    | 48.5%       | 37.1%          | 6.6%  | 42.1%                      | 43.7%          | 9.6%  |
| Other <sup>b</sup> ..... | 52.1%       | 32.3%          | 1.9%  | 46.5%                      | 37.2%          | 4.4%  |
| White .....              | 64.9%       | 25.0%          | 4.0%  | 52.9%                      | 34.9%          | 7.4%  |
| Black .....              | 56.1%       | 26.3%          | 7.4%  | 50.5%                      | 31.4%          | 8.1%  |
| Hispanic .....           | 60.3%       | 25.0%          | 5.5%  | 49.8%                      | 33.7%          | 8.5%  |
| Asian .....              | 62.0%       | 29.3%          | 4.0%  | 50.0%                      | 40.7%          | 5.3%  |
| Native American .....    | 44.2%       | 47.7%          | 3.8%  | 37.6%                      | 50.0%          | 7.8%  |

\* "Sample A" student survey respondents from 39 charter schools across 10 states; N = 4,954 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

<sup>b</sup> "Other" refers to children who were home-schooled, who attended another charter school before this one, or who did not attend school last year.

their charter schools and encouraged to check all that applied. On average, they noted 4.6 likes and 2.7 dislikes. (See Table 1.)

Asked “What do you like about this school?”, the most frequent answers were: “good teachers” (58.6%), “they teach it until I learn it” (51.3%), and “they don't let me fall behind” (38.5%). We found it interesting that the top three answers had to do with instruction. The next most frequent answer—“computers and technology” (35.7%)—was somewhat surprising, since our site visits yielded many complaints about a lack of technology due to budget constraints. Some charter schools, however, have developed sophisticated technology programs. (One California school, for example, is now wired with fiber optics and has a TV station.)

The next cluster of answers—“nice people running the school” (34.9%), “teacher's attention” (33.9%), “class size” (33.9%), and “curriculum” (33.3%)—mostly had to do with educational practices. Over all, among the eight most frequent answers, six concern teaching and learning. By contrast, when asked “What do you dislike about this school?” three of the four most common responses concerned non-academic matters: “poor sports program” (29.4%), “not enough other activities” (29.4%), “food” (28.6%), and “too much homework” (28.5%). Although these dislikes were noted by only a quarter to a third of students, they do send a message to charter school leaders about what they'll need to work on in the future to keep their constituents happy.

**Charter Schools vs. Schools Previously Attended**

On two questions, students were asked to rate features of their charter school against those of their previous school. On both counts, charter schools rate significantly higher. (See Table 2.)

Three students out of five (60.7%) say that their charter teachers are "better" than teachers at their previous school. And half (49.9%) say they are more interested in their school work. Just one in twenty reports worse teachers and one in thirteen has less interest in school work. Bear in mind that surveys were given only to youngsters in the middle and high school grades, a pupil population often considered hard for schools to please. From Table 2 we can deduce that there is particular satisfaction among students who have left traditional public schools and that student satisfaction crosses racial and ethnic lines.<sup>2</sup>

**Comparative Academic Performance**

Charter school students report that they are doing better, on average, at their charter school than at their previous school. (See Table 3.)

The proportion of students doing "excellent" or "good" work rose by 4.9% and 14.5% respectively. Those doing "average" work declined a little. The proportion doing "poorly" fell by 8.0% and those "failing" by 8.5%. Clearly, the numbers are moving in the right direction

Dramatic improvement occurred in many cases. Among students who report that they did poorly at their previous school, 16.9% are now doing "excellent" work and 43.3% are doing "good" work. Of those failing at their previous school, 19.8% are now doing "excellent" work and 36.5% are doing "good" work. (See Table 4.)

Charter school parents also appraised the academic performance of their children at their previous schools and (as of February 1997) at their charter school. Among parents who report that their children did "below average" work at their previous school,

**Table 4.**

| Student Performance Improvements (As Noted by Students) <sup>a</sup>  |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| % of Those Performing "Poorly" at Previous School Who Are Now:        | Excellent ..... 16.9%     |
|   | Good ..... 43.3%          |
|   | Average ..... 30.7%       |
|   | Poor ..... 5.9%           |
|   | Failing ..... 1.1%        |
| % of Those "Failing" at Previous School Who Are Now:                  | Excellent ..... 19.8%     |
|   | Good ..... 36.5%          |
|   | Average ..... 29.6%       |
|   | Poor ..... 6.5%           |
|   | Failing ..... 3.5%        |
| Student Performance Improvements (As Noted by Parents) <sup>b</sup>   |                           |
| % of Those Performing "Below Average" at Previous School Who Are Now: | Excellent ..... 8.2%      |
|   | Above Average ..... 23.8% |
|   | Average ..... 55.1%       |
|   | Below Average ..... 11.7% |
|   | Poor ..... 1.2%           |
| % of Those Performing "Poorly" at Previous School Who Are Now:        | Excellent ..... 18.9%     |
|   | Above Average ..... 25.6% |
|   | Average ..... 36.5%       |
|   | Below Average ..... 16.0% |
|   | Poor ..... 3.2%           |

<sup>a</sup>"Sample A" student survey respondents from 39 charter schools across 10 states; N = 4,954 (February 1997).

<sup>b</sup>"Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

8.2% indicate that their sons and daughters are now doing "excellent" work and 23.8% say their child is now doing "above average" work. Of those whose children did "poorly" at their previous school, 18.9% now report "excellent" work and 25.6% report "above average" work by their children. Again, the numbers are moving in the right direction.

In our sample alone, 814 children have moved out of the poor/failing category by changing to charter schools. That's 70% of all the children who say they were in that performance category in their previous school—a remarkable achievement.

**Table 3. Students' Rating of Their Performance (by Race/Ethnicity)<sup>a</sup>**

|                  |                              | Excellent | Good   | Average | Poor  | Failing |
|------------------|------------------------------|-----------|--------|---------|-------|---------|
| All Students     | Previous School .....        | 16.0%     | 26.7%  | 26.3%   | 13.3% | 10.3%   |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 20.9%     | 41.2%  | 24.4%   | 5.3%  | 1.8%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +4.9%     | +14.5% | -1.9%   | -8.0% | -8.5%   |
| White            | Previous School .....        | 19.0%     | 27.6%  | 24.8%   | 12.7% | 10.0%   |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 23.4%     | 43.2%  | 22.2%   | 4.6%  | 1.4%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +4.4%     | +15.6% | -2.6%   | -8.1% | -8.6%   |
| African American | Previous School .....        | 12.5%     | 22.7%  | 28.0%   | 14.9% | 10.2%   |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 20.2%     | 38.4%  | 24.0%   | 5.7%  | 2.5%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +7.7%     | +15.7% | -4.0%   | -9.2% | -7.7%   |
| Hispanic         | Previous School .....        | 12.2%     | 25.3%  | 27.1%   | 14.1% | 12.8%   |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 18.6%     | 40.7%  | 26.2%   | 7.0%  | 1.8%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +6.4%     | +15.4% | -0.9%   | -7.1% | -11.0%  |
| Asian            | Previous School .....        | 13.3%     | 28.7%  | 26.7%   | 12.7% | 15.3%   |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 18.0%     | 40.0%  | 29.3%   | 6.0%  | 2.0%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +4.7%     | +11.3% | +2.6%   | -6.7% | -13.3%  |
| Native American  | Previous School .....        | 14.6%     | 29.5%  | 36.6%   | 10.9% | 5.3%    |
|                  | Current Charter School ..... | 15.4%     | 39.9%  | 35.1%   | 5.3%  | 1.0%    |
|                  | Change .....                 | +0.8%     | +10.4% | -1.5%   | -5.6% | -4.3%   |

<sup>a</sup>"Sample A" student survey respondents from 39 charter schools across 10 states; N = 4,954 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

According to Table 5, more students are doing "excellent" or "above average" work in their charter school than in their previous school (as reported by parents). Indeed, the number of their children doing "excellent" or "above average" work increased by 22.7%, while the number doing "below average" or "poor" work decreased by 12.7%. What is striking is that these trends also hold true for special education, gifted, and limited English proficiency (LEP) students.

**Table 5. Parental Rating of Child's Overall Performance<sup>a</sup>**

|                                |                     | Previous School | Current Charter School | Change |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------|
| Total                          | Excellent .....     | 14.0%           | 24.5%                  | +10.5% |
|                                | Above average ..... | 20.0%           | 32.2%                  | +12.2% |
|                                | Average .....       | 27.0%           | 30.3%                  | +3.3%  |
|                                | Below average ..... | 12.0%           | 4.0%                   | -8.0%  |
|                                | Poor .....          | 5.3%            | 0.6%                   | -4.7%  |
| Special Education <sup>b</sup> | Excellent .....     | 5.9%            | 11.0%                  | +5.1%  |
|                                | Above average ..... | 10.6%           | 26.8%                  | +16.2% |
|                                | Average .....       | 36.8%           | 48.6%                  | +11.8% |
|                                | Below average ..... | 32.2%           | 11.8%                  | -20.4% |
|                                | Poor .....          | 14.5%           | 1.8%                   | -12.7% |
| Gifted <sup>b</sup>            | Excellent .....     | 26.9%           | 37.4%                  | +10.5% |
|                                | Above average ..... | 33.3%           | 40.7%                  | +7.4%  |
|                                | Average .....       | 26.5%           | 19.0%                  | -7.5%  |
|                                | Below average ..... | 8.4%            | 2.3%                   | -6.1%  |
|                                | Poor .....          | 4.9%            | 0.6%                   | -4.3%  |
| Limited English Proficiency    | Excellent .....     | 22.7%           | 27.6%                  | +4.9%  |
|                                | Above average ..... | 20.5%           | 35.3%                  | +14.8% |
|                                | Average .....       | 39.8%           | 28.4%                  | -11.4% |
|                                | Below average ..... | 10.2%           | 7.8%                   | -2.4%  |
|                                | Poor .....          | 6.8%            | 0.9%                   | -5.9%  |

<sup>a</sup> "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997).

<sup>b</sup> "Special Education" students are those identified by their parents as "not learning quickly, needing extra help", having a "physical disability", having "behavior problems", and/or having a "learning disability". "Gifted" students are those noted as being a "fast learner, often bored".

**Levels of Satisfaction Among Parents**

When asked "How satisfied are you with specific features of this school?", a clear trend emerges: most of the top answers (class size, curriculum, school size, individual attention by teachers, academic standards for students) are education-related, while most of the lower-ranked answers concern such non-instructional matters as facilities, extracurricular activities, transportation, food, and sports. Note, though, that even the "bottom" answers are very positive. If converted to let-

**Table 6. Overall Parental Satisfaction With Charter School<sup>a</sup>**

|  | Very Satisfied | Somewhat Satisfied | Uncertain | Not Too Satisfied | Quite Dissatisfied |
|--|----------------|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Opportunities for parent participation ..... | 75.9%          | 17.7%              | 5.1%      | 1.1%              | 0.3%               |
| Class size .....                             | 75.2%          | 19.2%              | 3.0%      | 2.3%              | 0.3%               |
| Curriculum .....                             | 71.6%          | 22.9%              | 3.4%      | 1.9%              | 0.2%               |
| School size .....                            | 74.5%          | 18.6%              | 4.5%      | 1.9%              | 0.6%               |
| Individual attention by teachers .....       | 70.8%          | 21.5%              | 5.2%      | 2.0%              | 0.5%               |
| Academic standards for students .....        | 67.8%          | 22.4%              | 6.7%      | 2.5%              | 0.6%               |
| Accessibility and openness .....             | 66.1%          | 23.6%              | 7.3%      | 2.2%              | 0.8%               |
| How much school expects of parents .....     | 66.0%          | 23.2%              | 7.8%      | 2.2%              | 0.8%               |
| People running the school .....              | 62.2%          | 26.4%              | 7.7%      | 2.7%              | 1.0%               |
| Quality of teaching .....                    | 56.6%          | 32.4%              | 8.1%      | 2.2%              | 0.8%               |
| Technology .....                             | 55.8%          | 24.6%              | 11.3%     | 5.9%              | 2.3%               |
| School facilities .....                      | 44.8%          | 34.1%              | 9.6%      | 8.5%              | 3.0%               |
| Extracurricular activities .....             | 43.1%          | 28.9%              | 20.0%     | 5.7%              | 2.2%               |
| Transportation to/from school .....          | 49.8%          | 22.9%              | 10.5%     | 10.0%             | 6.9%               |
| Food .....                                   | 42.3%          | 27.4%              | 14.3%     | 9.3%              | 6.7%               |
| Sports program .....                         | 23.0%          | 37.0%              | 10.3%     | 22.8%             | 6.8%               |

<sup>a</sup> "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages do not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

**Table 7. Overall Parent Rating of Charter School vs. School Child Would Otherwise Attend<sup>a</sup>**

|  | Better | About the Same | Worse |
|--|--------|----------------|-------|
| Class size .....                       | 69.3%  | 16.3%          | 2.5%  |
| Individual attention by teachers ..... | 69.9%  | 16.7%          | 2.7%  |
| School size .....                      | 68.6%  | 13.1%          | 4.4%  |
| Quality of teaching .....              | 65.7%  | 19.7%          | 2.0%  |
| Parent involvement .....               | 64.0%  | 21.3%          | 2.2%  |
| Curriculum .....                       | 65.0%  | 20.8%          | 3.1%  |
| Extra help for students .....          | 64.3%  | 19.7%          | 3.3%  |
| Academic standards .....               | 63.0%  | 22.2%          | 3.0%  |
| Accessibility and openness .....       | 60.5%  | 23.0%          | 2.5%  |
| Discipline .....                       | 60.2%  | 23.6%          | 3.6%  |
| Basic skills .....                     | 58.8%  | 25.7%          | 2.4%  |
| Safety .....                           | 59.5%  | 24.5%          | 3.5%  |
| School facilities .....                | 42.0%  | 27.1%          | 15.1% |

<sup>a</sup> "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

ter-grade equivalents, all of the grades would be A's or B's. Parents, overall, seem remarkably pleased with most aspects of their child's charter school (See Table 6.)

When parents were asked to rate their child's charter school against their other options ("Please compare this charter school with the school your child would otherwise be attending this year"), they ranked the charter schools higher on every single indicator—but especially on individual attention and class/school size, and also on curriculum and teaching. Facilities received the worst rating from charter-school parents—a grade that is unsurprising to us after 45 site visits to charter schools, many of them in very meager quarters. Yet even here, 42% of parents say that charter school facilities are better while only 15% say they're worse. (See Table 7.)

Parent satisfaction is also high for parents of children with special needs (e.g., special education students, gifted children, and LEP students). About two-thirds of parents with children in these categories think their charter school is better than the schools their children would otherwise attend when it comes to curriculum, quality of teaching, providing extra help when needed, and parental involvement.<sup>3</sup> (See Table 8.)

Here again, the surveys reveal strong satisfaction and a high degree of conviction that this school is better for their youngster than other available options on a wide array of factors. Several state-level evaluations of charter schools have drawn similar conclusions.<sup>4</sup>

These satisfaction levels for charter schools stand out in a time when there is growing dissatisfaction with traditional public schools. According to recent sur-

**Table 8. Parents' Rating of Charter School vs. School Child Would Otherwise Attend (By Parents of Special Needs Students)<sup>a</sup>**

|                     |                      | Special Ed. <sup>b</sup> | Gifted <sup>b</sup> | LEP <sup>c</sup> |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Curriculum          | Better .....         | 64.5%                    | 69.6%               | 75.4%            |
|                     | About the Same ..... | 21.8%                    | 18.3%               | 15.4%            |
|                     | Worse .....          | 4.9%                     | 3.0%                | 0.8%             |
| Quality of Teaching | Better .....         | 67.1%                    | 67.6%               | 61.5%            |
|                     | About the Same ..... | 20.6%                    | 19.5%               | 22.3%            |
|                     | Worse .....          | 2.4%                     | 2.4%                | 0.0%             |
| Extra Help          | Better .....         | 68.1%                    | 65.9%               | 64.6%            |
|                     | About the Same ..... | 17.6%                    | 20.6%               | 18.5%            |
|                     | Worse .....          | 4.3%                     | 3.2%                | 0.8%             |
| Parent Involvement  | Better .....         | 65.0%                    | 68.3%               | 52.3%            |
|                     | About the Same ..... | 23.6%                    | 19.2%               | 27.7%            |
|                     | Worse .....          | 1.8%                     | 2.4%                | 0.8%             |

<sup>a</sup> "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to no response and invalid responses.

<sup>b</sup> "Special Education" students are those identified by their parents as "not learning quickly, needing extra help", having a "physical disability", having "behavior problems", and/or having a "learning disability". "Gifted" students are those noted as being a "fast learner, often bored".

<sup>c</sup> "LEP" stands for Limited English Proficiency.

veys by Public Agenda, 61% of Americans complained about public-school standards being too low, and 60% said that schools do not place enough emphasis on "the basics."<sup>5</sup> Almost half (47%) of Americans said that they did not believe that a high school degree is a guarantee that a student has learned the basics.<sup>6</sup> In a 1995 report, Public Agenda described popular support for America's public schools as "fragile" and "porous" and warned of a "public poised for flight" unless schools begin to deliver on what the public considers to be the essential elements of education (which it listed as: safety, higher standards, order, and smaller classes).<sup>7</sup>

**Table 9. Teacher Satisfaction With Charter School<sup>a</sup>**

|                               | Very Satisfied | Somewhat Satisfied | Uncertain | Not Too Satisfied | Quite Dissatisfied |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Fellow teachers .....         | 61.2%          | 33.2%              | 3.3%      | 2.1%              | 0.2%               |
| Educational philosophy .....  | 61.6%          | 31.6%              | 4.3%      | 1.9%              | 0.6%               |
| School size .....             | 59.1%          | 31.8%              | 5.6%      | 3.1%              | 0.4%               |
| Students .....                | 50.9%          | 40.4%              | 5.4%      | 2.9%              | 0.4%               |
| Challenge of starting         |                |                    |           |                   |                    |
| new school .....              | 50.5%          | 33.5%              | 13.7%     | 2.0%              | 0.4%               |
| Administrators .....          | 53.6%          | 31.8%              | 7.1%      | 5.3%              | 2.2%               |
| Teacher decisionmaking .....  | 46.6%          | 31.9%              | 11.6%     | 7.4%              | 2.5%               |
| Governing board .....         | 38.4%          | 32.2%              | 22.7%     | 4.1%              | 2.5%               |
| Staff development .....       | 34.2%          | 38.9%              | 12.5%     | 11.9%             | 2.5%               |
| Instructional materials ..... | 35.7%          | 37.3%              | 8.2%      | 15.3%             | 3.5%               |
| Relations with community ...  | 21.3%          | 46.6%              | 23.5%     | 7.0%              | 1.6%               |
| Parental involvement .....    | 26.8%          | 42.1%              | 9.7%      | 16.9%             | 4.5%               |
| Salary level .....            | 25.5%          | 43.7%              | 9.2%      | 17.5%             | 4.1%               |
| Non-teaching                  |                |                    |           |                   |                    |
| responsibilities .....        | 23.8%          | 36.0%              | 21.0%     | 14.7%             | 4.5%               |
| Fringe benefits .....         | 24.6%          | 34.5%              | 19.4%     | 14.9%             | 6.7%               |
| Physical facilities .....     | 23.0%          | 37.0%              | 10.3%     | 22.8%             | 6.8%               |
| Relations with                |                |                    |           |                   |                    |
| school district .....         | 12.1%          | 26.0%              | 40.7%     | 15.7%             | 5.5%               |
| Relations with                |                |                    |           |                   |                    |
| teacher union .....           | 9.7%           | 6.8%               | 69.3%     | 8.0%              | 6.2%               |

<sup>a</sup> "Sample C" teacher survey respondents from 36 charter schools across 10 states; N = 521 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

### How Teachers Grade Their Charter Schools

When teachers were asked "How satisfied are you with specific features of this school and your experience in it?", the answers indicate a high degree of satisfaction with key aspects of the schools. (See Table 9.)

Combining the "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" columns, 93.2% of charter school teachers are satisfied with the school's educational philosophy, 94.4% are satisfied with their fellow teachers, 90.9% are satisfied with the school's size, 85.4% are satisfied with the school's administrators, 91.3% are satisfied with the students, and 84% are satisfied with the challenge of starting a new school. These are impressive numbers, especially given the newness of the schools.

When asked to evaluate their school's success so far in certain areas, the results were again positive. (See Table 10.)

The percentages of teachers who reported that the school had "much success" or "some success" broke down as follows: 97.6% for raising student achievement, 97.5% for providing an excellent educational alternative, 97.3% for providing safety, and 97.1% for educating hard-to-educate children. Teachers reporting that their school has had "little success" or "no success" broke down as follows: 24.7% for giving teachers adequate prep time, 15% for integrating technology with the curriculum, and 11.2% for giving teachers sufficient instructional supplies. On every single issue covered in the survey, at least three-fourths of teachers reported that their charter school was having "much" or "some" success. That probably explains why 82% of teachers plan to return to their charter school next year and fewer than 3% say they hope to be elsewhere. (See Table 11.)

### Why Do Families Choose Charter Schools?

Policymakers and analysts project onto the charter school movement various theories about why people might opt into these schools. Asking why real families actually choose charter schools is an important reality check. Our surveys probed why parents made their choices, whether they are pleased with the change, and whether they expect to stick with it. (See Table 12.)

Most of the leading answers (higher standards, educational philosophy, better teachers) have to do with educational matters. Nor is it surprising that parents would be drawn to the small size of most charter schools and their welcoming view of parental involvement. (According to the new federal study, the average enrollment of U.S.

**Table 10. Teachers' Views on Charter School Success\***

|   | Much Success | Some Success | Little or No Success |
|---|--------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Providing for safety                              | 66.3%        | 31.0%        | 2.7%                 |
| Providing for excellent educational alternative   | 62.4%        | 35.1%        | 2.5%                 |
| Positive influence on education in community      | 61.1%        | 36.4%        | 2.5%                 |
| Maintaining discipline                            | 60.2%        | 34.6%        | 5.3%                 |
| Building high-quality staff                       | 55.9%        | 40.6%        | 3.5%                 |
| Involving teachers in decision-making             | 56.9%        | 37.1%        | 6.0%                 |
| Raising student achievement                       | 48.0%        | 49.6%        | 2.3%                 |
| Setting/maintaining high academic standards       | 46.6%        | 48.7%        | 4.7%                 |
| Strong curriculum, powerful methods               | 45.9%        | 49.4%        | 4.7%                 |
| Attracting the kinds of students it hoped to have | 42.4%        | 53.8%        | 3.7%                 |
| Educating hard-to-educate students                | 40.1%        | 57.0%        | 2.9%                 |
| Keeping students in school                        | 43.0%        | 50.9%        | 6.0%                 |
| Suitably assessing pupil performance              | 37.7%        | 57.4%        | 4.9%                 |
| Providing necessary teacher training              | 40.6%        | 50.7%        | 8.7%                 |
| Obtaining necessary resources                     | 39.1%        | 52.9%        | 7.9%                 |
| Providing necessary instructional materials       | 42.2%        | 46.5%        | 11.2%                |
| Running smoothly                                  | 33.7%        | 59.3%        | 7.0%                 |
| Involving parents                                 | 36.0%        | 54.7%        | 9.3%                 |
| Integrating technology with curriculum            | 37.9%        | 47.0%        | 15.0%                |
| Giving teachers adequate preparation time         | 31.7%        | 43.6%        | 24.7%                |

\* "Sample C" teacher survey respondents from 36 charter schools across 10 states; N = 521 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

charter schools is only 275 students, and 61.9% of charter schools have an enrollment of fewer than 200 students.<sup>8</sup>)

Some of the reasons parents give (or don't give) for choosing a charter school are more surprising: only a few (16.9%) cited "child doing badly" as their reason for electing the charter school, and just a fifth (20.1%) cited safety concerns. It is interesting to note that the number of parents who say they chose this charter school because their "child was doing badly in his/her previous schools" (16.9%) closely mirrors the percentage (17.3%) who, on another question, described their child's previous academic performance as "below average" or "poor."

**Table 11. Teachers' Plans for Returning to Charter School\***

|                        |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| I Hope So              | 82.0% |
| Not Sure               | 15.3% |
| I Hope To Be Elsewhere | 2.7%  |

\*\* "Sample C" teacher survey respondents from 36 charter schools across 10 states; N = 521 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

Still, even those on the low end of Table 12 are actually big numbers, such as one in five parents reporting that their child has special needs that were not being adequately met by his or her previous school.

### Why Do Teachers Choose Charter Schools?

When asked "How big a factor were the following in your decision to teach in this school?," the leading choices were: school's educational philosophy (76.8%), wanted a new school (64.8%), like-minded colleagues (62.9%), good administrators (54.6%), and class size (54.2%). Least commonly cited as a "big factor" were: convenient location (28.2%), school less influenced by union (23.9%), safety (15.1%), attractive compensation (10.2%), and difficulty finding other employment (8.7%).

Table 13 suggests that charter school teachers appear more interested in educational quality and professional/entrepreneurial opportunities than salary and convenience.

When asked "What would you likely be doing this year if you weren't teaching in this school?," only 36.7% said "teaching in another public school." 13.1% said "teaching in another charter school," 8.6% said "teaching in a private school," and a whopping 27.1% said "other." Apparently, charter school teachers are an unconventional bunch. Over a quarter say that they'd be doing something other than teaching if they

**Table 12. Reasons Parents Chose Charter School<sup>1</sup>**

|   | Lower Income <sup>b</sup><br>(< \$30,000) | Middle Income<br>(\$30- 59,999) | Upper Income<br>(>\$60,000) | Total |
|---|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Small size of charter school                        | 52.5%                                     | 54.2%                           | 57.6%                       | 53.0% |
| Higher standards at charter school                  | 44.2%                                     | 47.9%                           | 50.6%                       | 45.9% |
| Program closer to my educational philosophy         | 37.2%                                     | 48.2%                           | 59.7%                       | 44.0% |
| Greater opportunity for parent involvement          | 45.5%                                     | 45.7%                           | 37.9%                       | 43.0% |
| Better teachers at charter school                   | 45.3%                                     | 39.3%                           | 40.3%                       | 41.9% |
| Unhappy with curriculum/teachers at previous school | 29.8%                                     | 39.2%                           | 42.2%                       | 34.5% |
| My child wanted to come here                        | 34.9%                                     | 27.3%                           | 25.2%                       | 30.3% |
| Location of charter school more convenient          | 41.9%                                     | 20.6%                           | 13.4%                       | 29.5% |
| Charter school offers before/after school programs  | 33.2%                                     | 18.9%                           | 13.3%                       | 24.3% |
| People told me this is a better school              | 27.5%                                     | 19.0%                           | 11.7%                       | 21.8% |
| Previous school was unsafe                          | 25.9%                                     | 18.5%                           | 10.8%                       | 20.1% |
| My child's special needs not met at previous school | 20.3%                                     | 22.4%                           | 17.8%                       | 19.9% |
| Prefer private school but could not afford          | 21.5%                                     | 17.9%                           | 15.2%                       | 18.7% |
| My child was doing badly in regular school          | 20.4%                                     | 16.6%                           | 9.5%                        | 16.9% |
| Other   | 7.1%                                      | 14.4%                           | 15.2%                       | 11.0% |

<sup>1</sup> "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

<sup>b</sup> \$30,000 is our "lower-income" threshold because it captures all families (with four or fewer children) who are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch programs.



**Table 13. Key Factors in Teachers' Decisions to Teach in Charter School\***

|   | Big Factor | Somewhat of a Factor | Not a Factor |
|---|------------|----------------------|--------------|
| School's educational philosophy .....   | 76.8%      | 18.0%                | 5.2%         |
| Wanted a new school .....               | 64.8%      | 25.1%                | 10.1%        |
| Like-minded colleagues .....            | 62.9%      | 26.4%                | 10.6%        |
| Good administrators .....               | 54.6%      | 30.0%                | 15.4%        |
| Class size .....                        | 54.2%      | 25.0%                | 20.9%        |
| Teachers have more authority .....      | 41.9%      | 33.7%                | 24.4%        |
| Committed parents .....                 | 38.3%      | 37.9%                | 23.8%        |
| Less bureaucracy .....                  | 40.2%      | 34.4%                | 25.4%        |
| School size .....                       | 35.7%      | 35.3%                | 28.9%        |
| Eager/good students .....               | 31.1%      | 38.6%                | 30.3%        |
| Convenient location .....               | 28.2%      | 36.9%                | 34.8%        |
| Less influenced by union .....          | 23.9%      | 24.5%                | 51.5%        |
| Safety .....                            | 15.1%      | 29.2%                | 55.7%        |
| Attractive compensation .....           | 10.2%      | 33.1%                | 56.6%        |
| Difficulty finding other position ..... | 8.7%       | 16.6%                | 74.8%        |

\* "Sample C" teacher survey respondents from 36 charter schools across 10 states; N = 521 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

weren't teaching in a charter school. This suggests that charter schools are tapping into sources of instructional horsepower not attracted to more conventional schools.

**Who Teaches in Charter Schools?**

The average charter school teacher comes in with 5.6 years of public-school teaching experience, 1.7 years of private-school teaching experience, 1.4 years of experience teach-

**Table 14. Teacher Demographics\***

|   |   |           |
|---|---|-----------|
| Previous Years of Teaching Experience                         | Public school .....                       | 5.6 years |
|   | Private school .....                      | 1.7 years |
|   | University/elsewhere .....                | 1.4 years |
|   | Home-schooling .....                      | 0.6 years |
| Certification   | Certified in this state .....             | 71.6%     |
|   | Certified but not in this state .....     | 3.7%      |
|   | Working on state certification .....      | 17.0%     |
|   | Not certified/not working on it .....     | 7.7%      |
| Current Member of Teachers' Union                             | Yes .....                                 | 23.6%     |
|   | No .....                                  | 75.6%     |
|   | No Response .....                         | 0.8%      |
| Previous Member of Teachers' Union                            | Yes .....                                 | 40.9%     |
|   | No .....                                  | 57.4%     |
|   | No Response .....                         | 1.7%      |
| Salary Level (compared with other job options)                | Significantly higher here .....           | 16.1%     |
|   | Slightly higher here .....                | 18.7%     |
|   | About the same .....                      | 27.5%     |
|   | Slightly lower here .....                 | 20.3%     |
|   | Significantly lower here .....            | 17.3%     |
| Likely Doing This Year If Not Teaching In This Charter School | Teaching in another charter school .....  | 13.1%     |
|   | Teaching in a regular public school ..... | 36.7%     |
|   | Teaching in a private school .....        | 8.6%      |
|   | Other .....                               | 27.1%     |
|   | No/Multiple response .....                | 14.6%     |

\* "Sample C" teacher survey respondents from 36 charter schools across 10 states; N = 521 (February 1997); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

**Table 15. Where Do Charter School Teachers Come From?\***

| Previous Employment (during 1995-96 school year) |       |
|--|-------|
| This Charter School .....                        | 49.4% |
| Another Charter School .....                     | 0.8%  |
| Regular Public School .....                      | 22.9% |
| Private School .....                             | 7.9%  |
| Home-schooled .....                              | 3.1%  |
| Recent Graduate .....                            | 13.6% |
| Return to Teaching .....                         | 4.2%  |
| Other "Non-Teacher" .....                        | 4.8%  |

\* "Sample D" school survey respondents from 49 charter schools across 9 states; N = 1,005 teachers (October 1996); percentages may not equal 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

ing in a university or elsewhere, and 0.6 years experience home-schooling.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of charter school teachers are certified, while 17% more are working on it. That means nine out of ten are or probably soon will be certified in the state in which they're teaching, notwithstanding the otherwise-unconventional cast of much of the charter teaching force. About a quarter (23.6%) of charter teachers are currently members of a teachers' union (compared to 40.9% who used to be). (See Table 14.)

Less than a quarter (22.9%) of charter school teachers taught in a regular public school in the year immediately prior to this one, while 13.6% were recent college graduates, 4.2% were returning to the profession after an absence, and 4.8% were coming from another field altogether. Almost half (49.4%) had taught in the same charter school last year. (See Table 15.)

In comparing salary levels, 34.8% of charter school teachers report that they make more money in the charter school than they would in another school, compared to 27.5% who say they make about the same, and 37.6% who say they make less.

During our site visits, we learned that charter schools offer a great deal to America's teachers: professional and entrepreneurial opportunities and more chances to be involved with school policymaking and planning. From our surveys we can deduce that, not only do teachers come to charter schools primarily for educational reasons, but they also feel that their charter schools are successful educationally. Of course, the truest "marketplace" test of whether a charter school is successful is whether families choose to attend them—and stick with their choice.

**Longevity**

Longevity is an important dimension of school choice, because it reveals much about parents' satisfaction with their decision. If a parent withdraws a child from a "regular" school in favor of a charter school, that makes a bold statement about

**Table 16. Parents' Plans for Keeping Child in Charter School (As Many Years As Available)\***

| Yes   | No   | Not Sure |
|-------|------|----------|
| 78.9% | 3.5% | 13.0%    |

\* "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages do not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

the quality of the schools they're leaving but only a tentative statement about the quality of the program they're choosing. But if that parent chooses a charter school and stays there, that reveals more about quality and satisfaction.

When asked "How long have your children been in their charter schools?", responses were: first year 40.2%, second year 29.1%, third year 12.8%, fourth year 5.3%, more 6.4%. Seven out of ten are in their first or second year, while only a quarter are in their third year or beyond. (Student-reported data are similar.) We know that the charter movement is still in its infancy and most charter schools are new. Many face a wide variety of start-up problems. Yet most parents seem determined to keep their children in them. Fewer than 4% intend to go elsewhere. (See Table 16.)

**Who Chooses Charter Schools?**

*Student Demographics.* In our sample, half (49.6%) of the students were members of minority groups: 25% were Hispanic, 15.7% were African-American, 4.1% were Asian, 3.7% were Native-American, and 1.1% were "other."<sup>9</sup> The first-year report on charter schools published by the Department of Education found very similar numbers in its larger sample: 48.4% of students are minorities, among whom 24.8% are Hispanic, 13.8% African-American, 6.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3.5% American Indian or Alaskan Native.<sup>10</sup> (In American public schools, by contrast, about 34% of students

**Table 17. Student Demographics\***

|   |  |       |
|---|--|-------|
| Race/Ethnicity  | White .....                              | 49.8% |
|   | African-American .....                   | 15.7% |
|   | Hispanic .....                           | 25.0% |
|   | Asian .....                              | 4.1%  |
|   | Native American .....                    | 3.7%  |
|   | Other .....                              | 1.1%  |
| Previous Schooling (Immediately Prior to This Charter School) | Regular Public School .....              | 63.1% |
|   | Another Charter School .....             | 1.4%  |
|   | Private School .....                     | 10.7% |
|   | Home-Schooled .....                      | 3.0%  |
|   | Former Dropout .....                     | 5.0%  |
|   | Did Not Attend School .....              | 16.8% |
| Gender  | Male .....                               | 48.0% |
|   | Female .....                             | 52.0% |
| Identified Special Needs Students                             | Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible .....        | 40.5% |
|   | Limited English Proficient .....         | 13.1% |
|   | Formal IEP (currently) .....             | 7.7%  |
|   | Formal IEP (previously) .....            | 3.5%  |
|   | Other Serious Learning Impediments ..... | 1.4%  |

\* "Sample D" school-reported data from 49 charter schools across 9 states; N = 15,931 students (October 1996).

are minorities.<sup>11</sup>) This close match between the two data sets would seem to confirm that charter schools enroll a significantly higher percentage of minority students than do conventional public schools.<sup>12</sup> (Note, too, that the federal study reported on 1995-96 enrollments while our data are for 1996-97.) One might suppose that the "creaming" allegation could now be laid to rest. Put simply, a third of public school students nationally are minorities, while half of charter school students nationally are minorities.<sup>13</sup> (See Table 17.)

According to the charter schools in our sample, 63.1% of their students had previously attended public schools, 10.7% went to private school, 3.0% were home-schooled, 1.4% attended another charter school, 16.8% were not in school (e.g., pre-K), and 5% were former dropouts.

The schools in our sample reported that 40.5% of their students are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a third (33.8%) of students enrolled in their charter school sample were eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, similar to the 36.6% of all students in the ten charter states who are eligible for this program.<sup>14</sup> Also, 13.1% of the students in our sample have limited English proficiency (LEP). This contrasts with the federal charter school report, which claims that about 7% of charter school enrollment was comprised of LEP students, compared to the 6.8% of students nationally who are classified as LEP.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the schools in our sample enroll such a large percentage of poor and LEP children (significantly higher than the national average) makes the high levels of satisfaction apparent in these surveys all the more impressive.

When it comes to disabled students, our sample indicates that charter schools are pulling their weight. According to data reported by the charter schools in our sample, 7.7% of their students had a formal individualized education plan (IEP), 3.5% did not now have an IEP but probably would have had one in their former public school, and 1.4% were students with other serious learning impediments. Altogether, these charter schools report that 12.6% of their students have disabilities that affect their education. (See Table 17.)

According to parents, 9.1% of their children had a learning disability and 1.8% had a physical disability. In addition, 11.5% of parents said their child had behavior problems, and 20.9% said their child "does not learn quickly—needs extra help." (See Table 18.)

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 7.4% of charter school enrollment in 1995-96 was comprised of students who had received special education services prior to enrolling at their charter school, compared to the 10.4% nationally who received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1994-95.<sup>16</sup> Charter schools are clearly serving a significant portion of children

**Table 18. Students' Educational Challenges (As Noted by Their Parents)\***

|   | Race/Ethnicity |       |          |       |            |       |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------|------------|-------|
|   | White          | Black | Hispanic | Asian | Native Am. | Total |
| Interested in some subjects, but not others ..... | 38.5%          | 32.5% | 34.4%    | 23.4% | 26.9%      | 35.6% |
| Fast learner; often bored .....                   | 34.5%          | 37.8% | 24.2%    | 29.8% | 26.9%      | 32.3% |
| No special challenges .....                       | 27.7%          | 19.8% | 29.4%    | 25.5% | 15.4%      | 26.6% |
| Does not learn quickly; needs extra help .....    | 17.6%          | 27.9% | 23.4%    | 17.0% | 19.2%      | 20.9% |
| Too social; not academic enough .....             | 13.2%          | 18.3% | 16.3%    | 6.4%  | 15.4%      | 14.7% |
| Behavior problems .....                           | 9.1%           | 16.2% | 15.0%    | 14.9% | 7.7%       | 11.5% |
| Learning disability .....                         | 10.4%          | 6.3%  | 7.7%     | 6.4%  | 19.2%      | 9.1%  |
| Has few friends .....                             | 7.9%           | 6.6%  | 7.6%     | 12.8% | 11.5%      | 8.2%  |
| Other .....                                       | 9.5%           | 6.9%  | 3.5%     | 8.5%  | 3.8%       | 7.3%  |
| Does not speak English very well .....            | 0.7%           | 2.5%  | 15.0%    | 8.5%  | 3.8%       | 5.0%  |
| Physical disability .....                         | 1.8%           | 2.5%  | 1.5%     | 0.0%  | 0.0%       | 1.8%  |

\* "Sample C" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997).

with special needs, but questions remain regarding the exact number as compared to those in traditional public schools. More research is plainly needed on this area. Of course, obtaining an accurate count requires a consistent definition of which children are part of the "special ed" universe. These numbers are elusive because some families will not submit

Family incomes vary widely. About a quarter (27%) of charter parents in our sample report incomes below \$20,000, 26% are between \$20,000 and \$40,000, 18% between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and 17.8% over \$60,000. (As expected, a number of parents declined to answer income questions.) (See Table 19.)

**Table 19. Parent Demographics\***

|  |   |       |
|--|---|-------|
| Total Number of Children in Charter School           | One .....                               | 52.1% |
|  | Two .....                               | 29.3% |
|  | Three .....                             | 10.0% |
|  | Four or more .....                      | 4.1%  |
| Length of Time At Least Once Child In Charter School | First year .....                        | 40.2% |
|  | Second year .....                       | 29.1% |
|  | Third year .....                        | 12.8% |
|  | Fourth year or more .....               | 11.7% |
| Highest Educational Level                            | Did not complete high school .....      | 12.0% |
|  | H.S., but no college .....              | 18.8% |
|  | Some college, no degree .....           | 28.6% |
|  | College graduate .....                  | 18.7% |
|  | Post-graduate/professional degree ..... | 12.2% |
| Total Family Income                                  | Less than \$10,000 .....                | 11.0% |
|  | \$10,000 - \$19,999 .....               | 16.0% |
|  | \$20,000 - \$39,999 .....               | 26.0% |
|  | \$40,000 - \$59,999 .....               | 18.0% |
|  | \$60,000 - \$99,999 .....               | 13.0% |
| More than \$100,000 .....                            | 4.8%                                    |       |

\* "Sample B" parent survey respondents from 30 charter schools across 9 states; N = 2,978 (February 1997); percentages may not add to 100% due to invalid and non-responses.

to having their children labeled, sorted, and treated differently and some schools are reluctant—for financial, staffing, and philosophical reasons—to "identify" special ed cases.

*Parent Demographics.* Less than a third (30.9%) of charter school parents have a college degree or higher. 12% did not complete high school.

### Conclusion

Our data sets reveal satisfaction levels that are wide and deep. There seems to be consensus among all primary constituents that charter schools are living up to their expectations and delivering a high-quality product (or at least improving upon the alternative).

Of course, it's one thing for charter school students to feel like they're getting a good education and another to *demonstrate* it (on a statewide assessment, for example). Individual schools are reporting improved student scores, but no national or state summary reports yet exist. Clearly there is a gap in our knowledge base when it comes to achievement data. The whole point of charter schools is to answer today's call for bold school reform by injecting freedom, choice, and accountability into school systems and thereby providing a better education for America's children. Test scores will be an important part of the story, and collection of this information is underway in various parts of the country. Meanwhile, another chapter of the story is being written by families and teachers who are choosing these independent public schools, reporting much learning within their walls, and sticking with them.

These surveys paint a statistical portrait that is compelling: there are striking levels of satisfaction among all the constituents of charter schools, their focus is on education (without frills), their students are flourishing academically, and they are havens for children—of all races, backgrounds, and abilities—who were not thriving in conventional schools.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The recently-released federal study is called *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997). Our first-year report was called *Charter Schools in Action: What Have We Learned?* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Essentially all the Native Americans in our sample attend one school, which happens to be a "conversion" school. Thus, the teachers in their charter school are likely to be the same as their teachers in the pre-charter school, so one would expect the "about the same" response to occur with great frequency. Also, a slightly higher percentage of black students did not answer these questions. When invalid responses and non-responses are factored out, 62.5% of black students say they like their teachers better and 56.1% say that they're more interested in their school work at this school than they were at their last one.

<sup>3</sup> The only exception is for parents of LEP children when it comes to parental involvement. In that case, just over half think the charter school is better than their previous school.

<sup>4</sup> See Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, *Minnesota Charter Schools Evaluation: Interim Report*, (University of Minnesota, December 1996); Pioneer Institute, *Massachusetts Charter School Profile, 1995-96 School Year*, (Boston: Pioneer Institute, July 1996); *Massachusetts Charter School Profile, 1996-97 School Year (Interim Report)*, (Boston: Pioneer Institute, March 1997); and Mary Gifford and Timothy Keller, "Arizona's Charter Schools: A Survey of Parents," Phoenix: Goldwater Institute, *Arizona Issue Analysis #140*, April 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, (New York: Public Agenda, 1994), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Johnson, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, (New York: Public Agenda, 1995), 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 and 13.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997), 65.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, since we have demographic data from 3 sources, we are presenting demographic data from our sample with the largest N (our school-reported data from Sample D).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997), 16. The data are for 58,620 students in 214 charter schools (1995-96). Apparently, minority enrollment is especially high in "conversion" schools (and especially for Hispanics). In addition, conversion schools that were formerly private schools enroll a surprisingly large percentage of blacks (*Ibid.*, 69).

<sup>11</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1996), 60. Data are for fall 1994.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that 63% of the children in our sample in 1995-96 were members of a minority group [see Finn, Manno, and Bierlein, *Charter Schools in Action: What Have We Learned?* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1996)].

<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are important state variations in minority enrollment patterns that warrant attention. For example, charter schools in Michigan and Minnesota have a significantly higher percentage of blacks and charter schools in Massachusetts have a higher percentage of Hispanics (than "regular" public schools in the state), while charter schools in Georgia have a significantly lower percentage of blacks than other public schools in the state.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997), 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

**"The individual teachers display a real commitment to excellence and fostering growth and development in the students. This is a breath of fresh air after our experience with the mainstream schools."**

*—A low-income Michigan charter school parent*

## Methodology

Our study yielded 4 sets of quantitative data, one each from students, parents, teachers, and schools:

- Sample A = student-reported data for grades 5 and up (n = 4,954 from 39 schools in 10 states). For this sample, a “student” was defined as a child enrolled in 5th grade or above. In ungraded or mixed-age schools, a “student” is someone 10 years or older. For the data to be included, we required that at least 70% of a school’s students respond to the surveys. It is worth noting that 35.6% of the student data comes from California, 18.7% from Arizona, and 16.7% from Colorado.
- Sample B = parent-reported data (n = 2,978 from 30 schools in 9 states). A “parent” was defined as a parent, guardian, or responsible adult with one or more child in any grade in the participating charter school. When siblings attended the same school, their parent filled out only one survey, using the oldest child as the “subject.” We required that at least 40% of the school’s parents respond. It is worth noting that 49.2% of our data comes from California, 15.4% from Michigan, and 12.7% from Colorado.
- Sample C = teacher-reported data (n = 521 from 36 schools in 10 states). A “teacher” was defined as a full- or part-time professional instructional employee of the school, in any grade, teaching any subject. (This did not

include aides, tutors, and parent volunteers.) We required that at least 80% of the school’s teachers respond. It is worth noting that 32.8% of our teacher data comes from California, 22.3% from Arizona, 14.0% from Michigan, and 12.9% from Colorado.

- Sample D = school-reported data on students and teachers (number of schools = 49; number of states = 9; number of students = 15,931; number of teachers = 1,005).

Samples A, B, and C were obtained by Hudson Institute and processed and tabulated by the Brookings Institution, while Sample D was obtained exclusively by Hudson Institute via self-reported data from the schools themselves. We did not use data that did not meet our response rates.

In a couple of instances, surveys were translated by schools so that parents with limited English proficiency could also participate. Individual identities were kept confidential. Surveys from Samples A, B, and C were coded. No names were ever written on them. Hudson Institute never had access to the identity of any of the individuals filling out surveys. Each school assumed responsibility for internal confidentiality. Also, individual school data were kept confidential, although tabulations were provided to participating schools themselves. Our analysis and reporting were by state, by type of school (e.g., rural/urban, elementary/secondary, etc.), and for our full national sample of 50 schools. We did not publicly report data on individual schools.

**“I feel like I’m a sponge. I’m always soaking up something new, something interesting, something challenging. I really feel free to use my professional judgment in a way that’s never happened before this school.”**

*—A California charter teacher*

## Project Description

"Charter Schools in Action" is a two-year study by the Hudson Institute's Educational Excellence Network. Supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, it began in July 1995 and will conclude in July 1997.

Through extensive site visits, phone interviews, and surveys, the project team gathered and analyzed information about participating schools, communities, and states. The results are meant to enhance public understanding of the benefits and limits of charter schools as an education reform strategy—and of significant issues related to their implementation.

The project has several goals: to illuminate the practical and policy issues surrounding the creation and successful operation of charter schools (including finances, governance, regulations, facilities, enrollment, and personnel); to begin to gauge the educational impact of these schools; and to inform people involved in creating and operating charter schools—both practitioners and policymakers—of strategies devised elsewhere.

During the first project year (1995-96), site visits were conducted to 43 charter schools in 7 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Detailed information was collected on 35 of them, a cross-section of the approximately 225 charter schools then operating nationwide. Over 700 interviews were conducted with individuals in these schools and communities.

During the second year (1996-97), site visits were made to 45 charter schools in 13 states; 17 schools were visited for the second time; and 18 schools that were visited in 1995-96 participated in follow-up interviews via telephone. The research team obtained direct information from a total of 50 charter schools in 10 states, a reasonable cross-section of the almost 500 charter schools nationwide. (The three states with operating charter schools that were added in the project's second year are Florida, Texas, and the District of Colum-

bia.) Additionally, visits were made to New Jersey, North Carolina, and Hawaii to study the implementation of those states' new charter laws. Over 600 interviews were conducted, bringing the two-year total to well over 1,300.

During the second project year, surveys were conducted of parents, students, and teachers in charter schools that agreed to participate—and whose response rates satisfied the project's minimum participation levels. The project team developed the three questionnaires in consultation with charter school experts nationwide and the Information Technology Services unit of the Brookings Institution, which also provided data processing and analysis. Results were tabulated from 4,954 students (fifth grade and older) attending 39 schools; from 2,978 parents of students attending 30 schools; and from 521 teachers in 36 schools.

Project staff during the first year were Hudson senior fellows Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Louann A. Bierlein. Joining the project staff in its second year was Hudson research fellow Gregg Vanourek. They were advised by knowledgeable individuals in the participating jurisdictions.

The Educational Excellence Network was founded in 1982 and is an information clearinghouse for education reformers. Directed by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch, the Network is now co-sponsored by Hudson Institute and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

*Charter Schools As Seen by Those Who Know Them Best: Students, Teachers, and Parents* is the first of seven briefings that will be forthcoming as part of the project's final report. Six subsequent briefings—on topics ranging from charter school accountability to start-up problems and federal/state policy issues—will be published in July 1997 and will be available then by calling 1-800-HUDSON-0 or on the Internet at <http://www.edexcellence.net> (as is last year's report: *Charter Schools in Action: What Have We Learned?*). Copies of the questionnaires are on the web site or can be obtained by calling (202) 223-5450.

**"The teachers are great and I'm learning so much. They don't just spend a week skimming a chapter in a book, giving a test, and moving on. We really spend time on learning and in the end I understand what was taught."**

*—A 15 year-old charter student from Massachusetts*



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