



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2008

Robin J. Lake, Editor

 UNIVERSITY OF
WASHINGTON
BOTHELL

 NATIONAL CHARTER
SCHOOL
RESEARCH PROJECT
center on **reinventing** public education

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DECEMBER 2008





About NCSRP

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSRP:

- Identifies high-priority research questions.
- Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.
- Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.

The Project is an initiative of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

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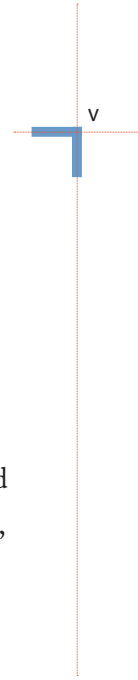
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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
OVERVIEW	
Should Charter Schools Be More Different Than Alike?	vii
<i>Robin J. Lake</i>	
CHAPTER 1	
Charter Schools and Student Achievement: A Review of the Evidence ...	1
<i>Julian R. Betts and Y. Emily Tang</i>	
CHAPTER 2	
How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction	9
<i>Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop</i>	
CHAPTER 3	
Equal Opportunity: Preparing Urban Youth for College	23
<i>Paul T. Hill</i>	
CHAPTER 4	
New Options for Serving Special-Needs Students	33
<i>Robin J. Lake and Joanne Jacobs</i>	
CHAPTER 5	
Encouraging Diverse Suppliers	43
<i>Frederick M. Hess and Bruno V. Manno</i>	
APPENDIX	
About the Authors	51



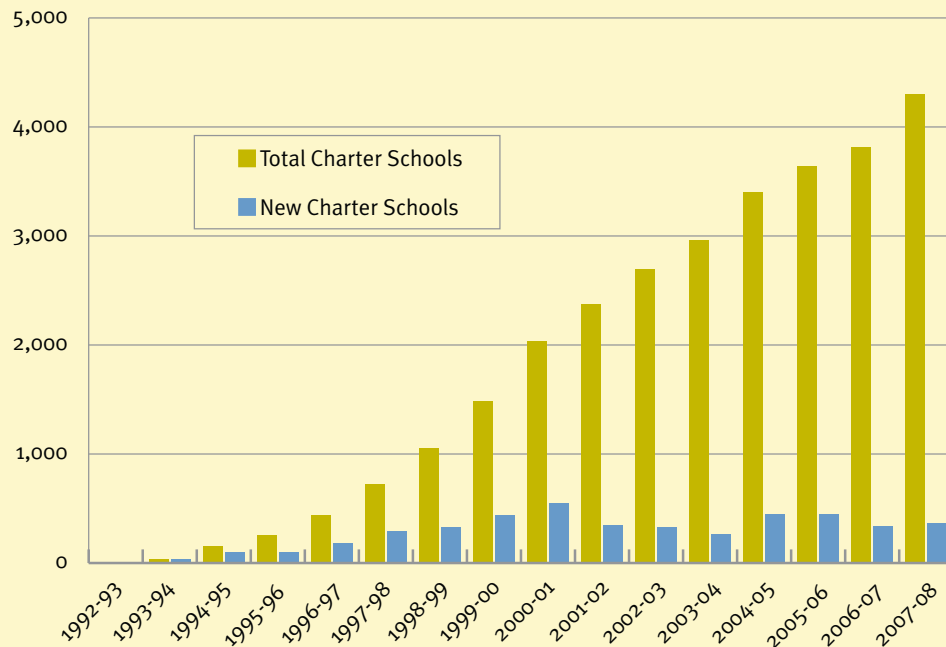
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FAST FACTS: Charter Schools in 2007-2008



- Number of charter schools in 2006-07: **3,816**
- Number of charter schools in 2007-08: **4,295***
- Percentage of all public schools that are charters in 2006-07: **3.9%**
- Percentage of all public schools that are charters in 2007-08: **4.5%**
- Percentage of all public school students that attend charter schools in 2006-07: **2.3%**
- Percentage of all public school students that attend charter schools in 2007-08: **2.6%**
- Number of states that *expanded* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students: **4**
- Number of states that *restricted* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students: **1****
- Number of charter schools that opened in 2006-07: **336**
- Number of charter schools that opened in 2007-08: **365**
- Number of charter schools that closed in 2006-07: **107**
- Number of charter schools that closed in 2007-08: **73**

* In some cases, multiple campuses operate under a single charter. In the fall of 2007, there were 4,295 charter school campuses operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Our count is significantly higher than in previous years because, beginning with the 2007-08 school year, we counted each charter school campus, rather than counting charter holders. Therefore, the difference between the total number of schools reported in 2006-07 and 2007-08 is overstated. The actual number of new schools is 365.

** Louisiana increased its cap from 42 to 70, Tennessee expanded the eligibility criteria for attending charter schools, Nevada removed a recent moratorium on new charter schools, and Rhode Island allowed its moratorium on new charter schools to expire. Delaware issued a temporary moratorium on new charter school applications.

SOURCE: Charter school figures come from NCSRP's annual survey of state charter school offices, conducted between July and September 2008, as well as data published on state Department of Education websites. Public school figures were compiled from state Department of Education websites and the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.

OVERVIEW

Should Charter Schools Be More Different Than Alike?

Robin J. Lake

Over the last three years, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* has provided new evidence and analysis about what is going on in charter schools, how well they are doing, where they need to improve, and what can be learned from the research on these types of public schools. Past volumes have outlined how achievement studies should be conducted and interpreted, suggested how to achieve more effective public oversight of charter schools and how to eliminate barriers to growth, and presented nationwide trends in the number of charters opened and closed and the characteristics of these schools.

In this year's edition, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings new evidence to some of these past questions and turns to some new ones. The essays in this volume provide:

- An update on how charter school students are performing academically (chapter 1);
- New data about how charter schools approach teaching and learning (chapter 2);
- Analysis of what college-prep charter schools offer inner-city students (chapter 3);
- An overview of how charter schools tackle special education (chapter 4); and
- An argument for mapping the demand side of charter schooling as a growth strategy (chapter 5).

What is striking throughout these essays is that charter schools are more different than alike, not only in terms of the populations they serve, the academic missions they pursue, and the results they produce, but also in their response to local need and capacity.

The essays in this volume show, for example, that:

NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT IS PROMISING OVERALL, BUT HIGHLY VARIED

A single generalization, like “on average, charter schools are at best slightly more effective than the schools their students would otherwise have attended,” can hide as much as it reveals. We learn a great deal more by asking how and why charter school effectiveness varies. In chapter 1, Julian Betts and Y. Emily Tang show us that there is strong evidence that charter schools are outperforming other public schools in many ways. But their analysis of existing charter school outcome studies also indicates that:

- Charter school studies are highly varied in quality. The maxim *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) applies here: only about a third of all charter studies can be trusted to give a fair picture of whether students are better off in a charter school or not.
- High-quality studies are more likely than weaker studies to find positive charter school results on student learning, in both reading and math.
- Even high-quality studies show tremendous variability in results. Charter schools perform much better in some localities than in others. Elementary charter schools, in general, appear to outperform charter middle and high schools.

Variation in charter school results has been a source of criticism in the past, with some observers lamenting “mixed” results. Betts and Tang argue, however, that a high degree of variation in achievement outcomes is an entirely predictable and possibly even a desirable short-term product of charter schooling. Since innovation and experimentation rely on diverse strategies and some risk taking, both failures and successes are to be expected. Local variation, again with different results, is also a factor that needs to be taken into account. Some localities and local charter schools have a very good grip on what they’re trying to accomplish; others are hoping for the best.

In the long run, the success of the charter movement will depend on whether it is able to build on successes and abandon failures. To reinforce success and eliminate failure, we need to understand what explains these variations. A second generation of achievement research in these areas is urgently needed. What are the attributes of highly productive versus unproductive charter schools? What are more successful states and cities doing that others might replicate? What explains the apparent low performance of charter high schools and what can be done about it?

CHARTER SCHOOLS DISTINGUISH THEMSELVES FROM TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THEIR EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AND OFFERINGS

In chapter 2, Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop present national data showing how charter schools approach teaching and learning. From this analysis, the charter sector appears to be using its autonomy to specialize. Charter schools are differentiating themselves compared to traditional public schools. Charter schools are more likely than other public schools to focus their educational designs on specific missions and populations; adapt their school day and year to meet the needs of their students; customize their programs to help struggling students; and bring college-prep courses to inner-city students. Even within the charter sector, there is great diversity in approach and specialization. As with the achievement results described above, charter schools are proving themselves more different than alike.

COLLEGE-PREP CHARTERS ARE AN IMPORTANT NEW DEVELOPMENT FOR INNER-CITY STUDENTS

By providing access to proven college-prep models (and suburban school performance expectations), charter schools appear to be offering something not otherwise available in many communities. In chapter 3, Paul Hill explains this important trend in charter high schools. A number of schools and nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) are offering inner-city, disadvantaged students access to a college-prep education normally seen only in competitive magnet schools and Catholic and suburban public schools. These schools are relentlessly focused and specialized, with demanding intellectual climates and curricula, longer school days, frequent assessments, and an intense school-wide teaching culture that continually reinforces the belief that all students will go on to college and be successful there.

These schools are also vividly described in David Whitman's recent book *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*.¹ The performance results are often astounding. Significant momentum toward further replication of these models in the charter sector is developing, but Hill points out that their existence does not make everyone happy. By no means do these models fit traditional notions held by school boards and administrators, nor union expectations about teacher workloads and pay schedules.

CHARTER SCHOOLS DELIVER NEW MODELS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

Due to the special vulnerability of their children and the due process rights built into special education statutes, parents of special-needs children are extreme choosers. They seek, and have the power of law behind them, the precise fit for their children's unique, and often highly complex, needs. By increasing the number and type of options available, charter schools represent an important addition to the public education landscape for these parents. Some charters have used their autonomy to create especially effective programs, which deserve to be viewed as promising new models for public education writ large.

NCSRP has developed a number of useful papers in the area of special education, currently in preparation for separate publication. In chapter 4, Joanne Jacobs and I provide an overview of this emerging field. The studies sponsored by NCSRP show that charter schools offer options for a large number of families with special-needs students. In fact, some charter schools have developed informal reputations as havens for these students. In many cases, particularly for those students with less severe disabilities, the variety of instructional approaches offered by charter schools can serve as beneficial interventions. Effective inclusion for students with less severe needs seems to be a particular strength of many charter schools, although the success of these efforts has not been widely discussed or even recognized.

Educating children with special needs can be an expensive and legally complex endeavor, one that not all small, stand-alone charter schools can handle effectively. To ensure that charter schools add overall benefit to the special-needs community, funders and policymakers should explore a variety of policy, research, and investment opportunities in charter schools and special education. These include:

- exploring the definition of “least restrictive environment” in a school choice context;
- assessing academic growth of children with disabilities in charter schools;
- identifying new approaches to special education;
- incubating national, state, and regional technical assistance networks; and
- seeding special education financial risk pools for charter schools.

A MORE SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIVERSE CONSTITUENT DEMAND IS NEEDED TO EFFECTIVELY GROW THE CHARTER SECTOR

In chapter 5, Rick Hess and Bruno Manno make a compelling case that, by focusing on creating a strong supply of new schools, charter school funders, policymakers, and advocates have largely ignored the different needs of the various constituencies on the “demand side” of charter schooling. Understanding what various types of students, parents, teachers, principals, school districts, and others want and need could allow greater targeting of charter schools and would also give focus to philanthropic investments and policy changes. In the long run, the authors argue, greater effort to match schools to expressed needs could pay off in increased student achievement.

Though charter schools are already highly diverse, Hess and Manno suggest that meeting the requirements of parents and other constituencies could make them more so by “mapping and unbundling choice.” They argue that because providers are encouraged (and routinely seek) to develop “whole-school” solutions, they wind up replicating the traditional services and structure of existing schools. While there is a demand for unbundled products that focus on discrete units—for example, human capital improvements; organizational, pedagogical, operational, and technological issues—the current charter movement is unable to encourage demand for these services because it is “expected to solve the entire problem of K–5 or 6–8 or 9–12 schooling.” Lowering this “high and unrealistic bar,” argue Hess and Manno, would permit many new, entrepreneurial problem-solvers to take their place at the table.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What does all this add up to? Despite some promising overall findings presented in these essays, charter school performance and practices continue to be very difficult to summarize. Chartering turns out to be less of a cohesive movement than a collection of distinct local efforts with vastly diverse approaches and results. The policy question at hand is whether that diversity is a problem to be solved or an opportunity to be embraced. If viewed as a problem to be solved, the charter movement may be in danger of repeating the very same mistakes, with regard to whole-school solutions and top-down fixes, that it set out to correct in the traditional education system.

The reality is that the charter movement is now caught up in the larger dynamics of accountability-based reform. In NCSRP studies of charter authorizers, many of the

biggest and most prominent, such as Central Michigan University (CMU), take a very top-down approach to oversight and are willing to impose a specific idea of good instruction and replace board members for the schools they oversee, even if that means all schools end up with similar approaches. Nobody knows whether such centralized approaches to charter oversight produce better results than the more arms-length relationships promoted by authorizers such as the State University of New York (SUNY), but the resemblance to conventional school district oversight is striking.

More broadly, many charter schools complain of an ever-increasing set of state-level rules and regulations with which they must comply. Certainly federal adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements make it harder for charters to develop unique approaches to standards, assessment, and accountability. And rules about “highly qualified teachers” have likely meant charter schools must rely more heavily on traditional hiring pools than they might otherwise choose to do.

These various layers of re-regulation make some wonder whether the charter movement is simply re-creating the district structure that it was supposed to help schools escape. To be sure, these are largely well-intentioned efforts among government agencies and private funders to promote more consistent quality in public schools in general and sometimes in charter schools specifically. It is an open question, however, whether the level of regulation and centralization we see in chartering today is *too much too soon* and imposes too many potential costs without commensurate benefits. Chartering actually needs state standards and responsible government performance oversight to fulfill its promise. But too much rigidity and not enough tolerance for risk in that oversight is a recipe for mediocrity.

As a general rule, centralized strategies are appropriate and most effective when the answers to problems are evident and can be applied consistently with reasonable likelihood of good results.² It is arguable that this is not the case in public education today. We do not know for certain what kinds of instructional approaches and organizational strategies work for all different types of students.

With pressure to quickly move back toward the conventional regulatory processes, staffing and curriculum approaches, and risk-averse strategies of conventional school districts, the charter community may be a bit more likely to achieve somewhat higher test scores, but in the process it may begin to drive away the entrepreneurial principals,

teachers, and niche educational services that are responsible for creating and sustaining some of the highest-performing and most innovative charter schools.

COULD GREATER DIVERSITY PRODUCE MORE CONSISTENT RESULTS?

Would an alternative approach conceivably produce consistently high-quality results with less potential cost? It may be, for instance, that an emphasis on research and development would do more to support breakthrough results in chartering than greater standardization. Research and development focuses on continuous improvement by investing resources in high-potential experiments, deep analysis and assessment, and actions that promote more effective practices and eliminate ineffective ones.

This could easily be the path of the future for charters. Based on the essays in this report, examples of potentially productive R&D strategies include:

- greater investment in research to uncover the reasons for variation in quality;
- exploration of policy actions to get states and cities to copy the regulatory and policy frameworks employed by successful peers;
- incentives for charter founders to experiment with promising new technologies;
- increased policy pressure for authorizers to close low-performing schools and help establish an ongoing pipeline of new schools to replace them; and
- mapping family, teacher, and government demands that could more effectively be met by targeted niche providers than by creating more new schools.

An R&D strategy will most certainly fail, however, if it fails to exploit the potential advantage of the charter sector's decentralized nature. Rather than responding to uneven quality in charter schools with centralized solutions, policymakers and funders must think creatively about new regulatory strategies that are appropriate to decentralized systems. For example, second-generation state charter evaluation systems would promote outcome measures that go beyond AYP while still holding schools strictly accountable for results. Exemptions from AYP requirements to allow measurement of multiple outcomes and value-added, for example, might be appropriate for charter schools overseen by the country's most sophisticated authorizers. Smarter state and federal regulatory systems would consider the cost of every new reporting or compliance requirement against the likely payoff. Investments in charter school growth would pur-

sue unbundled supply strategies and choice policies would allow parents more flexibility to choose a la carte services from charters.

People correctly argue that public education is a special case when it comes to experimentation and tolerance for risk. Parents do not (and should not) want risky public schooling programs. But it is also true that charter schools need not be recklessly experimental in order to produce dramatically better results. In future efforts to increase overall quality in the charter school movement, responsible variation in approach and even in results should be welcome and encouraged as long as there is continuous system-wide improvement in student learning and achievement.

NOTES

1. David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).
2. F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35 (September 1945): 519-30; and Rhys Andrews et al., "Centralization, Organizational Strategy, and Public Service Performance," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (February 2008).

CHAPTER I

Charter Schools and Student Achievement: A Review of the Evidence

Julian R. Betts and Y. Emily Tang

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers, funders, and the general public want to know how U.S. charter schools are performing nationally. It's a perfectly reasonable question. In a detailed paper prepared for the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP), we assessed the literature on charter schools to examine their achievement results.¹ This essay summarizes our findings.

Many researchers have tried to answer the broad question about charter schools and achievement through a variety of approaches. Studies have generally suggested that charter schools perform about the same as other public schools or that the results are “mixed,” with some charter schools performing better than traditional public schools, and some performing worse. These kinds of findings might leave policymakers wondering why they should expend political capital to pass a charter law for the first time, expand a state cap on charters, or invest more money to support the growth of charter schools. They might ask themselves: if charter school policies do not contribute to overall better student achievement or at least help close the achievement gap, why bother?

But it is premature for policymakers to believe that charter schools are weak or ineffective. In fact, based on our analysis, there is reason for guarded optimism that, despite great variation in results, charter laws may be effective policy tools, at least in some locales.

PAST CHARTER RESEARCH TELLS US LITTLE

The volume of research on charter schools and achievement has mushroomed in the last five years. However, most of these studies have used relatively unsophisticated “snapshots” of student achievement at a single point in time. Such methods can be misleading because charter schools do not attract “typical” students, and the demographic background of schools’ populations can fluctuate from year to year. A number of studies, both national and statewide, suggest that charter schools disproportionately attract students from less affluent and minority backgrounds. Without taking these differences into account, academic studies may be prone to understating the benefits of attending charter schools. A second common research design is to look at changes in test scores in a given grade over time without accounting for the fact that a school enrolls different students in that grade in different school years. Here, too, results could be misleading.

NCSRP’s Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel (2006) documented these patterns, and argued that these “snapshot” approaches are unlikely to produce unbiased estimates of the causal effect of attending a charter school on a student’s achievement.² The panel argued that two different approaches promised to provide more accurate results. The first would be to compare those who win and those who lose lotteries to attend a given charter school. Only three papers have used this approach to date, and the total number of charter schools studied in these three papers is just under fifty.

The next best approach, argued the Consensus Panel, would be to use one of several variations of value-added models. These models (admittedly imperfect) follow individual students over time and examine improvement in test scores over time. This approach is helpful because it takes into account a student’s past academic history. The more rigorous of these methods also avoid comparing apples to oranges in the sense that they do not compare one student to another, instead comparing each student’s progress in the years he or she attended a charter with progress when he or she attended a traditional public school.

We found 10 value-added studies, for a total of 13 studies that used sophisticated methods. This compares to a total of over 70 studies on charter schools and achievement, including those using methods found problematic by the Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel. Some readers may find the low number of sophisticated studies disappointing. There is strong evidence that weaker methods of study produce inaccurate

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schools.*

findings by failing to take into account the relatively disadvantaged backgrounds of students who attend charter schools.³

When restricting a review of charter school achievement research to studies using the most sophisticated methods, it must be acknowledged that even when rigorous studies are analyzed, it is hard to claim that they represent all charter schools. Most include just a sample of charter schools from a particular city or state—or sometimes across a few states. Because different states have vastly different charter school laws and methods of implementation and oversight, findings from one city or state do not necessarily tell us anything meaningful about what is going on elsewhere.

OUR APPROACH

With that caveat in mind, we explored both approaches: randomization based on lotteries, or taking into account a student's past achievement through value-added modeling or modeling gains in achievement from one year to the next. We used a variety of methods to assess whether charter schools do or do not outperform their traditional public school counterparts. (For a complete description of the methods used and results, see *Value-Added and Experimental Studies of the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: A Literature Review*.⁴)

Asking the question, What does the typical study show? in some cases produces quite different answers than if the question is, How does a typical charter school fare? We think the latter question holds far more relevance for policymakers. Our analysis, therefore, was designed mainly to produce estimates of how typical charter schools perform in various studies rather than to report on whether the average study produces positive or negative results.

FINDINGS

The review indicates that it is wrong to say that charter school performance is simply “mixed” or on par with traditional public schools. When we look only at the studies that use methods powerful enough to give valid results and try to reconcile differences among them (for example, years for which achievement data are available), we learn that:

Asking the question, What does the typical study show? in some cases produces quite different answers than if the question is, How does a typical charter school fare?

It is wrong to say that charter school performance is simply “mixed” or on par with traditional public schools.

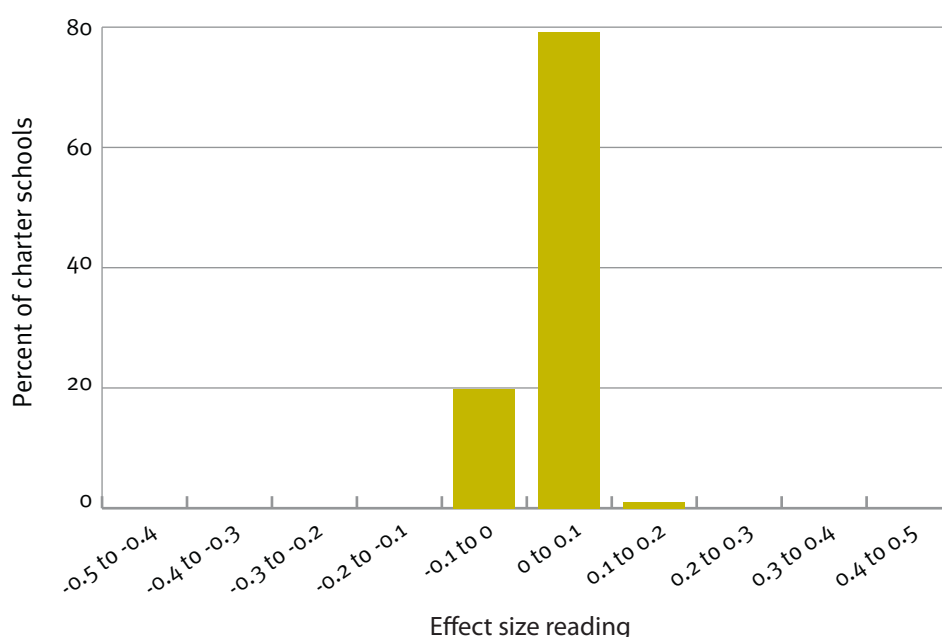
- Despite considerable variation among charter schools, the overall evidence suggests that charter schools more often outperform than underperform their traditional public school counterparts.
- There is ample evidence that charter schools in some geographic areas outperform traditional public schools. There is also considerable evidence (somewhat less prevalent) that charter schools in other areas underperform. The variation is closely associated with school location, grade level served, and subject matter.
- Charter schools often outperform traditional public schools on reading tests in elementary schools and on math tests in middle schools. In no study in this sample do charter schools seem to underperform in those areas in a statistically significant way.
- Elementary and K–8 charter schools, taken together, typically outpace traditional public schools. Some studies do produce evidence of large negative achievement effects for students attending charter schools. This is most notable in North Carolina, in both reading and math. However, depending on the analytic method used, between one-half to two-thirds of the studies reviewed show positive and statistically significant effects of charter school enrollment on math and reading test scores.
- The magnitude, or effect size, of the results for the elementary and K–8 charter schools is sizable, approximately 8 percent of a standard deviation for one-year gains in both math and reading. (To put this into perspective, a student with median test scores (ranking 50th out of 100 students) would be predicted to move up three points to about the 47th rank out of 100 students after one year at a charter school. This is not a large change, but over several years of such gains, it could be quite meaningful.) For comparison purposes, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007) estimate that in North Carolina, reducing class size by five students is associated with gains in achievement of 1.0–1.5 percent of a standard deviation.⁵
- Charter school performance is weaker in elementary math, middle school reading, and in high schools overall. For example, when weighted by the number of schools per study, studies of charter high schools produce significantly positive or negative results (12 percent positive and 85 percent negative). Overall, the size of the estimated effects at the middle and high school levels are far smaller than for schools serving elementary grades, with effect sizes of less than 1 percent of a standard deviation at the middle school level. And at the high school level, the median effect sizes are negative and fairly large (roughly -0.15 to -0.2 for the average charter high school).

Despite considerable variation among charter schools, the overall evidence suggests that charter schools more often outperform than underperform their traditional public school counterparts.

- The only evidence of consistent underperformance is in charter high school reading and math scores. These negative math effects are puzzling because the math effects in charter middle schools are significant and rarely negative. The high school findings are hard to explain and, obviously, a source of concern.

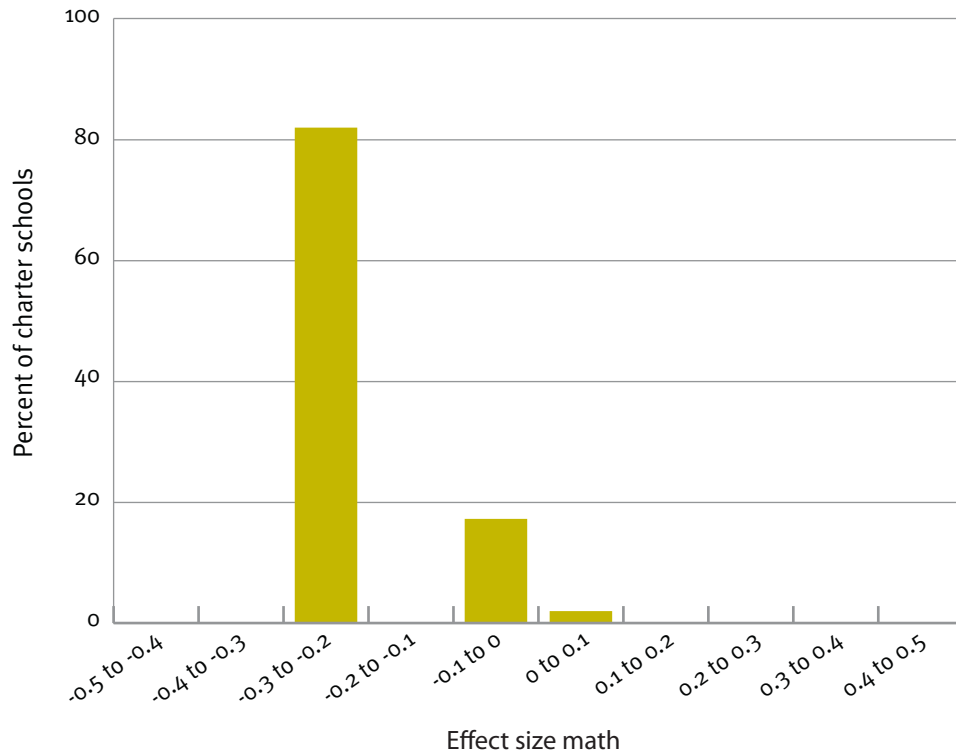
These results, then, show great variety in charter school performance, but some positive outcomes in elementary, K–8, and middle schools. Figures 1 and 2 show histograms of the effect sizes found in the literature (in which we give greater weight to a study based on 200 charter schools than to a study based on 10 charter schools). Figure 1 shows the positive effects in elementary reading, while figure 2 shows the negative effects in high school math.

FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF EFFECT SIZES FOR ELEMENTARY READING STUDIES, WEIGHTING EACH ESTIMATE BY THE NUMBER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS



The findings reported here should be considered preliminary and suggestive, a launching point for further investigation rather than a confirmation or nullification of the value of charter school policies.

FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF EFFECT SIZES FOR ALL HIGH SCHOOL MATH STUDIES, WEIGHTING EACH ESTIMATE BY THE NUMBER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS



On the other hand, some approaches are clearly working and they are worth exploring. Over one-third of the studies reviewed show significant and positive effects across all grade levels. The programs in these studies are getting consistently good results and they are worth paying attention to and replicating. (See our full report for a listing of results by study.⁶)

While these results are intriguing and carry with them potentially important implications, the literature needs to be treated with some caution. Researchers have conducted rigorous value-added or lottery-based studies of charter schools in only a very few states and major cities to date. Even among the relatively rigorous studies examined here, the quality of the data and analysis varies. The findings reported here should be considered preliminary and suggestive, a launching point for further investigation rather than a confirmation or nullification of the value of charter school policies.

IMPLICATIONS

The mission of charter schools is to use their autonomy to develop distinct strategies for improving curricula and teaching methods. The finding of considerable heterogeneity among charter schools probably reflects this spirit of experimentation. In the long run, the variation we see in charter school achievement may shrink or grow.

Over time, it is possible that the number of weaker charter schools will diminish or close due to market forces, while the number of stronger charter schools expands. Hanushek et al. (2007) provide evidence from Texas that parents are more likely to pull their children out of ineffective than effective charter schools, that is, out of charter schools that boost students' test scores by less than average.⁷ This is just one state, but the finding suggests that in the long run, heterogeneity in quality could lead to uniformly higher school quality in the charter sector.

Of course, it is probably not enough for parents to be more likely to transfer their children out of low-performing than high-performing charter schools. We would also hope that charter schools that fail to boost student achievement eventually lose their charters, while charter schools that outperform not only have their charters renewed but are allowed to extend to new campuses. There is very limited evidence that closure rates have increased over the last few years and some evidence that some authorizers are becoming more selective in choosing qualified applicants.⁸ If these two trends hold, they too would lead to more consistent charter school quality.

Armed with more information that shows where their own charter schools are strong or weak academically (and which states are producing successful outcomes), policymakers could go one step further. They could decide to improve state laws and support structures to attract higher quality charter operators and place pressure on authorizers to close low-performing charter schools. Philanthropic and government agencies should support more widespread and high-quality studies to make that possible.

While we wait for that day to come, it is extraordinarily important for charter school authorizers to base their chartering decisions not on superficial and often misleading comparisons of test score levels between charter and traditional schools, but instead on sound analysis that compares individual student gains in achievement.

We would also hope that charter schools that fail to boost student achievement eventually lose their charters, while charter schools that outperform not only have their charters renewed but are allowed to extend to new campuses.

NOTES

1. Julian R. Betts and Y. Emily Tang, *Value-Added and Experimental Studies of the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: A Literature Review*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).
2. Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel, *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines*, National Charter School Research Project White Paper Series, No. 2 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006).
3. Julian R. Betts, Y. Emily Tang, and Andrew C. Zau, *Madness in the Method? A Critical Analysis of Popular Methods of Estimating the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement* (San Diego: University of California, 2007).
4. Betts and Tang, *Value-Added and Experimental Studies*.
5. Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, *How and Why Do Teacher Credentials Matter for Student Achievement?* National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 12828, 2007, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12828>.
6. Betts and Tang, *Value-Added and Experimental Studies*.
7. Eric A. Hanushek et al., "Charter School Quality and Parental Decision Making with School Choice," *Journal of Public Economics* 91 (2007): 823–48.
8. See, for example, Andrew Rotherham, "Smart Charter School Caps: A Third Way on Charter School Growth," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at Charter Schools in 2007*, ed. Robin J. Lake, National Charter School Research Project, 65–73 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction

Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools promised to be different and most people assumed they would be. Since these new schools enjoyed a “blank slate” and a great deal of autonomy over school design, observers expected to see charters experimenting with everything from curriculum to organizational structures. There were good reasons to break the mold of traditional public schools, not the least of which was that traditional schools had failed many students, especially low-income minority students. However, there are also reasons why charter schools might resemble traditional public schools. The image of a “good school” is deeply entrenched in the minds of American families—especially for high schools, the launching pad into college or decent work opportunities. For schools competing for students, offering programs that met parents’ expectations could be just as critical as the schools’ ability to offer something different.

So, some 15 years into the charter movement we still need to ask, how different are charter schools? To explore this question NCSRP analyzed a national survey of public school programs and practices and a sample of charter school proposals approved by authorizers. The research shows that charter schools differ from traditional public schools in several ways. Specifically, charter schools are more likely to:

- Be focused around specific instructional designs;
- Offer different grade configurations and smaller classes, spend more time on instruction every day, and stay open more days per year;

There were good reasons to break the mold of traditional public schools, not the least of which was that traditional schools had failed many students, especially low-income minority students.

- Customize support for struggling students;
- Offer college-prep coursework instead of school-to-work programs for high-minority student populations.

NATIONAL DATA ON SCHOOL PROGRAMS

The research for this chapter primarily used the 2003–2004 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to learn how charter schools and traditional public schools compare in such curricular and program offerings as after-school programs and English Language Learners (ELL) mainstreaming. The SASS is a nationally representative survey of public and private schools; the 2003–2004 survey is the most recent survey available. It is conducted every four years by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The SASS is an important and useful nationally representative data source because it allows researchers to compare charter schools and traditional public schools in the same data set. However, the programmatic questions are not as detailed or as deep as would be ideal for this type of study.¹

To supplement the SASS survey analysis, we also reviewed a sample of 38 charter school applications from California, North Carolina, and Texas to gain a richer view of how charter schools may be addressing elements of their education programs.

Accounting for the basic differences between charter and traditional public schools

It is known that charter schools differ from traditional public schools in their location and size. Charter schools tend to be located in urban areas and also tend to be smaller than their neighboring traditional public schools. Schools in urban contexts have not only different opportunities and resources but also serve different types of student populations than schools in rural towns and small cities. To account for these differences, this chapter presents results from a restricted sample limited to only schools that enroll fewer than 750 students located in urban centers and their surrounding fringe. However, since small school size may be a deliberate organizational strategy, we occasionally lift the size restriction and report any substantial differences between the small school sample and the sample that includes schools of all sizes.

Even when differences in location and size are accounted for, the fact remains that charter schools tend to serve different student populations than traditional public schools. For example, table 1 shows that, relative to traditional public schools, charter schools even in this restricted sample serve more minority students and students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch. When relevant, NCSRP accounts for these differences across sectors by focusing on schools with the largest share of low-income and minority students.

TABLE 1. BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHARTER AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS	
	Charter	Traditional public
Minority enrollment**	56.44%	43.01%
Free/reduced-price lunch**†	53.02%	44.86%

NOTE: Includes only schools in urban or urban fringe areas serving fewer than 750 students

****** Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

† Includes only schools participating in the free lunch program

FINDINGS

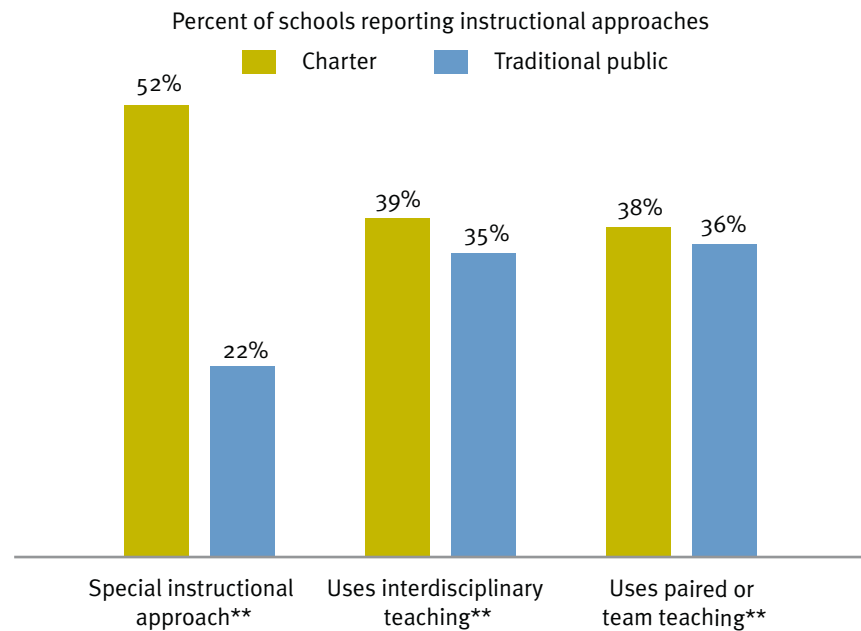
A student's experience in school is largely driven by the school's instructional approach, classroom and school structures, curriculum, and support services. Collectively, these aspects of the school account for the amount of time students spend in school, how they spend their time in school, the material they learn, and how they interact with teachers. The discussion below details the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools in four key aspects of school programs: instructional approaches, classroom and school structures, curriculum (specifically high school curriculum), and student support services.

FINDING #1: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY THAN TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO EMPLOY A FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

INSTRUCTION: Charter school founders must define their instructional approach in their charter school applications, forcing them to think in relatively concrete terms about how they will approach teaching and learning in their school. It is not surprising, then, to see that almost half of charter schools report using a “special instructional approach” (for example, Montessori, self-paced instruction, open education, ungraded classrooms²). The prevalence of specialized instruction in charters is well above the 22 percent of urban traditional public schools reporting the use of such a model (see figure 1).

There is no evidence from the SASS, however, that charter schools break dramatically from the traditional discipline-based approach (for example, courses in traditional subjects such as history, mathematics, etc.) to instruction. Just slightly more charter schools than traditional public schools report using interdisciplinary teaching—a strategy that provides students with cross-disciplinary instruction and which is useful when a small staff must teach a full academic curriculum. Similarly, just a slightly higher proportion of charter schools employ team-teaching methods.

Charter school founders must define their instructional approach in their charter school applications, forcing them to think in relatively concrete terms about how they will approach teaching and learning in their school.

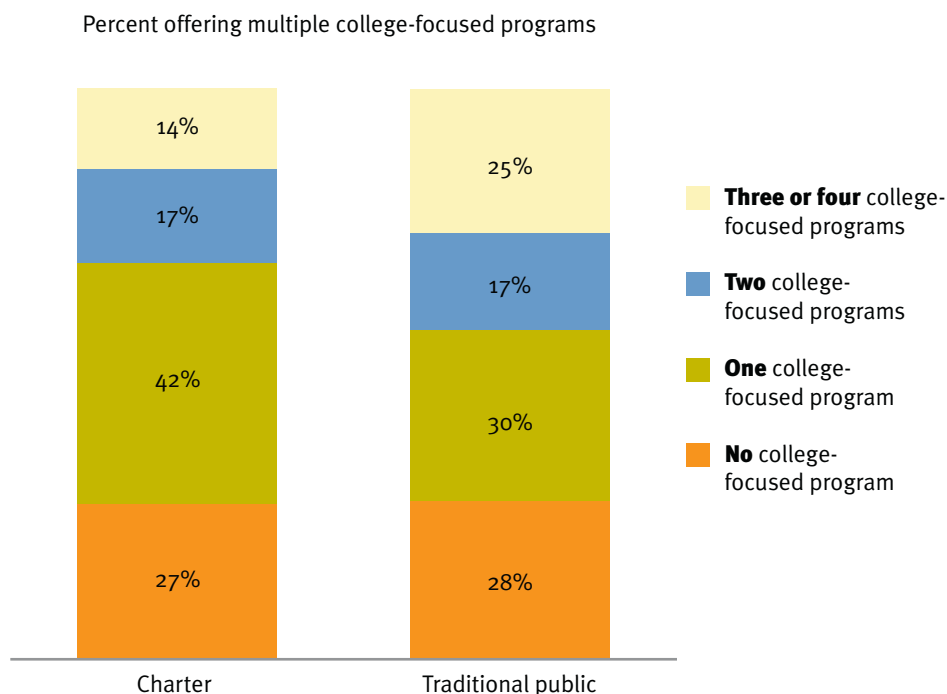
FIGURE 1. CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MORE FOCUSED AND STEPPING OUTSIDE THE NORM

**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

CURRICULUM: The SASS survey offers some insights into the presence of college-focused and school-to-work learning curricula in high schools.

Charter schools appear just as likely to offer some form of college-focused curriculum (73 percent in charter schools versus 73 percent in traditional public schools), but they are more likely to create their own college-prep programs (for example, partnerships with local community colleges or honors classes) than to use costlier national programs such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate curriculum. However, charter schools, perhaps in keeping with a more focused instructional program, tend to offer fewer college-focused curriculum options to students. While 31 percent of charter schools report offering more than one of these college-focused programs, 42 percent of traditional public schools report doing so (figure 2).

FIGURE 2. CHARTER SCHOOLS OFFER FEWER OPTIONS IN EACH SCHOOL

NOTE: Includes only schools serving high school aged students and those with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. All differences are significant at a 95% level of confidence.

The charter applications that NCSRP reviewed show that charters tailor their college-prep programs to student needs with a combination of individualized instruction, college-prep and study-skills curriculum, extended school days or school years, and tutoring and counseling to get their students college ready.

FINDING #2: CHARTER SCHOOLS OFFER NON-TRADITIONAL GRADE AND DEPARTMENT CONFIGURATIONS, SMALLER CLASSES, GREATER TIME ON TASK

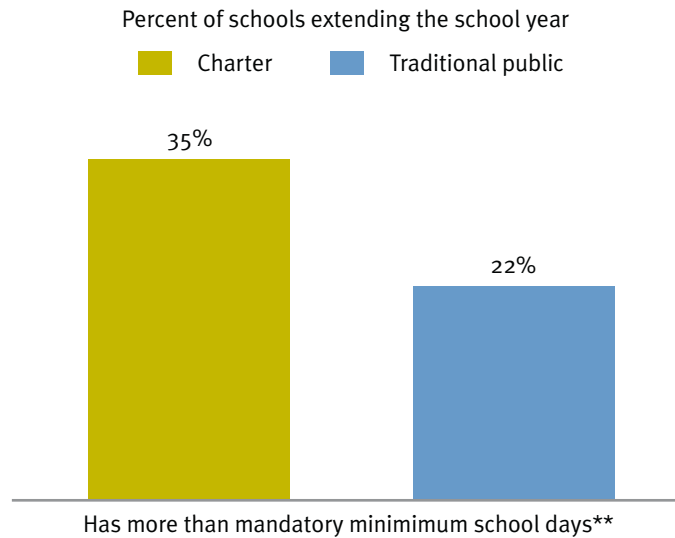
Building a school from scratch, as most charter schools do, offers school founders the opportunity to completely rethink the way they organize their schools and classrooms. Many charter schools take advantage of this blank slate to do several things differently—everything from extending the school day and calendar to moving away from traditional classroom organization.

MORE TIME ON TASK: First, the chances are significantly greater that a charter school will have a longer school year than a traditional public school (see figure 3). Almost 35

Many charter schools take advantage of this blank slate to do several things differently—everything from extending the school day and calendar to moving away from traditional classroom organization.

percent of charter schools reported a longer school year than the mandated minimum; just 22 percent of traditional public schools report exceeding the minimum number of calendar days.

FIGURE 3. CHARTER SCHOOLS STRETCH THE SCHOOL YEAR

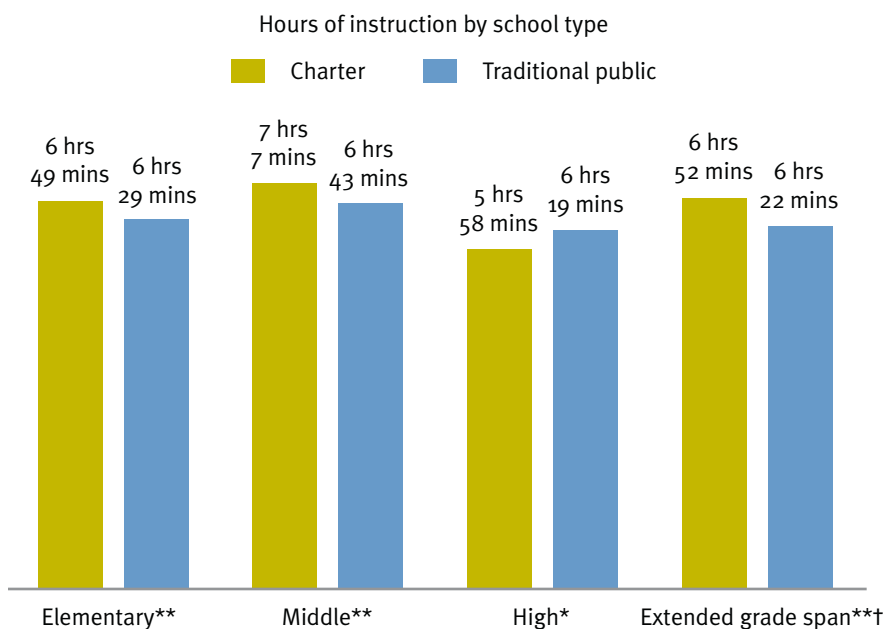


**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

Not only do charter schools extend the number of days, but at the elementary and middle school levels, they also extend the school day itself (see figure 4). At the elementary and middle school levels, the average charter school day was almost 20 minutes longer than the average day in traditional public schools. Over a typical 180-day school year, that alone would add up to an additional 60 hours of instruction. By adding five or ten days to the school year, elementary and middle school charters provide an additional 100–200 minutes of instruction.

What is true at the elementary and middle school levels is not true at the high school level. In fact, the relationship is reversed: the charter high school day is about 20 minutes *shorter* than the average traditional public high school day.

FIGURE 4. CHARTER SCHOOLS CHANGE THE LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL DAY

*Indicates that difference is significant at a 90% level of confidence

**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

† Extended grade spans include schools that serve grade spans that extend beyond the traditional grade spans for elementary, middle, or high schools. Examples of extended grade spans include K-12 or 7-12.

NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

MODIFYING CLASS SIZE: Charter schools not only change school organization and time on task, they also modify class size (see figure 5). At the elementary and high school levels, charter schools tend to offer students smaller classes. Charter elementary school classes, on average, have two fewer students per class than do elementary classes in traditional schools; at the high school level, they have three fewer students on average. On the other hand, at the middle school level (the least common grade span among charter schools), traditional schools tend to have one less student in the average-sized class than charter schools.

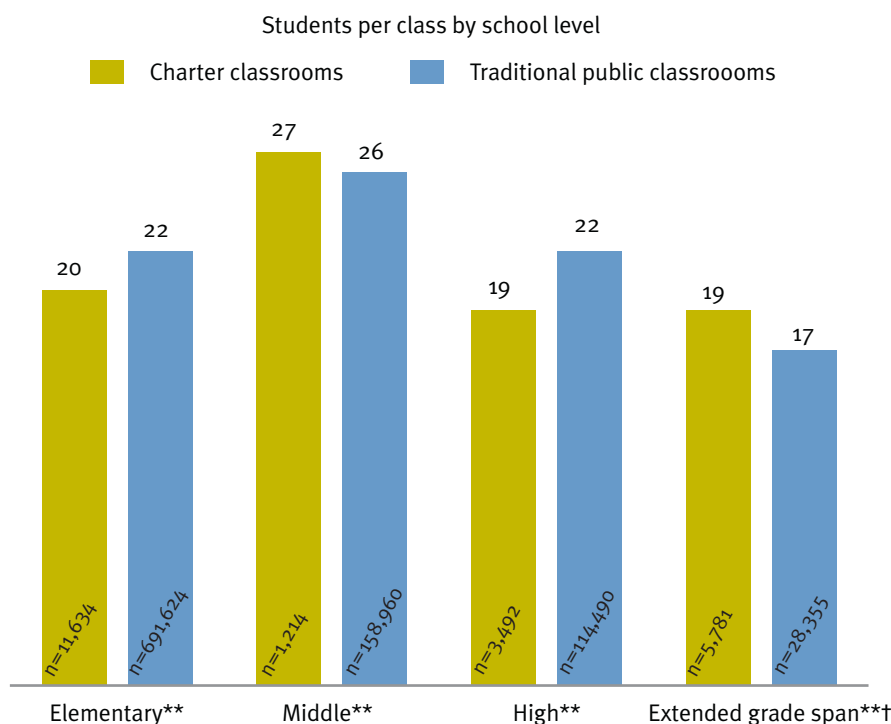
In less common grade configurations (“extended grade spans”), traditional public schools tend to have two fewer students per class than charter schools. These are schools serving grade spans that do not correspond with traditional grade structures for elementary, middle, and high schools—for example, K-12 or 7-12 schools.

It is important to note that this analysis, to ensure a fair comparison, included only schools with fewer than 750 students and excluded classrooms where one might expect

Charter schools not only change school organization and time on task, they also modify class size.

to see exceptionally small class sizes. Without the size restriction, charter and traditional public schools appear to have approximately the same average class size.

FIGURE 5. CHARTER SCHOOLS LOWER CLASS SIZE FOR ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

† Extended grade spans include schools that serve grade spans that extend beyond the traditional grade spans for elementary, middle, or high schools. Examples of extended grade spans include K-12 or 7-12.

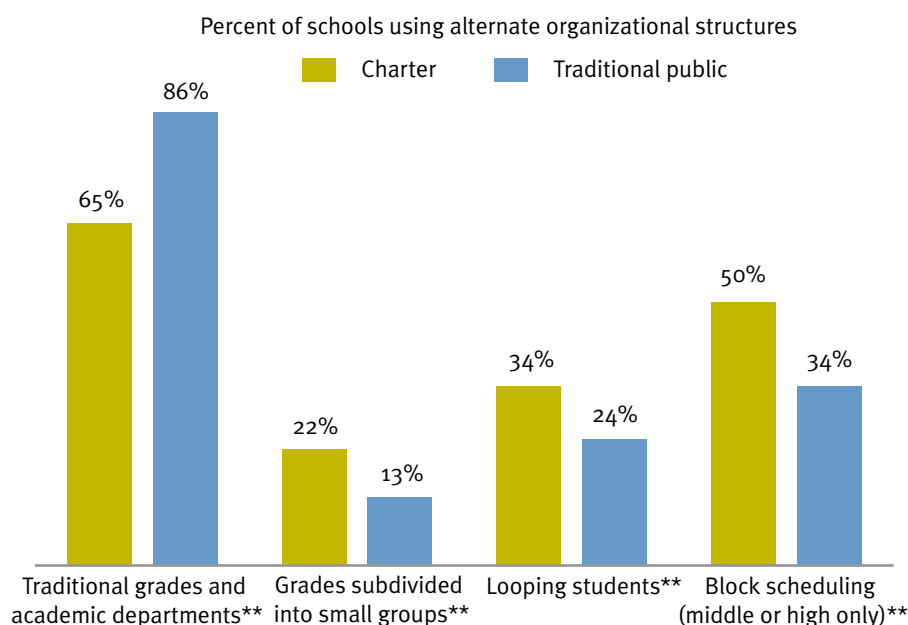
NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. Average class sizes were calculated using teacher-reported data from the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey Teacher Questionnaire. The analysis included teachers from schools in central cities, or the urban fringe of a central city, and excluded special education teachers and teachers in unconventional classroom structures (e.g. pull-out classes, team teaching, or elementary school enrichment such as physical education). All results have been weighted to be nationally representative of teachers in charter schools and traditional public schools.

Many charter schools move further outside the norm in the ways they organize time and grade levels, as well as their students and teachers.

NON-TRADITIONAL GRADE AND DEPARTMENT CONFIGURATIONS: Many charter schools, as shown in figure 6, move further outside the norm in the ways they organize time and grade levels, as well as their students and teachers. Charter schools are less likely to report using the traditional grade and department structures. As many as one-third of small urban and urban fringe charter schools say they do not organize their students into traditional grades and departments. By contrast, only 13 percent of similar traditional public schools say the same.

Relative to traditional public schools, charter schools are also more likely to subdivide their grades into teams or houses, while students in charter elementary programs are considerably more likely to spend multiple years with the same teachers—a practice known as “looping.” In addition, charter high school students, relative to their traditional public school peers, are more likely to take classes on a block schedule, which allows for extended instructional periods for classes (typically about 90 minutes). When the sample is no longer restricted to small schools, there is very little difference in the relative shares of schools using these alternative structures, suggesting that schools of 750 students or fewer are making these choices for programmatic reasons and not because they suit the school’s size.

FIGURE 6. CHARTER SCHOOLS ORGANIZE TIME AND GRADE LEVELS DIFFERENTLY



**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

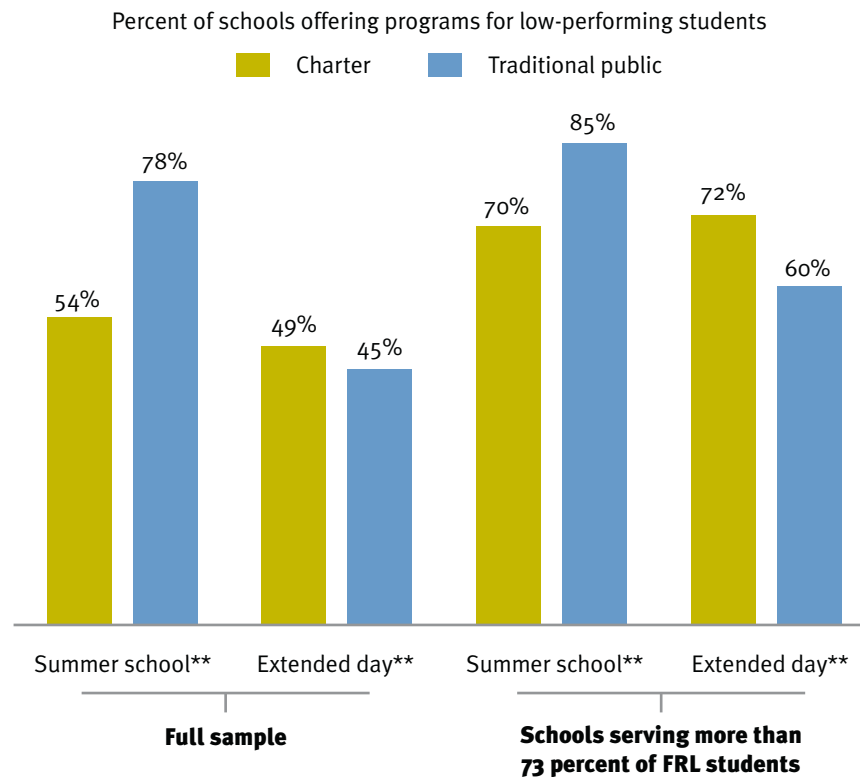
NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

It is interesting to note here that charter schools, which face significant resource constraints, are implementing—either deliberately or by circumstance—two high-cost strategies: longer school days in elementary and middle schools, and smaller class sizes in high schools.³ This is an important observation because, as noted above, charter schools seem to shy away from other potentially valuable but nationally recognized high school curriculum programs, suggesting that these schools most likely value the benefits of more time on task and smaller class sizes or cannot avoid the higher staffing costs involved.

FINDING #3: CHARTER SCHOOLS CUSTOMIZE SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

The SASS asks about summer school and extended-day programs—two well-known ways in which schools attempt to remediate and accelerate low-performing students. Public schools are more likely than charters to offer students at least one of these options: about 71 percent of charter schools and 85 percent of traditional public schools offer low-performing students at least one. However, charter schools are slightly more likely to offer extended-day programs, and substantially more likely to offer extended-day interventions in schools serving large proportions of low-income students. Across all charters, 49 percent offer extended-day programs, compared to 45 percent of traditional public schools. When it comes to schools with 73 percent or more of their enrollments made up of low-income students, nearly 75 percent of charter schools offer extended day, compared to just 59 percent of traditional schools.⁴

FIGURE 7. CHARTER SCHOOLS LIKELY TO OFFER EXTRA ACADEMIC SUPPORT, ESPECIALLY FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS



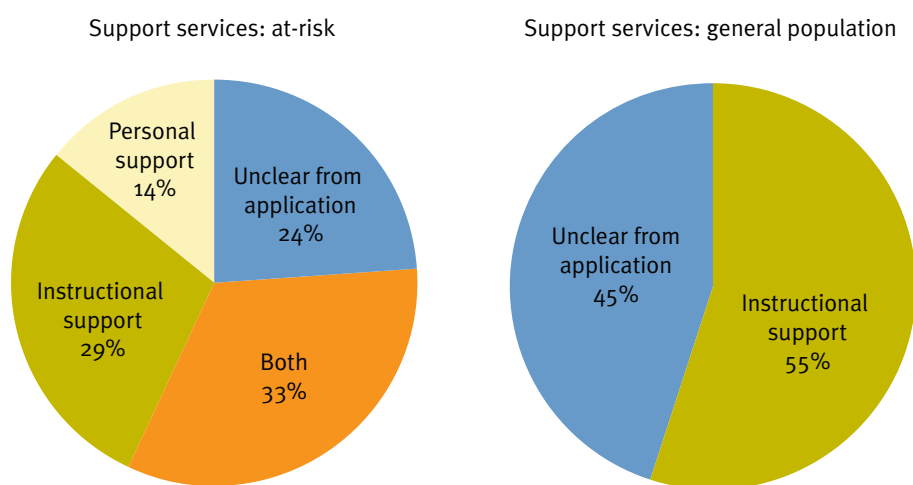
**Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

NCSRP's review of charter applications shows that summer school and extended day are just a sliver of the support services that are common in charter schools. Typical charter school instructional services include mandatory after-school tutoring, optional tutoring, college or other academic counseling, and post-graduate support. Many charter middle and high schools also offer personal support services including child care, counseling services, mentoring, health services, and job placement assistance.

TAILORED SUPPORT: As with the SASS results, this review of charter applications shows that schools targeting at-risk students employ different strategies than those serving a general population. In their applications, charter schools serving at-risk populations are more likely to describe an explicit intervention strategy and are more likely to describe strategies that employ both personal support services and instructional supports (see figure 8).

FIGURE 8. CHARTER SCHOOLS TAILOR SUPPORT FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

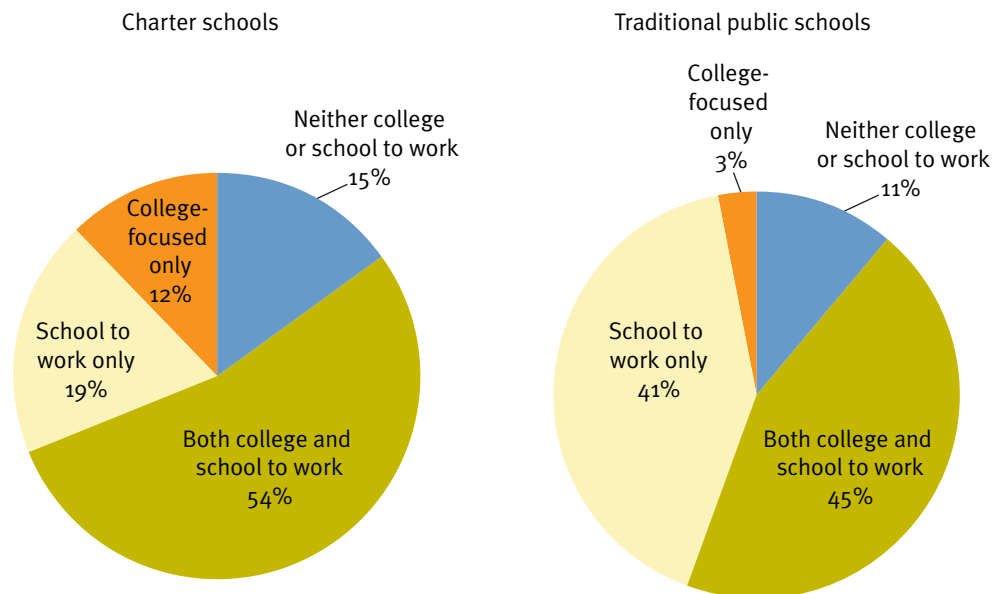


NCSRP's review of charter applications shows that summer school and extended day are just a sliver of the support services that are common in charter schools.

FINDING #4: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO OFFER COLLEGE- PREP COURSEWORK INSTEAD OF SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAMS TO HIGH- MINORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

Charter schools with high-minority⁵ populations are more likely to have an explicitly college-focused curriculum than are similar traditional public schools. Two-thirds (66 percent) of charters versus 48 percent of traditional public schools reported offering at least one college-focused program. By contrast, 73 percent of charter schools offered a school-to-work curriculum while 86 percent of traditional public schools did so. Even more striking is the fact that 41 percent of traditional public schools offered only school-to-work learning while only 19 percent of charter schools reported offering school to work without a college-focused option, suggesting that charter schools are much more likely to press minority students to be college-focused.

FIGURE 9. CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVING MINORITY STUDENTS OFFER A COLLEGE-FOCUSED CURRICULUM WHILE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS EMPHASIZE SCHOOL TO WORK



NOTE: Includes only schools serving high school-aged students and those with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. All differences are significant at a 95% level of confidence.

Charter schools with high-minority populations are more likely to have an explicitly college-focused curriculum than are similar traditional public schools.

CONCLUSION: SUBTLE BUT POTENTIALLY IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN

Innovation in education means different things to different people. To some it means doing something that has never been tried; to others it means putting strategies together in new ways. Those in the first camp may be dismayed that the instructional programs in charter schools in some ways look very much like those in traditional public schools. However, those in the second camp may look at these results and argue that many charter schools are innovating by stepping outside the norm to:

- create focused instructional designs;
- rearrange time to better suit learning goals via longer blocks of learning time and extending the school day and year;
- personalize attention by keeping students with the same teacher for multiple years and lowering class size;
- commit to extra support for struggling at-risk students while offering minority students access to a college-focused curriculum; and
- combine well-known supports and programs flexibly so as to tailor curriculum and instruction to student needs.

For now, it is clear that charter schools are focusing, choosing among, and subtly adapting many established educational strategies in hopes of meeting the needs of the students they serve. Whether or not these differences lead to better results is arguably the only aspect of innovation that matters.

NOTES

1. While the SASS has many strengths, including its breadth of questions and wide sample size, it also has weaknesses in relation to charter school-specific issues and school program offerings. The SASS was originally developed with the traditional public school in mind. However, there are five questions at the end of the SASS that pertain specifically to charter school authorizers and school founding. The questions surrounding the issues of curriculum and target population are not very detailed and many of the questions could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Because charter schools are only a small part of the SASS population, the survey developers chose not to include many questions that would have been relevant to only a minority of the respondents.
2. These are exactly the examples offered to survey respondents in the SASS.
3. Some charter school observers might argue that charter schools, which typically operate outside local collective bargaining agreements, often do not pay their teachers more money or even pay them less despite the longer school day and thus do not feel the cost of a longer school day. While these schools may not feel a direct cost from the longer school day, their teachers would bear the cost of the longer school day and the school would likely feel the effects as they compete for teachers in the local labor market.
4. For 25 percent of schools in NCSRP's sample, more than 73 percent of their students are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch.
5. Schools with 69 percent or more minority students represent schools in the highest quartile of minority concentration in NCSRP's sample of schools.

CHAPTER 3

Equal Opportunity: Preparing Urban Youth for College

Paul T. Hill

An advertisement on the San Francisco Bay Area Craigslist¹ website reads:

Want to teach some of the smartest kids in California? \$45,500 with full benefits and bonuses.

American Indian Public Charter School & American Indian Public High School are seeking self-contained middle and high school classroom teachers for the 2008–09 school year (report to work June 9, 2008).

No previous teaching experience required; we simply want smart, enthusiastic, and motivated individuals to push our students to new academic heights. Recent college graduates (including those graduating this May or June) are encouraged to apply.

Applicants with strong math backgrounds are especially desirable. Multicultural specialist and self-esteem experts need not apply; we require & reward hard work from our faculty & students, regardless of their backgrounds.

Submit resume, cover letter, and transcripts (official or unofficial) via fax or e-mail. We are hiring immediately!

This posting comes from a charter school—a demanding middle school aiming to get students started on the right foot for college, but a school that is not reserved for children of the elite but for inner-city, low-income minority students.

PORTRAIT OF A SCHOOL

Oakland's American Indian Public Charter School (AIPCS) has the assertive, no-nonsense tone that its Craigslist ad projects. And this unusual ad attracts the teachers that AIPCS's leaders want: Graduates of elite colleges, many in their late 20s, with science or mathematics backgrounds who, while they lack certification, have a passion for teaching disadvantaged students. People hired make more money than beginning Oakland public school teachers and work a longer school day, while also being expected to teach classes on Saturday and during mandatory summer school sessions.

Students, dressed in school uniforms, sit packed together in small rooms. Equally divided between boys and girls, the students are a remarkably diverse racial and ethnic stew. They are quiet and attentive. Nobody sleeps or wisecracks. Every seat is full and there are no students in the hall cutting class.

The school's spending priorities are transparent. Most of the money goes for teacher salaries. Textbooks and instructional materials are up to date but they are well cared for and re-used. School head Ben Chavis, a full-blooded Lumbee Indian who made his fortune in business, possesses a Ph.D. and once taught at San Francisco State University. He is unpaid, and the administrative structure of the school is tiny. Extracurricular activities—cross-country and debate—require neither equipment nor extra staff. The Spartan facilities are clean and meet code, but offer no amenities. Chavis ripped out all of the school's computers and created a "library" crammed on to a small stage, supplemented by weekly bookmobile visits. Several classrooms look out on abandoned boarded-up buildings, and students are expected to clean the grounds and bathrooms.

AIPCS is a middle school. Students study a curriculum that would be familiar to graduates of old-fashioned classics-oriented middle and high schools. Teachers stand in front of the class but engage it in rapid-fire question and answer exchanges, turning quickly to the blackboard to demonstrate a tough concept or to show how a new idea links with familiar ones. Teachers use North Carolina math, science, and history books, because Chavis believes California texts are watered down. Every class finishes the assigned

Students, dressed in school uniforms, sit packed together in small rooms. Equally divided between boys and girls, the students are a remarkably diverse racial and ethnic stew.

book. Students get help after school if they are falling behind, but the course material is presented on schedule.

There are few electives so that every student can focus on the math, science, history, and English courses that the school considers gatekeepers to competitive colleges. The school practices tough love, insisting that all students can master demanding course-work, if they focus their time and energies.

The school exercises authority to an end. Its disciplinary methods are controversial. One rule requires students who have not completed homework assignments to sit on the floor during class. Students accept the school's discipline and order. Girls as well as boys also accept Chavis's hard but pointed kidding about their effort and deportment. Chavis is unconcerned that these methods are controversial. He confronts visiting educators who complain about unenlightened methods and posts an abrasive set of "common sense" maxims on the school's website (see sidebar) that makes no secret of the school's contempt for what Chavis perceives to be the outlook and values of mainstream educators and educational theorists.

There are no vacancies at the school. Hispanic, Asian, and African American parents who are determined to have their children succeed and get into college lobby to get their children into the school and put up with its many demands on students' time. Parents, most of whom are single mothers or grandmothers, may visit the school, but they are not welcome to fret about workload or deportment standards.

Ironically, the school's strong academic reputation makes it difficult to keep the American Indian students who enroll, because academically prepared Native Americans get offered free rides at prestigious private schools. In 2007, the school posted the highest test scores of any school in Oakland. Its scores also bested Piedmont Middle School, a private school in a ritzy Oakland suburb with mostly white and Asian students. AIPCS's fledgling high school for ninth and tenth graders outscored storied Lowell High in San Francisco, generally considered to be one of the top high schools in the United States.

Parents, most of whom are single mothers or grandmothers, may visit the school, but they are not welcome to fret about workload or deportment standards.

COMMON SENSE & USEFUL LEARNING AT AIPCS

Dr. Ben Chavis

1. The school facility is open daily from 8:30am until 4:00pm, except Saturdays, Sundays, and all holidays known to mankind.
2. The staff of AIPCS does not preach or subscribe to the demagoguery of tolerance. Anyone who does not follow our rules will be sent packing with their rags and bags!
3. Squawkers, multicultural specialists, self-esteem experts, panhandlers, drug dealers, and those snapping turtles who refuse to put forth their best effort will be booted out.
4. Boot-licking or self-promoting is not allowed by any politician who enters our classrooms. Politicians should beware: teachers are on duty!
5. We do not believe standardized tests discriminate against students because of their color. Could it be many of them have not been adequately prepared to take those tests?
6. The staff does not allow students to wear hats, gold chains, or ear-bobs in the building. Adults are not allowed to use cell phones, beepers, and other gadgets in our school.
7. Dr. Chavis does provide psychological evaluations to quacks and Kultur specialists on a sliding scale. See him immediately for such rates.
8. All solicitors should note the nearest exit upon entering this institution of learning. We view such alley cats with a fishy eye.
9. No more than one psychologist or school administrator is allowed in our school at a time. This rule is part of our commitment to high academic standards.
10. Photographs of the Director of Staff are on sale at the front office. Payment must be made in advance. CASH ONLY! The photographs will be sent to you by pony express.
11. The staff of AIPCS is of the first rank. We request that you do not flirt with them. They will accept your cash donations!
12. Visitors are welcome daily. Due to the time it takes to re-educate university visitors, we are limiting their number to a maximum of four individuals a week.
13. It will be difficult for our staff to meet with those educational experts who "know it all." We are willing to meet with such tomcats on Halloween night.
14. How does anyone convince a Billy goat or taxpayer that school administrators possess above average intelligence? How will we address this educational dilemma?
15. Our staff does not subscribe to the back swamp logic of minority students as victims. We will plow through such cornfield philosophy with common sense and hard work!
16. If you wish to share any suggestions regarding this page, our common sense committee accepts suggestions from 8:30am to 8:31am each holiday.

SOURCE: <http://www.aipcs.org/CommonSense.html>.

A TREND

The National Charter School Research Project's *Inside Charter Schools* (ICS) initiative includes case studies of eleven charter high schools, four of which have a clear college-prep focus. News accounts suggest such schools are emerging in many big cities. Not all the college-prep charter schools that ICS visited are as flamboyantly led as the American Indian Public Charter School, or as traditional in their approaches to student and teacher roles. But they have a lot in common.²

Although they differ in many particulars, the new college-prep charter schools resemble urban Catholic high schools that offered a route to assimilation and economic mobility for Irish and Italian immigrants in the 20th century. These new schools are authoritative, demanding a lot while assuring students that meeting the school's demands will lead to new opportunities and success. School leaders justify rules in terms of their practical consequences for students, a set of attitudes closely related to what David Whitman calls "the new paternalism," the conviction that adults know more than students, educational staff know more than parents, and strong relationships involving obligations and demands need to be built between students and faculty.

Each school has, in its own way:

A DEMANDING INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE built around university preparatory material and the expectation that students will write and speak in ways that competitive colleges take for granted. Unlike urban public schools that teach watered-down math, science, and literature,³ and track less capable students into vocational courses, these schools teach what college-bound students are expected to know. Students often struggle, due to weak elementary school preparation, but they are motivated by the fact that the material they must learn is rich and interesting.

A CENTRIPETAL CURRICULUM, especially in high school, one that pulls all students toward mastery of key subjects. This is done by limiting the schools' course offerings and by making sure students who struggle with the material get extra help outside school hours, rather than missing core instruction.

Although they differ in many particulars, the new college-prep charter schools resemble urban Catholic high schools that offered a route to assimilation and economic mobility for Irish and Italian immigrants in the 20th century.

CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE PROGRESS OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, INCLUDING FREQUENT TESTING

, so that nobody falls far behind. Though some schools use technology (for example, databases informed by frequent testing), most rely on teacher effort. Staff meetings are used to identify students in trouble and make sure all teachers are working in the same direction.

COORDINATION AMONG TEACHERS to ensure that students learn what they need in one area (for example, mathematics) to do work assigned elsewhere (for example, science) and that teachers in all courses know what students have learned previously.

A STRONGLY MANAGED SCHOOL CLIMATE to protect students from distraction and minimize the amount of time and energy teachers devote to keeping order. Applicants to the school are told about expectations for student behavior and effort. Every adult in the school upholds the same standards, and older students are expected to act as models for younger ones.

OVERT BICULTURALISM, so that students learn the behavioral codes associated with higher education and professional work, while continuing to value their heritages and home languages. Like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), many of the schools that ICS visited formally teach rules for adult interaction—for example, sit facing the other person and look at him or her; nod to show you are listening; respond in full sentences. One school teaches golf and sponsors a field hockey team to compete with area prep schools.

VALIDATION OF THE SCHOOL'S EFFECTIVENESS by connecting students with graduates who are succeeding in high schools or competitive colleges. Schools celebrate college admission, for example, by posting pennants from schools that graduates will attend, or encouraging cheers for graduating seniors who come to school wearing their college sweatshirts. AIPCS also publicizes its results on all California tests and enters students in debate competitions.

The college prep charter schools that ICS visited have a lot in common but they are not all the same. Some target one ethnic group (Hispanics in Southern California and the Bay Area, African Americans connected to a church-based community develop-

Schools celebrate college admission by posting pennants from schools that graduates will attend, or encouraging cheers for graduating seniors who come to school wearing their college sweatshirts.

ment agency in Texas), while others attract a more ethnically diverse population of low-income or minority students from a large under-served area.

The college-prep charter schools studied also aggressively socialize their students to prepare them for entry into universities and the professions. The schools' methods vary, however. Some use chanting and communal events in ways reminiscent of KIPP. Others are more didactic, teaching ethics and holding group discussions on what Ted Sizer would call "essential questions." All put strong pressure on their teachers and administrators to adhere to school values in their own transactions with students and outside lives.

Though all these schools make sure students graduate with transcripts full of college prep courses, and prepare students for the SAT or ACT, they use a variety of teaching methods. Most of the charter schools visited make aggressive use of online materials; many spend time on project-based learning. Some place students in part-time white-collar jobs, so they can see firsthand the kind of work and life opportunities a college degree can bring.

No other charter school visited offered such high beginning teacher salaries or provided as austere an environment as the American Indian Public Charter School. Nor were they all as dismissive of traditional teacher certification. One California school is staffed by teachers from an elite university college of education—individuals who place great value on their own autonomy and the uniqueness of their classrooms.

However, all of these schools use the end goal of college admission as their guiding star. They orient student work on that goal and put course requirements and test preparation (as necessary) in that context. Managers of a coalition of four such schools in the Los Angeles area admit that their approach to instruction is evolving from progressive to standardized, as they learn what it takes to overcome immigrant and low-income students' educational disadvantages.

For those familiar with research on schools that are effective with poor and minority students, these attributes should be no surprise. At this level of generality the college prep charter schools offer students an experience very much like that of the Catholic schools studied by Coleman,⁴ Bryk,⁵ Hill,⁶ and Irvine.⁷ The common theme of all those studies was that schools offering supportive communities, demanding instruction, indi-

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vidual attention, and strong moral guidance are highly effective for low-income minority youth.

As Irvine concludes, schools must respect students' backgrounds, but they can also help students become members of broader communities with universal middle-class values. It is done by showing students that they have choices about how to act and where to direct effort, and by demonstrating that learning is possible, satisfying, and ultimately rewarding. Other schools not included in Irvine's study, including KIPP and the religiously themed Cristo Rey, have demonstrated the power of similar methods.

Schools like this are not for everybody. Academic demands are unrelenting, and a student who skips school or tunes out has no chance to succeed. Behavioral demands are too much for students who prefer the loose discipline prevalent in public schools. Children of university-educated professionals might not need the controlling environment or highly structured curriculum these schools offer, but many of these students do.

Such schools can transform students. Focus groups with high school students who transferred from unfocused and unruly schools reveal that these students admit to calibrating their work effort and behavior to what they saw other students doing, and therefore to what the school accepted as normal.

The schools described above are not for all educators either. But these schools have no trouble finding capable principals and instructors, including teachers trained in schools of education and teachers from alternative sources like Teach for America, who believe that thousands of capable young people are lost every year for want of an intellectually demanding environment.

WHAT CHARTERING CONTRIBUTES

There is little new about these schools. They provide a very familiar and well-proven form of education, and they provide students with the kinds of familial supports and middle-class role models that once made Catholic schools so important to poor European immigrants. But they are making it available to students for whom it was not previously available. Catholic schools' small size and high costs (and their dwindling numbers) strictly limit the numbers of students who can attend. Some districts offer a few good magnet schools that have been over-subscribed for decades.

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Reluctant to create competitors for their large comprehensive high schools and facing little pressure that low-income students will move to private schools or the suburbs, districts have ignored a real demand. Charters open a new supply route. Without chartering, these students, and the teachers and administrators that make the schools work, would not have the same opportunities.

The schools studied here were not lavishly spending foundation money. Most operated on the state funding provided charter schools. The American Indian Public Charter School now has funds from one relatively small foundation, one that was too tough to be frightened off by Ben Chavis' declaration, "We don't want your money!" All, however, get invaluable volunteer help from school heads, churches, or neighborhood associations.

College-prep charter schools for disadvantaged students are not easy to build or keep in operation. Principals and teachers must themselves be in command of difficult subject matter. They must also be dedicated to bringing students up to the same level. Adults who are accomplished in these ways have many other job options, and schools must constantly struggle to keep or replace them.

Among the schools studied, those most open to experimentation and teacher autonomy struggled to make sure courses fit together and students' experience accumulated over time. Schools that provide a more uniform program, like AIPCS, might be more stable and coherent in the short run, but will be gravely challenged when their founders leave.

Of all the necessary ingredients of a college-prep charter school, willing parents are the easiest to find. There is obviously an unmet demand for schools that value intellectual attainment and lead students to value hard intellectual work. Public school districts seem content to offer one or a few such schools, and to assume, regardless of whether they are oversubscribed, that enough is enough. Chartering opens up public education to new providers, and lets the supply of schools respond to demand.

The schools described here are relatively new, and they have not been subjected to the kind of formal evaluation that can assess their effectiveness, controlling for student characteristics and other factors. It seems clear, however, that parents and students believe these schools are working and that students are learning differently, compared to their experience in district-run middle schools. Parents also believe their children have valuable new opportunities.

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In cities like Oakland, where public education has struggled for so long and so many children have languished for lack of opportunities to learn, college-prep charter schools look like the best news in a long time.

Popular as they are with families, there really are not enough of these schools. They are hard to set up—absent a charter framework. They require powerful leaders, who may be in short supply. They also require dedicated teachers, many of whom might prefer the security of traditional schools. They may also affront the sensibilities of educators who believe every public school should be broad and comprehensive. They may also be no-win solutions to district administrators worried in a top-down accountability environment about the effects of encouraging schools to set their own schedules and purchase their own instructional materials. Teachers union leaders (with the possible exception of the American Federation of Teachers) are unlikely to sit by idly while very young teachers get paid above official pay scales to lead larger classes and work longer hours.

School leaders like Ben Chavis are not above rubbing salt in the wounds of people who feel affronted, offended, or worried. Antagonism is likely to continue, at least in some communities. However, as long as chartering is legal, schools fulfill the terms of their charters, and government agencies tasked with overseeing charters do their jobs, more such schools are likely to emerge.

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NOTES

1. [Http://sfbay.craigslist.org/](http://sfbay.craigslist.org/).
2. For a much more extensive analysis of college-prep charter schools, done independently of the ICS study but reaching similar results, see David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).
3. See Jeannie Oakes, Molly Selvin, Lynn A. Karoly, and Gretchen Guito, *Educational Matchmaking: Academic and Vocational Tracking in Comprehensive High Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992).
4. James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
5. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, et al., *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
6. Paul T. Hill, Gail Foster, and Tamar Gendler, *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1990).
7. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds. *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

CHAPTER 4

New Options for Serving Special-Needs Students

Robin J. Lake and Joanne Jacobs

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) launched a study to build empirical evidence about how charter schools are navigating the special education policy environment. NCSRP wanted to identify new or promising approaches to special education in the charter school community. The research focused on the following questions:

- Which special education challenges most seriously impact the growth and expansion of the charter school movement?
- Why do parents with special-needs children choose (or not choose) charter schools?
- What practices related to special education have charter schools or networks of charter schools adopted that could be considered innovative or especially promising for the traditional public education system to consider?
- What are the policy, research, and investment opportunities that could best address the challenges?

NCSRP will publish findings from this work in 2009.¹ These findings are worth attention and discussion from the broad public education community. Here are some of the highlights from our research:

- Despite the difficulties involved in maneuvering through complex legal and financial special education requirements, charter schools seem to be viable options for a large number of families with special-needs students.
- In fact, some charter schools have developed informal reputations as havens for special-needs students.
- Particularly with respect to the needs of students with less severe disabilities, the variety of instructional approaches offered by charter schools can serve as beneficial interventions for all students.
- Effective inclusion for students with less severe needs seems to be a particular strength of many charter schools.
- Some charter schools have used their autonomy to take innovative and very successful approaches to special education. Until now, these efforts have not been well recognized or discussed.

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Before examining some of the policy issues involved, it is enlightening to explore examples of how charter schools are effectively meeting the needs of children with disabilities. What follows are vignettes drawn from three different charter schools: CHIME Institute, Roxbury Prep, and Stockwell Academy.² The programs described range from those treating students with relatively straightforward learning disabilities to those treating students with far more severe challenges, including autism and Down syndrome. The schools, located in California, the Midwest, and New England, serve students from kindergarten through middle school, while one school plans to extend its program through Grade 12 in 2009. The programs emphasize school teamwork, mission, and student inclusion. In short, they emphasize the very things promoted by Public Law 94-142 (enacted in 1975) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, enacted in 1997).

CHIME INSTITUTE'S ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: TEAMWORK IS KEY

CHIME was started as a model demonstration project funded for three years (1987–1990) by the U.S. Department of Education. Originally, it was known as the Children's Center Handicapped Integration Model Educational (CCHIME) Project. Its goal was

to develop an effective model for providing special educational services at an existing child development program, housed at California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

Claire Cavallaro and Michele Haney, professors in the special education program at the CSUN College of Education, established the CHIME Institute. The founders established it as a private nonprofit corporation in August 1990, to extend the work of the earlier grant. The CHIME Charter Elementary School was established in fall 2001 and serves children from kindergarten through 5th grade. The CHIME Charter Middle School opened fall 2003. In 2007, the elementary school was named in honor of California's governor and his commitment to education.

Scenes such as the following are not unusual at the CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger School: Using a walker, a boy joins his friends at recess. A girl motions to an aide for her communications device. A boy pulls out his inhaler. Another leaves class to jump on a mini-trampoline set outside the door. An aide sets up flash cards, a tape player, and a stoplight timer for a first grader with Down syndrome, while his classmates discuss a story they've read.

What is interesting about these scenes is that they are accepted so matter-of-factly at CHIME. Children don't point or tease. They don't seem to notice. At CHIME, students are accustomed to differences. Some students are gifted, while about 15 percent of the students have disabilities ranging from mild to severe.

CHIME uses an old elementary school site in an affluent leafy neighborhood. But the students come from many different San Fernando Valley communities, representing 32 different zip codes. About half the students are Caucasian, one-third Hispanic, and the rest African American or Asian American. Most are mainstream students whose parents think the school offers something special. It's a diverse world, they say. Their kids will be ready to deal with it.

Co-teaching makes inclusion work. It really is all about teamwork. There's no such thing as a lonely teacher at the school. Special educators and paraprofessionals are pushed into classes to work with disabled students—and with other children who need help that day. Nobody is pulled out. After classes end, teachers, special educators, and aides meet in each classroom for 25 minutes to “debrief.” All are considered part of the teaching team.

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The school doesn't wait for students to get behind before offering extra help.

The school doesn't wait for students to get behind before offering extra help. A language and speech pathologist and a recreational therapist work with kindergartners at risk for reading problems. "We went from 15 at-risk kindergartners to 2," says Julie Fabrocini, the principal. Given help with phonological awareness, language, and speech, most will do well in first grade and never need special education.

The teachers make sure students know what's expected. Teaching behavioral expectations explicitly helps children on the autism spectrum, but it also helps everyone else. Classes include students who are variously gifted, typical, low-achievers, and disabled. Co-teaching, co-planning, and co-assessing make inclusion work, says teacher Rachel Knopf.

It's hard to find schools with so much commitment to making inclusion work. During her time as a teacher at a Chicago magnet school, Nina Adler, a parent of a child with cerebral palsy, "didn't have enough support to work with children with disabilities. There wasn't time for teachers to meet and talk about a child's needs." Now as a parent at CHIME, she feels she's part of a team with everyone working toward the same goal. "There's so much understanding and openness," she says.

For example, when Leo, a boy with autism and a lot of excess energy, feels himself losing control, he walks outside, jumps up and down on a small trampoline set up for him, and then runs around the building. When he's calmed down, he returns to class. At his previous school, an aide held him down when he couldn't sit still, says Principal Fabrocini.

Nancy Oliver, the mother of a non-disabled second grader, says she chose CHIME over excellent local schools because of its small size and its strong mission: "Everybody is here and everybody is welcome." She believes her son will learn life skills at the school that he wouldn't learn in a more conventional environment. Her son told her that he wished his "Big Buddy" would talk more but said they enjoyed painting together. She found out later the Big Buddy is unable to talk. Her son hadn't mentioned the older boy was disabled.

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ROXBURY PREPARATORY CHARTER SCHOOL: NOTHING SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION

Roxbury Preparatory Charter School serves grades 6–8 and focuses on preparing its students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college. Roxbury Prep is founded on the philosophy that all students are entitled to and can succeed in college preparatory programs when: 1) the curriculum is rigorous, engaging, and well planned; 2) the school emphasizes student character, community responsibility, and exposure to life’s possibilities; and 3) a community network supports students’ academic, social, and physical well-being.

There’s nothing special about how special education students are treated at Roxbury Prep. Most students don’t know who is officially classified with a disability and is entitled to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and who is not. Everyone is mainstreamed and many students who don’t have IEPs get extra help. “The reason why our special education program is successful is because our regular education is successful,” says co-director Dana Lehman. “We could designate most or all of our students as special ed. A lot of special ed is a way to get kids who are hard to serve away from teachers who don’t want to serve them,” according to Lehman. As a result, many of the accommodations typical of IEPs are standard procedure at Roxbury, says special needs coordinator Jamie Thornton. The school’s philosophy is that all students benefit from structure, monitoring, clear and repeated directions, and work that is broken into learnable chunks. “We think special ed kids for the most part can go to college,” Thornton says. “There’s a lot of over-identification as special ed.”

Some students find the school too difficult and choose to leave. But some surprise themselves. “We had a girl who was in my office all the time complaining the work was too hard,” says Jenna Leary, the learning specialist. “Now she’s in high school calling me to complain it’s too easy. She wants me to get her into honor classes.”

Martin Rios didn’t learn to read in elementary school, where he was partially mainstreamed. His mother, Carmen Rios, hoped he’d do better at a small middle school with individual attention and a longer school day. A friend urged her to look at Roxbury Prep. Her friend’s child lost out on the lottery. Martin was accepted. When Martin started sixth grade, he could read two words—“I” and “a”—says Leary. Martin and his younger brother, who has less severe reading problems, “are great thinkers but they can’t decode,” she adds.

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Her son has had to work much harder than ever before, Martin's mother says. "At the other school, homework was very easy; it could be done in half an hour. Now it takes two to three hours per night." Rios gets a weekly call from a teacher checking in with her. She comes to school about once a month to discuss Martin's behavior. All communications are provided in English and Spanish, her first language. "Here, I know what's going on in school." The school keeps pushing her son to do better, she reports.

THE CHARYL STOCKWELL ACADEMY: WHERE MISSION HAS MEANING

Like most schools, the Charyl Stockwell Academy (CSA) wants to provide a safe, enriching environment for young children to grow into adolescence. But the Academy's mission statement links that humanistic concern directly to academics: "CSA believes that meeting the basic human, growth and development needs of each child will increase achievement and prepare the child for adult life."

This powerful mission developed from a powerful source. After years working as administrators and teachers for special-education students, Chuck and Shelley Stockwell were told their daughter Charyl wasn't learning to read due to a learning disability. Actually, seven-year-old Charyl had a massive brain tumor. After going through surgery and chemotherapy, Charyl attended the Wayne County, Michigan school her father led as principal. The Stockwells decided to create a charter school that would teach children like Charyl—but not *just* children like Charyl. In 1996, they opened their school. In 2001, after their daughter's death, they renamed it the Charyl Stockwell Academy in her memory.

Chuck was the first executive director of the school; he now runs CS Partners, an educational consulting and management company that works with other charter schools. Shelley took over as executive director in time to start a middle school and expand enrollment. Next year, the school will initiate its move to becoming a K–12 by adding a ninth grade.

Although high-performing schools surround it, the Stockwell charter school has found it easy to attract students. Parents like the small classes, individual attention, and the promise that children will progress at their own pace. The school's character education program, which helps students develop self-control, is another draw. Parents of gifted

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children choose the school as well as parents who have been told their children are disabled. At the core of Stockwell's inclusion strategy is the belief that early intervention and excellent teaching can prevent many children from being diagnosed with disabilities. While schools often label 12 to 15 percent of students as disabled, the Stockwells believe only 3 to 4 percent have unpreventable disabilities.

Having spent years working in special education, the Stockwells were convinced that the traditional special education approach wasn't serving students' needs. The old model—special schools for disabled students—was abandoned in the eighties and nineties in Michigan. Mainstreaming saved money, but at a cost to students, Chuck says. Seriously disabled students got less help. Students with minor learning problems got labeled. "I'd gotten sick of special education," Chuck recalls. "We identified a lot of kids who never would have been considered disabled before. We created a whole new group of disabled students and then threw them away."

From the first, the Stockwells decided on multi-age classrooms. Chuck explains, "Not all five-year-olds belong in kindergarten, or six-year-olds in first, or seven-year-olds in second grade. Kids who don't meet that schedule we call 'learning disabled' or 'emotionally impaired' or 'cognitively impaired.' The difference between a kid with a 100 IQ and one with a 75 IQ is that the kid with the 75 needs more time to learn." At Stockwell Academy, two teachers work with a group of 40 students in a three-year age range. That allows students to be grouped by performance level in various subjects without being segregated.

Students in kindergarten through third grade and new students are screened for developmental issues such as gross and fine motor skills; sensory integration; self-control; ability to focus; and auditory, visual, and language problems.

Every child should be seen first as a general-education student, Shelley believes, "maybe with a glitch." Every teacher has to take responsibility for educating every student.

Children who lag behind are referred to a Teacher Support Team (TST), which analyzes why the child is struggling and comes up with strategies. Unlike the resource-room model, TST is "a very clear and focused intervention," Shelley says. "It's intense. If there's no progress, we change the program." The team profiles the child's health history and family issues. Does he sleep through the night? What does he eat? "We assess and

"Not all five-year-olds belong in kindergarten, or six-year-olds in first, or seven-year-olds in second grade."

"We assess and intervene, assess and intervene, assess and intervene."

intervene, assess and intervene, assess and intervene,” Chuck says. “Intervention is based on a theory of what’s going on.”

Parents of special-education students who enroll at Stockwell Academy sometimes say, “Get my kid out of special ed,” one teacher says. “We tell them to give us a year. Often they’re out after a year. They don’t need it.” By sixth grade, Stockwell’s special-education students outperform the average mainstream students of local districts, the teacher says.

Cognitively impaired students aren’t a problem, says Chuck. “What’s most difficult is dealing with kids who exhibit violent behavior.” Trained aides help by providing “sensory breaks” for students who get overwhelmed in class. An aide takes the child out of the room to run around the gym, do deep breathing exercises, or do heavy lifting to work off excess energy and calm down.

“The extremely gifted kids can be a challenge,” says Jessica Wojtowicz, who teaches five-, six-, and seven-year-olds. “I’ve got a five-year-old in my class who talks about another kid as his ‘arch-nemesis.’ But he can’t put on his shoes.”

Teachers must buy in to the program or go elsewhere, emphasizes Chuck. “You’re not coming here to do your own thing. We’re a vision-driven school. We don’t believe in academic freedom. We believe in mission.”

AN EXPENSIVE AND LEGALLY COMPLEX ENDEAVOR

Educating children with special needs is an expensive and legally complex endeavor, one that not all small, stand-alone charter schools can handle effectively. Based on its research, NCSRP suggests that funders and policymakers take a series of steps to build a more effective special-needs infrastructure to ensure that charters add overall benefit to the special-needs community.

First, funders and policymakers should explore the *policy* opportunities:

- Provide guidance regarding policy issues that are unclear in charter statutes.
- Equalize special education funding.
- Increase access to state special education service and support structures (for example, allow participation in cooperatives).

Educating children with special needs is an expensive and legally complex endeavor, one that not all small, stand-alone charter schools can handle effectively.

- Create incentives for authorizers and operators to collaborate on developing high-quality special education programs in charter schools.

Next, they should explore the *research* opportunities:

- Examine special education service provisions and outcomes in the charter sector.
- Explore the definition of “least restrictive environment” in the school choice context.
- Assess the academic growth of children with disabilities in charter schools.
- Identify new approaches to special education.

Finally, they should explore the *investment* opportunities:

- Incubate national, state, and regional technical assistance networks.
- Cultivate special education infrastructures (for example, special education cooperatives) and research tracking effectiveness and financial sustainability.
- Seed special education financial risk pools.
- Fund efforts to maximize special education revenue streams.
- Develop legal advocacy funds for charter schools.

The idea of charters (and choice more broadly) is that a greater diversity of schools permits parents to select the right “fit” for their children. Students with special needs represent a particular type of diversity, and their needs, by definition, are special. What seems clear from the review of these models (and others) is that many charter schools are able to do an excellent job of providing the right fit for these special students.

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NOTES

1. The reports to be published by NCSRP are: Tracey O'Brien, Kelly Hupfeld, and Paul Teske, *Challenges and Charter Schools: How Families with Special-Needs Students Perceive and Use Charter School Options*; Lauren Morando Rhim, and Dana Brinson, with Joanne Jacobs, *Exploring Success in the Charter Sector: Case Studies of Six Charter Schools Engaged in Promising Practices for Children with Disabilities*; and Lauren Morando Rhim and Bryan Hassel, *Special Education Challenges and Opportunities: Issues Influencing Growth and Expansion of the Charter School Sector and Related Policy, Research, and Investment Opportunities* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, forthcoming).
2. Vignettes are based on interviews by the author. Parent and student names have been changed throughout this chapter to provide anonymity.

CHAPTER 5

Encouraging Diverse Suppliers

Frederick M. Hess and Bruno V. Manno

Much of today's K–12 education discussion focuses on boosting the “supply” of quality district or charter schools. Such conversations typically emphasize creating new schools through charter school start-up funds; incubating charter management organizations through philanthropic measures; expanding voucher programs or lifting charter caps; or boosting public school choice programs, including through the public choice and supplemental service provisions of *No Child Left Behind*. Supply-side activities also feature measures to police the quality of these new schools through testing, *No Child Left Behind*-style accountability, and charter school authorizing. Much has been learned along the way, although we are far short of fostering a dynamic, quality-conscious supply side.

In these discussions, a lot of attention is also devoted to the demand side of the “supply-demand” equation. It consists largely of passionate rhetoric regarding the value of school choice, the number of parents seeking such choice, and efforts to make available the information families need to make wise decisions. Largely ignored is the demand for anything that is less than a complete school. So the need for textbooks, data analysis capability, or cost-effective educational strategies rarely enters the choice discussion.

Four related factors deserve mention on this count. First, there is a growing set of demand-side “consumers” who are neither parents nor traditional students. School districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) shop for different services to purchase rather than provide directly. Principals search for cost-effective reading and remediation programs. Teachers seek genuine professional development and effective

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assessment tools. Students who drop out or lose interest shop for an engaging learning environment that prepares them for adult success.

Second, new providers routinely seek to develop and supply “whole-school” solutions to education problems that seek to replicate the services and structure of traditional graded schools. This comes at the expense of more searching efforts to unpack the human capital, organizational, pedagogical, service delivery, operational, and technological challenges that bedevil K–12 schooling—and discover how to overcome them. The result is that new providers typically are expected to solve the entire problem of K–5 or 6–8 or 9–12 schooling in order to sit at the school improvement table. This sets a high and unrealistic bar for new, entrepreneurial problem-solvers, potential entrants, and tool-builders.

Third, in seeking new supply-side models capable of delivering more radical advances in instruction and educational delivery, familiar assumptions prove unnecessarily constrictive. For example, utilizing niche providers in profoundly more effective ways is inhibited by the presumption that all funding ought necessarily flow to a school building staffed by mostly full-time teachers, with a narrow focus on student selection of schools and test scores.

Finally, within the realm of “chartering” and “school choice” advocacy, many regard multiple supply-side choices, including today’s highly acclaimed CMOs, as the cutting edge, if not the “bleeding edge,” of school reform.¹ While efforts like the District of Columbia Opportunity Voucher Program, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Achievement First, and Green Dot deserve the acclaim they receive, they also reinforce conventional assumptions about what schools should look like and how they should provide services, deploy staff, and use specialized providers. Little attention is paid to the possibility that these efforts are unduly reliant on a limited pool of talent, philanthropic, and community resources that may not be replicable at the scale policymakers or reformers desire.

In short, the many solutions proposed to improve district and school outcomes exist within a web of policies, routines, contracts, and practices that constrain how they can address new challenges. Districts operate as a monopolistic general contractor, directly or indirectly supplying families and students with the services they deem appropriate. Districts (or CMOs) purchase and supply core academic services (for example, teachers, administrators, instructional materials) and subcontract for or indirectly provide support services (for example, transportation, food, janitorial services). These systems largely lack

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the incentives, capacity, dispersed autonomy, or political will to respond to new customer preferences.

MAPPING AND UNBUNDLING CHOICE

In the private sector and the best of the nonprofit social sector, it is routine for effective organizations to develop increasingly sophisticated maps of what consumers want and need, and how to deliver a product or service. In education, such refined maps are a pipe dream. The task today is to understand the basic educational demand curve; the price points and other costs that families, schools, educators, school systems, or the policy and civic communities are willing to pay for particular services; and how services might be unbundled—for example, how assessment, content provision, and tutoring might be provided by different individuals or groups, or in different facilities—and matched to demand.

School choice discussions, then, need to get past general praise for choice. In particular, they should be grounded in a more sophisticated segmentation of the needs of education consumers and proceed to consider the niche or specialized services that can assist various actors and respond to different demands.

Equally essential is the need to find systematic ways of helping policymakers, funders, and education leaders confront schooling challenges in manageable steps. Rather than constantly seeking to “solve” problems through policy and “whole-school” solutions, there is a need to address discrete challenges one at a time.

Ultimately, the challenge is to find the right fit between supply-side services and demand-side actors, to segment supply and demand so as to be clear about what consumer need is met with which offering. This approach to education’s social market is sorely needed.

SEGMENTING FAMILIES

How would such segmentation work in practice? A good illustration outside education is a data-driven typology of families developed by the Bridgespan Group for an analysis of Oakland, California’s Communities of Opportunity initiative. This is a community-

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based strategy for transforming San Francisco's southeastern neighborhoods.² The starting point for this initiative was a family-based view of the conditions faced by residents in the community. Families were differentiated into three categories.

- ***Families in chronic crisis:*** These families are experiencing crises like domestic violence or child neglect, have regular contact with child welfare agencies, strain to stay together as a functioning unit, and have children with very limited opportunities for success or healthy development.
- ***Families in a fragile state:*** These families earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, lack resources to remain resilient, and have children with limited opportunities for success or healthy development.
- ***Families that are self-sufficient:*** These families earn more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, live in stable homes costing less than 30 percent of their income, are not engaged with major child welfare agencies like the criminal justice system or foster care, and have opportunities for their children to be successful and healthy adults.

With this data-driven typology illuminating the different conditions and needs of each family, existing social programs and services were more effectively matched and delivered to families.

SEGMENTING STUDENTS: DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Some urban districts—for example, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago—now use student-level data from different public agencies to segment young people who are at risk of leaving school, targeting interventions that help them complete high school and make the transition to a job or further education. For example, a Philadelphia analysis uses information from the University of Pennsylvania Cartographic Modeling Laboratory to merge individual-level data on young people from the school district and the city's social service agencies, including the Department of Public Health, the Department of Human Services, and the Office of Emergency Shelter and Services.³

What emerges is a rich and textured portrait of local students in several groupings. This analysis is able to pinpoint two 8th-grade factors and one 9th-grade factor that give students at least a 75 percent probability of leaving school. With this knowledge, schools are able to identify those at risk of leaving school and work with a coalition of education and social service providers to help these young people finish their education.

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Boston has identified predictive factors that lead to four mutually exclusive segments of students who are most at risk of falling off track to graduation. The factors account for nearly 75 percent of all eventual dropouts. District leaders are expanding a range of educational environments and services that will help these young people stay in and complete school.

SEGMENTING STUDENTS: POST-SECONDARY MATCHING

Another school-based example focuses on a retrospective analysis of how educational supply and demand can be matched and mismatched.⁴ This analysis examines a sample of Chicago high school seniors who aspired to complete at least a four-year degree and undertook the college application process.

The study's segmentation of students (the demand side) is based on several data sources, including performance in high school courses, ACT scores, and involvement in college preparatory Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate coursework. The selectivity and segmentation of colleges (the supply side) is based on *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*.⁵

The general conclusion of this analysis is startling. Only 27 percent of students are matched with what are, in the analysts' view, appropriate colleges. About two-thirds (62 percent) end up attending a college with a selectivity level below their given level of qualification. Only 11 percent were in colleges at about their given level of qualification. Most of the mismatch occurs with students enrolling in two-year colleges or not enrolling at all.

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SEGMENTING SERVICES AND MARKET NICHEs

One pivotal shift implicit in taking the demand seriously is to move from the mindset that successful providers need to duplicate the services of a school or district to an alternative where providers *address discrete problems for particular clients*. In each case, the purpose of an innovation is not to replace the entirety of a school or school system but to provide a particular service that benefits students, schools, or school systems. In other words, the hunt is not for the elusive "100 percent solution" but for one-hundred different "one percent solutions."

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There are a growing number of examples of how this might occur. The New Teacher Project identifies promising teachers and supports human resource development. New Leaders for New Schools selects and prepares principals. Wireless Generation advances literacy instruction; Spectrum K12 provides special education services; Presidium Learning offers back-office support; Standard and Poor's provides state-level data analysis; and ProActive School provides information-technology solutions. None of these providers tries to duplicate all the services a school district or an individual school might offer. In each case, the aim is not to replace or replicate a school but to provide a particular service to students, schools, or school systems.

One advantage of this approach is that it allows providers to become good at one thing and slowly expand their reach.

One advantage of this approach is that it allows providers to become good at one thing and slowly expand their reach. Michael Dell was able to start small by selling hand-assembled personal computers. Amazon.com began by selling nothing but books. Microsoft provided software, but never sought to offer the hardware available from more formidable existing competitors. If Amazon.com had been regarded as serious only if it had been able to displace all the services provided by Barnes & Noble, or if Microsoft had been expected to compete with IBM in selling computers, software, and consulting services, it is questionable that either would have succeeded.

Yet, there is a clear bias in education toward “whole-school” replacement, an expectation that entrepreneurs should open completely new schools, not simply deliver a single, important advance. This expectation makes it more difficult for specialized providers to attract funding or support and distracts them from developing, refining, and delivering a particular service or product.

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Efforts to promote school accountability, including the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act, generally aggravate this tendency by embracing the “whole-school” mindset. On the one hand, these accountability systems are beneficial for supply-side activity because they illuminate areas of need and provide a measuring stick that policymakers and practitioners can use to gauge the effectiveness of traditional systems and new providers. This is a crucial advance from the old approach of input regulation, with its emphasis on dollars spent and student attendance. Such metrics provide no opportunity to gauge the quality of entrants, new or old.

On the other hand, new accountability systems emphasizing reading and math performance in grades three to eight and high school completion are currently crafted to evaluate academic progress on a school-wide basis. This is useful for whole-school com-

petitors, but it makes it difficult for niche providers to demonstrate their worth. More broadly, the focus on NCLB-style test results has not been accompanied by serious progress in determining how effective a provider is at recruiting teachers, offering professional training, or meeting needs in K–2 literacy coaching, foreign language instruction, or data analysis. The ability to measure the effectiveness of niche services and steer funds accordingly is essential to this.

Philanthropies and state governments can play a key role here by supporting the development of demand-side maps and identifying and targeting resources toward underserved niches. As noted earlier, most CMOs are today focused on similar challenges. This may make sense, given the primacy of the racial achievement gap, but the strategy should be more fully discussed by policymakers and funders intent on maximizing the potential of philanthropic capital.

CONCLUSION

In the increasingly sophisticated, complicated, and dynamic social market that is education, the dominant demand constituencies will include not only families but also consumers of various services, including schools, systems of schools, educators, policymakers, and the wider community. The key task is to match supply with an increasingly complex segmentation of demand.

Such an approach raises concerns of its own. For example, in “unbundling” K–12 provision, how will the essential roles of legitimate and responsible providers be determined? The question is easier asked than answered. It must, however, be addressed through assessment and evaluation if the opportunities presented by new technologies, tools, and ventures are to be realized.

Some will shake their heads at this approach, suggesting it is too complicated. Such concerns are reasonable. There are three considerations to offer in response. First, be clear about the problem. We are *not* suggesting that individual families will typically be using a number of service providers. We are suggesting that schools, school systems, and other supply-side providers need much more agility when they weigh the benefits and cost-effectiveness of niche providers, with these intermediary organizations assembling, bundling, and then assisting in matching and providing services.

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Second, waves of substantial rethinking always entail some distress and complication on the front end more than they do later. The breakup of AT&T or the emergence of the Internet entailed shaking out, confusion, and noise—much of which later abated as new norms and arrangements emerged in the changed environment.

Finally, disruptive innovation is always messy. But such disruption is the cost of progress. As Clayton Christensen demonstrates in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, cost-effective innovations that ultimately upend established routines are key to performance breakthroughs.⁶

For all the varieties of reform bruited about in recent decades, the core of K–12 schooling has remained remarkably stable. It is precisely the fruit of that legacy that reformers bemoan. We are suggesting that the current system, with its crude arrangements and disinterest in niche provision, is probably not capable of operating in profoundly more effective and productive ways. The ultimate choice may be between segmentation and mediocrity.

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NOTES

1. A synonym for “cutting edge,” the term implies a greater degree of risk. Frequently applied to technologies that are new and probably imperfect.
2. Barry Newstead, Joe Doctor, and Don Howard, *Communities of Opportunity: Case Study* (San Francisco: The Bridgespan Group, November 2006).
3. See the Youth Transition Funders Group for further information on these four school districts: <http://www.ytfg.org/mpgresources>.
4. Consortium on Chicago School Research, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College* (University of Chicago, 2008).
5. Guide published annually by Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
6. Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1977). See also his discussion of education in *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

APPENDIX

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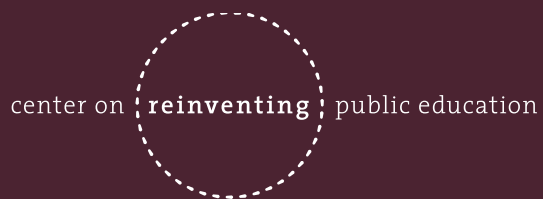
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