ARE BAD SCHOOLS IMMORTAL?

The Scarcity of Turnarounds and Shutdowns in Both Charter and District Sectors

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Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Winkler

DECEMBER 2010

basis policy research

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FOREWORD

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Are bad schools immortal? Based on the pioneering analysis in these pages, it would seem so, at least for most such schools most of the time. About three-quarters of them stay open—and stay bad, certainly when judged by the meager (bottom quartile) proficiency levels that their pupils attain.

Even more troubling, this glum track record is nearly as weak in the charter-school sector as in the district sector, despite the acclaimed charter-movement doctrine that "bad schools don't last—either they improve or they close."

Would that it were so. Yet 72 percent of the original low-performing charter schools examined in this study were still operating, and still low-performing, five years later, compared with 80 percent of district schools. That means very few schools picked themselves up, rolled up their sleeves, and "turned around" their low achievement levels to above the state average. Bona fide turnarounds were rare: Just 1.4 percent of district schools and less than 1 percent of the charters earned that accolade.

We must, however, register three disclaimers. First and most obvious, analyst David Stuit did not—could not, talented though he is—actually examine eternity and thus we cannot truly speak of immortality. He tracked 2000+ low-performing public schools (1,768 of them district-operated, 257 of them charters) in ten states from 2003-04 through 2008-09. It's possible, even likely, that by spring 2010 at least a few more of them had improved or closed, and that this process is continuing. (It's just as possible, of course, that some schools in Stuit's larger sample that were *not* low-performing in the base years of his analysis could later have slipped down into that category.)

Second, we're tough graders. To be deemed a turnaround, a school in its state's lowest decile (i.e., proficiency at or below the 10th percentile) at the beginning of the period had to surpass the 50th percentile within five years. That means a school might have made substantial progress (e.g., 2nd to 50th percentile) yet not qualify as turned-around.

Third, this analysis relies on absolute proficiency scores on state tests (variable as these tests and proficiency definitions are) to judge school performance. Stuit did not—again, for the most part could not—undertake "value added" analysis. We may fairly surmise that some of these schools are adding considerable academic value to significant numbers of children even as they remain well below average in getting kids to "proficiency," compared with other schools in their states.

Still and all, the picture is not pretty. We find in these results two large takeaways that policy makers and educators should ponder:

- Though the charter sector does a bit better than the district sector at closing bad schools (19 percent of the low-performing schools identified in 2003-04 had closed by 2008-09, compared with 11 percent in the district sector), it still has a long, long way to go before it can truly be said to live up to the core assertion that its governance and accountability arrangements facilitate the elimination of low performers.

- Real transformation is truly rare in both sectors, which compels one to ask whether Secretary Duncan's emphasis on this reform strategy is warranted, whether the billions of federal dollars being channeled into weak schools may be largely wasted, and whether the many would-be turnaround experts and consulting firms springing up around the land to help states and districts spend those dollars are little more than dream merchants. Would not all that energy and money be better spent to strengthen the accountability (and sponsorship) systems that lead to shutting down and replacing bad schools?

We at Fordham know from direct experience how difficult it is for authorizers, even conscientious ones, to close bad schools. Kids are often content in them, as well as safe and decently cared for. Parents are frequently satisfied, welcome, and engaged, even when test scores are abysmal. Mediocre as such schools can be, they may well be better than the alternatives available to these families, often poor and minority residents of tough inner-city neighborhoods with few decent education options. Community relations and politics are involved, too.

We've walked in these shoes in Ohio, where Fordham is a charter authorizer in four cities. Over the past five years, we have sponsored a total of thirteen schools in the Buckeye State. Besides the seven that remain in our portfolio, one left of its own volition (because we were too demanding with regard to academic achievement); two are schools that, after costly but fruitless multi-year efforts to turn them around with neither cooperation nor success, we admonished to seek other sponsors (being unwilling ourselves to terminate them as no decent alternatives were readily available for those hundreds of kids); and three are schools which closed voluntarily with our help (one of these merged into the local district). We recount these tales and many more in *Ohio's Education Reform Challenges: Lessons from the Frontlines*.[1]

Indeed, we've learned a lot, including the sorry fact that charter authorizers have few incentives—beyond their consciences—to shut schools down and plenty of reason not to do so. Besides all the pain and suffering involved in closures, in Ohio and many other states, the authorizers' own revenues are determined by how many schools they sponsor and how many students those schools enroll. To shrink or shut a school is to reduce the sponsor's income.

Yet real school makeovers are even harder. Those that succeed generally entail soup-to-nuts transformations that replace the adults who work in the school—including tenured teachers—and start afresh with a new team, new curriculum, etc. In truth, a real transformation isn't much different from closing an old school and opening a new one, usually in the same building and likely with many of the same kids.

That these transformations *can* happen is demonstrated by the twenty-six schools out of the 2,025 low-performers in our original sample that actually made it into the top half of their states' proficiency rankings within five years. Several of the school profiles included in this report describe how this came about. And the education world has been awash for decades in books and articles about heroic principals who achieved miraculous transformations of once-dire schools. Yet this kind of extreme makeover is next to impossible to scale or replicate with any confidence that it will work as well in the Franklin School as it did in the Jefferson School. The odds are stacked against it happening even once, much less in a systematic way.

A somewhat larger (but still shockingly small) number of schools (164) made *moderate* performance gains. By 2009, their proficiency scores placed them in their states' second quartiles (i.e., 26th to 50th percentile). This was the case with 9 percent of the charters and 8 percent of district schools.

States Differ

The states in this study turned out to differ markedly from one another. Stuit chose them because they are home to about 70 percent of all U.S. charter schools and each had data that lent it to this kind of longitudinal analysis. But that doesn't mean the states behave alike. Indeed, some state-to-state differences are tantalizing, perplexing, in a couple of cases even somewhat encouraging. For example:

1. Minnesota's charter and district sectors displayed both the highest rates of persistent low performance and the lowest rates of closure among the ten states, notwithstanding that this state's charter law is deemed best-in-the-nation by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.[2]

2. In Arizona, Florida, and California, we find the charter sectors doing better—statistically speaking—than the district sectors when it comes to closing schools.

   - Arizona: A much larger proportion of low-performing charter schools has been closed in the Grand Canyon state than district schools—or than charter schools in most other states. Six of the nineteen low-performing Arizona charter schools in 2003-04 had shut by 2008-09, representing 32 percent of the sample. Just 5 percent (five of ninety-five) of low-performing district schools closed during that period.

   - Florida: Six charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were closed by 2008-09, representing 23 percent of all charters, compared with 7 percent in the district sector.

   - California: Eighteen percent of California charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were closed by 2008-09, versus 7 percent of low-performing district schools.

3. Ohio, we're pleased to note, has been significantly more successful in closing low-performing schools (both the district and the charter variety) than the other nine states in the study. Closure rates were almost identical in the two sectors of public education in the Buckeye State: 35 percent of Ohio's low-performing charters and 34 percent of its low-performing district schools were closed (compared with 19 and 11 percent, respectively, for the entire 10-state sample).[3]

4. Though Arizona is sometimes called the "wild west" of the charter world, Texas turns out to be wilder—both in terms of charter quality and closure rates. Over 30 percent of Texas's charter sector was low-performing in 2003-04, compared with just 1 percent of its district sector; in Arizona, it was 16 and 9 percent, respectively. Further, just 11 percent of the Lone Star State's weakest charters closed over five years, compared with a full 32 percent of Arizona's low-performing charters.

Policy Implications

Below, we offer some advice to policy makers. First, though, it's worth the reader's while to get reacquainted with some thoughtful remarks by Secretary Duncan to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference in June 2010:

> *All of you are in the room because you're a part of the charter school movement, you're part of the charter school franchise. Bad charter schools taint all of your reputations and allow your opponents, your opposition, to use those examples.*
>
> *There has not been…courageous leadership from the charter school movement itself to step up and say, "Here are criteria below which these schools should cease to exist."…[Y]ou should not be tolerating in your family academic failure.*
>
> *I think you need to do the same around authorizers, where you have states or districts that are much too lenient in whom they approve and much too lenient in whom they allow to continue to operate. I think you need to have a list of good authorizers and bad authorizers and very clear criteria about what it takes.*
>
> *At the end of the day, the movement can't be to create more charter schools; the movement has got to be to create more great schools. Unfortunately, we have far too many mediocre charters, and we have far too many charter schools that are absolutely low-performing.*
>
> *Your best are world-class—again, your best give me extraordinary reason for hope for public education in this country—but this movement has to do a much better job of policing itself, and again, the political costs that the charter school movement is paying for poor performance may be much higher than you realize.*[4]

Now to our own quartet of recommendations:

1. **Make sure that state standards (including Common Core) are not only linked to assessments but also to tougher accountability systems than we've seen in most places in recent years.** Accountability for individual district and charter schools cannot happen in isolation. We can't expect district leaders and charter authorizers to make tough decisions without support and political cover from state policy makers. For instance, states can help school leaders enforce accountability mechanisms by constructing user-friendly systems that identify low-performing schools, permitting or requiring that student achievement results play a part in teacher evaluations, and defining what it means to be college and career ready—then aligning high school exit and college entrance requirements to it.

2. **Those accountability systems (including next iteration of NCLB/ESEA) need to forego fake excuses for transformations and turnarounds.** No one, especially those who are in the business of repairing broken schools, thinks the transformation process is simple or painless. That so few low-performing schools attain turnaround status underscores this difficulty. NCLB's "sanctions" gave the false impression that school turnaround was simply a matter of implementing the right fix—whether by installing a new curriculum, appointing outside experts

to run the school, extending the day, contracting with an education management organization (EMO), arranging for a state takeover, etc. Let's stop pretending that transformations and turnarounds can be followed like recipes and admit that they're more art than science. As Bryan Hassel and others have suggested, our low-performing schools need to be nimble enough to try multiple intensive strategies, courageous enough to admit failure, and determined enough to tweak the mix until they get what works for them. That said, some schools simply don't work and won't work, which leads us to recommendation #3.

3. **Policy makers should focus more on shutdowns than turnarounds.** There's a reason that our most accomplished charter schools are start-ups. Turning low-performing schools into high-performing or even average ones is not work for the fainthearted. Seven years ago, we commissioned a report titled *Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?* in which author Ronald Brady dolefully concluded, "Success is not the norm…the intervention experience is marked more by valiant effort than by notable success." Sadly, the same could be said today. In fact, the limited research findings on school turnarounds and shutdowns—including those now before you—are not "mixed," as analysts like to say. Rather, they echo Brady's conclusion: Turnarounds are the exception, not the rule. So, let's *treat* them as exceptions—and adjust our focus, resources, and energies accordingly.

4. **Crack down on authorizers, including changing the incentives by which they operate, and/or building achievement-based "death penalties" into state law.** Secretary Duncan is right: Bad charters and shoddy authorizers taint the reputations of all those in the charter space. We've said it before: Just because a wannabe school operator asks to hang out a charter-school shingle does not mean it can run an effective educational institution that works for students. Keeping bad charters from opening—and intervening in those that deliver bad results—is what must remain the focus for authorizers.

Since that's easier said than done, we should think about how to make it less complicated. Andy Smarick, former think tank analyst and now a senior official in New Jersey's education department, wrote earlier this year:

> *After undergoing improvement efforts, a struggling private firm that continues to lose money will close, get taken over, or go bankrupt. Unfit elected officials are voted out of office. The worst lawyers can be disbarred, and the most negligent doctors can lose their licenses. Urban school districts, at long last, need an equivalent…The beginning of the solution is establishing a clear process for closing schools.*[5]

We agree. But we also need to be thoughtful about how closure processes should work. Ohio's charter "death penalty" is instructive here. In 2005, dismayed that authorizers were allowing bad schools to continue operating, the state passed legislation requiring the automatic closure of any charter school meeting specific low-performance criteria. The law has been tweaked since then—and contains nuances related to the grades that a school serves—but in essence it mandates closure for charter schools that have been in academic emergency for three of the four most recent years. In other words, it takes the difficult decision to close a school out of the hands of authoriz-

ers and bases it on objective measures of pupil achievement. This is a mixed blessing, to be sure. Conscientious authorizers are better able to tailor specific interventions or other remedies for low-performing schools than are one-size-fits-all statutes. But at least one of these two conditions must prevail if students are to be protected from bad schools that linger.

Changing the incentives for low-performing schools, though, means attention to penalties *and* rewards. Charter advocates might also take a page from New Orleans's Recovery School District (RSD), which is considering an "earn your freedom" clause whereby low-performing charters that make sufficient gains can transfer to another authorizing entity (outside of RSD) should they so choose. The point is that rethinking charter-school accountability means dismantling its perverse incentives and building in both attractive rewards and stringent consequences.

We leave you with an "ah-ha" moment. Many reformers (including ourselves, at times) have argued that turnarounds seldom work because schools remain burdened by the same old dysfunctions that made them bad in the first place: union contracts, central office bureaucracies, hiring regulations that send the best teachers elsewhere, etc. But charter schools don't face those stumbling blocks. So if bad charters can't turn themselves around, why on earth do we think bad public schools—still tied down by these constraints—will be able to do so?

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We're thankful, too, for the hard work of many others on the Fordham team. Executive Vice President Michael Petrilli hatched the study idea and offered helpful input on drafts. Janie Scull, research analyst and production associate, assisted on numerous fronts—including helping Stuit interview school staff for the profiles, editing drafts, shepherding report production, and attending to myriad details to bring the report across the finish line. Policy analyst Daniela Fairchild also helped with the profiles and proofreading, along with intern Amanda Olberg. Public affairs director Amy Fagan and new-media manager Joe Portney managed dissemination. Erin Montgomery served as copyeditor and Bill Buttaggi fashioned the clever design.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fixing chronically failing schools is one of the Obama administration's central education goals, and charter schools have been asked to play a pivotal role in this reform agenda. In principle, charter schools are subject to greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have a better track record of eliminating low-performing schools because they either improve or shut down. But does this really happen?

This study investigates the successes of the charter and district sectors in eliminating bad schools via dramatic turnarounds in performance and/or shutdowns. It identified 2,025 low-performing charter and district schools across ten states, each of which is home to a sizable number of charter schools.[6] These particular schools were tracked from 2003-04 through 2008-09 to determine how many turned around, shut down, or remained low-performing.

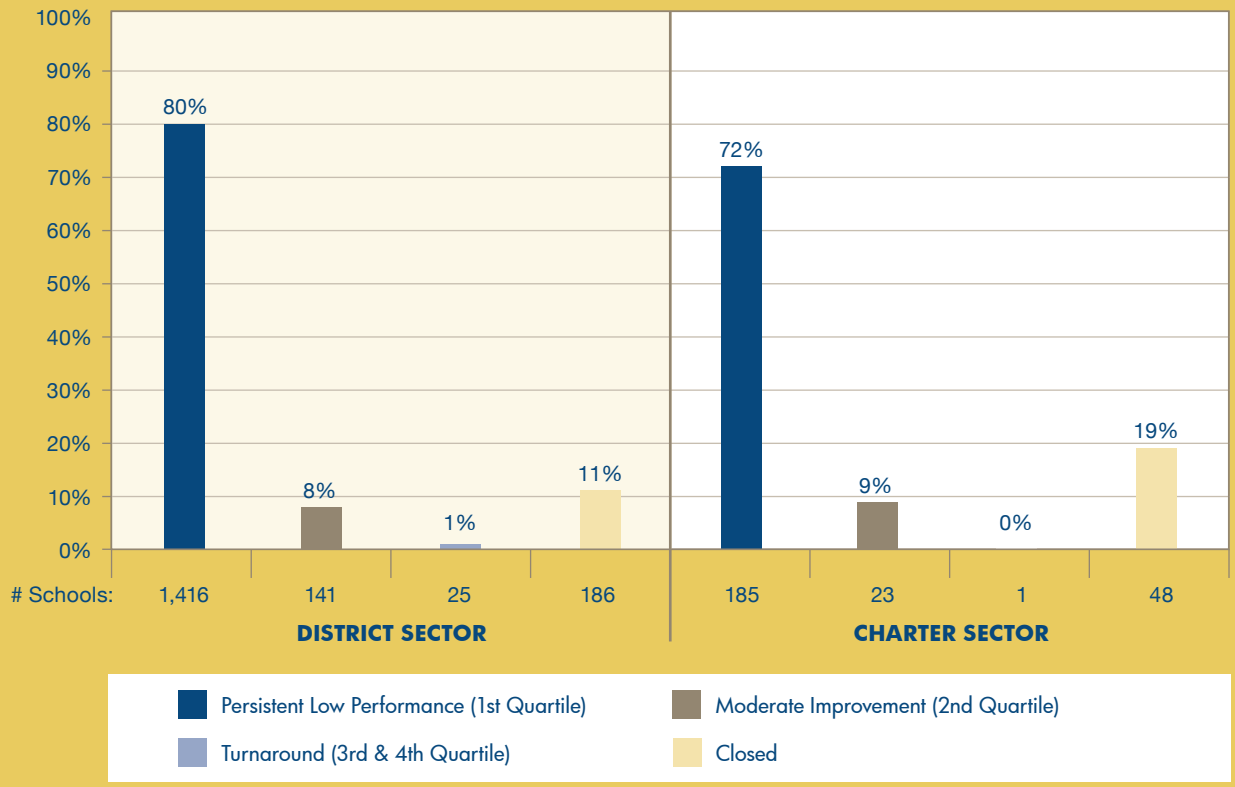
What did results show? A dismal state of affairs. In all ten states, the charter sector has done a slightly better job of eliminating low-performing schools, but neither sector has cause for celebration (see Figure ES-1 on page 11). Seventy-two percent of the original low-performing charter schools remained in operation, and remained low-performing, five years later, compared with 80 percent of district schools.

Few low-performing schools in either sector—barely 1 percent—managed to dramatically improve their academic performance over this five-year period, and fewer than 10 percent made even moderate gains. Charter schools were not statistically more or less likely to turn around than their district peers.

To the extent that this study yields any good news, it is this (and it is modest): In all ten states, low-performing charter schools were likelier to close than were low-performing district schools. Nineteen percent of weak charters were shuttered, versus 11 percent of district low performers. And in both sectors, the majority of schools that closed were lower-performing than their neighboring schools; thus, students leaving closed schools had better academic options nearby.

We conclude that it is easier to close a low-performing school than to turn one around. Rather than pushing dubious turnaround efforts, charter authorizers and education policy makers alike should ramp up their efforts to close bad schools, particularly in cases where higher-performing schools are nearby.

Figure ES-1. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Figure ES-1 reports the percentages of the original 2003-04 low-performing schools within the ten states that met each of the four classifications in 2008-09; schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if they were no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

INTRODUCTION

At the center of the Obama administration's education agenda is the goal of reducing the number of persistently failing schools across the country. All of the Department of Education's high-profile grant competitions—Race to the Top (RttT), Teacher Incentive Fund, Promise Neighborhoods—have required grantees to address the problem of low-performing schools. Most relevant is the $3.5 billion in Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs), aimed at helping states intervene in their lowest-performing schools—"an unprecedented sum" intended to stimulate "fundamental changes."[7]

Charter schools play a pivotal role in the administration's school-improvement strategy. The president's proposed 2010 budget included an additional $52 million in charter-school funding—a 25 percent increase from 2009. And the $4.25 billion RttT competition favored charter-friendly states, a carrot which succeeded in convincing many previously reluctant charter states to change course.[8] Secretary of Education Arne Duncan envisions a role for the charter sector not just in improving its own schools but also in improving district schools. In a 2009 address to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), he challenged charter leaders to "adapt your educational model to turning around our lowest–performing schools."[9]

Duncan presumably places such faith in charter schools because of the underlying premise of the charter movement. In theory, charter schools are subject to greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have a better track record of eliminating low-performing schools, because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

Critics cite evidence that charter schools fail systematically to outperform district schools and question the rationality of spending millions of federal dollars to turn around low-performing charters, which by design should be shuttered.[10] Moreover, the hope that the charter sector will be a strong partner in turning around failing district schools would be little more than wishful thinking if that sector cannot keep its own educational house in order.

This study, then, aims to answer two key questions: How successful is the charter sector relative to the district sector in eliminating or turning around bad schools? And what's the evidence that low-performing schools in either sector dramatically improve over time?

Research on Turnarounds

Are school turnarounds even possible? The question has sparked a great deal of debate. In an early 2010 article, Andrew Smarick, then a think-tank analyst and now a senior official in New Jersey's education department, cites scores of failed turnaround efforts and concludes, "The history of urban education tells us emphatically that turnarounds are not a reliable strategy for improving our very worst schools."[11]

Also in 2010, Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution examined California test scores from 1989 to 2009 and found that schools rarely make large jumps in their statewide rankings. He writes that "much of the rhetoric on turnarounds is pie in the sky—more wishful thinking than a realistic assessment of what school reform can really accomplish."[12] Indeed, a comprehensive literature review by Ronald C. Brady in 2003 found that no factors or practices are guaranteed to accomplish successful turnarounds.[13] In 2008, a federal panel reached the same conclusion as it

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT SCHOOL CLOSURES?

Closing a school as a result of substandard performance is one tool in the school reformer's toolbox. In theory, school closures can benefit students by transforming a low-performing school into a higher-performing reconstituted school or by moving students to better schools in the neighborhood.[14]

Unfortunately, that does not always happen. Tom Loveless (2003) examined the performance of conversion schools—low-performing district schools that close and reopen as reconstituted charter schools—in California and found that the new schools performed at about the same level as regular public schools.[15] Brian Gill and colleagues (2007) examined the achievement of Philadelphia public-school students in schools taken over by private management companies and did not find a statistically significant effect on students' math or reading achievements.[16] However, Paul Peterson and Matt Chingos (2009) also examined the Philadelphia experience and concluded that takeover had a positive effect on math achievement worth nearly 60 percent of a year's learning.[17]

Two Chicago studies examined the city's high-profile school closure initiative, implemented during Arne Duncan's tenure as CEO, and its impact on students. Duncan led the city's Renaissance 2010 campaign and systematically closed dozens of the city's lowest-performing schools, reopening many as charter schools. The Consortium on Chicago School Research compared the test performance of displaced students in eighteen closed elementary schools to a matched group of students in similar schools that did not close.[18] The authors did not find a statistically significant difference in growth rates, except for displaced students who transferred to schools that were academically stronger. A second study of the Chicago experience, conducted by SRI International, tracked students in 2006-07 and 2007-08 who moved from twenty-three closed schools and did not find a statistically significant difference between transferring students and their matched control group.[19]

All of these studies examine impacts of closure in the short term, not the extent to which closure, as a school-improvement strategy, yields long-term benefits for communities. While school closures may not immediately benefit currently enrolled students, closures may provide better educational options for future generations by eliminating failing schools and incentivizing other schools to improve.

was unable to find any studies on turnarounds that met the rigorous evidentiary standards of the What Works Clearinghouse.[20]

The handful of turnaround success stories that do exist suggest that such school transformations are possible but rare. Turnaround experts Bryan Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel of Public Impact observe that school turnarounds, while feasible, are uncommon because the intensive interventions that are necessary to yield successful outcomes are seldom attempted.[21]

What no research has done yet is compare turnaround rates in the charter and district sectors.[22] This is a particularly important question in light of the Obama administration's education-reform priorities. One would expect the two sectors of public education to display markedly different strategies—and results—in addressing their low-performing schools. Authorizer oversight and the threat of closure should create stronger incentives for charters to improve even as their greater autonomy and operational flexibility (e.g., personnel, budget, and curriculum) should allow school leaders to make necessary changes more swiftly and surely. But do these hypotheses hold true? Are turnarounds, in fact, more likely to occur in the charter sector?

PART 1

Are Bad Schools Immortal?

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ARE BAD SCHOOLS IMMORTAL?

The study identifies 2,025 low-performing charter and district schools in ten states in the baseline year of 2003-04. These low performers are tracked over five years and the status of each in 2008-09 is classified as: (1) persistent low performance, (2) moderate improvement, (3) turnaround, or (4) closed. Classifications within each sector are then compared to determine whether rates of persistent low performance, moderate improvement, turnaround, and closure differ for charter and district schools. Within-state and across-state comparisons are presented.

Data

Data for this study were collected from two primary sources: grade-level reading and math proficiency rates from state department of education websites and demographic, geographic, and programmatic data from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD).[23]

The analysis investigates charter and district schools in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Collectively, these states were home to 71 percent of all charter schools in 2008-09.[24] They are included in this study because each has a sufficiently large sample of charter schools with publicly accessible test-score data going back to 2002-03.[25]

Charter-school environments vary across the states (see Table 1 on page 18). Five permit state-level authorizers, all have local school-board authorizers, and four allow university or nonprofit authorizers. Table 1 includes NAPCS's grading of state charter-school laws.[26] It also shows historical charter-school closure rates by state, or the proportion of charter schools in each state that have been closed prior to 2008-09 as a percentage of the total charter schools that have opened in each state. The last column shows the percentage of total public schools in the state that are charters.

Methods

The study is limited to elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in 2002-03 and 2003-04.[27] (High schools were excluded because consistent longitudinal data for high schools were unavailable in all ten states.) Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities.[28] In addition, schools that tested fewer than twenty students in any year between 2003-04 and 2008-09 were excluded because their small test samples do not allow for reliable performance classifications.[29]

Table 1. Characteristics of the Charter-School Sectors in Ten States

	YEAR CHARTER LAW PASSED	CHARTER-SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS			MAX. LENGTH OF INITIAL CHARTER TERM (IN YEARS)	NAPCS LAW RANK	HISTORICAL CHARTER CLOSURE RATE (%)	# OF SCHOOLS IN OPERATION 2003-04 (BASELINE YEAR)	# OF SCHOOLS IN OPERATION 2008-09 (FINAL YEAR)	% OF CHARTER SCHOOLS TO ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS (2008-09)
		STATE	LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS	UNIVERSITY / COLLEGE / NON-PROFITS						
AZ	1994	Yes	Yes	No	15	10	19%	505	474	23.7
CA	1992	Yes	Yes	No	5	3	13%	444	747	7.5
FL	1996	No	Yes	No	5	11	21%	257	396	10.6
MI	1993	No	Yes	Yes	10	14	11%	212	232	6.1
MN	1991	No	Yes	Yes	3	1	18%	101	153	6.9
NC	1996	Yes	Yes	No	5	32	31%	93	97	3.9
OH	1997	No	Yes	Yes	5	26	16%	163	327	8.6
PA	1997	No	Yes	No	5	12	9%	102	127	3.9
TX	1995	Yes	Yes	No	5	21	10%	274	496	5.9
WI	1993	No	Yes	Yes	5	33	17%	137	218	9.7

Notes: Because Texas charter-school operators are allowed to operate multiple campuses under one charter contract, Texas's 496 school campuses operate under 263 charter contracts.

Source: Figures in columns 2-6 are drawn from the Center for Education Reform's (CER) Charter School Laws across the States *(Washington, D.C., 2008); column 7 is drawn from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' (NAPCS) state charter-law rankings database (out of 40 states), 2010; column 8 is based on author's calculations from data in CER's Accountability Report (Washington, D.C., 2009); columns 9-11 are from NAPCS's 2009 Public Charter School Dashboard.*

The full dataset is presented in Table 2 (see page 19). A total of 24,921 district schools and 944 charter schools are included.

Data for each school from 2002-03 to 2008-09 were examined. This time frame allows for identification of low-performing schools in 2003-04 based on average test performance in 2002-03 and 2003-04, and it permits determination of turnaround status based on average 2007-08 and 2008-09 test scores. Data were therefore tracked over five years, from 2003-04 to 2007-08. During this time period, all charters are assumed to have undergone either a formal charter-renewal process or an interim performance review; thus the analysis should capture the extent to which authorizers close schools when given a formal opportunity.

Table 2. Charter- and District-School Dataset in Baseline Year (2003-04)

	DISTRICT		CHARTER	
	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE
AZ	817	190	97	22
CA	4,944	1,196	174	54
FL	1,630	553	93	30
MI	1,534	599	116	14
MN	807	N.A.	33	N.A.
NC	1,242	477	61	13
OH	1,937	476	45	4
PA	1,508	548	44	11
TX	3,734	1,331	82	26
WI	1,011	387	15	10
TOTAL	**19,164**	**5,757**	**760**	**184**

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

How Were Low-Performing Schools Identified?

Within the dataset, the study identified 257 charter schools and 1,768 district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04. Two performance metrics were used to identify these schools: First, a school's average combined 2002-03 and 2003-04 reading and math proficiency rate had to rank in the lowest 10 percent among all schools of the same type (elementary or middle) in the relevant state;[30] second, schools had to fail to meet their states' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency targets in both 2002-03 and 2003-04.[31] This definition of low performance is consistent with the 2008 IES panel recommendations as well as recent federal guidelines for identifying schools eligible for SIG funds.[32]

More technical approaches that use student-level scale scores would allow for more precise and reliable identification of low-performing schools, but measuring school performance by proficiency rates and AYP status identifies schools that individuals on the ground (school staff, authorizers, district leaders) recognize as low-performing. Proficiency rates from state standardized tests are less than ideal for measuring school performance, but they are universally recognized as the metric that matters most in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era.[33]

How Were Schools Classified?

Bryan Hassel and his colleagues at Public Impact define a turnaround as "a documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization."[34] A review of the research points to two defining characteristics of turnarounds. First, they begin as *chronically* low-performing schools.[35] Second, they demonstrate remarkable increases in performance over a short period of time. The IES panel emphasizes that the short time period is what distinguishes a turnaround from mere school improvement.[36]

To qualify as a **turnaround** in this study, a school identified as low-performing in 2003-04 needed to rise above the 50th percentile in its state by 2008-09, based on its average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rate. Similar to the method used to identify low-performing schools, this turnaround criterion incorporates two years of data to provide a more reliable performance estimate. This definition allows at least four years for turnarounds to occur (2003-04 to 2007-08), in line with the timeline suggested by over fifty experts at a turnaround conference sponsored by Foundation Strategy Group (FSG) Social Impact Advisors.[37] Still, certain caveats apply to our definition of a turnaround (see *Turnaround Disclaimer* on page 21).

Schools were classified as making **moderate improvement** if they exited a state's bottom quartile in average 2007-08 and 2008-09 proficiency rates. (The bottom quartile is commonly used as a threshold for identifying low-performing schools, teachers, and students.[38]) These schools are, in a sense, held harmless because they made relatively strong gains in proficiency scores as compared with other schools in the state (a minimum of 15 percentile points), but the gains were not dramatic enough to qualify as a turnaround. Schools that failed to exit the bottom quartile were designated as demonstrating **persistent low performance**.

A school was designated as **closed** if it was no longer operating by the start of the 2009-10 school year. School closings were identified by the school operational status code in CCD and then cross-checked using data from state department of education websites. The specific reasons for closure were not investigated in this analysis and may, therefore, include factors not immediately relevant to this study, such as citywide demographic changes, school demolition-and-construction programs, etc. Note that some schools may have been reconstituted, consolidated, or converted to charter status.

Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	School's average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 rises to the state's 51st percentile or above.
Moderate Improvement:	School's average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranks in the state's 26th to 50th percentile.
Persistent Low Performance:	School's average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 remains in the state's 25th percentile or below.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the start of the 2009-10 school year.

School closures were broken into two groups: "academically beneficial" closures and "others." A school closure was designated as "academically beneficial" if the average proficiency rate of the five closest public schools (charter or district) within a three-mile radius was higher than the proficiency rate of the closed school. This technique is designed to determine whether or not the closure benefits students by filtering out bad schools from their set of options. Studies have found that parents place a high value on proximity when choosing schools, particularly low-income parents, whose likelihood of selecting a school declines by 25 to 35 percent for each mile.[39] To the extent that a school closure disperses concentrations of low-achieving students and sends them to schools where average achievement is higher, past research suggests the outcome is beneficial.[40]

TURNAROUND DISCLAIMER

It is important to note that a quick change in a school's proficiency rates (a "turnaround") may not necessarily be due to an increase in the school's effectiveness. Instead, it may reflect changes in students' background characteristics or other factors that are unrelated to actual school quality.[41] The influence of student background and prior learning on a school's overall performance cannot be controlled for without student-level data, and it can be difficult to compare one school's performance with another. (That said, the proportions of low-income and high-needs students served in most of the schools in this study changed very little, on average, from 2003-04 to 2008-09; see more in *The Scarcity of Turnarounds* on page 29). This is an important limitation to the study, but it stands to reason that a turnaround (by our definition) may still benefit students even if it does not represent a true change in a school's effectiveness. Prior research dictates that the academic achievement of a school's student body has an important influence on an individual student's academic performance.[42] If a turnaround disperses a concentration of low-achieving students (either by displacing them to higher-performing schools or by raising school achievement), it is likely a good thing in the long run.

The study's turnaround criteria are based on relative school performance and introduce both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage is the simplicity and intuitiveness of comparing schools with others in the state.[43] But one disadvantage is that a relative definition guarantees both winners and losers: As one school exits the bottom half of its statewide distribution, another school enters. This would be of particular concern if all schools in a state were improving—making it possible for a school to make steady improvement while maintaining its percentile ranking—but National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) trends show that, in most states, this is not the case.[44] A second disadvantage is that most school accountability frameworks are not based on relative definitions; rather, states set common standards and absolute performance benchmarks for all students (e.g., NCLB-mandated annual proficiency targets).[45] Still, these absolute proficiency rates are ambiguous given that states constantly tinker with test items, test scales, academic content standards, and proficiency cut scores.[46]

Finally, observe that the study's criteria for school improvement are strict: Hypothetically, a school that rose from the 1st percentile to the 25th over the course of the study would have qualified as a persistently low-performing school, while a school that rose from the 1st to the 50th would have been deemed as having made moderate improvement. While such schools should be recognized for their progress, a school that continues to perform below the state's average after five years should not be dubbed a turnaround; similarly, a school that remains in a state's bottom quartile is still low-performing, despite the progress it may have made.

RESULTS

Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

Table 3 shows the number and proportion of charter and district schools in the dataset that qualified as "low-performing" in the base year. Charter sectors in all ten states had higher concentrations of persistently low-performing schools in 2003-04 than did district sectors. Across all ten states, 27 percent of charter schools were in the lowest decile in reading and math proficiency and failed to meet their AYP proficiency targets in both 2002-03 and 2003-04; this was true for 7 percent of district schools.

Table 3. Low-Performing Schools in Baseline Year (2003-04)

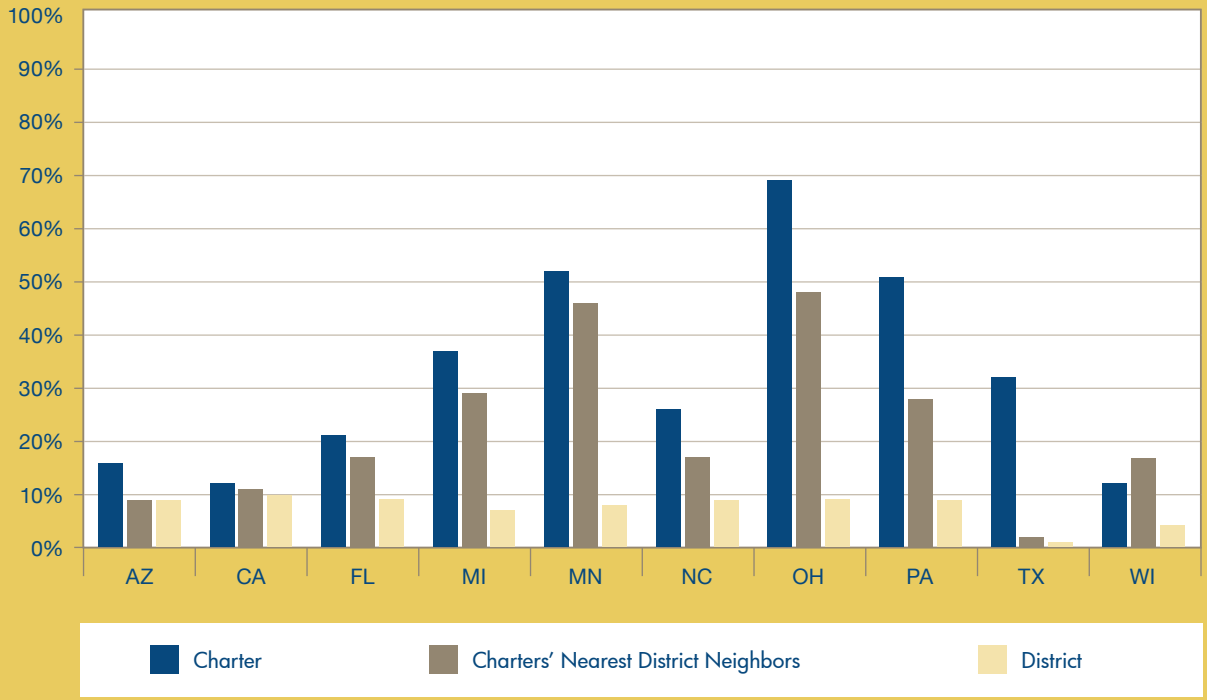
	DISTRICT SCHOOLS			CHARTER SCHOOLS		
	ALL DISTRICT SCHOOLS	LOW-PERFORMING	% LOW-PERFORMING	ALL CHARTER SCHOOLS	LOW-PERFORMING	% LOW-PERFORMING
AZ	1,007	95	9.4	119	19	16.0
CA	6,140	603	9.8	228	28	12.3
FL	2,183	206	9.4	123	26	21.1
MI	2,132	152	7.1	130	48	36.9
MN	807	67	8.3	33	17	51.5
NC	1,719	147	8.6	74	19	25.7
OH	2,413	207	8.6	49	34	69.4
PA	2,056	178	8.7	55	28	50.9
TX	5,064	60	1.2	108	35	32.4
WI	1,398	53	3.8	25	3	12.0
TOTAL	**24,919**	**1,768**	**7.1**	**944**	**257**	**27.2**

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Decile rankings of schools' proficiency rates were analyzed separately for elementary and middle schools within each state.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

The disproportionate number of charters as compared to district schools in their states' lowest deciles may be misleading because in many states charters are concentrated in high-need urban communities. To better evaluate the propensity for low performance across sectors, charter schools were compared with their closest neighboring district schools with free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) percentages within ten points of the charters' FRL percentages. Figure 1 displays the proportions of low-performing schools in the charter, district, and matched samples. In all states but Wisconsin (which had only three low-performing charters), the proportion of charter schools designated as low-performing is greater than what is found in the matched district comparison group or among the entire sample of district schools. In the majority of states, however, the proportion of charters designated as low-performing is more akin to that of the matched district comparison group than to that of the district schools.

Figure 1. Proportion of Sector Designated as Low-Performing in 2003-04



Notes: "Charters' Nearest District Neighbors" refers to the geographically closest district school of the same type (elementary or middle) with a free and reduced-price lunch percentage within ten points of the charter school.

Source: Author's calculations. Data gathered from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools

Who were the low performers in 2003-04? Table 4 (see page 25) compares the characteristics of low-performing schools to others in their respective sectors. In both, low-performing schools were about twice as likely to be located in an urban center. The percentages of poor and minority students in low-performing schools are roughly twice those of other schools. Additionally, the low performers were likelier to receive federal Title I funds for school-wide interventions such as after-school programs and additional academic support staff.

Note that the average enrollment in district schools exceeds that of charters by over 200 pupils. Charters' smaller size may provide an advantage in meeting the study's definition of a turnaround. Part of this advantage is statistical: Pushing a few students over a state's proficiency threshold will yield a larger benefit to the school-wide proficiency rate for small schools. At the same time, small schools may have an operational advantage because minor changes (e.g., replacing two underperforming teachers) will have larger repercussions.

The average number of school years that low-performing charter schools had been in operation by 2003-04 was 4.9. In seven of the ten states in the study, the maximum allowable charter term is five years, so in 2003-04 many of the charters were entering a renewal year, or had recently completed a renewal, in which case they would be back for renewal in the final years of this study (2007-08 or 2008-09).

Table 4. Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools in Baseline Year (2003-04)

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHERS	ALL DISTRICT SCHOOLS	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHERS	ALL CHARTER SCHOOLS
Location (%)						
Urban	57	24	27	63	35	43
Rural	10	25	24	8	20	17
Other	33	50	49	29	45	41
Student Population (%)						
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	80	44	48	68	35	49
Black	43	12	14	54	20	29
Hispanic	39	25	26	23	18	19
Special Education	14	13	13	12	11	11
Limited English Proficiency	22	12	13	10	10	10
Resources						
Students Per Teacher	17.6	17.5	17.5	16.9	19.4	18.7
State and Local Revenue Per Pupil	$9,422	$8,155	$8,244	$7,950	$7,759	$7,810
% Schoolwide Title I	88	55	49	79	38	57
Avg. Percentile Ranking of Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2002-03 & 2003-04)	5.67	54.4	50.9	4.92	49.6	37.7
# Schools	1,768	23,151	24,919	257	687	944
Avg. Enrollment	582	569	570	339	364	357
Years in Operation	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	4.92	4.95	4.94

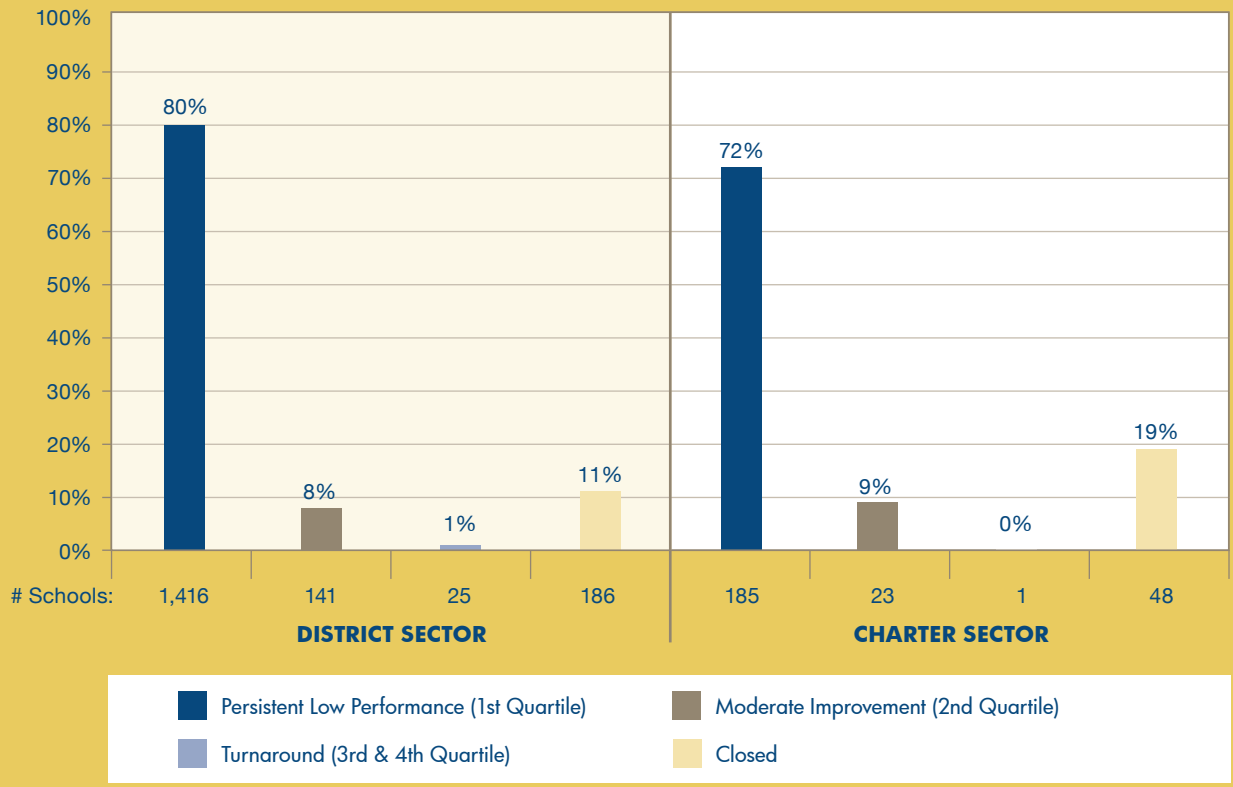
Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. "Low Performers" refers to schools that failed to meet their respective states' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency thresholds in 2002-03 and 2003-04 in addition to having average combined 2002-03 and 2003-04 reading and math proficiency rates that fell within lowest decile within their respective states. "Others" refers to all schools in the dataset that were not designated as low performers. "State and Local Revenue Per Pupil" is calculated using district-level NCES CCD files. District averages are used for charter schools that do not have Local Educational Agency (LEA) status. Therefore the reported funding averages likely over-state actual charter-school funding levels because most non-LEA charters are not eligible for all forms of state and local revenue received by their host districts. School locations based on NCES Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns. "Schoolwide Title I" schools are those with a poverty level (determined by free and reduced meal counts, Aid for Dependent Children [AFDC], census, or Medicaid) at or above 40 percent.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Did Low Performers Improve by 2008-09?

In all ten states, the data indicate that the charter sector was slightly better at eliminating low-performing schools, although neither sector has cause for celebration. Figure 2 summarizes the status of the original 2003-04 low-performing schools in 2008-09. Seventy-two percent of the 2003-04 low-performing charter schools remained in their states' bottom quartiles, compared with 80 percent in the district sector.[47] These overall differences were statistically significant.[48]

Figure 2. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Table 5 shows that, in each of the ten states, the proportion of schools that remained in the lowest quartile of statewide proficiency was greater in the district sector than in the charter sector. However, these differences were statistically significant only in Arizona, Florida, and Michigan. (See Part 2 on page 39 for full analysis of state-level results.)

Table 5. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09 by State

		SCHOOLS	PERSISTENT LOW PERFORMANCE (1ST QUARTILE)	MODERATE IMPROVEMENT (2ND QUARTILE)	TURNAROUND (3RD & 4TH QUARTILE)	CLOSURES		
						ACADEMICALLY BENEFICIAL CLOSURES	OTHER CLOSURES	TOTAL CLOSURES
AZ	District	95	0.83	0.12	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.05
	Charter	19	0.58	0.11	0.00	0.21	0.11	0.32
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.25**	0.01	0.00	-0.19**	-0.07*	-0.26***
CA	District	603	0.77	0.13	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.07
	Charter	28	0.71	0.11	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.18
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.05	0.03	0.02	-0.11***	0.01	-0.10**
FL	District	206	0.87	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.07
	Charter	26	0.73	0.04	0.00	0.23	0.00	0.23
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.14**	0.01	0.00	-0.17***	0.00	-0.16***
MI	District	152	0.90	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.05
	Charter	48	0.75	0.13	0.02	0.10	0.00	0.10
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.15***	-0.09	-0.01	-0.06*	0.01	-0.05
MN	District	67	0.94	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
	Charter	17	0.94	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.06
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.00	0.03	0.01	-0.04	0.00	-0.04
NC	District	147	0.86	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.11
	Charter	19	0.74	0.11	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.16
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.12	-0.08	0.01	-0.09	0.04	-0.05

(continued on page 28)

(continued from page 27)

Table 5. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09 by State

		SCHOOLS	PERSISTENT LOW PERFORMANCE (1ST QUARTILE)	MODERATE IMPROVEMENT (2ND QUARTILE)	TURNAROUND (3RD & 4TH QUARTILE)	CLOSURES		
						ACADEMICALLY BENEFICIAL CLOSURES	OTHER CLOSURES	TOTAL CLOSURES
OH	District	207	0.62	0.04	0.00	0.32	0.02	0.34
	Charter	34	0.56	0.09	0.00	0.29	0.06	0.35
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.06	-0.05	0.00	0.03	-0.04	-0.01
PA	District	178	0.85	0.05	0.01	0.09	0.00	0.09
	Charter	28	0.79	0.04	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.18
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.06	0.01	0.01	-0.09	0.00	-0.09
TX	District	60	0.77	0.15	0.05	0.00	0.03	0.03
	Charter	35	0.74	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.11
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.02	0.01	0.05	0.00	-0.08	-0.08
WI	District	53	0.83	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.15	0.15
	Charter	3	0.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.33
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.16	0.00	0.02	0.00	-0.18	-0.18
SECTOR TOTALS	District	1768	0.80	0.08	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.11
	Charter	257	0.72	0.09	0.00	0.15	0.04	0.19
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.08**	-0.01	0.01	-0.06***	-0.02**	-0.08***

*Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turn-around" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. The difference between the percentages of charter and district schools within each classification is also reported for each state; * Significant at p ≤.10; ** Significant at p ≤ .05; *** Significant at p≤ .001. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.*

Source: Author's calculations. Data collected from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

The Scarcity of Turnarounds

Very few low-performing schools in either sector were able to exit the bottom 50 percent of schools in their states during this five-year period. Charter schools were not statistically more or less likely to turn around than their district peers. Of the 1,768 district schools in the dataset that were low-performing in 2003-04, only twenty-five (1.4 percent) raised their average 2007-08 and 2008-09 proficiency rates above their states' 50th percentiles, while only one of the 257 (0.4 percent) originally low-performing charter schools met the turnaround criteria.[49] The low rate of turnarounds in both sectors underscores the stubborn persistence of weak academic performance in individual schools and the slender odds of dramatic change in that performance.

Because the successful turnarounds were statistical outliers, it is difficult to accurately determine what factors contributed most to their success. Still, the data do not suggest that turnarounds resulted from major changes in school population demographics. On average, the turnaround schools served a larger proportion of FRL and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students and a smaller proportion of special-education students in the baseline year than did other low-performing schools (Table 6). These proportions shifted by roughly 1 percent, on average, from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Four of the twenty-six turnaround schools experienced double-digit increases in their

Table 6. Student-Population Characteristics of Turnarounds

	TURNAROUNDS	OTHERS
Student Population in Baseline Year		
Avg. Enrollment	508	551
Number of Tested Students	212	206
% Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	83	78
% Special Education	10	14
% Limited English Proficiency	34	20
Change in Student Population from 2003-04 to 2008-09		
Δ Avg. Enrollment	-90	-75
Δ Number of Tested Students	-22	-9
Δ % Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	1	1
Δ % Special Education	1	0
Δ % Limited English Proficiency	0	1
# SCHOOLS	**26**	**1,999**

Notes: "Others" refers to all charter and district schools that were originally designated as low-performing in 2003-04 that did not meet the criteria for a turnaround by 2008-09. Schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state.

Source: Author's calculations. Data collected from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

FRL percentages, suggesting they made dramatic improvements despite increasingly challenging student populations. Turnaround schools had slightly smaller enrollments, but tested more students on average, indicating that changes in proficiency scores were not systematically more influenced by sampling error, i.e., year-to-year shifts in the characteristics of tested students.

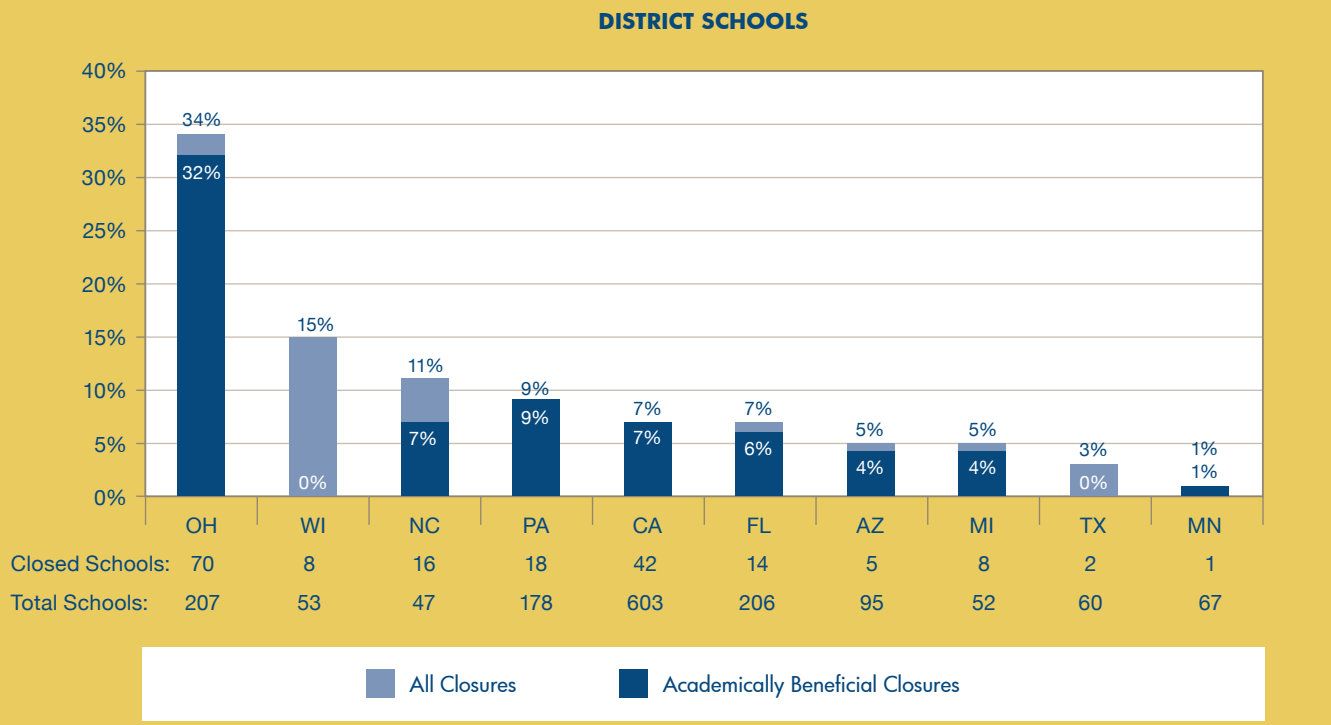
Internet searches were conducted to verify the status of turnarounds. All evidence suggests that these turnarounds were genuine. For example, the one turnaround school in Florida (Stewart Street Elementary) rose from a state rating of an "F" to a "B" in two years, which it partly attributes to adopting the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)—a comprehensive reform that includes performance pay, career ladders, and professional development. Another turnaround school was Columbus Elementary in Appleton, Wisconsin, which was selected as a 2009 Blue Ribbon School because of its dramatic improvement. And Carstens Elementary, a high-poverty school in Detroit, was recently described by the *Detroit News* as a "beacon of hope in a southeast Detroit neighborhood."[50]

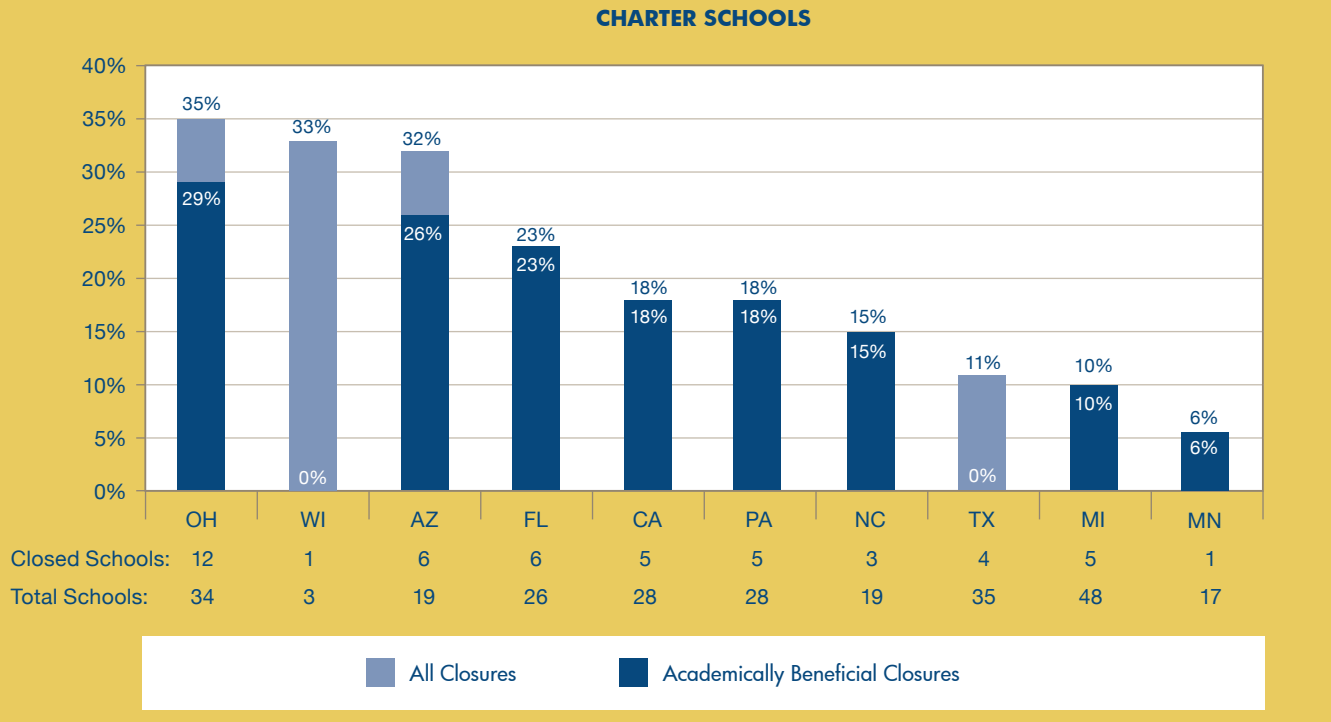
More schools in the study demonstrated moderate improvement (n=164) than met the turnaround criteria, though those proportions were still low across all ten states. Low performers in Texas were most successful in demonstrating moderate improvement, with 15 and 14 percent of low-performing charter and district schools, respectively, exiting the state's bottom quartile of proficiency over five years.

The Silver Lining—School Closures

Low-performing charter schools were statistically likelier to close by 2008-09 than low-performing district schools, though neither sector closed large proportions of their low performers. In the full dataset, 19 percent of low-performing charter schools (48 of 257) were closed, compared with 11 percent of low-performing district schools (186 of 1,768). In both sectors, the majority of closed schools were lower-performing than their neighbors and thus termed "academically beneficial closures." Eighty-one percent of the closed charter schools (39 of 48) and 84 percent of the closed district schools (156 of 186) had proficiency rates that were lower than the average proficiency rate of schools within a three-mile radius. Figure 3 (see page 31) presents the percentages of low-performing district and charter schools that were shut down in each state and distinguishes between academically beneficial closures and others. In each of the ten states, a higher proportion of charter schools was shut down. These differences were statistically significant in Arizona, California, and Florida.

Figure 3. Proportions of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools That Closed by 2008-09





Notes: Bars indicate for each state the percentage of schools designated as low-performing in 2003-04 that had closed by 2008-09. Darker shades indicate rates of "academically beneficial" closures, i.e., closures where the surrounding schools averaged higher proficiency rates than those of the closed schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Data on school operational status gathered from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

DISCUSSION

Data underscore the distressing durability of low performance among both charter and district schools. Of the 2,025 low-performing schools in the dataset (257 charters and 1,768 district schools), only one in five exited its state's bottom quartile of proficiency after five years (including closures). Turnarounds were rare: Only twenty-six schools demonstrated enough improvement to meet the study's turnaround criteria, and the probability of turnarounds across all ten states was approximately 1 percent. Despite the current emphasis placed on school turnarounds in federal and state school-improvement strategies, the data show that America's numerous turnaround efforts face overwhelming odds. That said, it is unlikely that all low-performing schools in the dataset engaged in the intensive reforms that proponents of turnarounds emphasize as critical to success. We can fairly suppose that most of them engaged in *some* type of school-improvement effort—more than likely, multiple types. Yet this study's findings raise doubts about those who claim to know the secret to turning around failing schools. If silver-bullet solutions existed, a good many more than 1 percent of all low-performing schools in ten states would have turned around.

The charter sector was no more successful in turning around its low performers than its district counterpart. Only one of the 257 low-performing charter schools in the dataset (0.4 percent) made a turnaround. The proportion of turnarounds in the charter sector was lower than in the district sector, though not statistically different. The prevailing theory maintains that low-performing charter schools—given the freedom that all charters have to innovate—will have greater incentive to improve because if they don't, they will presumably be shuttered.[51] Our data, however, show that this autonomy-accountability dynamic has not resulted in turnarounds of low-performing charter schools in ten major charter states.

Still, the news is not all bad for the charter sector. Across all ten states, it did roughly twice as well as the district sector in shutting down low-performing schools. Nineteen percent of the low-performing charter schools were closed, compared with 11 percent of the low-performing district schools. While shutting down an additional 8 percent of low-performing schools is not earth-shattering, it is also not inconsequential. In fact, it's somewhat reassuring since the capacity to close rather than maintain bad schools, despite the pain that school closure ordinarily brings, is part of what distinguishes the charter movement from its traditional brethren.

Yet the charter sector has left itself with much room for improvement. Seventy-two percent of the low-performing charter schools in the sample neither exited the bottom quartile nor closed over a five-year period. Such a high rate of persistent failure is hard to swallow—some might say inexcusable—within a reform movement built upon the pillars of strong school accountability. Children entering first grade in such a school in 2003-04 were exiting sixth grade at the end of 2008-09. If their bad schools failed during that period to build for them the foundations of a solid education, it is extremely unlikely that they will ever acquire one.

CONCLUSION

The NCLB era was marked by schools side-stepping dramatic turnaround labors in favor of less-intrusive improvement efforts.[52] If schools continue to skirt the dramatic reforms that turnaround proponents deem critical, there's little reason to expect better results from low-performing schools in the next five years than we've seen in the last five—or twenty-five, for that matter.

The success of the new turnaround agenda will hinge partly on how the charter sector responds. As the charter movement has matured, charter leaders have questioned whether authorizers should attempt to turn around failing charter schools rather than shut them down. Though the conversation has shifted from quantity to quality, in practice many authorizers are hesitant to close schools. For instance, the charter authorizing board of the State University of New York (SUNY) is considering replacing the administration and staff at one failing school instead of pushing for its closure.[53] The results of this study suggest that such an intervention is misguided: The likelihood that a charter school will make a dramatic turnaround is about one in 250.

More recent debates have centered on whether the charter sector should accept Secretary Duncan's challenge to take over and transform bad district schools. Thus far charter leaders have proven exceptionally reluctant to do so—and this study appears to justify their reluctance if only because the records of transformation in both the charter and district sectors are so limited.

Rather than embarking on dubious turnaround efforts, charter authorizers and district leadership alike should ramp up efforts to close low performers, particularly in cases where better-performing schools are nearby. This will signal to school leaders and policy makers that failure will not be tolerated in either sector. In states with charter caps, this will also free up charter slots that other proven operators can use to start successful new schools.

Authorities can certainly choose to table closure options in hopes that a failing school will turn around. But they will likely be disappointed. Worse, charter authorizers who fail to hold schools accountable will continue to threaten the legitimacy of the charter-school movement.

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3. There are several possible explanations for the relatively high level of school closings in Ohio during this period and not all of them have to do with educational achievement or accountability. Enrollments in urban districts were declining and districts were closing and consolidating schools for this reason. Several major urban districts built significant numbers of new school buildings during this time, which led to some old schools being closed and their pupils transferred. In the charter sector, some schools closed for financial reasons, often because Ohio's low per-pupil reimbursement rate for charters means that very small schools have great difficulty making ends meet.
4. U.S. Department of Education, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, July 1, 2010, http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/remarks-secretary-arne-duncan-national-alliance-public-charter-schools.
5. Andy Smarick, "The Turnaround Fallacy," *Education Next* 10, no. 1 (2010): 21-26, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20101_20.pdf.
6. A school was identified as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and it also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I school improvement grants. However, it does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.
7. *Federal Register* 74, no. 164 (August 2009): 43101.
8. For example, New York—where teacher unions have long waged battle to end school choice—more than doubled its charter cap from 200 to 460, and Louisiana removed the cap entirely.
9. U.S. Department of Education, "Turning Around the Bottom Five Percent," Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, June 22, 2009, http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.html.
10. Terry Ryan, "Should Federal Dollars Be Used to Try and Turnaround Failing Charters?," *Flypaper*, April 6, 2010, http://www.educationgadfly.net/flypaper/index.php/2010/04/should-federal-dollars-be-used-to-try-and-turnaround-failing-charters/; Diane Ravitch, "The Big Idea -- It's Bad Education Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2010, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/14/opinion/la-oe-ravitch14-2010mar14/2.
11. Andy Smarick, "The Turnaround Fallacy," *Education Next* 10, no. 1 (2010): 21-26, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20101_20.pdf.
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13. Ronald C. Brady, *Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003).
14. A recent study found that students' test scores increased when they moved to schools with higher performance levels. See Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414.
15. Tom Loveless, "Charter Schools: Achievement, Accountability, and the Role of Expertise," in *The 2003 Brown Center Report on American Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 27-35.

16. Brian Gill and others, *State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management, and Student Achievement in Philadelphia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

17. Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson, "For-Profit and Nonprofit Management in Philadelphia Schools," *Education Next 9*, no. 2 (2009): 65-70, http://educationnext.org/for-profit-and-nonprofit-management-in-philadelphia schools/ educationnext.org/files/ednext_20092_64.pdf.

18. Marisa de la Torre and Julia Gwynne, *When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, 2009).

19. Viki M. Young and others, *Renaissance Schools Fund-supported Schools: Early Outcomes, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2009).

20. Rebecca Herman and others, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008), http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf.

21. Emily Ayscue Hassel and Bryan Hassel, "The Big U-Turn: How to Bring Schools from the Brink of Doom to Stellar Success," *Education Next 9,* no. 1 (2009): 21-27, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20091_20.pdf.

22. Despite some positive research findings on charter-school effectiveness, there are concerns that the sector is not effectively policing itself. The Center for Education Reform reports that 657 (12.5 percent) of the 5,250 charter schools opened across the nation have been shuttered as of 2009. Ninety-two closures were primarily for academic reasons, implying that only 2 percent of all charter schools have been shut down due to low performance. According to the 2009 survey of charter-school authorizers conducted by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), schools are most likely to be closed when their charter is up for renewal. They found that one in seven schools (14 percent) that were up for renewal did not survive the process. Only 1 percent of schools were closed (voluntarily or involuntarily) outside the renewal process. See Sean Conlan, Alex Medler, and Suzanne Weiss, *The State of Charter School Authorizing 2009: 2nd Annual Report on NACSA's Authorizer Survey* (Chicago: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2009), http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/2009_Facts_Report.pdf.

23. The final school-level CCD files from 2002-03 to 2007-08 were used in addition to the preliminary 2008-09 CCD file. At the time of this study, CCD had not published free and reduced-price lunch data for the 2008-09 school year, so these data were retrieved from state department of education websites.

24. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Public Charter School Dashboard, http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2009.

25. In addition, these states have mature charter-school programs. All schools had passed charter legislation by 1997. Therefore, authorizers had ample time prior to the baseline year of this study to refine their accountability practices, figure out which schools were low-performing, and develop protocols for intervening in low-performing schools.

26. These ratings are based on a number of factors that signal state favorability towards charter schooling, including allowing multiple authorizers, automatic waivers from state rules and regulations, and equitable per-pupil funding. See *A New Model Law for Supporting the Growth of High-Quality Public Charter Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009), http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/ModelLaw_P7-wCVR.pdf.

27. Schools with non-traditional grade spans that tested in grades 3-8 were classified as either elementary or middle, depending on whether they tested more students in grades 3-5 or 6-8. For example, a K-8 school that tested 300 students in grades 3-5 and 200 in grades 6-8 would be classified as an elementary school, and only proficiency rates for their 3rd- to 5th-graders would be analyzed.

28. Past studies have found that schools perform worst in their first year of operation. See Ron Zimmer and others, *Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009). Excluding schools opening in 2003-04 avoids misclassifying a new school as low-performing in the base years. Alternative schools were included in the dataset. For most states, the inclusion of alternative schools is inconsequential because there are not many exclusively alternative schools in the elementary and middle grades. However, in Texas, close to 50 percent of charter schools are alternative. Differences in the rates of turnaround and closure between charter and district schools in Texas may partly reflect the high proportion of alternative schools in the charter sector.

29. See, for example, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Using Imprecise School Accountability Measures," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2002): 91-114.

30. The analysis averaged tested grades in 2002-03 and 2003-04 within the 3rd- to 5th-grade span for elementary schools and within the 6th- to 8th-grade span for middle schools. The average of 2002-03 and 2003-04 was weighted based on the number of students tested in each year. Many states did not test in all grades 3-8 in 2002-03 and 2003-04, and therefore their averages were based only on the grades tested. California, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas tested math and reading in all grades 3-8. Arizona tested in grades 3, 5, and 8. Michigan tested math in grade 4 and 8 and reading in grades 4 and 7. Minnesota tested in grades 3 and 5, and therefore no Minnesota middle schools were included in the analysis. Ohio tested in grades 4 and 6 in both subjects. Pennsylvania tested in grades 5 and 8 in both subjects. Wisconsin tested both subjects in 4 and 8. Schools' percentile rankings were calculated separately for elementary and middle schools. Averaging across years and combining subjects and grades into a composite score yields a more reliable estimate of the schools' overall performance status than using a single year. See Robert L. Linn and Carolyn Haug, "Stability of School Building Accountability Scores and Gains," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2002): 29-36; Vonda L. Kiplinger, "Reliability of Large-Scale Assessment and Accountability Systems," in *The Future of Test-based Educational Accountability*, ed. Katherine E. Ryan and Lorrie A. Shepard (New York: Routledge, 2008), 93-114.

31. Schools that made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) because of safe-harbor provisions but failed to meet the state's absolute proficiency targets were considered to have met the study's criteria for low-performing.

32. SIG funds are reserved for Title I schools performing in the bottom 5 percent in reading and math proficiency. In the case that SIG funds remain after distribution to the bottom 5 percent of schools, the remaining funds flow to the next lowest 5 percent. See *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2010), http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf. In their applications for SIG funds, many states incorporated multiple years of proficiency rates to target schools lacking progress. For example, North Carolina targeted schools with reading and math proficiency rates below 50 percent in 2008-09 and either 2007-08 or 2006-07. California and Minnesota used a three-year average of reading and math proficiency rates.

33. For a thorough critique of the problems of proficiency rates see Andrew Ho, "The Problem with 'Proficiency': Limitations of Statistics and Policy Under No Child Left Behind," *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 6 (2008): 351-360. The author explains that proficiency trends will be unrepresentative of the schools' complete performance trends because they are heavily influenced by the proportion of examinees who fall near the proficiency cut score. Some states have incorporated schools' value-added scores into their identification of SIG schools. Using value-added scores for this purpose—particularly simple methods such as changes in proficiency from one year to the next—is precarious because value-added scores can be highly unreliable predictors of a schools' future effectiveness. Idiosyncratic "non-persistent" factors cause the relative standing of schools' value-added scores to fluctuate from year to year. Therefore, incorporating value-added scores may result in the misclassification of schools as "persistently" low-performing. See Dale Ballou, "Sizing Up Test Scores," *Education Next* 2, no. 2 (2002): 10-15, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20022_10.pdf.

34. *School Turnarounds: The Cross-Sector Evidence* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2007), http://publicimpact.com/~publici1/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_evidence_review.pdf.

35. A 2008 expert panel convened by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) defined chronically low-performing schools as those with high proportions of students failing to meet state standards for two or more consecutive years (Rebecca Herman and others, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide*, Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008, http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf).

36. See page 5 in Herman et al., 2008. Turnaround experts at MASS Insight suggest significant gains in two academic years (*School Turnaround Models Emerging Turnaround Strategies and Results*, Boston: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, 2010, http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/112/file/1/pubs/2010/07/20/Turnaround_Models_7_19_10.pdf). Schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIGs) are expected to show results within three years ("School Improvement Grants—January 23, 2010," U.S. Department of Education, http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/nastid2.pdf).

37. Jeff Kutash and others, *The School Turnaround Field Guide* (New York: Wallace Foundation, 2010), http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/school-turnaround-field-guide-executive-summary.pdf.

38. Natasha Ushomirsky and Daria Hall, *Stuck Schools: A Framework for Identifying Schools Where Students Need Change—Now!* (Washington, D.C.: Education Trust, 2010), http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/StuckSchools.pdf; Tom Loveless, "Do Schools Ever Change? An Empirical Investigation," in *The 2009 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2010), 19-25.

39. Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, "Parental Preferences and School Competition: Evidence from a Public School Choice Program," NBER *Working Paper Series* 11805 (2006).

40. The current performance of students in the neighboring schools provides no guarantee that the displaced students will benefit because it does not tell us if the surrounding schools are actually more effective. However, a recent experimental study found students' test scores increased when they moved to a school with higher performance levels. See Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414. Other non-experimental studies have found that the academic, demographic, and socio-economic characteristics of peers can have a greater impact on students than their own characteristics. See, for example, Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling, "Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity Data," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 5 (2010): 1201-46.

41. It is reasonable to expect that low-performing schools—particularly charter schools that are entirely schools of choice—will have above-average student mobility.

42. Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414.

43. A recent Department of Education blog post identified a Kentucky middle school as an example of a successful turnaround because it now ranks in the top 15% in the state. J. Johnson, "Illuminating Positive Change: Rural Transformation at West Carter Middle School," *Ed.gov Blog*, July 12, 2010, http://www.ed.gov/blog/topic/turnaround-schools/.

44. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.

45. A third drawback of the relative approach is that the difficulty of a turnaround will differ from one state to the next. Schools in states such as Texas that have low proficiency cut scores will have a narrower distribution of school proficiency rates because the scale of proficiency rates is censored, i.e., schools cannot perform better than 100 percent proficiency. Consequently, states that have low proficiency cut scores are prone to have schools concentrated by the 100 percent proficiency ceiling. For states with a narrow distribution, a smaller increase in absolute proficiency rates may lead to a larger jump in a school's ranking.

46. Many researchers have pointed out that trends on state assessments are misleading because states have modified their testing systems. See, for example, Bruce Fuller and others, "Gauging Growth: How to Judge No Child Left Behind?" *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 5 (2007): 268-78. The authors show that trends on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are flat, while most states have shown double-digit growth in proficiency rates since the introduction of NCLB.

47. Seventy-seven percent of the schools that were designated as persistently low-performing failed to make overall AYP in 2007-08, and over 52 percent were in some form of state-mandated school improvement. For example, of the nineteen Ohio charter schools that were labeled persistently failing, all were designated by the state in Ohio for 2008-09 as either in academic emergency or academic watch (the lowest two of five performance categories).

48. Test of significant differences conducted using a two-sided binomial proportion test.

49. These findings are due in part to the strong effect of student poverty on school performance. The correlation of schools' proficiency rates to their free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) percents ranged from 0.55 to 0.78 across the ten states.

50. Marisa Schultz, "18 DPS Schools Off Closure List, but 32 Others Will Be Shuttered," *Detroit News*, June 8, 2010.

51. Some research, however, has shown that charter schools are not accorded significantly more autonomy than district schools. See, for example, Dana Brinson and Jacob L. Rosch, *Charter School Autonomy: A Half-Broken Promise* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010), http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/201004_CharterAutonomyReport.pdf.

52. Caitlin Scott, *A Call to Restructure Restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in Five States* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2008).

53. Len Maniace and Yoav Gonen, "SUNY Eyes Broken-charter Fix," *New York Post*, October 29, 2010, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/suny_eyes_broken_charter_fix_lITBEgh0xUG8UoRbReYB0K#ixzz14tq15CCM.

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PART 2

Examining the States' Lowest-Performing Schools

ARIZONA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Arizona's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The major takeaway for Arizona is that a much greater proportion of low-performing charter schools have been closed in the Grand Canyon State than in its district sector or in charter sectors of other states. Six of the nineteen low-performing Arizona charter schools in 2003-04 had shut down by 2008-09, representing 32 percent of the sample. Only 5 percent (five of ninety-five) of low-performing district schools closed during that period. Arizona's charter sector had the third-highest closure rate of the ten state charter sectors. This indicates that, in Arizona, the charter sector's more stringent accountability policies are working. Still, in both sectors, a majority of low-performing schools failed to make substantial improvements from 2003-04 to 2008-09—and continued to operate.

Characteristics of Arizona's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON ARIZONA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Arizona passed charter legislation in 1994. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 566 charter schools operated in Arizona during 2009-10.[1] They served over 113,000 students, or 10.5 percent of all Arizona public-school pupils—the highest percentage of any state.[2] One hundred and one Arizona charter schools have closed since 1994, representing 15 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 64 percent of Arizona's charter schools are independently operated, while 18 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 19 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Arizona's charter law was ranked tenth (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits both local school boards and an independent State Board for Charter Schools to authorize charters. The State Board of Education can also approve charters, but has not done so since 2003. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 119 Arizona charter schools and 1,007 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that nineteen charter schools (16 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did ninety-five district schools (9 percent). The fact that Arizona's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Arizona Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	16% (n=19)	9% (n=95)	10% (n=114)
Others	84% (n=100)	91% (n=912)	90% (n=1,012)
Total Schools	119	1,007	1,126

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 42) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low performers in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 514, compared with 622 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 269, versus 283 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Arizona's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	48.4	43.8	44.2	57.9	48.0	49.6
Rural	31.6	19.4	20.6	15.8	11.0	11.8
Other	20.0	36.8	35.3	26.3	41.0	38.7
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	85.7	50.2	53.5	84.9	39.4	48.8
Special Education	11.3	12.2	12.1	8.3	7.9	8.0
Limited English Proficiency	31.1	15.2	16.7	17.0	3.0	5.3
Hispanic	55.6	36.0	37.9	54.5	18.6	24.3
Black	5.1	4.4	4.5	8.8	5.4	5.9
# Schools	95	912	1,007	19	100	119
Avg. Enrollment	514	622	612	269	283	281

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

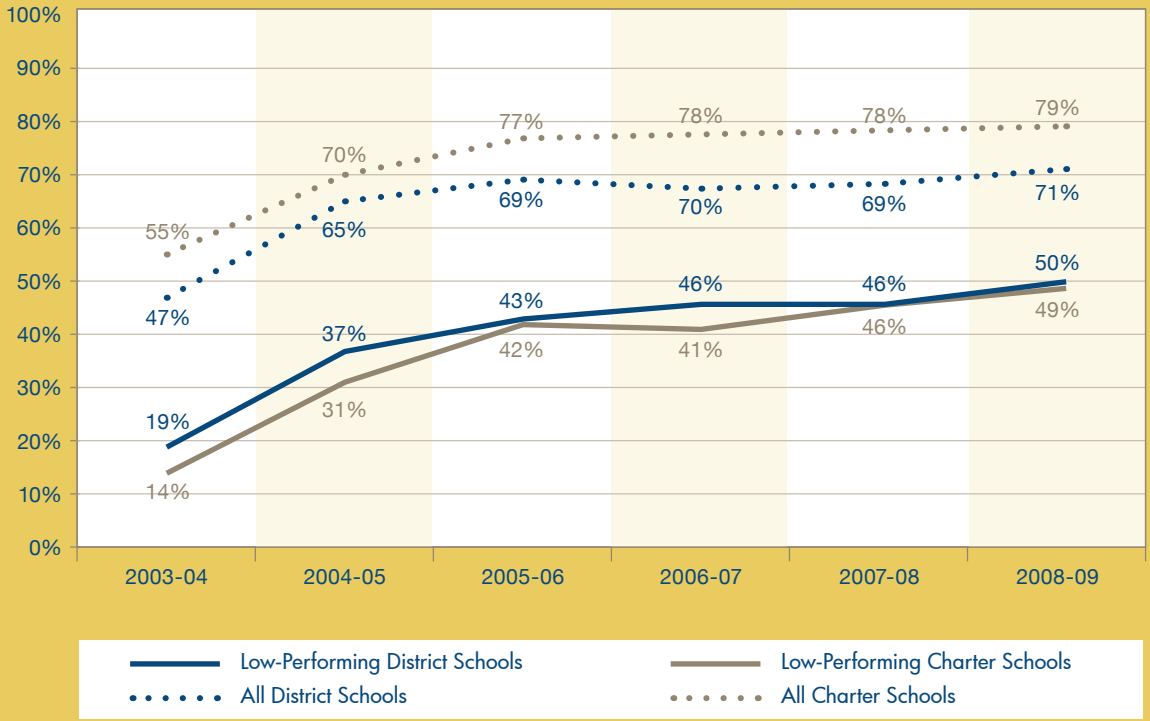
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 43) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Arizona schools improved dramatically during that five-year period. However, it is unclear whether that was due to real improvement in achievement or changes in the difficulty of the state test, particularly since the state's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remained relatively flat during this time.[6]

Average school proficiency rates from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were slightly higher in the charter sector than in the district sector. Still, comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other.[7] As for low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. Arizona's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on ninety-five low-performing district schools, 1,007 total district schools, nineteen low-performing charter schools, and 119 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Arizona from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 44) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 45) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Arizona's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile five years later. Still, the charter sector was more successful at eliminating low performers. Of the ninety-five low-performing Arizona district schools in 2003-04, 83 percent (n=79) remained in the lowest quartile in 2008-09, compared with 58 percent (n=11) of the nineteen low-performing charter schools.

- Arizona's charter sector did significantly better at eliminating low-performing schools than did the 10-state charter sector, while the persistence of low performance in the district sector was on par with the 10-state district average.

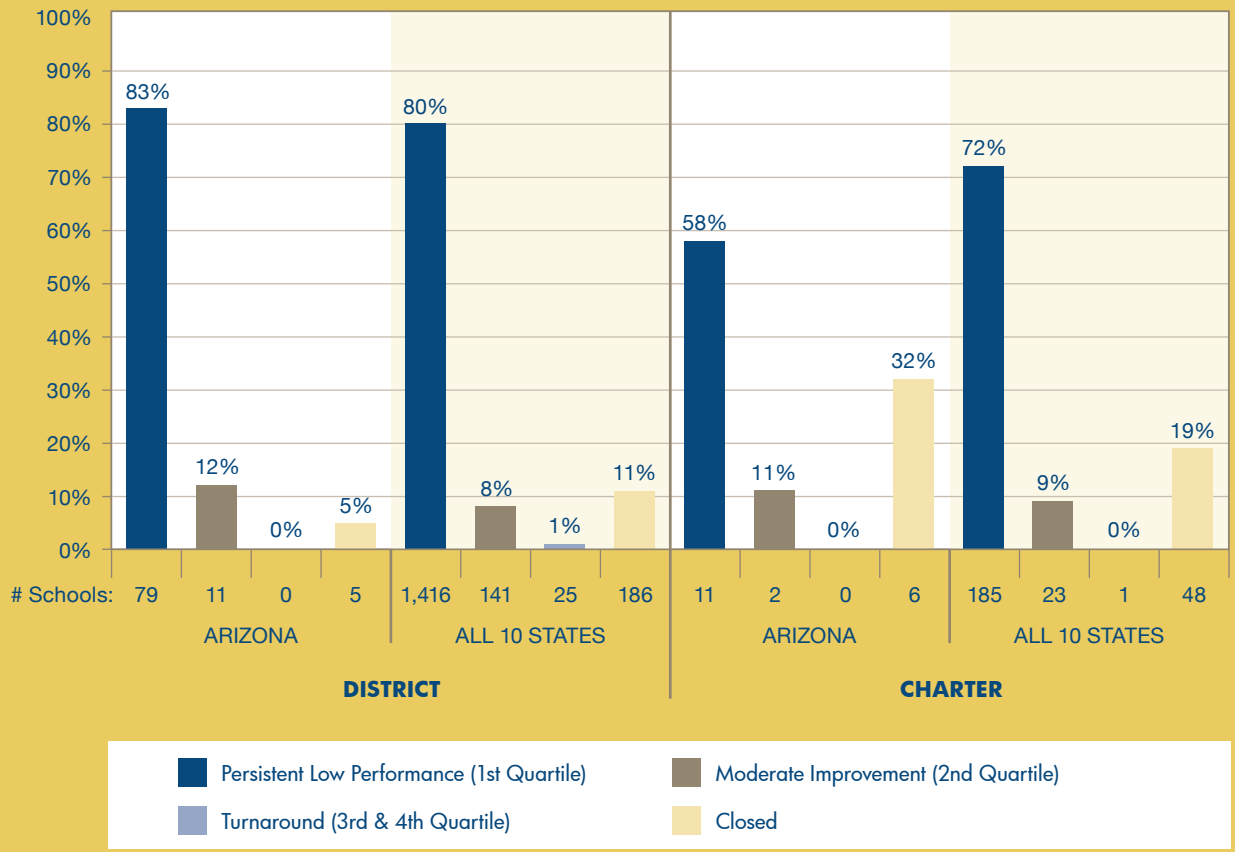
- Arizona's charter sector did better than the district sector at eliminating persistently failing schools via closure. Six of the nineteen low-performing Arizona charter schools in 2003-04 had shut down by 2008-09, representing 32 percent of the sample. Only 5 percent (five of ninety-five) of low-performing district schools closed during that period. Arizona's charter sector had the third-highest closure rate of the ten state charter sectors, while the district sector ranked seventh among ten states' district sectors.[10]

- None of Arizona's low-performing schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better—only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools met the criteria—indicating the tough odds facing America's many and earnest school turnaround efforts.

In sum, neither sector in Arizona proved itself effective at improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of low-performing schools in both sectors turned around over a five-year period; rather, the overwhelming majority of low performers in both sectors stayed that way.

Still, Arizona's charter sector shut down proportionally more low performers than its district sector: A low-performing charter school in Arizona had roughly a one-in-three chance of closure, compared to a one-in-twenty chance in the district sector. Arizona's charter sector was also more successful at shutting down low-performing schools than seven of the nine other state charter sectors in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Arizona can improve the quality of its public education system by continuing efforts to shut down low performers in both sectors. Note that even with greater autonomy and flexibility, charter schools rarely make dramatic turnarounds in performance. For those charter authorizers who defer the closure option in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Arizona schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of Arizona's low-performing charter and district schools—specifically, accountability pressures imposed on the schools, improvement strategies, and background that may explain why the schools' performance trended as it did from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Because the analysis revealed that Arizona's charter sector closed 32 percent of its low-performing schools while the district sector closed just 5 percent, the profiles below examine a low-performing charter that was closed and a low-performing district school that remains open despite five years of consistently low test scores.

Tucson Urban League Charter

Tucson Urban League Charter school was granted a charter in 1996 to serve middle and high school students in a poor urban neighborhood. Despite support from a well-established community organization, the school struggled from the outset. It persistently failed on all measurable dimensions of quality: Overall proficiency rates hovered around 10 percent; fewer than one in five students graduated; and attendance rates typically fell below 80 percent. Tucson Urban made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in just one year between 2003-04 and 2008-09.

As with many failing charter schools, declining enrollment also posed financial challenges. With ten teachers and roughly 125 students scattered across seven grades, the school found it difficult to offer a robust academic program.

In light of the overwhelming evidence against the school, the State Board for Charter Schools worked with school staff to voluntarily surrender the charter contract in 2009. School representatives could not dispute its poor track record and, given the financial challenges, decided that such voluntary termination was the best course of action. Voluntary terminations such as this are relatively common in Arizona. In fact, all six of the low-performing charters in this study's sample that closed did so through voluntary surrender.

Bethune School

Eighty-three percent of Arizona's low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency over the five-year period of this study. One is the Bethune School in the Phoenix Elementary School District. A Title I school, it enrolled over 600 K-8 students during 2008-09, of whom roughly half were English-language learners. The school's improvement plan emphasizes leadership mentoring, professional development on reading and math instructional practices, and the use of intervention specialists for struggling readers.

Yet the school's proficiency rates have consistently ranked in the bottom 10 percent of the state since 2003-04 and, in 2008-09, its average reading and math proficiency rate was only 34 percent. After four consecutive years of failing to make AYP, Bethune made it via "safe harbor" in 2006-07 and 2007-08, permitting the school to avoid restructuring.[11] Although the 7-point proficiency gains required to qualify for safe harbor were welcome, they did not portend enduring improvement in the school's performance trajectory. Bethune again failed to make AYP in both 2008-09 and 2009-10, and is again facing NCLB corrective action. As with many other failing schools in this study, Bethune was identified as "persistently lowest-achieving" in the state's 2010 application for federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds.

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6. Because state-established proficiency "cutoff" standards often change, measures of school achievement over time are often moving targets. (See, for example, John Cronin and others, *The Proficiency Illusion*, Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007.) Arizona's proficiency cut score changed in 2005 when the state adopted new academic standards at all grade levels. Instead of measuring low performers' progress by absolute change in proficiency rates, then, this study measures progress by comparing a school's proficiency rates relative to the proficiency rates of other schools in the state over time. State NAEP scores retrieved from: National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.
7. This finding is consistent with more rigorous student-level analyses of the effectiveness of Arizona charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of charter and district students to be within 0.01 standard deviations of each other (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends in the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Arizona, however, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
10. Although Arizona's charter closure rate of 32 percent ranked 3rd among the 10-state charter sectors included in the analysis, it should be noted that the 2nd-ranked state was Wisconsin, which only had a charter school sample of three schools; such a small sample clearly is not large enough to draw reliable conclusions on Wisconsin's charter-sector performance.
11. The "safe harbor" provision of the No Child Left Behind Act permits schools to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress by making a 10 percent reduction in the percentage of students—overall or in subgroups—who score below proficient.

CALIFORNIA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of California's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turn-around and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of California's public-school sectors. The vast majority of California's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements after five years. California's charter sector has been more successful at closing persistently low-performing schools, a positive sign of the charter sector's approach to accountability at work. Eighteen percent of California charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were closed by 2008-09, versus 7 percent of low-performing district schools. Still, 71 percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still around, and still low-performing, in 2008-09.

Characteristics of California's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON CALIFORNIA'S CHARTER SECTOR

California passed charter legislation in 1992. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 860 charter schools operated in the state during 2009-10,[1] serving more than 340,000 students, or 5.5 percent of all California public-school pupils.[2] One hundred and twenty California charter schools have closed since 1992, representing 14 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 82 percent of California's charter schools are independently operated, while 15 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 2 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of California's charter law was ranked third (among forty state laws) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards and the State Board of Education to serve as authorizers. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state, although no more than 100 new ones may open in a single year.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 228 California charter schools and 6,140 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that twenty-eight of the charter schools (12 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 603 of the 6,140 district schools (10 percent).

Table 1. California Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	12% (n=28)	10% (n=603)	10% (n=631)
Others	88% (n=200)	90% (n=5,537)	90% (n=5,737)
Total Schools	228	6,140	6,368

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. California Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 50) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low performers in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 731, compared with 669 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charters was 433, versus 474 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of California's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	45.6	30.1	31.6	39.3	27.5	28.9
Rural	11.3	11.6	11.5	25.0	19.0	19.7
Other	43.1	58.4	56.9	35.7	53.5	51.3
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	81.3	48.0	51.3	52.7	26.0	29.2
Special Education	12.2	10.2	10.4	13.1	10.9	11.1
Limited English Proficiency	38.0	23.6	25.0	25.5	20.3	20.9
Hispanic	70.2	39.7	42.7	55.4	25.9	29.5
Black	13.4	7.1	7.7	17.1	10.3	11.1
# Schools	603	5,537	6,140	28	200	228
Avg. Enrollment	731	669	675	433	474	469

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

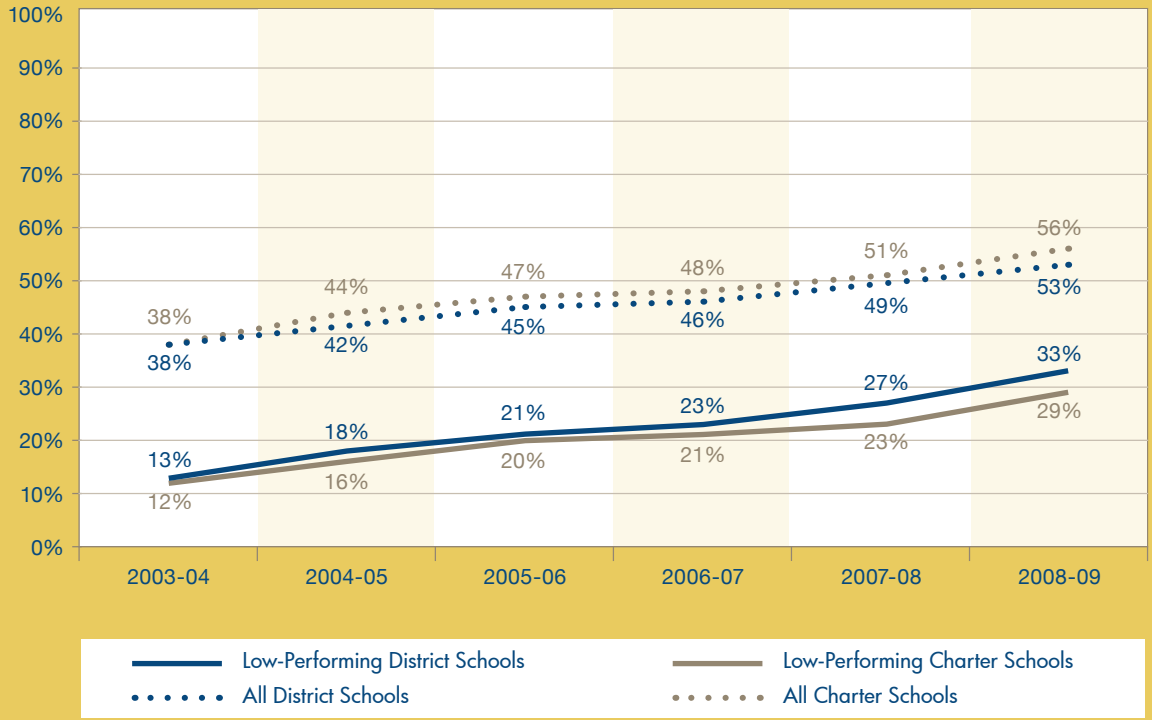
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 51) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 and contrasts them with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. California's average proficiency rates in both sectors rose by over 15 percentage points during this period. Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also suggest that the state's reading and math performance improved from 2003 to 2009.[6]

The two school sectors improved their average school proficiency rates at about the same rate.[7] As for the low performers, we found no meaningful differences in proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. California's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 603 low-performing district schools, 6,140 total district schools, twenty-eight low-performing charter schools, and 228 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. California Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in California from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 52) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 53) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. California's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable findings emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later. Seventy-one percent of charter schools remained, as did 77 percent of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)

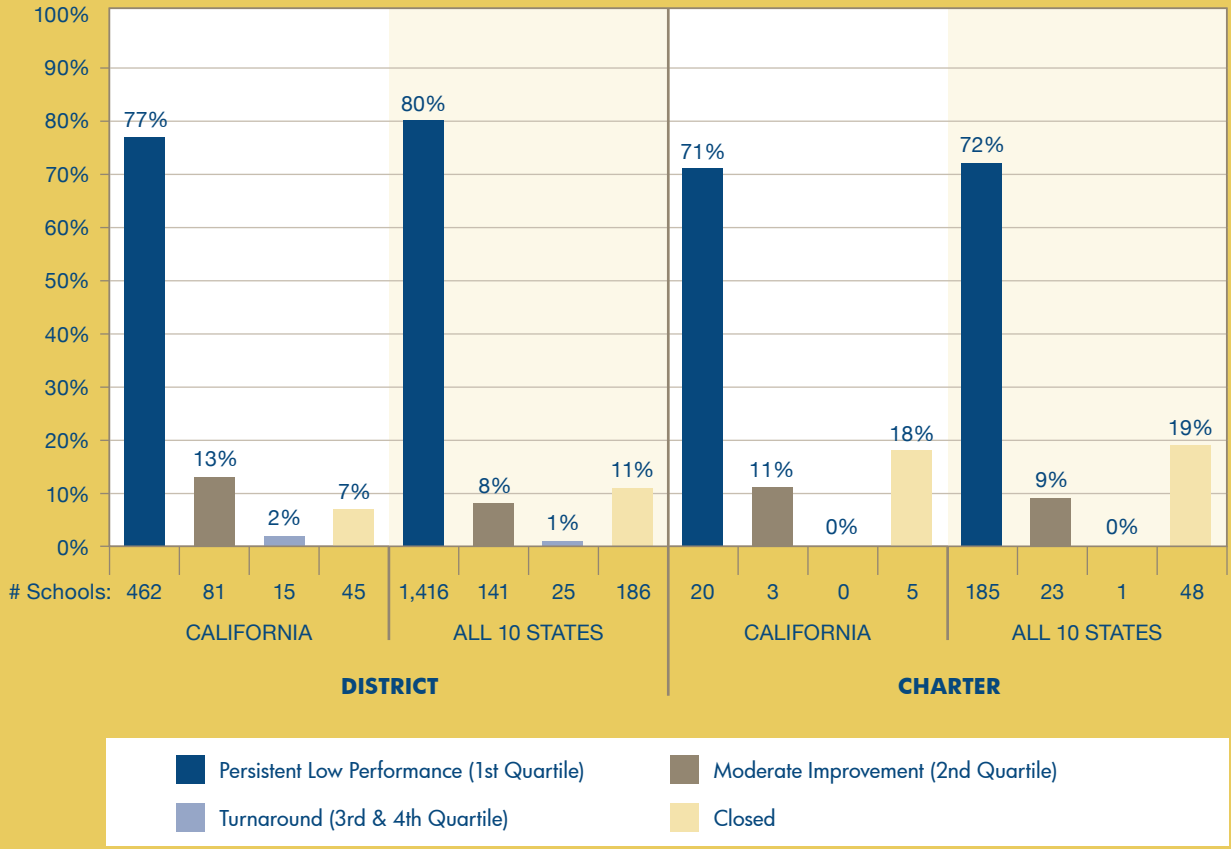
- Low-performing charter schools were more likely to be shut down than low-performing district schools. This was the case for all ten states in the study. California's charter closure rate matched the multi-state average. Eighteen percent (n=5) of the low-performing charter schools were closed, versus 7 percent (n=45) of low-performing district schools—a statistically significant difference.

- Turnarounds were rare in both sectors. None of the low-performing California charter schools met our criteria for a turnaround, while only 2 percent (n=15) of low performers in the district sector did so. These statistics illustrate the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

In sum, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of California's public-school sectors. Seventy-one percent of the state's charter schools that were low performers in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, as did 77 percent of low-performing district schools; a negligible fraction in both sectors made dramatic turnarounds in that time. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite their greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

While California's charter sector was more successful at *shutting down* low-performing schools than the district sector, only 18 and 7 percent of California's low-performing charter and district schools were closed, respectively. California's charter and district sectors performed on par with the averages of the ten states in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. California Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

As in other states, both of California's public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state's public-education system would likely benefit if both sectors ramped up efforts to close down low performers, rather than investing time and energy in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who defer the closure option in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvements, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of California schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, the cases provide some insight into the different experiences of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Below are brief accounts of the closures of two Oakland schools, one district-operated and one charter, both of which were motivated by chronically low academic performance and orchestrated by leadership in the Oakland Unified School District.

Elmhurst Middle School

In 2003, Oakland launched an intensive campaign to close eighteen failing district schools, divide them into smaller schools, and infuse each with a new staff and greater control over operations and budget. This effort was fueled in part by grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's small-schools initiative. As a result of these and other interventions, the district has been named California's "most improved" urban district for five consecutive years.[10]

One of Oakland's closed schools was Elmhurst Middle School. A 2002 case study by the School Redesign Network described it as "the lowest-performing" middle school in Oakland. Elmhurst had seventeen teacher vacancies, was covered in graffiti inside and out, and had grounds littered with high weeds and abandoned cars. Fights among students were common.[11] Proficiency rates at Elmhurst rarely surpassed 10 percent.

To address this dismal state of affairs, the district recruited a principal with experience turning around a failing middle school in Harlem. Starting in 2005, he led efforts to close down Elmhurst Middle and re-establish in that building two smaller schools that would focus on academic rigor and personalized instruction. Elmhurst Middle School shut down prior to 2007-08. Early results are positive; both of the smaller new schools have made steady increases in reading and math proficiency over the past two years.

Dolores Huerta Learning Academy

Dolores Huerta Learning Academy, a small K-8 charter school authorized by the Oakland Unified School District, closed in 2009 after repeated years of low performance. It had enrolled about 200 students, predominately Hispanic and low-income. From 2003-04 to 2008-09, its overall reading and math proficiency rates bounced between 9 and 32 percent. According to California's Academic Performance Index, the school regularly placed in the bottom 10 percent statewide and among similar schools.

A 2008 site visit report by the district's independent evaluator reported that "student achievement over the lifecycle of its charter term has been erratic and is overall low in comparison to other district and charter schools; the school has struggled to make its dual immersion program effective; there is little curricular cohesion in the school and instruction is weak overall; school policies and procedures have not been cohesive nor consistently implemented; and the school has consistently had a high rate of teacher turnover, for example, 7 of 12 teachers are new this year."[12] With this evidence, the district requested that the school surrender its charter during its second renewal process, which it did.

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6. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.
7. This finding is consistent with more rigorous student-level analyses on the effectiveness of California charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) did not find a statistically significant difference in the average growth of California's charter and district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends in the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In California, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
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FLORIDA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Florida's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that school performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Florida's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the state's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements over five years. Florida's charter sector has, however, been more successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools—one positive indication of the charter sector's more stringent accountability policies at work. Six charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were closed by 2008-09, representing 23 percent of all charters, compared with 7 percent in the district sector. Florida's charter closure rate was above the 10-state average; only Ohio, Wisconsin, and Arizona closed larger proportions of low-performing charters. Still, 73 percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still operating, and still low-performing, in 2008-09.

Characteristics of Florida's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary

BACKGROUND ON FLORIDA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Florida enacted charter legislation in 1996. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 413 charter schools operated in Florida during 2009-10,[1] serving over 137,000 students, or 5 percent of all Florida public-school pupils.[2] Ninety-two Florida charter schools have closed since 1996, representing 18 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 81 percent of Florida's charter schools are independently operated, while 1 percent partner with a nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 18 percent partner with a for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Florida's charter law was ranked eleventh (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards to authorize charters. (The legislature created an independent statewide authorizer, but in 2008 it was ruled unconstitutional by the state Court of Appeals and subsequently dissolved.) There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 123 Florida charter schools and 2,183 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that twenty-six of the 123 charter schools (21 percent) met the criteria for low performance, compared with 206 of the 2,183 district schools (9 percent). The fact that Florida's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Florida's Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	21% (n=26)	9% (n=206)	10% (n=232)
Others	79% (n=97)	91% (n=1,977)	90% (n=2,074)
Total Schools	123	2,183	2,306

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Florida Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 58) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 545, compared with 821 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 164, compared with 342 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Florida's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	35.9	15.0	16.9	26.9	14.4	17.1
Rural	5.8	15.6	14.7	0.0	25.8	20.3
Other	58.3	69.4	68.3	73.1	59.8	62.6
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	81.0	52.4	55.1	64.7	37.2	43.0
Special Education	14.8	15.8	15.7	15.7	15.6	15.6
Limited English Proficiency	10.0	7.0	7.2	8.5	7.4	7.6
Hispanic	18.2	19.4	19.3	14.5	16.5	16.0
Black	65.6	22.5	26.6	56.9	21.7	29.1
# Schools	206	1,977	2,183	26	97	123
Avg. Enrollment	545	821	795	164	342	305

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

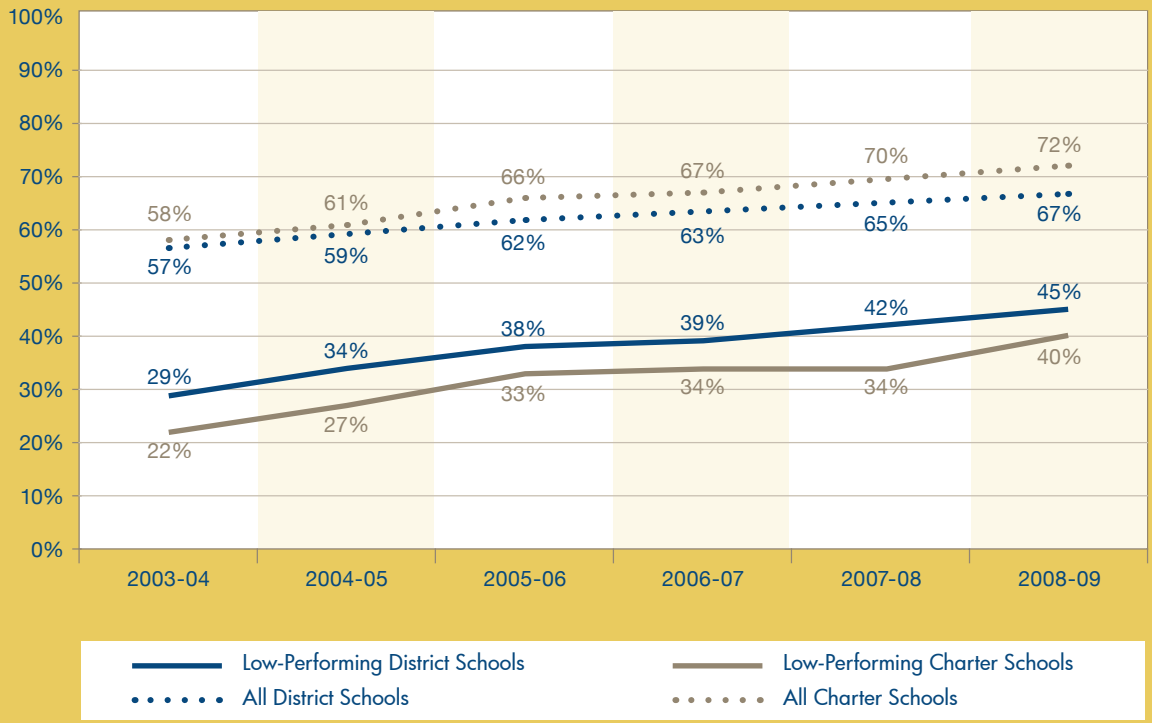
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 59) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Florida schools improved steadily during that five-year period. Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also suggest that the state's reading and math performance increased from 2003-04 to 2008-09.[6]

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were slightly higher in the charter sector than in the district sector. Still, a comparison of the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other.[7] As for low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in their proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. Florida's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 206 low-performing district schools, 2,183 total district schools, twenty-six low-performing charter schools, and 123 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Florida Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Florida from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 60) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 61) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Florida's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- The vast majority of schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later.

- Florida's charter sector did better by its low performers than did the district sector. Seventy-three percent (n=19) of the low-performing charters in 2003-04 remained in the lowest quartile, compared with 87 percent (n=180) of the low-performing district schools. Florida's district sector had the third-highest rate of persistent low performance of the ten states in the study.

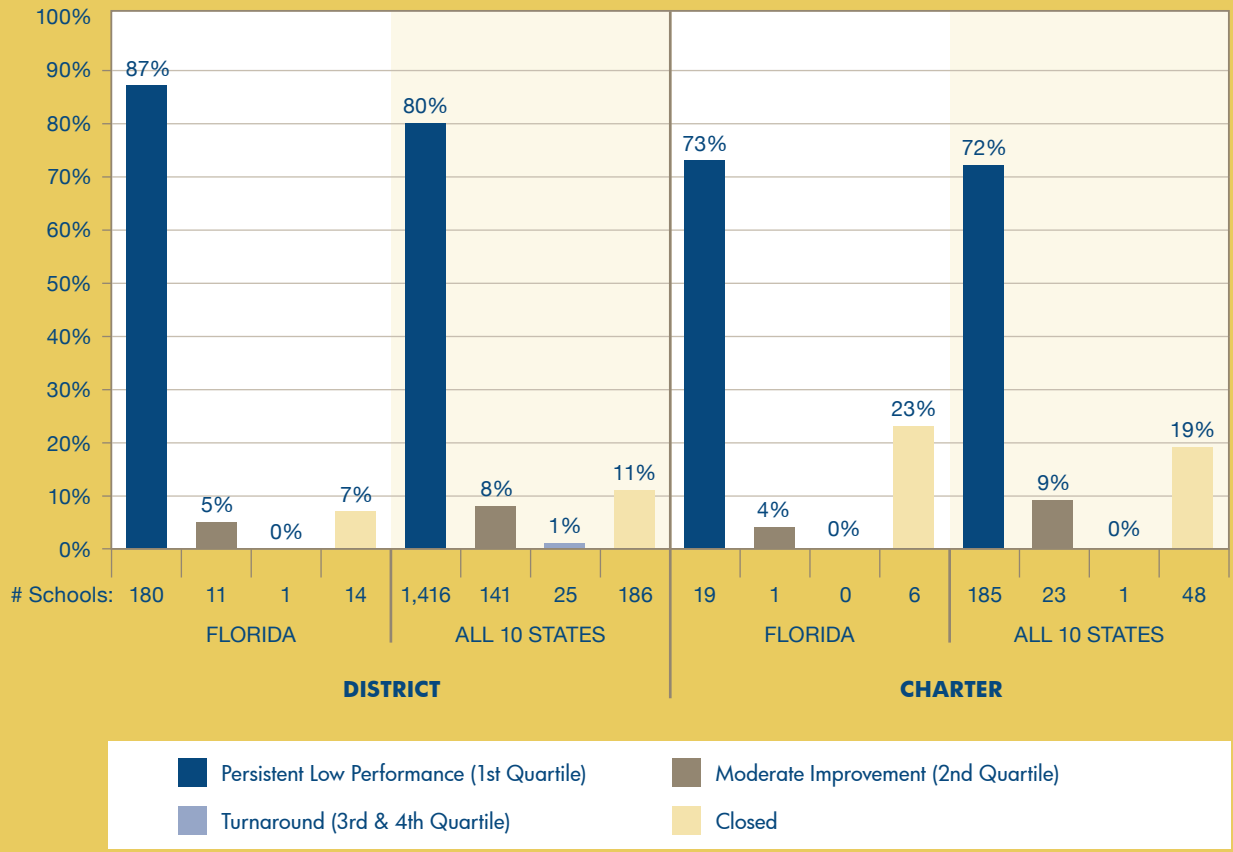
- As was the case in all ten states, Florida's low-performing charters were likelier to be closed than similarly weak district schools. Six of the former were shut down from 2003-04 to 2008-09, representing 23 percent of all charter schools, compared with 7 percent in the district sector. Florida's charter closure rate was above the 10-state average; only Ohio, Wisconsin, and Arizona closed larger proportions of low-performing charters.

- None of Florida's low-performing charter schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09, and just one district school met the criteria. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better—only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools met the criteria—indicating the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

In sum, neither Florida's charter sector nor its district sector is skilled at dramatically improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of low-performing schools in both sectors turned around over a five-year period; rather, the overwhelming majority of low performers in both sectors remained that way over time.

Still, Florida's charter sector shut proportionally more of its low performers than the state's district sector: A low-performing charter school in Florida had roughly a one-in-four chance of being closed, versus a one-in-fourteen chance in the district sector. Florida's charter sector was also more successful at shutting down low-performing schools than six of the nine other state charter sectors in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Florida Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Florida's charter and district sectors could improve the quality of the state's public education system by strengthening their efforts to shut down low performers. Even with more autonomy, charter schools rarely make dramatic turnarounds in performance. For those authorizers who defer closure options in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Florida schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Florida's charter sector closed a larger proportion of its low performers than the state's district sector; the following two case studies profile a low-performing charter school that closed and a similarly low-performing district school that remains open.

Origins Montessori Charter

Six of the twenty-six Florida charter schools that were designated as low-performing in 2003-04 were closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year. Only one, however, had its charter revoked due to low academic performance; the other five lost their charters due to financial mismanagement or insolvency. This reinforces a message heard repeatedly from charter authorizers: Financial problems and academic problems tend to go hand-in-hand.

Origins Montessori was an elementary charter school in Orlando that served an economically and ethnically diverse population. The school's reading and math proficiency rates consistently ranked in the bottom 10 percent statewide: In 2003-04, it had an overall proficiency rate of 23 percent, which barely inched to 26 percent by 2006-07. The state gave the school an "F" in 2004-05 and a C in 2005-06. In 2007, Origins Montessori was closed by its authorizer, the Orange County School District, after district officials discovered evidence that the school had accepted funds for students who were not enrolled and had assigned students to teachers who were not on official employment rolls.[10] These discoveries served as an immediate impetus to close the school—and its poor academic performance served as weak counterargument.

Sunland Park Elementary School

An alarming 87 percent of Florida's low-performing district schools failed to exit the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency after five years. One such school is Sunland Park Elementary in Broward County. Located in a low-income Fort Lauderdale neighborhood, it enrolls about 400 students in grades K-5, over 90 percent of whom are poor and nearly all of whom are African American. Many of the families served by the school live in subsidized housing. Sunland Park faces high student mobility with an annual turnover rate of over 45 percent.

The school's academic performance is stubbornly low. From 2003-04 to 2008-09, its overall reading and math proficiency rate moved only from 34 percent to 35 percent. Based on its performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the school received three consecutive "F" grades by the Florida Department of Education between 2006-07 and 2008-09. Though it underwent NCLB-mandated reconstitution in 2006 and replaced its principal, those changes have yet to pay off—and leadership has since remained unstable.[11] Principals left abruptly after 2006-07 and 2007-08, and in 2008-09, retired principals were used to fill the position until district officials could locate a permanent hire. The teaching force has also proved unstable. Thirty-six percent of the instructional staff was new to the school in 2008-09 and three teachers were removed during the school year on recommendations from the Florida Department of Education's regional director. Sunland Park was listed as a "persistently lowest achieving" school in the state's application for federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds.[12]

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MICHIGAN

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Michigan's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Michigan's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the Wolverine State's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements after five years. Seventy-five percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still operating—and still doing badly—in 2008-09. The news for low-performing district schools is even worse: Ninety percent remained laggards five years later. Furthermore, neither sector did remarkably well at *closing* persistently low-performing schools. Just 10 percent of the charter schools in our sample that were low-performing in 2003-04 closed by 2008-09, versus 5 percent of similar district schools.

Characteristics of Michigan's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON MICHIGAN'S CHARTER SECTOR

Michigan passed charter legislation in 1993. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 283 charter schools operated in Michigan during 2009-10,[1] serving over 110,000 students, or 7 percent of all Michigan public-school pupils.[2] Thirty charter schools have closed since 1993, representing 10 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 44 percent of Michigan's charter schools are independently operated, while 3 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 53 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Michigan's charter law was ranked fourteenth (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards and public universities, including community colleges, to authorize charters. There is no cap on the number of charter schools that can be authorized by local school boards and community colleges, but state universities may only sponsor a total of 150 schools.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 130 Michigan charter schools and 2,132 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that forty-eight of the 130 charter schools (37 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 152 of the 2,132 district schools (7 percent). The fact that Michigan's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Michigan Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	37% (n=48)	7% (n=152)	9% (n=200)
Others	63% (n=82)	93% (n=1,980)	91% (n=2,062)
Total Schools	130	2,132	2,262

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Michigan Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 66) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low performers in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 523, compared with 451 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 428, versus 409 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Michigan's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	63.8	8.5	12.4	43.8	26.8	33.1
Rural	3.9	30.8	28.8	2.1	26.8	17.7
Other	32.2	60.8	58.7	54.2	46.3	49.2
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	72.2	31.9	34.9	74.8	45.1	57.4
Special Education	14.5	13.0	13.1	7.9	8.1	8.0
Limited English Proficiency	6.9	3.0	3.2	4.3	3.2	3.6
Hispanic	8.3	3.4	3.8	5.8	5.0	5.3
Black	70.7	11.2	15.5	66.3	33.8	45.8
# Schools	152	1,980	2,132	48	82	130
Avg. Enrollment	523	451	456	428	409	416

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

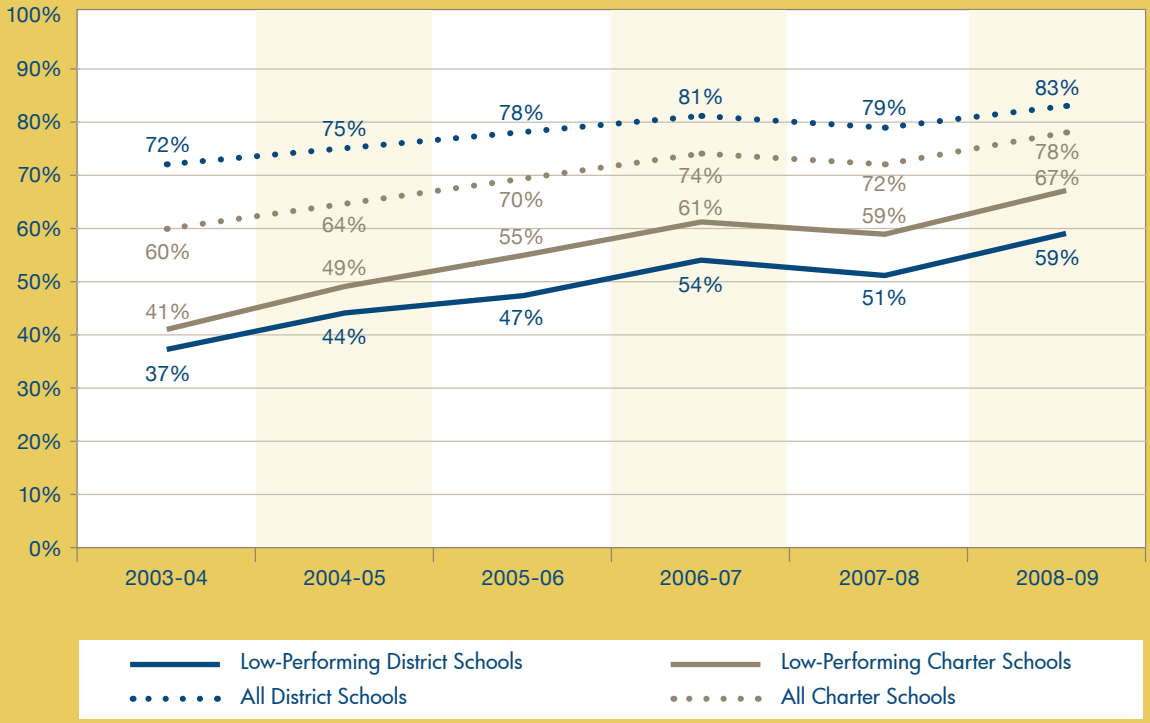
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 67) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Michigan schools improved by double-digits over the five-year period. However, it is unclear whether this is due to real improvement in achievement or changes in the difficulty of the state test, particularly since the state's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remained relatively flat during this time.[6]

Average proficiency rates for all schools were lower in the charter sector than in the district sector, although the gap narrowed from 2003-04 to 2008-09. As for low-performing district and charter schools, both made substantial proficiency gains in that time: Michigan's low-performing charter schools averaged a 26-point rise in proficiency from 2003-04 to 2008-09, compared with a 22-point rise in the district sector. The average annual change in proficiency was not statistically different between the low-performing charter and district schools.[7]

Figure 1. Michigan's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 152 low-performing district schools, 2,132 total district schools, forty-eight low-performing charter schools, and 130 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Michigan Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Michigan from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 68) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[8]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 69) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Michigan's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable findings emerge:

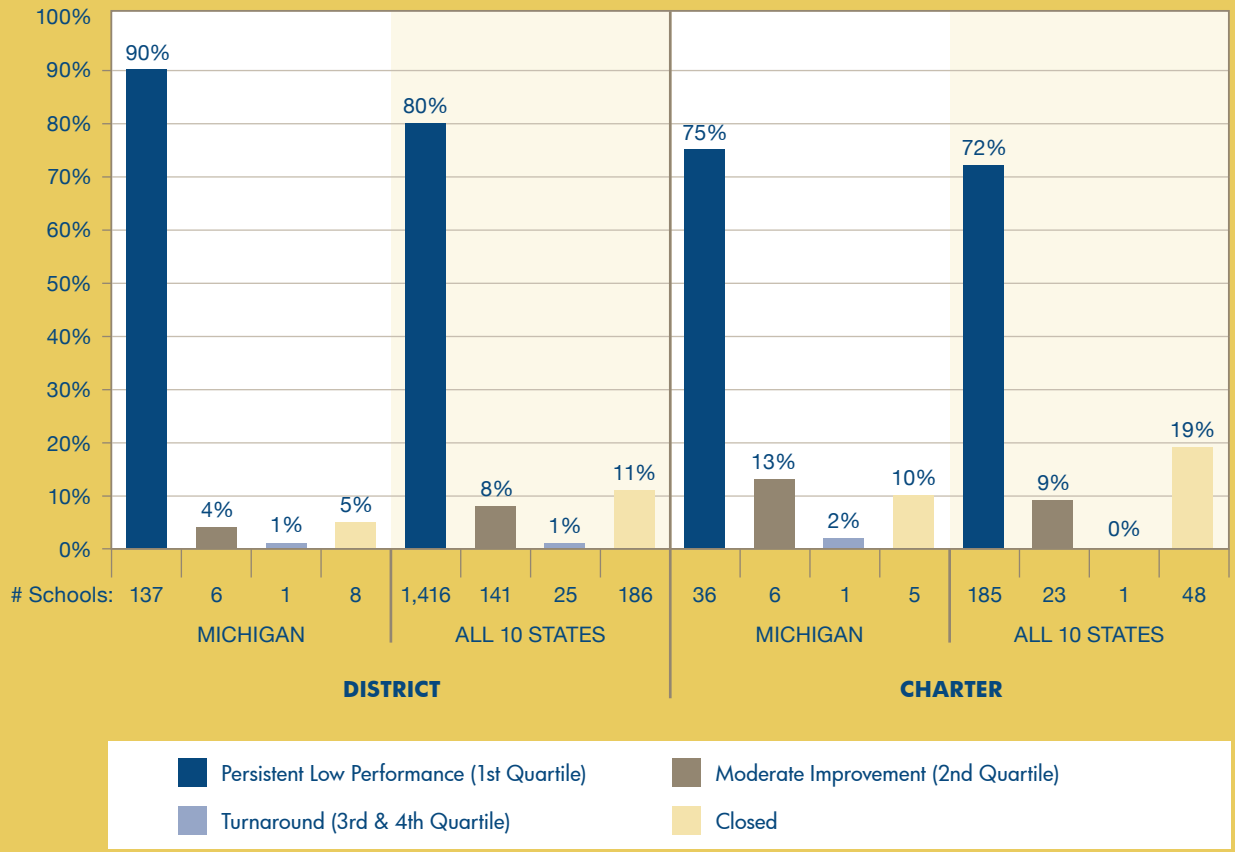
- The vast majority of schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile five years later. That includes 75 percent (n=36) of Michigan's low-performing charters, the third-highest rate of persistent low performance in the ten charter sectors in the study. Of Michigan's low-performing district schools, 90 percent remained in the lowest quartile five years later.

- Michigan's low-performing charter schools had a higher closure rate than the low-performing district schools, although the difference was not statistically significant. Ten percent (n=5) of the low-performing charter schools shut down from 2003-04 to 2008-09, compared with 5 percent (n=8) of the district schools. These closure rates were lower than those for most states; in fact, Michigan's charter and district sectors had the second- and third-lowest closure rates among their respective sectors.

- Only two of Michigan's low-performing schools—one charter and one district school—qualified as "turnarounds" by 2008-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, however, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics illustrate the long odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

In sum, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Michigan's public-school sectors. Seventy-five percent of Michigan's charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, along with an overwhelming 90 percent of low-performing district schools; a negligible fraction in both sectors made dramatic turnarounds in that time. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite having greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Michigan Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Only 10 and 5 percent of Michigan's low-performing charter and district schools were closed over the course of the analysis, respectively. On this measure, Michigan's charter and district sectors performed below the average performance of all charter and district sectors among the ten states in this analysis.

Both sectors in Michigan need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state's public-education system may benefit more from that work than from investing time and energy in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes that schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Michigan schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

The findings in Michigan indicate that the charter sector was somewhat more successful than the district sector in closing weak schools; the cases below profile a low-performing charter that closed and a low-performing district school that remains open despite consistently low test scores.

Tri-Valley Academy of Arts and Academics

Five of the forty-eight low-performing Michigan charter schools were shut down between 2003-04 and 2008-09. One was the Tri-Valley Academy of Arts and Academics, a K-8 school in Muskegon that served a predominantly poor population. In the school's last year (2007-08), 98 percent of its 200 students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 94 percent were African American. The school was one of Michigan's first charters, first sponsored by Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in 1995.

GVSU gave the school a generous amount of time to demonstrate improvement before shutting it down. But its reading and math proficiency scores consistently ranked in the bottom 1 percent statewide. Proficiency rates never surpassed 40 percent and the school repeatedly failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Poor academic results caused families to leave and enrollment dropped by more than 30 percent in the year before closure. The school's inability to make sustained improvement stemmed partly from inconsistent leadership: It had nearly a dozen principals over that many years. In response to GVSU's concerns, the school board replaced its education management organization in 2006, but the change did not bring substantial improvement. The school continued to lag behind students in surrounding district schools and its charter was finally revoked after the 2007-08 school year.

A.L. Holmes Elementary School

A.L. Holmes Elementary School is one of the lowest-performing in the state. Enrolling near 600 students, the K-8 school is located in a poverty-stricken, African American neighborhood on Detroit's east side. It has one of the highest funding levels in the state—more than $12,000 per pupil—yet for the past six years it has ranked in the bottom 1 percent statewide in overall reading and math proficiency.

The school was restructured in 2005-06 due to repeated AYP failures, but evidence of subsequent improvement is scant. Since restructuring, the state has given the school a "D-Alert" rating—the state's second-lowest school-proficiency rating—based on its test scores. Like most low-performing schools investigated in this analysis, Holmes has struggled to find and keep strong leaders, cycling through three principals in the last six years. The school was recently designated one of the state's "persistently lowest achieving" and will receive a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) to implement one of four approved turnaround models.[9] Following the national trend, it plans to employ the least intrusive of the four turnaround approaches—the "transformation" model, entailing principal replacement, instructional changes, and professional-development enhancement.[10]

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5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports there were a total of 4,008 public schools in Michigan in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 2,263 schools after excluding 179 schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 684 schools designated by NCES as high schools, seventy-two schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 810 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Michigan Department of Education.
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7. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in characteristics of the students enrolled. In Michigan, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
8. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
9. Michigan Department of Education, "92 Lowest Achieving Schools Identified; and Latest 'Top-to-Bottom' School Rankings Released," news release, August 16, 2010, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-37818_56562-242163--,00.html.
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MINNESOTA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Minnesota's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Minnesota's public-school sectors. Almost all of the state's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates over five years. Among the ten states in this analysis, Minnesota was least successful in this regard; its charter and district sectors have the highest rates of persistent low performance and the lowest rates of closure among their counterparts in the other nine states. For instance, while 35 percent of low-performing charter schools in Ohio closed their doors between 2003-04 and 2008-09, only 6 percent of similar schools in Minnesota did the same.

Characteristics of Minnesota's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify

BACKGROUND ON MINNESOTA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Minnesota passed charter legislation in 1991, the first state to do so and thus the one with the longest history and greatest experience in charter schooling. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 162 charter schools operated in Minnesota during 2009-10.[1] These schools served close to 35,000 students, or 4 percent of all Minnesota public-school pupils.[2] Since the program's start in 1991, thirty-one charter schools have closed, representing 16 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 99 percent of Minnesota's charter schools are independently operated, while 1 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs). The strength of Minnesota's charter law was ranked first (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards, colleges and universities, and nonprofit organizations to authorize charters. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, thirty-three Minnesota charter schools and 807 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that seventeen of the thirty-three charter schools (52 percent) met the criteria for low-performance, as did sixty-seven of the 807 district schools (8 percent). The fact that Minnesota's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Minnesota Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	52% (n=17)	8% (n=67)	10% (n=84)
Others	48% (n=16)	92% (n=740)	90% (n=756)
Total Schools	33	807	840

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Minnesota Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 74) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 469, compared with 443 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 202, compared with 176 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Minnesota's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	82.1	4.9	11.3	88.2	12.5	51.5
Rural	4.5	40.3	37.3	0.0	43.8	21.2
Other	13.4	54.9	51.4	11.8	43.8	27.3
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	75.1	30.2	33.9	85.5	48.0	67.4
Special Education	13.6	13.7	13.7	9.9	11.9	10.8
Limited English Proficiency	33.4	4.5	6.9	38.5	0.0	19.9
Hispanic	14.5	4.0	4.9	10.5	0.6	5.7
Black	35.4	4.2	6.8	53.7	8.8	31.9
# Schools	67	740	807	17	16	33
Avg. Enrollment	469	443	445	202	176	189

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

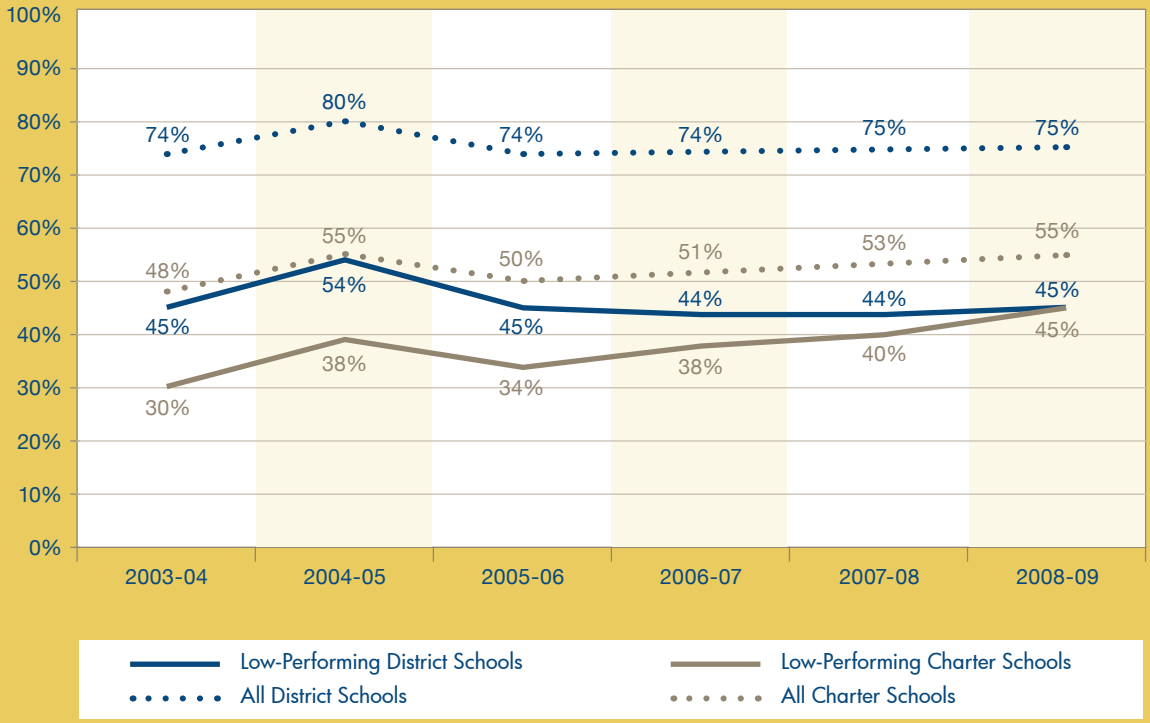
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 75) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Minnesota schools were relatively stable during that five-year period, although results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show state achievement has risen slightly since 2003.[6]

Average proficiency rates among all Minnesota charters were substantially lower than their district counterparts in 2003-04 and this gap persisted through 2008-09.[7] The seventeen low-performing charters, however, averaged significantly larger proficiency gains than the low-performing district schools, enough to close the performance gap between low performers in both sectors.[8] Low-performing charters made a 15-point increase from 2003-04 to 2008-09, averaging a 3 percent gain per year. In contrast, the average proficiency rate of low-performing district schools did not change over the five-year period.[9]

Figure 1. Minnesota's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on sixty-seven low-performing district schools, 807 total district schools, seventeen low-performing charter schools, and thirty-three total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Minnesota Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Minnesota from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 76) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[10]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 77) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Minnesota's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable findings emerge:

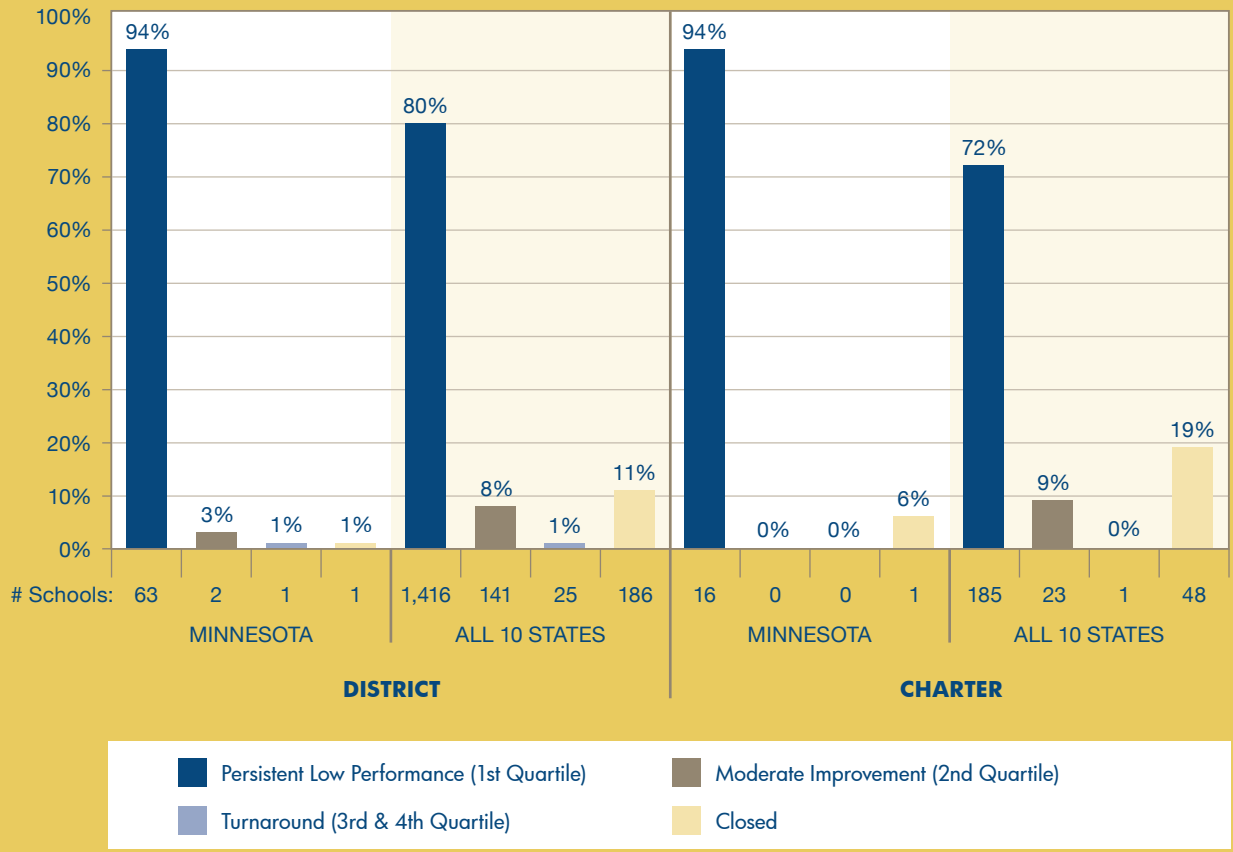
- The vast majority of Minnesota schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later. In both sectors, 94 percent of low-performing schools remained in the bottom quartile. These represent the highest rates of persistent low performance of all ten states in the study.

- None of the low-performing charter schools and only one low-performing district school qualified as a "turnaround" by 2009-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- School shutdowns were rare in both sectors. Only one low-performing charter and one low-performing district school closed between 2003-04 and 2008-09. Minnesota's closure rates for low-performing charter and district schools were the lowest among the ten states included in the study.

In sum, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Minnesota's public-school sectors. Ninety-four percent of Minnesota's charter and district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, and less than 1 percent made dramatic turnarounds. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite having greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts. Despite its charter law ranking first among forty states, Minnesota does not appear to be more successful than other states at eliminating failing schools; its charter and district sectors have the highest rates of persistent low performance and the lowest rates of closure among the ten states in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Minnesota Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Both of Minnesota's public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The data indicate they are trailing behind their counterparts in other states. The state's public-education system may benefit if both sectors ramp up efforts to close down low performers rather than invest time and energy in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare occurrences. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes the school will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Minnesota schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the experiences of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

In Minnesota, 94 percent of the low-performing schools in both sectors remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later. These were the highest rates of persistent low performance among the ten states in the study. To illustrate this trend of chronic low performance in both sectors, one school from each is profiled here.

Sojourner Truth Academy

Sojourner Truth Academy, a Title I charter school in North Minneapolis authorized by the nonprofit Pillsbury United Communities, enrolls around 250 students in K-6. Over 90 percent of the school's students are minorities eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and over 20 percent are English-language learners. Annual student mobility has ranged from 19 percent to 37 percent from 2003-04 to 2008-09.

The school appears to be proactive in its improvement efforts. It voluntarily opted to participate in the state's Q-Comp human-capital reform initiative, in addition to adopting the Teacher Advancement Program (a performance-based pay system that includes professional development). The school employs a variety of formative and summative assessment programs to foster data-based decision-making. Staff attend weekly team meetings to discuss student progress and develop lessons. Class sizes are kept small, typically twenty to twenty-four students. Nevertheless, the school has demonstrated low performance since it opened in 1999. Its proficiency rate has never surpassed 50 percent and its statewide ranking has never risen above the 10th percentile. The school failed to make AYP in four of the last six years and currently operates under NCLB-mandated school-improvement sanctions. But perhaps change is on the horizon: Minnesota recently passed legislation to strengthen its charter school law. The new law requires authorizers to reapply for a license, and the Minnesota Department of Education rejected an initial application from Pillsbury United Communities, perhaps because of its poor track record. If the school cannot find a new authorizer from among the state-licensed organizations, it will be forced to close.

Anne Sullivan Elementary

Anne Sullivan Elementary is a K-8 school in the Minneapolis School District. The school is located in the city's urban core and enrolls over 600 students. In 2008-09, 82 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; 63 percent were African American; 7 percent were Hispanic; 14 percent were designated as special education; and 30 percent were English-language learners.

Sullivan's reading and math proficiency has flatlined for the past six years, with proficiency rates between 40 and 50 percent. Since 2003-04, the school's proficiency rate has never ranked above the state's 10th percentile, falling well below district and state averages in all grades. The school failed to make AYP for seven straight years and is currently implementing an NCLB-mandated restructuring plan. Teacher and principal turnover is high, a typical challenge for the failing schools in this study. The current principal, in his second year at the school, is the seventh in twelve years and is expected to retire. It is no surprise that the school has struggled to demonstrate sustained improvement with such inconsistent leadership. An independent evaluation of the school conducted in 2009 identified additional weaknesses, including lack of a coherent curriculum across grades, inconsistent expectations set by teachers, infrequent monitoring of classroom instruction, and failure to use data to gauge teacher effectiveness. The school has difficulty landing quality teachers and often ends up the unwilling recipient of ineffective but tenured teachers who bounce from school to school—a phenomenon common to large districts and known as the "dance of the lemons."[11]

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5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports there were a total of 2,552 public schools in Minnesota in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 840 schools after excluding 276 schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 640 schools designated by NCES as high schools, seventy-one schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 725 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Minnesota Department of Education.
6. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.
7. A 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of Minnesota's charter students was around 0.03 standard deviations lower than similar district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Minnesota, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. Given that the low-performing charter schools started well below the low-performing district schools, the difference in proficiency gains may be due partly to mean reversion, i.e., the statistical phenomenon where extreme scores at one point are drawn towards the average in the future.
10. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
11. Minneapolis Public Schools, "Quality Review Report: Anne Sullivan Communication Center," Cambridge Education, http://sullivan.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/sullivan_final_08-09.pdf.

NORTH CAROLINA

Examining the State'sLowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of North Carolina's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of North Carolina's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the Tarheel State's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly skilled in closing weak schools: Seventy-four percent of the charters that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way (and remained open) in 2008-09, as did 86 percent of low-performing district schools.

Characteristics of North Carolina's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that**

BACKGROUND ON NORTH CAROLINA'S CHARTER SECTOR

North Carolina passed charter legislation in 1996. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 102 charter schools operated in North Carolina during 2009-10,[1] enrolling almost 39,000 students, or 3 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.[2] Thirty-four charters have closed since 1996, representing 25 percent of all charters ever opened here.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 93 percent of North Carolina's charter schools are independently operated, while 2 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 5 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of North Carolina's charter law was ranked thirty-second (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law allows the State Board of Education and the University of North Carolina (UNC) to authorize charters, although UNC has yet to avail itself of this opportunity. By law, no more than 100 charter schools may operate in North Carolina.[4]

this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, seventy-four North Carolina charter schools and 1,719 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that nineteen of the seventy-four charter schools (26 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 147 of the 1,719 district schools (9 percent). The fact that North Carolina's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. North Carolina Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	26% (n=19)	9% (n=147)	9% (n=166)
Others	74% (n=55)	91% (n=1,572)	91% (n=1,627)
Total Schools	74	1,719	1,793

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2010).

Table 2 (see page 82) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 332, compared with 622 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 269, versus 283 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of North Carolina's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	33.3	15.1	16.6	47.4	23.6	29.7
Rural	25.9	49.1	47.1	31.6	40.0	37.8
Other	40.8	35.8	36.2	21.1	36.4	32.4
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	80.4	47.2	50.0	67.4	19.9	32.1
Special Education	14.2	14.4	14.4	22.4	13.9	16.0
Limited English Proficiency	4.3	4.4	4.4	2.6	0.7	1.2
Hispanic	6.6	6.0	6.0	2.4	2.4	2.4
Black	67.1	28.3	31.5	71.2	24.9	36.8
# Schools	147	1,572	1,719	19	55	74
Avg. Enrollment	332	622	542	269	283	244

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

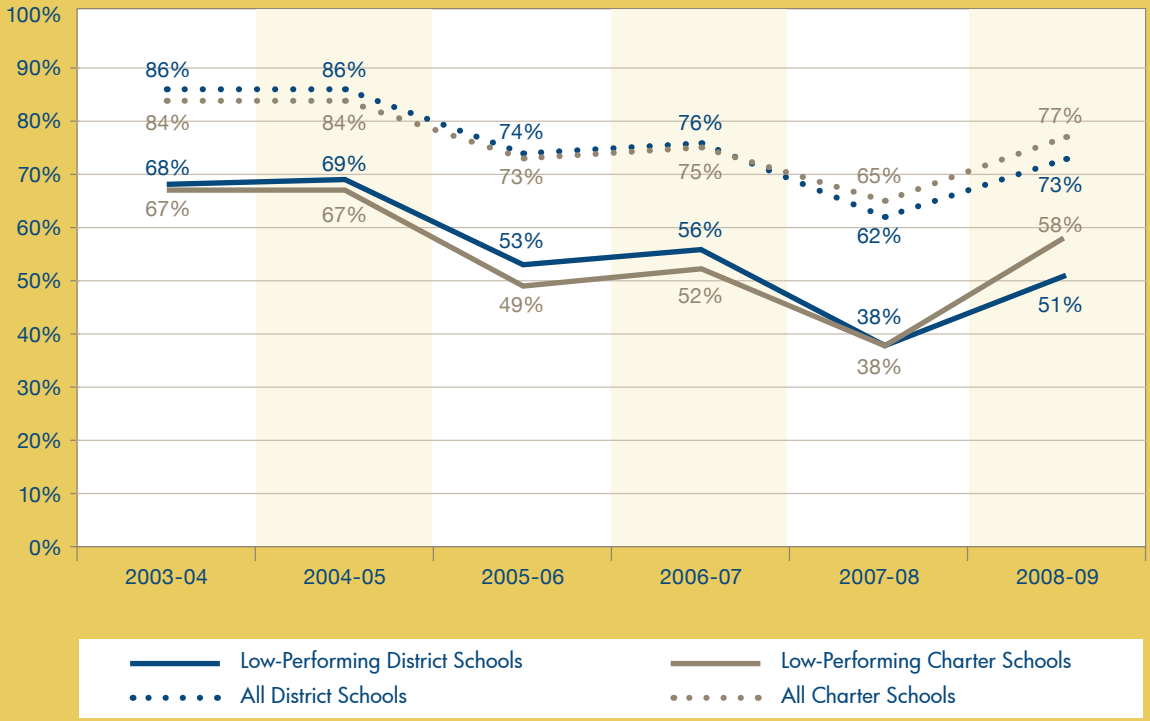
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 83) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 and compares them with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. North Carolina's proficiency trends are somewhat ambiguous during this period due to two major changes in the state's math and reading tests. Yet major dips in proficiency rates in 2005-06 and 2007-08 show that these changes made the tests more difficult.[6]

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were almost identical in the charter and district sectors.[7] As far as the low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in their proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. North Carolina's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 147 low-performing district schools, 1,719 total district schools, nineteen low-performing charter schools, and seventy-four total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in North Carolina from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 84) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 85) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their statuses by 2008-09. North Carolina's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable takeaways emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained there five years later. Seventy-four percent (n=14) of the low-performing charters stayed in the bottom quartile, as did 86 percent (n=126) of low-performing district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)

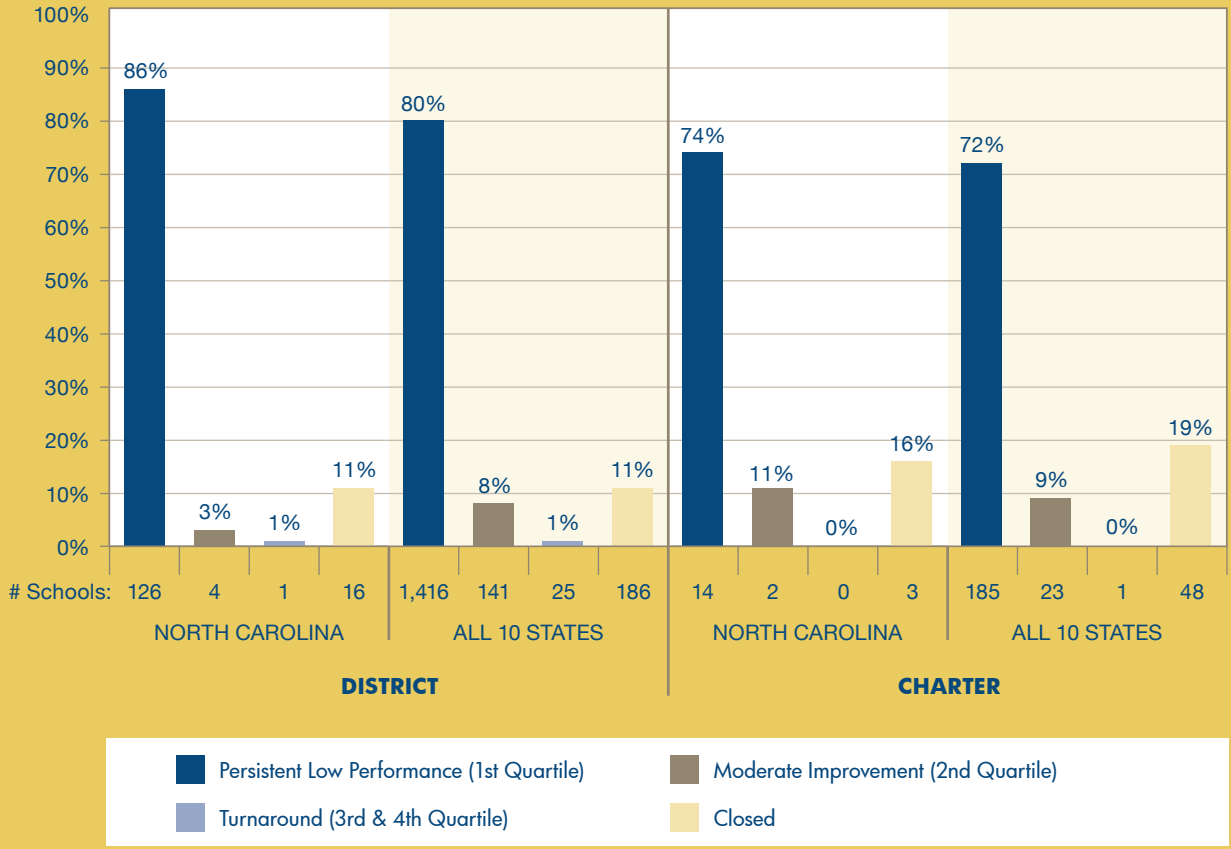
- None of North Carolina's low-performing charter schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turn-around" by 2008-09, and only one of 147 low performers in the district sector met the turn-around criteria. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, however, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- A higher percentage of low-performing schools closed in the charter sector than in the district sector, although the difference was not statistically significant—16 percent (n=3) of the low-performing charters and 11 percent (n=16) of the low-performing district schools.

In sum, neither sector of public education in the Tarheel State is skilled at dramatically improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of such schools turned around over a five-year period while the overwhelming majority remained low performers. Closure rates in North Carolina's charter and district sectors were unimpressive, slightly below average among the ten states in this analysis.

Both of North Carolina's public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. This may prove more fruitful than investing time and resources in turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes that schools will make dramatic improvements, these results suggest they are likely to be disappointed.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of North Carolina schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the different experiences of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

In North Carolina, 86 percent of low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later, compared with 74 percent of low-performing charter schools. The case studies below highlight one low-performing district school that failed to make notable improvement over five years and a charter school that made "moderate improvement" and thus exited the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency.

Roberts Elementary School

Eighty-six percent of North Carolina's low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency from 2003-04 to 2008-09. One such school is Roberts Elementary* in the Durham Public School District. A Title I school, it serves over 700 students in grades K-5, about 95 percent of them poor and minority. Like most other schools in the city, Roberts has high student mobility.

One of the lowest-performing schools in the district, Roberts shows little evidence of improvement since 2003-04. Its reading and math proficiency rates have consistently ranked in the lowest 10 percent of the state. With the same principal at the helm from 2003-04 through 2008-09, the school has retained most of the same academic program, aside from the addition of a few instructional coaches. Due to six consecutive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) failures, however, it has recently been forced to implement an NCLB-mandated restructuring plan. The restructuring plan calls for extending the school day and engaging parents in students' learning, as well as bringing in a new principal to take authority over all staff hiring and firing decisions. It also involves intensive professional development and leadership coaching. In view of Roberts Elementary's history of weak performance, it is unclear whether these changes will bring improvement.

Walker Academy

Walker Academy* is one of two low-performing North Carolina charter schools that exited the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency between 2003-04 and 2008-09. A small K-6 school, it enrolled 132 students in 2008-09, nearly all of them poor and African American.

Although the school did not make a full turnaround, it has improved markedly since 2003-04. The threat of NCLB sanctions in 2003-04 and 2004-05 served as a wake-up call and instilled among the school's leadership "a stronger mindset" to do the needful. It proceeded to make AYP and demonstrate acceptable growth on the state's value-added metric for the next four years (2005-06 to 2008-09). Consequently, it has dodged NCLB sanctions for three years and exited its authorizer's "watch list" four years ago.

What happened? The school's management team attributes its gains to a culture of high expectations, talented teachers, and skilled leadership at both the board and administrative levels. The school is constantly adapting its academic program to address changes to the state curriculum. Data drives decisions; formative and summative assessments are disaggregated to determine which classrooms and students need help with particular concepts. The school has also established partnerships with local and national organizations to provide services such as family counseling and summer and after-school programs. The school's small size creates financial challenges, but it has fostered strong working relationships among the staff.

**Pseudonym*

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6. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that 4th- and 8th-grade results in reading went down only slightly from 2003 to 2009, while math scores showed an upward trend (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/).
7. This finding is consistent with more rigorous student-level analyses on the effectiveness of North Carolina charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) did not find a statistically significant difference in the average growth of North Carolina's charter and district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In North Carolina, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.

OHIO

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectory of Ohio's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The big news for the Buckeye State is that Ohio has been much more aggressive in closing low-performing schools (both the district and the charter variety) than the other nine states in the study. Closure rates were roughly the same within Ohio's charter and district sectors: Thirty-five percent of Ohio's low-performing charter schools and 34 percent of Ohio's low-performing district schools were closed (compared with 19 percent and 11 percent, respectively, for the entire 10-state sample).[1] Of the low-performing Ohio schools that remained open, few made much progress over the five-year period, and none were "turned around." This points to the challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite having greater operational autonomy, may not be better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

Characteristics of Ohio's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary

BACKGROUND ON OHIO'S CHARTER SECTOR

Ohio first passed charter legislation in 1997. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 338 charter schools operated in the state in 2009-10.[2] These schools served over 100,000 students, or 5 percent of all Ohio public-school pupils.[3] Sixty-two charter schools have closed in the state since 1997, representing 16 percent of all charters ever opened in Ohio.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 56 percent of Ohio's charter schools are independently operated, while 21 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 23 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Ohio's charter law was ranked twenty-sixth (among forty states) by NAPCS.[4] The state allows school boards, state universities, and nonprofit organizations to authorize charters, but caps the number of charter schools that each authorizer can sponsor.[5] Only school operators that meet certain performance targets are presently allowed to open new start-up schools in Ohio.[6]

or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools in which more than twenty students participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, forty-nine Ohio charters and 2,413 district schools were included in the dataset.[7]

Table 1 shows that thirty-four of the forty-nine charter schools (69 percent) met the criteria for low-performance, as did 207 of the 2,413 district schools (9 percent). The fact that Ohio's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Ohio Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	69% (n=34)	9% (n=207)	10% (n=241)
Others	31% (n=15)	91% (n=2,206)	90% (n=2,221)
Total Schools	49	2,413	2,462

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Ohio Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 90) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 451, compared with 414 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 449, versus 254 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Ohio's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	84.5	17.5	23.3	94.1	73.3	87.8
Rural	1.0	29.3	26.9	0.0	6.7	2.0
Other	14.5	53.1	49.8	5.9	20.0	10.2
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	80.3	32.7	36.8	78.1	62.7	73.1
Special Education	17.2	13.7	14.0	10.1	11.5	10.5
Limited English Proficiency	2.9	2.0	2.0	0.1	0.0	0.1
Hispanic	8.3	6.4	6.5	5.9	7.9	6.8
Black	71.2	22.9	29.1	81.0	57.0	73.3
# Schools	207	2,206	2,413	34	15	49
Avg. Enrollment	451	414	418	449	254	390

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

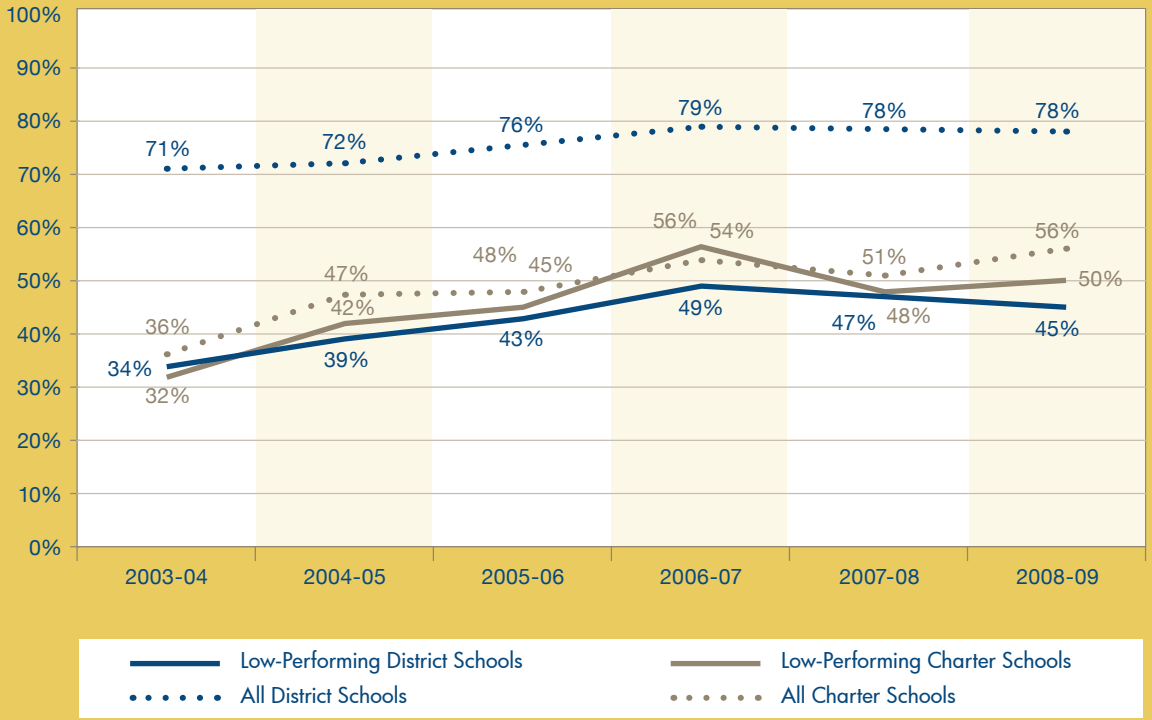
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 91) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset.

Average proficiency rates improved steadily in both sectors over the five-year period.[8] Larger increases were seen in the charter sector, although its average proficiency rate remains more than 20 percentage points below the district sector.[9] Ohio's low-performing charter schools averaged larger proficiency gains than low-performing district schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09, but this difference was not statistically significant.[10]

Figure 1. Ohio's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 207 low-performing district schools, 2,413 total district schools, thirty-four low-performing charter schools, and forty-nine total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Ohio Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Ohio from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 92) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[11]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 93) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Ohio's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable findings emerge:

- Ohio had the smallest proportion of persistently low-performing schools of the ten states in the study. Yet most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later: Fifty-six percent (n=19) of the low-performing charter schools remained in the bottom quartile as did 62 percent (n=128) of the low-performing district schools.

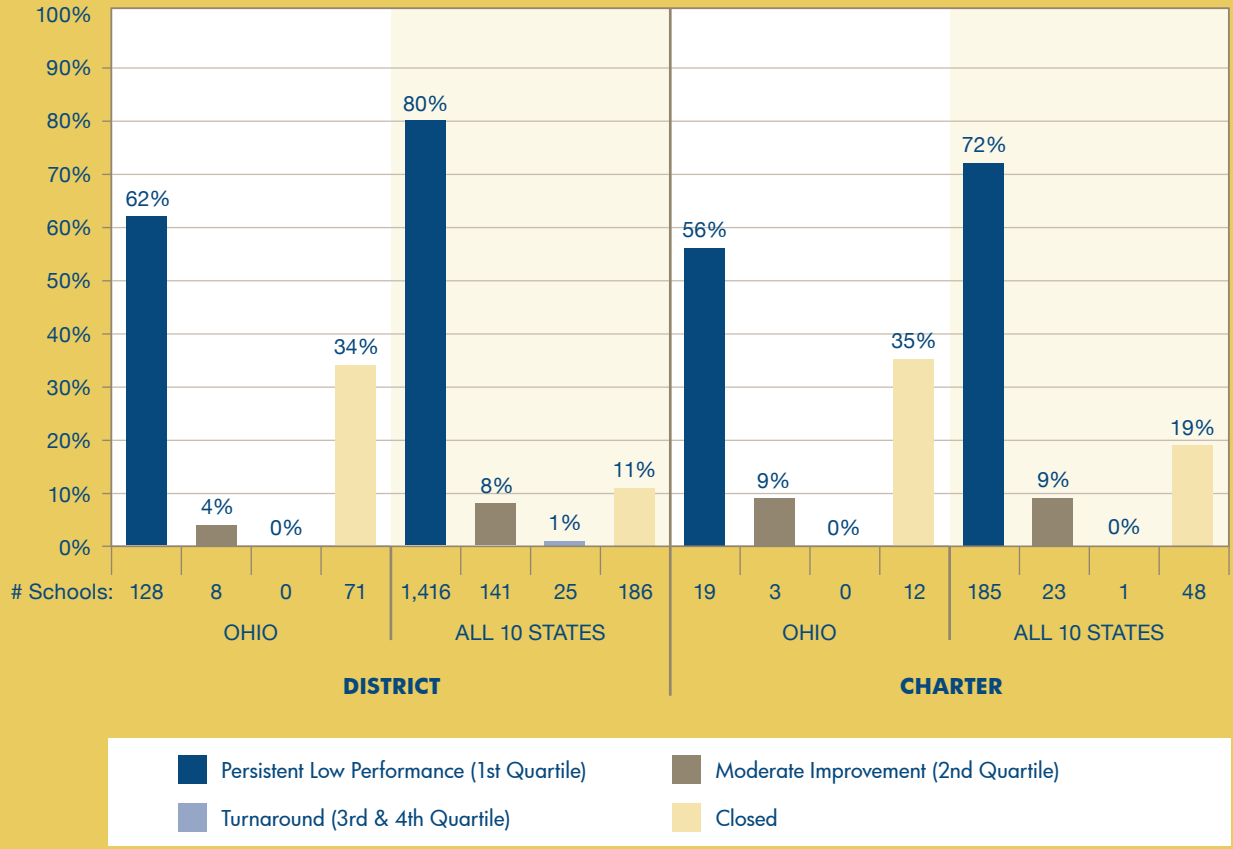
- Ohio's charter and district sectors also closed the largest percentages of low-performing schools among the ten states in the study. Closure rates were roughly the same within Ohio's charter and district sectors: 35 percent (n=12) of Ohio's low-performing charter schools and 34 percent (n=71) of Ohio's low-performing district schools were closed.

- None of Ohio's low-performing schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics illustrate the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

On balance, neither Ohio's charter sector nor its district sector showed itself skilled at dramatically improving its low-performing schools. Yet both Ohio sectors were more successful in closing low-performing schools than their counterparts among the other nine states in this analysis: A low-performing school in either Ohio sector had a roughly a one-in-three chance of closure.

Ohio can improve the quality of its public education system by continuing to shut down low-performing schools.[12] Even with their additional autonomy, charter schools rarely make dramatic turnarounds in performance. For those charter authorizers who defer the closure option in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Ohio Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Ohio schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the different experiences of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Because Ohio was relatively successful in closing low performers, at least when compared with other states in this study, the following two cases profile two schools that were in fact closed during this period.

Washington Park Elementary

Thirty-four percent of Ohio's low-performing district schools shut their doors between 2003-04 and 2008-09, mostly as a result of school consolidation efforts. These consolidations were undertaken in response to dwindling district enrollments caused by the growth of charter schools as well as by demographic decline in most Ohio cities. Cincinnati Public Schools closed fifteen schools in our sample between 2003-04 and 2008-09, while Columbus Public Schools and Cleveland Public Schools closed ten and seven schools, respectively.

One school closed in Cincinnati was Washington Park Elementary. Though the school failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2005,[13] the reason for its closure depends upon whom one asks. Media accounts told varying stories: Some depicted its closure as a move to aid the area's economic growth; others accused the district of deciding that the school "was no longer needed";[14] still others blamed lagging attendance and difficult home environments for the school's poor performance.[15] A representative from the deputy superintendent's office, however, had another version: "The school was closed as a part of a consolidation effort" that had nothing to do with the school's academic performance, she explained. The consolidation came into effect in August 2007, when Washington Park combined with Rothenberg Preparatory Academy.[16]

To be fair, ambiguity surrounding Washington Park's closure is not unique among closed schools in this report; because low performance and low enrollment are often intertwined, it can be difficult to tease out the primary reason for a school's closure.

Colin Powell Leadership Academy

Thirty-five percent of Ohio's low-performing charter schools were closed between 2003-04 and 2008-09, the highest closure rate among the ten state charter sectors in the study. A handful of these charters were closed in consequence of former attorney general Marc Dann's intense campaign against the state's charter schools.

Colin Powell Leadership Academy was an elementary school located in Dayton. Over 95 percent of its students were African American and poor, and its student mobility rate ranged from 60 to 70 percent. The school was targeted in a lawsuit filed by Dann that accused it (and other schools) of failing to educate children and therefore failing to meet its fiduciary responsibilities as a charitable trust. In light of the lawsuit and the many operational challenges facing the school, its board and superintendent opted to voluntarily surrender its charter in January 2008, during the middle of a school year.

Dann's attack on charter schools seemed politically motivated, but it was also indicative of growing frustration over the failure of Ohio's authorizers to hold their schools accountable. Colin Powell Leadership Academy's low performance left little room for arguments against its closure. Despite various efforts by the school to improve via class-size reductions, after-school tutoring, and professional development—and to engage its authorizer in providing academic supports and evaluations—its proficiency rates ranked consistently in the bottom 10 percent statewide. It was rated in "Academic Emergency" by the state's accountability system for three straight years prior to its closure. In 2005-06, it met just one of twelve school accountability indicators, yet its authorizer provided little evidence that it did much to support the school or to close it. According to the school's former superintendent, the authorizer focused most of its energy on ensuring that the school's financial documents were in order.

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1. Ohio underwent a massive school construction campaign during this time that included minimum sizes for buildings; thus some of these closures could be due to the consolidation of buildings. For more information, see the Ohio School Facilities Commission's 2002 annual report at http://www.osfc.state.oh.us/Portals/0/PDFs/pub_2002.pdf.
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6. Ohio Revised Code, "3314.016 Operators of New Start-up Schools," LAWriter Ohio Laws and Rules, http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/3314.016.
7. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 3,988 public schools in Ohio in 2003-04. This analysis was limited to 2,462 schools after excluding sixty-two schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 786 schools designated by NCES as high schools, sixty-one schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 617 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for more than twenty students for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Ohio Department of Education.
8. Modest increases were also observed in 4th- and 8th-grade math and reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/).
9. This analysis is insufficient to yield conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of Ohio's charter and district sectors. More rigorous student-level analyses suggest that academic growth is lower, on average, in Ohio's charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of Ohio's charter-school students is 0.06 standard deviations lower, on average, than similar district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
10. Proficiency trends in the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. But Ohio showed no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
11. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
12. In 2005, Ohio passed legislation requiring the automatic closure of any charter school meeting specific low-performance criteria. This legislation was modified in 2006 and again in 2009. The 2009 amendment dictates that schools meeting the following criteria must close automatically: For schools serving students in grade three and below, closure is required for schools that have been in academic emergency for three of the four most recent school years; for schools serving students from grades four to eight (or grades four to nine, but no grade higher than nine), closure is required for schools that have been in academic emergency and that have demonstrated less than one standard year of academic growth in reading or math for at least two of the three most recent years; for schools serving students in grade ten and above, closure is required for schools that have been in academic emergency for three of the four most recent years. The first two schools affected by this legislation were slated to close in June 2009. See Ohio Revised Code, "3314.35 Permanent Closure After July 1, 2008 - Criteria," LAWriter Ohio Laws and Rules, http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/3314.35 (accessed November 15, 2010), and Ohio Department of Education School Options, "Annual Reports on Ohio Community Schools," Ohio Department of Education, http://education.ohio.gov/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=662&ContentID=42095&Content=91368.
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PENNSYLVANIA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Pennsylvania's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Pennsylvania's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the Keystone State's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools. Eighteen percent of the charter schools in the study that were low-performing in 2003-04 closed by 2008-09, versus 9 percent of similarly low-performing district schools. Regrettably, 79 percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make substantial improvement (or close) by 2008-09; eighty-five percent of district schools fared the same.

Characteristics of Pennsylvania's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

BACKGROUND ON PENNSYLVANIA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Pennsylvania passed charter legislation in 1997. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 144 charter schools operated in Pennsylvania during 2009-10,[1] serving over 79,000 students, or 4 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.[2] Fourteen charter schools have closed since 1997, representing 9 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 86 percent of Pennsylvania's charter schools are independently operated, while 7 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 7 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Pennsylvania's charter law was ranked twelfth (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] The state permits local school boards to authorize "brick and mortar" charters and the Pennsylvania Department of Education to authorize virtual charters. State law places no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, fifty-five Pennsylvania charter schools and 2,056 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that twenty-eight charter schools (51 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 178 district schools (9 percent). The fact that Pennsylvania's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Pennsylvania Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	51% (n=28)	9% (n=178)	10% (n=206)
Others	49% (n=27)	91% (n=1,878)	90% (n=1,905)
Total Schools	55	2,056	2,111

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Pennsylvania Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 98) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 603, compared with 514 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 404, compared with 480 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Pennsylvania's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	84.3	12.4	18.6	89.3	37.0	63.6
Rural	2.2	32.5	29.9	3.6	7.4	5.5
Other	13.5	55.2	51.6	7.1	55.6	30.9
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	75.7	28.6	32.7	37.6	14.3	26.2
Special Education	14.0	14.0	14.0	9.7	8.4	9.1
Limited English Proficiency	--	--	--	--	--	--
Hispanic	15.6	3.6	4.6	14.0	3.5	8.9
Black	67.5	8.4	13.5	77.9	29.0	53.9
# Schools	178	1,878	2,056	28	27	55
Avg. Enrollment	603	514	521	404	480	442

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

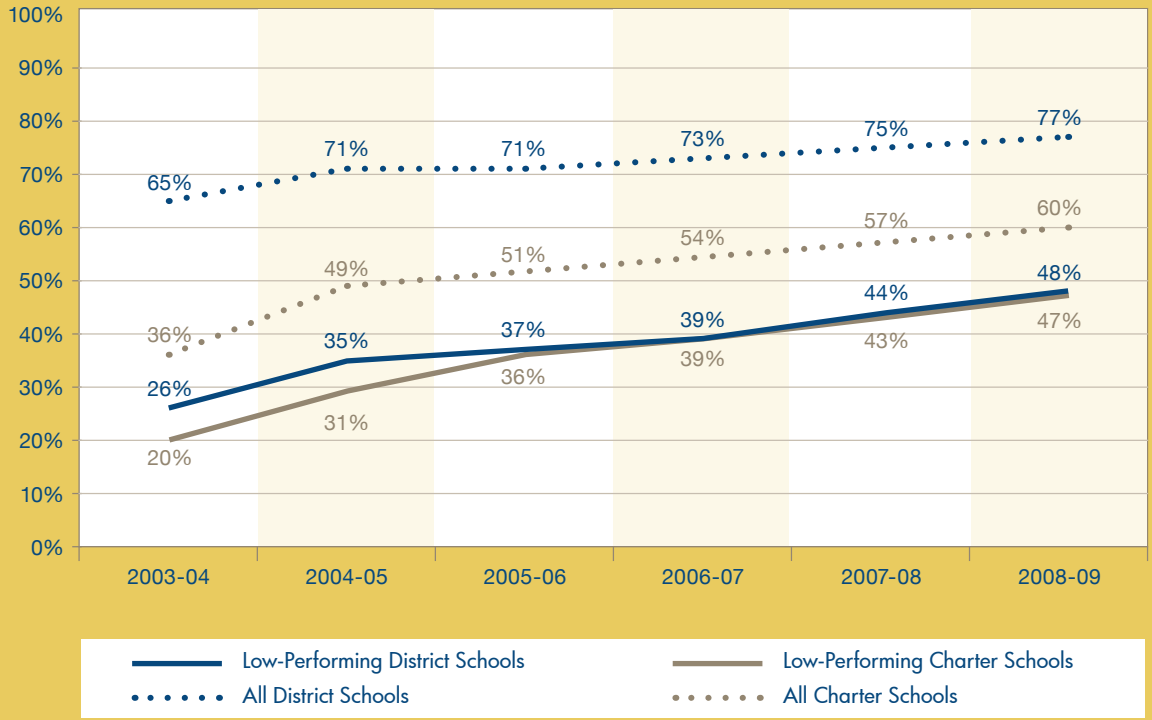
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 99) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset.

Average proficiency rates for all Pennsylvania schools improved steadily over the five-year period.[6] Charter-sector proficiency lagged that of the district sector during that time, but the charter sector was able to narrow that gap from twenty-nine points in 2003-04 to seventeen in 2008-09. As far as the low-performing schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends between the two sectors.[7]

Figure 1. Pennsylvania's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 178 low-performing district schools, 2,056 total district schools, twenty-eight low-performing charter schools, and fifty-five total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Pennsylvania Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Pennsylvania from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 100) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[8]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 101) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Pennsylvania's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three takeaways are notable:

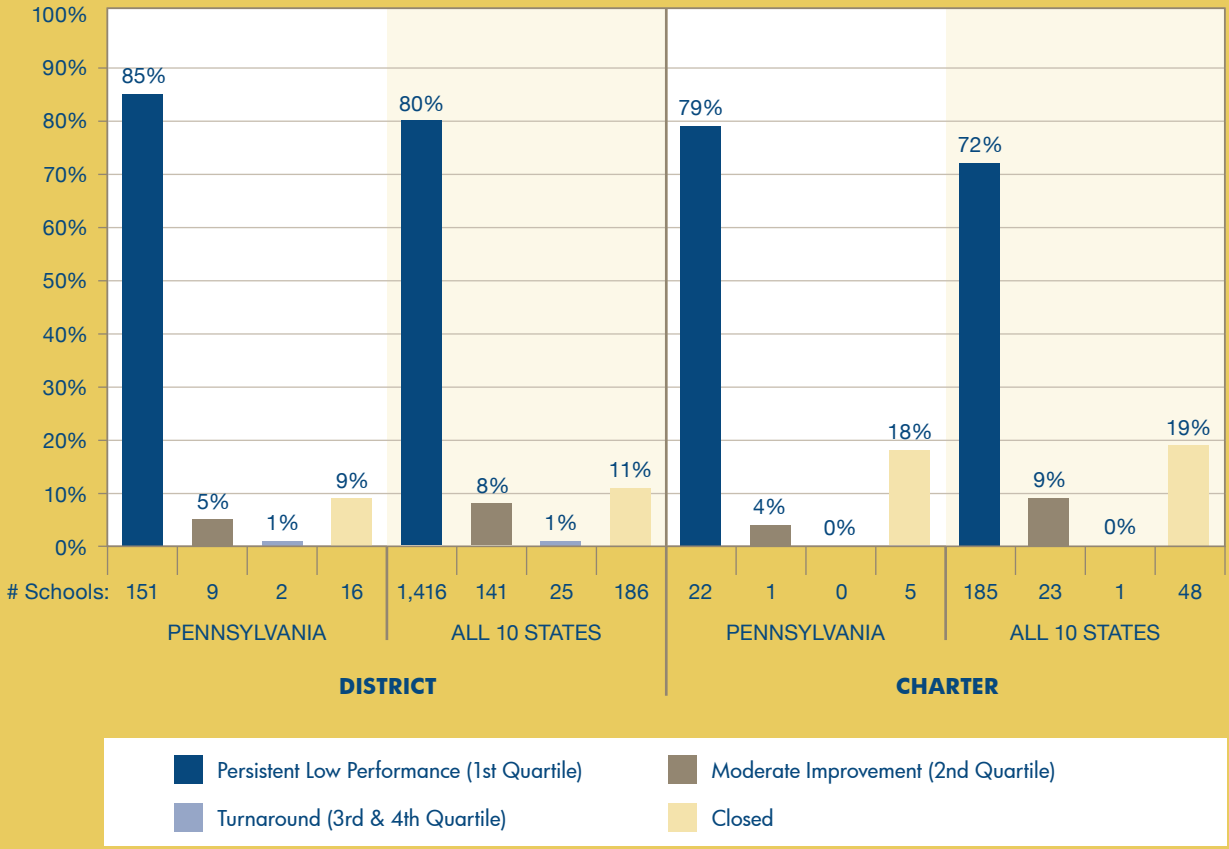
- The vast majority of schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way five years later. Seventy-nine percent of charter schools (n=22) remained in the bottom quartile, as did 85 percent (n=151) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)

- None of the low-performing charter schools and only two of the 178 district schools (1 percent) qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, however, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- As with the other nine states in the study, Pennsylvania's low-performing charter schools were more likely to close than their district-operated counterparts. Eighteen percent (n=5) of the low-performing charter schools closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year, compared with 9 percent (n=16) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.) These rates of closure were not very different from the overall charter and district closure rates of the ten states.

On balance, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Pennsylvania's public-school sectors. Seventy-nine percent of Pennsylvania's charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 continued to operate without notable improvement over a five-year period, as did 85 percent of low-performing district schools; a negligible fraction in both sectors made dramatic turnarounds during that time. Eighteen and 9 percent of Pennsylvania's charter and district sectors closed, respectively, roughly on par with the 10-state charter and district averages. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite their greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Pennsylvania Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Both of Pennsylvania's public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state's public-education system may benefit more by ramping up efforts to close down low performers than by investing time and energy in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes that schools will make dramatic gains, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Pennsylvania schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

While most low-performing schools in Pennsylvania remained that way five years later, Pennsylvania was home to two of the twenty-six turnaround schools in the 10-state analysis. The following two cases profile one charter school that remains open despite consistently low test scores, as well as one district school that turned around over five years.

Campbell Elementary School

Campbell Elementary School* is a K-5 school located in a low-income, urban neighborhood in Philadelphia. Nearly all of its students are poor and African American.

The school made consistent improvement from 2002-03 to 2008-09, with the most dramatic gains in the last three years. Its overall proficiency rate rose from 17 percent in 2003-04 to 43 percent by 2006-07, but consecutive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) failures required it to undergo NCLB-mandated restructuring. As part of that process, much of the staff was replaced (though not the principal). After restructuring, the school's performance rose dramatically—from 43 percent in 2006-07 to 76 percent in 2007-08 and then to 83 percent in 2008-09, placing it in the 70th percentile statewide.

School officials attribute the successful turnaround to a number of factors. In 2003, Campbell entered into partnership with a behavioral health-care agency to address school discipline and violence issues. Since 2003, reported incidents of violence have dropped dramatically. Other interventions targeted teacher collaboration, including teacher participation in screening and hiring new colleagues, a task previously handled at the district level. The principal noted a "snowball effect": as the school improved, more people and outside groups wanted to be a part of its improvement process. In the past year, it was invited to team up with the Office of the Mayor. The school's next goal is to enter the prestigious "90-90" club, i.e., schools where 90 percent of students are proficient though 90 percent are poor.

Sanders Community Academy

Seventy-nine percent of the low-performing charters in 2003-04 remained in the bottom proficiency quartile five years later. One such school was Sanders Community Academy,* a Pittsburgh charter serving approximately 300 students in grades six through twelve. The school's population is predominantly poor and minority, with 97 percent of students African American (in 2008-09) and 88 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Sanders' performance stagnated from 2003-04 to 2007-08, with a statewide proficiency ranking that never exceeded the 10th percentile. Since the school opened in 1999, leadership has been inconsistent, with new principals taking over in 2003-04, 2004-05, and 2007-08. It has undergone NCLB-mandated school improvement since 2003-04. In 2006, the Pittsburgh Public School Board voted to close the school, but a week later reversed that decision due to community pressure. There is a glimmer of hope, however. Proficiency rates rose more than twenty points from 2007-08 to 2008-09 and the school made AYP for the second consecutive year. In addition, its instructional staff has stabilized and teacher turnover is down from previous years.

**Pseudonym*

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4. Center for Education Reform, "'Race to the Top' for Charter Schools; Which States Have What It Takes to Win: Charter School Law Ranking and Scorecard 2010—Pennsylvania," http://charterschoolresearch.com/laws/pennsylvania.htm.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 3,267 public schools in Pennsylvania in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 2,111 schools after excluding twelve schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 615 schools designated by NCES as high schools, thirty-four schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 495 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
6. Increases were also observed in 4th- and 8th-grade math and reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/).
7. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sector could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Pennsylvania, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
8. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.

TEXAS

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Texas's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Texas's public-school sectors. The vast majority of Texas's low-performing district and charter schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools: Only 11 percent of low-performing charters closed over five years, as did only 3 percent of district low performers. (These closure rates were well below the overall rates for the ten states in the study.) Overall, 74 percent of the charters and 77 percent of the district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still in existence and still low-performing in 2008-09.

Characteristics of Texas's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON TEXAS'S CHARTER SECTOR

Texas passed charter legislation in 1995. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 387 charter schools operated in Texas during 2009-10,[1] serving over 147,000 students, or 3 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.[2] Thirty-eight charter schools have closed since 1995, representing 9 percent of all charters ever opened.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 76 percent of Texas's charter schools are independently operated, while 22 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 2 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Texas's charter law was ranked twenty-first (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards and the State Board of Education to authorize charters. The number of state-authorized open-enrollment charters is capped at 215, though existing charters can expand through additional campuses.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 108 Texas charter schools and 5,064 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that thirty-five charter schools (32 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did sixty district schools (1 percent). The fact that the Texas charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools than its district sector may reflect, in part, the large fractions of charter schools that offer alternative educational programs and that are located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Texas Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	32% (n=35)	1% (n=60)	2% (n=95)
Others	68% (n=73)	99% (n=5,004)	98% (n=5,077)
Total Schools	108	5,064	5,172

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency (2010).

Table 2 (see page 106) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 673, compared with 557 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 303, compared with 250 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Texas's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	66.7	38.7	39.0	80.0	71.2	74.1
Rural	21.7	25.9	25.8	8.6	9.6	9.3
Other	11.7	35.4	35.1	11.4	19.2	16.7
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	83.8	55.5	55.9	72.8	57.9	62.7
Special Education	13.8	11.9	11.9	16.1	10.4	12.3
Limited English Proficiency	25.2	15.7	15.8	5.9	10.0	8.7
Hispanic	56.8	41.2	41.3	39.6	32.4	34.7
Black	31.3	12.8	13.1	43.4	37.4	39.3
# Schools	60	5,004	5,064	35	73	108
Avg. Enrollment	673	557	558	303	250	267

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

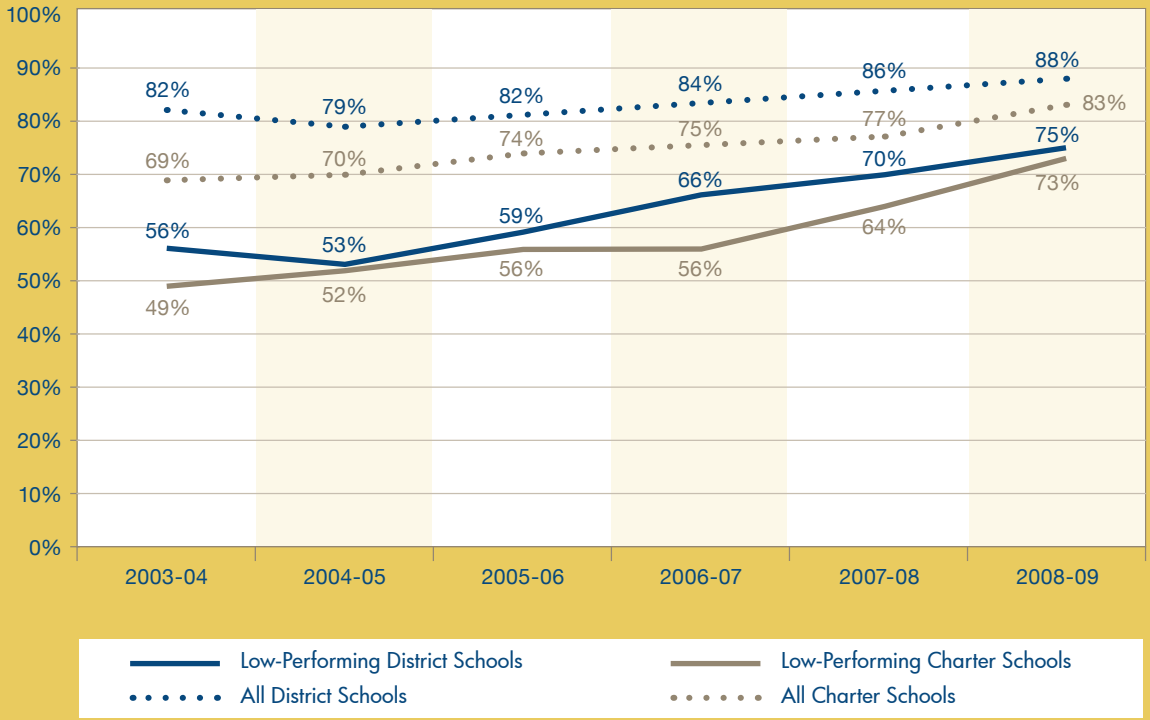
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 107) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Texas schools improved over the five-year period.[6]

Average school proficiency rates for all Texas schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were lower in the charter sector than in the district sector, and comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other in performance gains.[7] As far as Texas's low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. Texas's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on sixty low-performing district schools, 5,064 total district schools, thirty-five low-performing charter schools, and 108 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Texas from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 108) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 109) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Texas's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained low-performing five years later. That was the case with 74 percent (n=26) of charter schools and 77 percent (n=46) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)

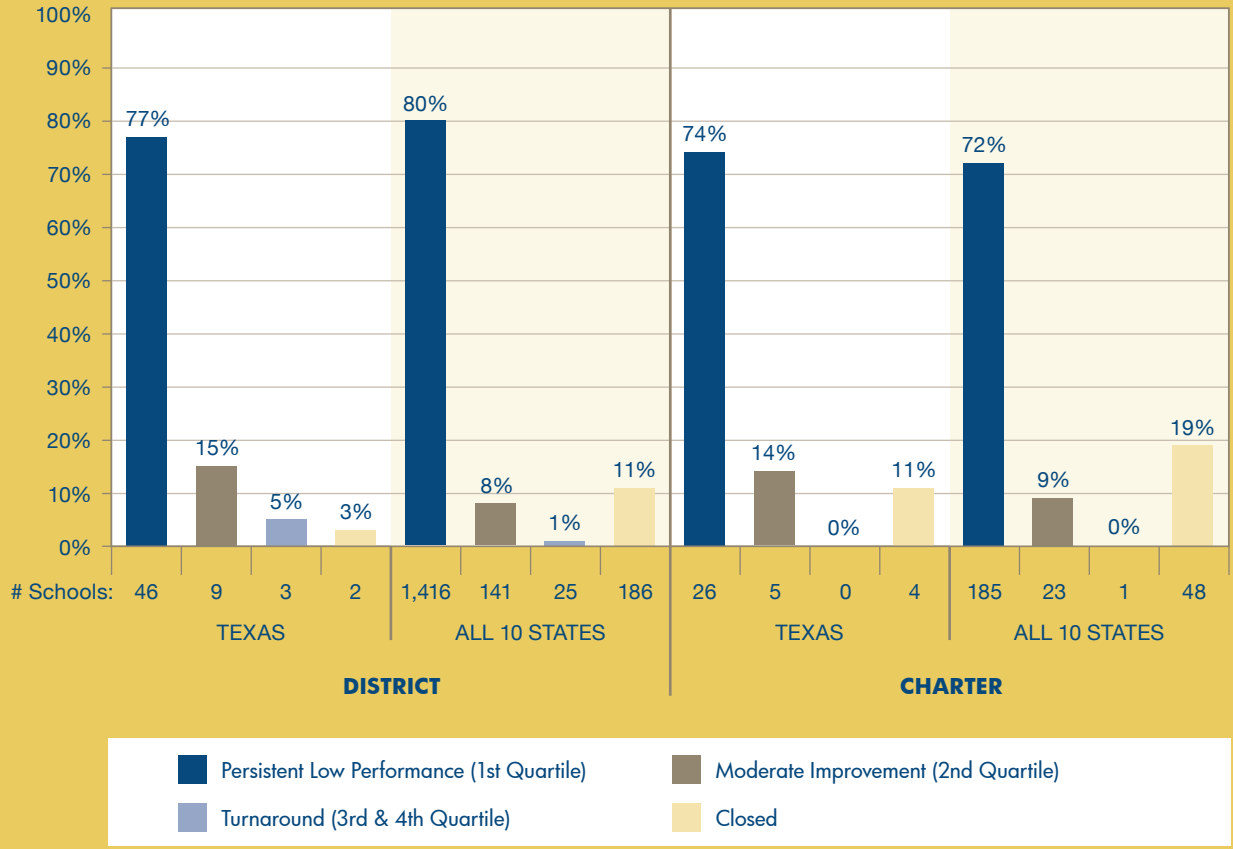
- None of Texas's low-performing charters and just three of its low-performing district schools (5 percent) qualified as "turnarounds." Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- Texas's charter and district sectors were home to the largest proportions of moderately improved schools among the ten states in the analysis. Fourteen and 15 percent of Texas's low-performing charter and district schools demonstrated moderate improvement, respectively.

- As with all ten states in the study, low-performing charters were more likely to close in Texas than low-performing district schools. Eleven percent (n=4) of the former closed before the 2009-10 school year, compared with 3 percent (n=2) of the district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.) Texas's charter and district closure rates were both well below the overall rates for the ten states in the study.

In sum, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Texas's public-school sectors. Seventy-four percent of Texas's charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, as did 77 percent of low performers in the district sector. In both sectors, a negligible fraction made dramatic turnarounds. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite having greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Only 11 and 3 percent of Texas's low-performing charter and district schools were closed over the course of the analysis, respectively. Texas's school-closure rates were low among the ten states in this analysis, but the Lone Star State saw more examples of moderate improvement, placing it in the middle of the pack in terms of eliminating low-performing schools.

Both sectors in Texas need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state's public-education system may benefit more by ramping up efforts to close low-performing schools than from investing time and resources in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes the school will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Texas schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

The first case describes the closure of a chronically low-performing charter school. As Texas is home to three of only twenty-six school turnarounds among all ten states in the analysis, the other highlights the rare successful turnaround of a district school.

I Am That I Am Academy

I Am That I Am Academy was a Dallas charter school that closed after 2006-07. As with many low performers in this study, it was afflicted by both financial mismanagement and low academic performance. Still, the authorizer waited for the school to founder from financial misconduct rather than close it on academic grounds.

In 2002, I Am That I Am Academy opened to serve at-risk students in grades seven to twelve who had failed one or more grades or been previously expelled. Ninety-six percent of the school's students were African American, 4 percent were Hispanic, and 83 percent were poor. Enrollment fluctuated between sixty and 150 pupils throughout the school's tenure, and student-mobility rates regularly topped 25 percent. In 2002-03, the school's overall reading and math proficiency was 26 percent, placing it in the bottom 1 percent of schools statewide. By 2006-07, proficiency had only inched to 29 percent, and the school still ranked in the 1st percentile.

Unacceptable performance was accompanied by questionable fiscal practices. The superintendent hired three of her four children to work at the school. In 2002, one of them reported inflated attendance figures to the Texas Education Agency; the Academy was subsequently forced to return $200,000 to the state.[10] In 2005, it was discovered that the school had been charging seniors $30 for every day of school missed—a clear violation of state law. At the time of closure, the board and superintendent were tangled in a lawsuit regarding the disappearance of $750,000 in state funds. I Am That I Am Academy finally closed voluntarily in February 2008 because it ran out of money, displacing seventy-three students in the middle of the school year. Though plenty of evidence surfaced to justify closing the school for financial misconduct and academic failure, the Texas Education Agency chose not to do so.

Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School

Five percent of the district schools in our Texas sample (three of sixty) met the criteria for turnarounds, including Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School in Laredo. This K-5 school served close to 400 students; in 2008-09, the student body was entirely Hispanic and 96 percent poor.

The school made dramatic performance gains over five years. In 2003-04, it earned an overall proficiency rating of 51 percent, ranked in the lowest percentile of schools statewide, and failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target. By 2008-09, however, it ranked in the 75th percentile statewide and 95 percent of its pupils scored proficient in reading and math. The school earned an "Exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency in 2008-09 and 2009-10.

The school's remarkable improvement is largely attributed to a concentrated effort to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the state standards. Staff was provided ongoing professional development to learn how to successfully map instruction to the state curriculum. In addition to alignment efforts, the school implemented the federal Reading First program and a structured after-school program.

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5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 8,110 public schools in Texas in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 5,172 schools after excluding 119 schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 1,426 schools designated by NCES as high schools, 186 schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 1,207 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Texas Education Agency.
6. Increases were also observed in 4th- and 8th-grade math and reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/).
7. This analysis is insufficient to lend conclusions to the overall effectiveness of Texas's charter and district sector. More rigorous student-level analyses on the effectiveness of Texas's charter schools suggest that academic growth is lower, on average, for charter-school students than similar district students. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of Texas's charter school students is 0.05 standard deviations lower, on average, than similar district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sector could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Texas, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
10. Karen Ayres Smith, "Founder, Board Blame Each Other for Lynacre Academy's Demise," *Dallas Morning News*, February 17, 2008, http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/stories/021708dnmetdeadcharter.3bdcbf0.html.

WISCONSIN

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Wisconsin's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

This study finds that the vast majority of Wisconsin's low-performing schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. The number of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin was too small (n=3) to render meaningful comparisons between the state's charter and district sectors, but results from the other nine states in this analysis reveal that dramatic turnarounds are equally rare for charter and district schools. Yet, overall, the charter sector across all ten states proved itself more successful than the district sector at *closing* persistently low-performing schools, a positive sign that charter accountability is working.

Characteristics of Wisconsin's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify

BACKGROUND ON WISCONSIN'S CHARTER SECTOR

Wisconsin passed charter legislation in 1993. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 223 charter schools operated in Wisconsin during 2009-10,[1] serving over 36,000 students, or 4 percent of all public-school pupils.[2] Thirty-nine Wisconsin charter schools have closed since 1993, representing 15 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 98 percent of Wisconsin's charter schools are independently operated, while 2 percent partner with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Wisconsin's charter law was ranked thirty-third (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards, the City of Milwaukee, and local universities to authorize schools in Milwaukee. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, twenty-five Wisconsin charter schools and 1,398 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that three of the twenty-five charter schools (12 percent) met the criteria for low-performance, as did fifty-three of the 1,398 district schools (4 percent). The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small to render meaningful comparisons of turnaround and closure rates between the sectors.

Table 1. Wisconsin Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	12% (n=3)	4% (n=53)	4% (n=56)
Others	88% (n=22)	96% (n=1,345)	96% (n=1,367)
Total Schools	25	1,398	1,423

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2010).

Table 2 (see page 114)compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 480, compared with 378 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 521, compared with 332 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Wisconsin's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	92.5	21.9	24.5	100.0	68.2	72.0
Rural	1.9	39.3	37.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	5.7	38.9	37.6	0.0	31.8	28.0
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	82.6	28.9	31.0	91.0	35.8	38.2
Special Education	16.8	14.5	14.6	12.9	15.3	15.0
Limited English Proficiency	6.5	2.4	2.6	2.2	5.9	5.5
Hispanic	17.2	4.6	5.0	0.3	9.1	8.1
Black	63.0	6.2	8.3	99.3	20.5	30.0
# Schools	53	1,345	1,398	3	22	25
Avg. Enrollment	480	378	382	521	332	355

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

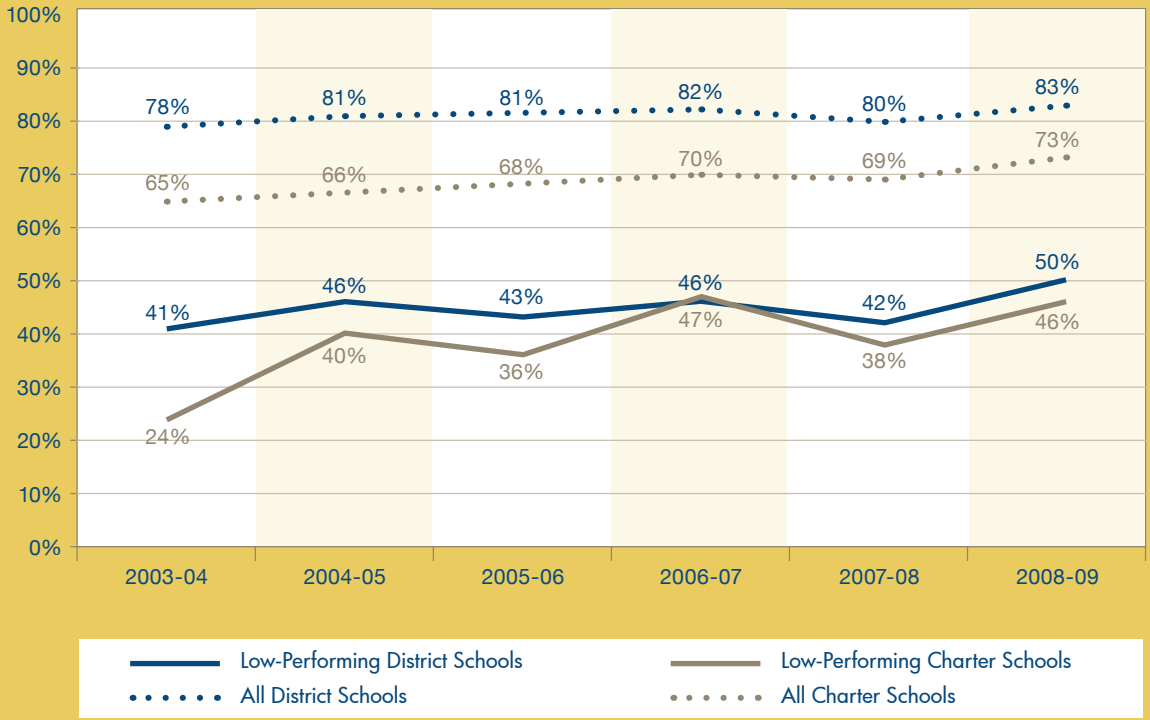
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 115) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Wisconsin schools rose slightly during that five-year period.[6]

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were consistently more than ten percentage points lower in the charter sector than in the district sector. Comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other in performance gains. Given that just three charters in our sample qualified as low-performing, the analysis cannot draw meaningful conclusions regarding whether Wisconsin's charter sector is more successful at addressing school failure.

Figure 1. Wisconsin's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on fifty-three low-performing district schools, 1,398 total district schools, three low-performing charter schools, and twenty-five total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Wisconsin from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 116) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[7]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 117) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Wisconsin's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small (n=3) to render meaningful comparisons between the sectors. Still, three notable findings for the district sector emerge:

- The majority of district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way five years later. Eighty-three percent (n=44) of low-performing district schools failed to exit the bottom quartile by 2008-09, much like the overall rate of the ten states in the study.

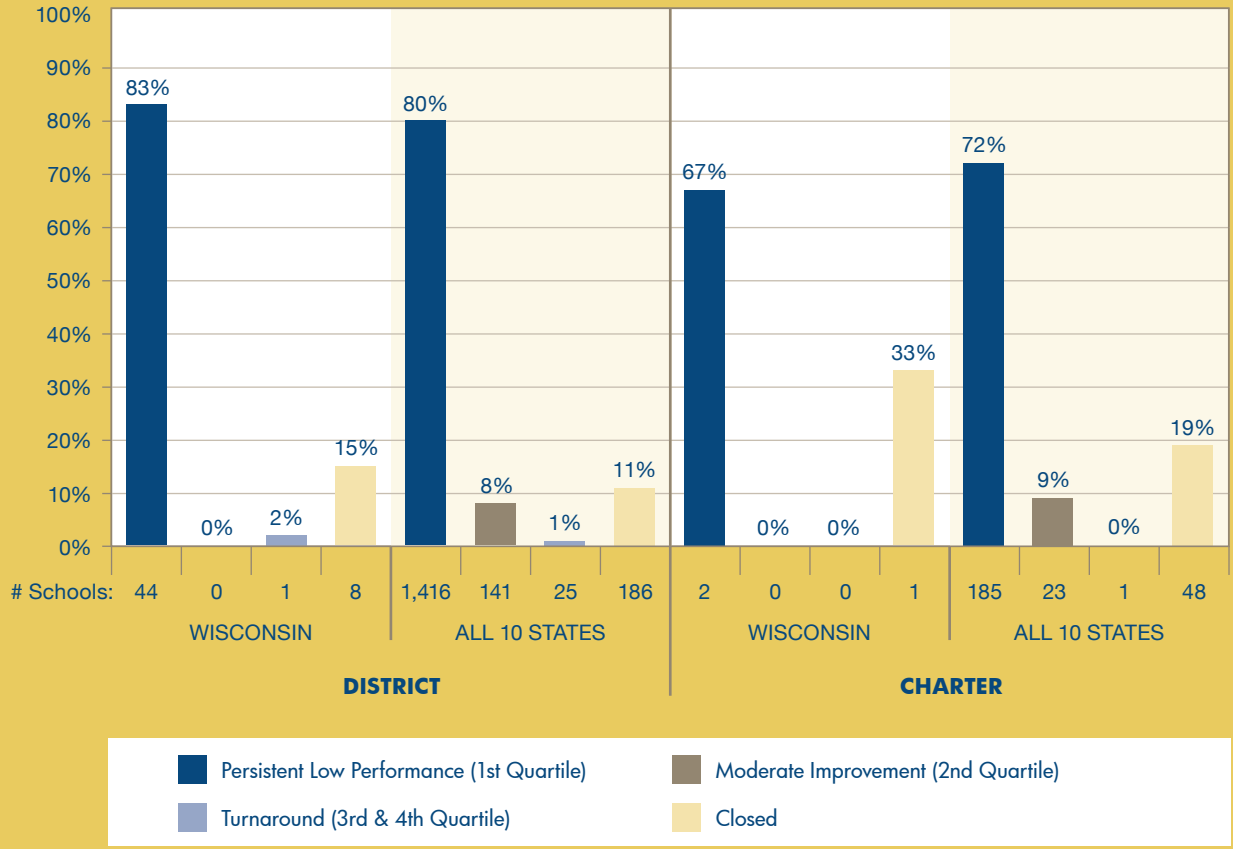
- Only one of the fifty-three district schools (2 percent) met the criteria for a "turnaround." Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria, respectively. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- Fifteen percent (n=8) of Wisconsin's low-performing district schools closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year, a higher rate than all states but Ohio.

In sum, this analysis shows that low performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in Wisconsin as elsewhere. The vast majority of Badger State schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, and a negligible fraction made dramatic turnarounds.

The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small (n=3) to render meaningful comparisons between the sectors. But data from the other nine states underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter and district sectors across the country need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. State public-education systems may benefit if both sectors ramp up efforts to close weak performers; this may prove more beneficial than investing time and resources in improbable turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes that schools will make dramatic improvements, these results suggest they are likely to be disappointed.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Wisconsin schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

In Wisconsin, findings showed that the vast majority of district schools failed to make notable improvement from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Therefore, one case study highlights a persistently low-performing district school; the other describes a closed charter school.

John Burroughs Middle School

John Burroughs Middle School serves roughly 500 students in grades six through eight. This Title I school is located on the north side of Milwaukee and serves a predominately African American student population. Ninety percent of its students are poor and 22 percent receive special-education services. Burroughs is plagued by high student mobility and frequently retains students from grade to grade.[8]

Burroughs consistently ranks near the bottom of the state in reading and math proficiency. Its proficiency rates were nearly stagnant from 2003-04 to 2008-09, increasing only from 30 to 36 percent over five years. By the district's own metric, the school has demonstrated low value-added and attainment scores in reading and math since 2004-05, except for 2007-08. The school is currently under NCLB-mandated corrective action due to repeated failures to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Like many schools designated as low-performing in this study, it was recently listed as a "persistently lowest-achieving school" in the state's application for federal Title I school improvement funds.

Money does not appear to be the problem, however. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) receives close to $12,000 per pupil, $1,500 above the state average. Burroughs Middle houses six computer labs, a large media center equipped with smart boards, an extensive community learning center that provides homework assistance and enrichment programs, and an array of after-school tutoring programs. Yet MPS does not impel dramatic school improvement. Compared to charter schools, which undergo annual performance reviews, MPS utilizes no consistent process for monitoring school performance and responding to persistent failure.

Malcolm X Charter School

Wisconsin law designates two types of charter schools—instrumentality and non-instrumentality. The former are authorized by districts, must employ district staff, and enjoy less autonomy, while the latter have greater autonomy and may employ non-district personnel. In 2009-10, twenty-five of the thirty-four charter schools authorized by the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) were instrumentality.[9]

Malcolm X Charter School was such a school until its closure in 2007. The middle school enrolled around 400 students in grades six through eight, nearly all of them African American and poor. The school created its own curriculum and instructional approach inspired by Kwanzaa philosophy.

Malcolm X opened in 2002 and was eventually closed by MPS on the grounds of low academic performance. During its tenure, its proficiency rates—never above fifty percent—placed it in the bottom 1st or 2nd state percentile. The school failed AYP in four of five years and there is no evidence that it embraced rigorous school-improvement interventions.

Malcolm X's experiences exemplify weak charter-school policies that blur distinctions between charter schools and district operations. For example, MPS moved the principal of Malcolm X to a different low-performing charter school after Malcolm X shut down. When the other charter school also shut down (also due to low performance), the principal then moved to a central office position. This mingling of district and charter affairs runs contrary to the notion of autonomy that is central to the logic of charter schools. It is no surprise that both district and instrumentality schools within MPS have similarly stubborn performance trajectories, given that school staffing and operations are both controlled by the central office.

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