



CURA REPORTER

VOLUME 34

WINTER 2004

NUMBER 1

Charter Schools, Parents, and Public Schools in Minnesota

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Charter schools—which are a Minnesota invention—have been alternately hailed as the promise, and derided as the scourge, of public education in the United States.

Although the specifics vary by state, charter schools receive public funds, money that, as both opponents and proponents point out, otherwise would have gone to traditional public schools. For charter school advocates, this potential loss of funds should encourage public schools to become better competitors in the new educational marketplace. For opponents, the loss of funds adds another strain to an already strained system. What proponents and detractors have both ignored, however, is that money, although obviously important, is only one of the resources required for an effective public school. Parental involvement is also critical, not only to individual student achievement but also to the effective functioning of the schools. This article takes a closer look at the effects of charter school reforms on principals' attempts to reach out to their parent community and the parental responses to these efforts.

This report is part of a larger project examining the impact of recent educational reform initiatives in Minnesota on leadership within the public schools, focusing primarily on school choice and the No Child Left Behind Act. The project, which involved surveys of and interviews with Minnesota public school principals, was made possible through a Faculty Interactive Research Program grant from CURA. The data for this



Photo courtesy of Hubert H. Humphrey Institutes Center for School Change

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article come from the Minnesota Schools Survey, a mailed survey that was conducted in association with the University's Minnesota Center for Survey Research (a program of CURA) during November and December of 2003 and with the assistance of the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals and the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association.

The Promise of Charter Schools

As their name implies, charter schools are accountable primarily to their charters or founding documents rather than to the school district or state bureaucracy, thus they are free from many of the regulatory and collective bargaining constraints that traditional public schools face. At present, there are more than 2,500 charter schools operating in

39 states serving nearly 700,000 students. In Minnesota, 88 charter schools are currently in operation with a total enrollment of roughly 14,000 students.

To date, there has been no systematic research demonstrating that students in charter schools learn more than students in traditional public schools. In fact, recent studies have challenged some of the academic promise of charter schools. One study just completed by the Minneapolis school district found that students in the city's traditional public schools were actually doing better than students in the district's charter schools. A Wisconsin study showed that charter schools in Milwaukee were doing no better than traditional public schools at ameliorating the troubling and persistent achievement gap between minority and nonminority students. Just recently, the State University of New York recommended that New York's first three charter schools not be renewed because of lack of academic success and poor organization, a finding that may not bode well for the future of the state's other 50 charters, all of which are due to be evaluated in the next few years.¹

For opponents, these results suggest that charter schools may not be worth the effort given the risks they pose to traditional public schools. According to advocates, the lack of data supporting significant achievement gains is due mainly to the fact that charter schools often serve students who have not done well in traditional public schools. In addition, advocates point to the high levels of parent satisfaction with charter schools, although some research suggests that even these benefits fade within the first year.

Like voucher programs—their private school cousins—charter schools were never only about the students who attend them. Rather, the hope has always been that charter schools will spur innovation and change through competition, driving traditional public schools to improve their services. By turning parents into customers, the argument goes, public schools will become more customer-oriented. With more than 90% of K–12 students in the United States still attending traditional public schools (as opposed to 1% attending charter

¹ Allie Shah, "Charter Schools Get Lower Marks," *Star Tribune*, 12 November 2003, B1; "Fourth Grade Achievement Gap in Charter Schools Mirrors MPS," *Public Policy Forum Research Brief*, 16 December 2003; and David M. Herszenhorn, "Report Faults New York's First 3 Charter Schools," *The New York Times*, 13 January 2004, A1.

Photo by Steve Schneider



Harvest Prep charter school in north Minneapolis. Advocates argue that charter schools spur innovation and change through competition, driving traditional public schools to improve their services.

schools), any widespread benefits from charter schools must be grounded in the positive effects they have on noncharter schools.²

Surprisingly, there has been little systematic research on the critical question of how charter schools affect noncharter public schools. Most of the work that has been done has been limited to observational studies, which have found that the responses by traditional public schools have been mostly symbolic rather than substantive and that any large-scale, programmatic changes in the public schools are hampered by poor communication between charter and noncharter schools. The problem with these studies, however, is that they have been looking too far down the causal chain for the benefits or costs of charter schools and have therefore failed to ask a basic—and critical—question about the effects of charter schools on the performance of traditional public schools: Do charter schools lead to a different, and more customer-focused, approach to leadership within the public schools? Any larger systematic benefits must be predicated on an affirmative answer to this question.

Findings from the Minnesota Schools Survey

The results of the Minnesota Schools Survey lead to two main findings. One of these findings supports the potential benefits of charter schools, whereas the other raises serious questions about the long-term impact of charter schools, particularly as the number of such schools grows. Charter schools do lead to a more customer-focused public school principalship, both in the charter schools themselves and in traditional public schools that face competition from them. However, this increased attention to customers may drain the most active and involved parents away from traditional public schools and toward charter schools. Given this often ignored resource drain, optimistic claims about a charter school-induced bureaucratic reinvigoration in traditional public schools may be premature.

Survey questionnaires were sent to 1,434 public and charter school principals



Both charter and traditional public school principals consider parental involvement most useful in setting performance standards, establishing curriculum, and creating discipline policy.

in Minnesota in November and December of 2003. When an individual principal was responsible for more than one school, a survey was sent to only one of the schools. The response rate was very high, with slightly less than 70% of those principals surveyed responding during the study period. A smaller percentage of charter school principals responded to the survey, primarily because charter schools are more likely to have one principal overseeing separate “schools” within the same building, as well as the fact that many Minnesota charter schools are run by teams.

This report focuses on the effects of Minnesota’s charter schools on leadership, outreach, and parental involvement in charter schools and traditional public schools. The analysis is based on a comparison of principals’ views of their own leadership, and parental response to that leadership, according to the status of the school—that is, whether the school is a charter school, a traditional public school located in a district where charter schools operate, or a traditional public school located in a district where no charter schools are in operation. This approach makes it possible to look for unique patterns in leadership, outreach, and parental response not only in charter schools but also in those traditional public schools that face competition from charter schools (or at least potential

competition if the grade ranges of the schools do not overlap).

The findings are presented here as simple statistical means—average responses to various questions in the survey grouped by the three categories outlined above. Each of these basic analyses, however, was accompanied by more advanced statistical tests (probit and ordered probit regression analysis) to verify that observed differences among the three groups of principals were not due to some other unobserved characteristic of the school, its principal, or its students. The more detailed analyses controlled for the size of the school, its grade range, the percentage of students who are of minority ethnicity, the percentage of the student body that receives free lunches, the percentage of students who are classified as having limited English proficiency, and the school principal’s education and experience. For each of the tables in this report, I note the findings of the more advanced regression analyses (shown as confidence intervals, a term that will be explained below). In addition, I repeated each analysis after deleting Minneapolis and St. Paul schools from the sample to verify that characteristics unique to the Twin Cities were not driving the results (given that every public school principal in the Twin Cities is, at least theoretically, faced with a charter school).

² Many students, including those in Minneapolis, have the opportunity to choose schools in adjacent districts. Although these programs also provide competitive pressures on the public schools, the focus for this research report is on the effects of the statewide charter school legislation.

In all cases, the substantive conclusions were unchanged.

Charter school reforms are associated with a more mission-centered and customer-focused leadership style on the part of public school principals.

Table 1 shows the responses of principals to questions about how they spend their scarcest resource—their time. Individual principals were asked to rate how much time they spent on each of seven activities within the past month: facilitating the school’s mission, supervising faculty, guiding the curriculum, building relationships with the parent community, maintaining the physical security of students and staff, managing facilities, and completing administrative tasks. Principals were asked to rate time spent on these activities on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing “none or almost none,” and 5 representing “a great deal.” Table 1 presents the mean (average) scores for each of the three groups of principals in question, along with a confidence interval around the mean score. A *confidence interval* may be thought of as a “band of uncertainty” around a value, which allows one to account for the uncertainty inherent in sampling only a portion of the target population (even when the response rate is quite high, as it was in this study). When the confidence intervals associated with the values for a particular variable do not overlap between two different comparison groups, then one can conclude with more confidence that the values reported really do differ statistically between the two groups in question.

As is evident in Table 1, charter schools are associated with a principalship that is more focused on achieving the school’s mission, as well as reaching out to the parent community. Both charter school principals and principals of public schools facing competition from charter schools report spending a relatively higher percentage of their time on achieving the school’s mission and reaching out to the parent community than do principals of public school not facing competition from charter schools. Charter school principals also report spending more time guiding the curriculum and significantly less time having to maintain the physical security of students and staff than either of the groups of noncharter public school principals. Because of the much smaller sample of charter school principals, the confidence intervals for these variable do overlap. However, the results of the

Table 1. Minnesota School Principals’ Perceptions of Time Spent on Leadership Activities

Time spent . . . *	Public school principals in noncharter school districts	Public school principals in charter school districts	Charter school principals
Facilitating achievement of the school’s mission	2.83 (2.75–2.92)	3.43 (3.29–3.57)	3.45 (3.10–3.80)
Supervising faculty	3.02 (2.95–3.10)	3.26 (3.14–3.37)	2.96 (2.60–3.25)
Guiding development of the curriculum	2.72 (2.64–2.80)	2.84 (2.71–2.96)	3.06 (2.61–3.51)
Building relationships with the parent community	3.14 (3.08–3.20)	3.28 (3.18–3.39)	3.46 (3.17–3.76)
Maintaining the physical security of students and staff	3.20 (3.12–3.28)	3.17 (3.05–3.29)	2.85 (2.52–3.17)
Managing facilities	3.05 (2.97–3.13)	2.99 (2.87–3.12)	2.85 (2.47–3.24)
Completing administrative tasks	3.90 (3.83–3.97)	3.97 (3.86–4.08)	3.95 (3.65–4.25)
Mean score on all activities	3.12 (3.09–3.16)	3.27 (3.12–3.34)	3.22 (3.00–3.46)
Number of respondents (n)	620	262	39

Source: Minnesota Schools Survey

Note: Numbers in boldface type represent the statistical mean (average) among all responses in that category. Numbers in parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean scores.

* Respondents were asked the following question: “During the past month, about how much of your time was spent on the following activities,” where 1 = none or almost none, 2 = slightly less time than other activities, 3 = about as much time as other activities, 4 = slightly more time than other activities, and 5 = a great deal of time.

regression analyses showed that the observed differences in mission emphasis and parent focus for all groups were statistically significant, as was the finding that charter school principals spend less time than their counterparts managing facilities and maintaining physical security. It is important to note that the mean scores for total time spent on all activities do not vary significantly by the type of the school. In other words, it is not merely the case that charter school principals or public school principals in charter school districts feel more time pressures than their counterparts who lack charter school competition. Rather, these principals, whether by choice or necessity, spend more time on those aspects of leadership that are associated with achieving the school’s mission and

reaching out to the parent community and less time on those activities not central to mission and outreach.

Charter schools are associated with principals viewing parental involvement as more useful across a range of school policies and activities. Data from the Minnesota Schools Survey show that the increased attention to building relationships with parents that is brought about by charter schools is also accompanied by a belief that parental involvement is useful. These attitudinal differences are important because increased customer awareness is useful only if customers are valued for their involvement. Table 2 compares perceptions of principals in the three types of schools concerning the utility of parental involvement in six school policy areas: setting performance standards, establishing curriculum,

hiring teachers, evaluating teachers, setting discipline policy, and deciding how to spend the budget. These assessments were again based on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating that parental involvement “limits (my influence) very much,” and 5 indicating that parental involvement “enhances (my influence) very much.”

For all principals, both charter and noncharter alike, parental involvement is considered most useful in those areas of school policy that more directly affect the standards toward which students should aspire, the curriculum that serves to get them there, and the discipline policy that keeps them focused on that effort. There are also interesting and potentially important differences among the three groups of principals on those aspects of parental involvement that go beyond traditional volunteering. Both charter school principals and noncharter school principals facing competition are more positive about parental involvement on issues that directly relate to school governance, including personnel and budget issues. These results, which were also borne out by the more advanced statistical analysis, indicate that charter schools can induce a customer-centered approach on meaningful issues of school governance, not just by encouraging parents to volunteer time, energy, or cookies.

Charter schools are associated with greater parental outreach efforts. Attitudinal differences, although worth noting, are relevant only if they are accompanied by behavioral differences. It may be inconsequential, in other words, whether principals are more customer-focused or parent-friendly if there are no accompanying organizational changes that facilitate greater parental involvement. Table 3 presents data on the percentage of principals who reported offering parents a chance to participate in three ways: by volunteering, by helping to govern the school, and by helping to spend the school budget. Most principals reported offering these options to parents. Of interest is not the level of participation principals reported offering to parents, or whether these reports are completely accurate, but rather if there are meaningful differences among the three types of schools in the opportunities available for parents to participate.

Interestingly, charter school principals appear to be slightly less likely to offer parents an opportunity to volunteer than are principals at noncharter

Table 2. Minnesota School Principals’ Perceptions of the Utility of Parental Involvement

Utility of parental involvement in . . . *	Public school principals in noncharter school districts	Public school principals in charter school districts	Charter school principals
Setting performance standards at this school	3.45 (3.39–3.51)	3.54 (3.45–3.63)	3.89 (3.59–4.09)
Establishing curriculum at this school	3.41 (3.37–3.47)	3.40 (3.31–3.47)	3.69 (3.41–3.97)
Hiring teachers at this school	3.04 (3.00–3.08)	3.22 (3.13–3.30)	3.51 (3.21–3.81)
Evaluating teachers at this school	3.01 (2.96–3.06)	3.11 (3.03–3.20)	3.25 (2.98–3.53)
Setting discipline policy at this school	3.54 (3.48–3.61)	3.54 (3.45–3.63)	3.67 (3.37–3.96)
Deciding how your school budget will be spent	3.09 (3.04–3.13)	3.39 (3.29–3.49)	3.38 (3.08–3.68)
Mean score on all areas	3.26 (3.23–3.30)	3.36 (3.31–3.42)	3.56 (3.34–3.78)
Number of respondents (<i>n</i>)	636	263	39

Source: Minnesota Schools Survey

Note: Numbers in **boldface type** represent the statistical mean (average) among all responses in that category. Numbers in parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean scores.

* Respondents were asked the following question: “To what extent does parental involvement limit or enhance your influence on the following policy areas at this school,” where 1 = limits very much, 2 = limits somewhat, 3 = no effect, 4 = enhances somewhat, and 5 = enhances very much.

Table 3. Minnesota School Principals’ Self-Reported Willingness to Offer Parents Opportunities to Participate

Willingness to offer parents the opportunity to . . .	Public school principals in noncharter school districts	Public school principals in charter school districts	Charter school principals
Volunteer	95% (93–96)	98% (96–100)	91% (91–100)
Participate in school governance	82% (79–85)	93% (89–96)	97% (91–100)
Participate in budget decisions	76% (72–79)	86% (81–90)	92% (83–100)
Number of respondents (<i>n</i>)	651	270	38

Source: Minnesota Schools Survey

Note: Numbers in **boldface type** represent the statistical mean (average) among all responses in that category. Numbers in parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean scores.

schools. However, this apparent difference is somewhat misleading because charter schools are more likely to be high schools, which typically provide fewer volunteer opportunities than do elementary and middle schools. This apparent difference disappeared in the regression analyses that controlled for school grade level and other school, student, and principal characteristics.

What did not disappear when controlling for these other factors is the fact that principals at charter schools, and at public schools that compete with charter schools, are more likely to offer parents a chance to participate in school governance and budget decisions. These results confirm that the attitudinal changes toward parental participation reported in Table 2 carried over into action. Charter school principals and principals at schools facing competition from them are more parent-focused, feel that parents are more influential, and back up those perceptions through increased opportunities for parental involvement.

Charter schools appear to be siphoning the most active parents from traditional public schools. The evidence presented so far paints a rather optimistic portrait of Minnesota’s charter school reforms. It appears that these reforms are associated with more customer-focused and customer-friendly public institutions, both at the charter schools themselves and at noncharter public schools facing competition from charter schools. However, the final piece of the puzzle—the actual parental response to these outreach efforts—provides reason to be much less hopeful. Although charter schools appear to be enjoying an increased level of parental participation, it also appears that these gains may be coming about because the most active parents are being siphoned off from noncharter public schools in the same districts.

Table 4 presents data on trends in actual parental participation at all three types of schools. For each group, the probabilities that parental participation is increasing significantly, increasing, decreasing, or decreasing significantly are presented, controlling for other variables. Among charter school principals, 70% report a favorable trend in parental involvement, whereas very small percentages report a decrease. Unfortunately, public school principals in charter school districts report a worse situation than do principals at schools

Table 4. Minnesota School Principals’ Perceptions of Trends in Parental Involvement in Their Schools

Percentage of principals who feel that . . .	Public school principals in noncharter school districts	Public school principals in charter school districts	Charter school principals
Parental participation at their school is increasing significantly	6%	4%	19%
Parental participation at their school is increasing	45%	37%	70%
Parental participation at their school is decreasing significantly	2%	3%	0.4%
Parental participation at their school is decreasing	11%	15%	3%

Source: Minnesota Schools Survey

Note: Predicted percentages are based on ordered probit regression results.

not facing competition from a charter school. Public school principals facing competition are more likely to report that parental involvement is decreasing in their school, findings that are confirmed by the regression analyses. Because these results are based on principals’ perceptions, they do not, by themselves, prove that this phenomenon is taking place. However, other studies have demonstrated that it is precisely the most active parents who choose to participate in experimental programs such as charter schools. Moreover, these results are consistent with a process in which the most active parents in districts with charter schools have exited noncharter public schools at the same time that principals in those schools are trying harder to keep their remaining parents involved.

The concern is that Minnesota’s traditional public schools are reporting lower levels of parental involvement—in spite of the fact that they are making more efforts to involve their parent communities—because of the departure of more active and involved parents. This is a type of resource drain that has not been discussed very often; however, it could have serious implications for public schools. Active parents are the ones to whom principals turn when they try to implement a vision for their school. Active parents are the first ones who make the calls in the classroom phone tree and the first ones to pressure their principals to improve services.

Of course, parental involvement is not always beneficial, and a school can have too much of it. However, the argument that there will be systemic benefits from competition within a school district assumes the existence of aware and involved customers. The results in Table 4 suggest that Minnesota’s traditional public schools may be competing in this new educational marketplace with decreased parental, as well as financial, resources.

Conclusion

The evidence from the Minnesota Schools Survey is clear, but paints a mixed picture of the effects of charter schools in the state. Minnesota’s charter schools are having positive effects, both on the charter schools themselves and on traditional public schools facing competition from the charter schools. These reforms appear to be accompanied by an increased sense of customer awareness on the part of public school principals, as well as increased efforts to nurture the parent community as a valuable resource in the educational enterprise. It is too early to write off charter school reforms, therefore, even though achievement gains have not been demonstrated. The results of this analysis support the continuation of the charter school experiment.

However, the beneficial effects of charter schools also come at a cost, one which policy makers would be wise to pay attention to, particularly as the



Hope Academy charter school in St. Paul. The current study found that although charter schools encourage greater parental outreach efforts and a more customer-focused leadership style, they may also drain away the most active parents from traditional public schools.

number of charter schools in Minnesota continues to grow. The same competition that leads to more customer awareness simultaneously siphons off the parents that the public schools need most in their efforts to attend to and involve their community. It is not merely a question of equity, in that it may be unfair to deprive the public schools of active parents. Research clearly supports the beneficial effects of parental involvement on the academic achievement of students. More central to this analysis, however, is the consideration that the most active parents (along with the principals themselves) are going to be the drivers of change

within public schools. If the most involved parents have left a traditional public school for a charter school, then it becomes more difficult to imagine who exactly is going to put pressure on public schools to improve and change.

The challenge for policy makers, then, is to try to offer appropriate support and incentives to public school principals to increase attention to and involvement of parents in meaningful aspects of school policy. In a sense, the goal is to emulate the positive aspects of marketplace reforms without risking its more destructive consequences. Therefore, policy makers would be wise to consider the possibility of supplementing

charter school reforms with efforts to reward and support traditional public school principals who take the same steps toward a parent-friendly school as do those principals who have been compelled to by the force of the marketplace.

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The author would like to thank Robert J. Schmidt, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals, and P. Fred Storti, executive director of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association. In addition, the author would like to thank Rossana Armson, Pam Jones, and Marc Wagoner from the Minnesota Center for Survey Research, and graduate student assistants Angela Bos and Jeff Hubbard.

This research was funded through a grant from CURA's Faculty Interactive Research Program. The program was created to encourage University faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. These grants are available to regular faculty members at the University of Minnesota and are awarded annually on a competitive basis.