RESEARCH BRIEF

Teacher Turnover in Charter Schools

David Stuit and Thomas M. Smith

JUNE 2010

The rapid growth in charter schools during the past two decades has occurred despite inconclusive evidence that they are academically superior to their traditional public school counterparts. The discrepant findings from five rigorous studies released in the last six years underscore this point: one study found positive effects (Solomon & Goldschmidt, 2004); three found mixed effects (Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005; Sass, 2006); and one found negative effects (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

The current study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the organizational conditions of charter schools by examining teacher turnover. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)[1] and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS),[2] researchers from the National Center on School Choice looked at how teacher turnover differs between charter and traditional public schools and the extent to which these differences are explained by variations in teacher characteristics, school organizational conditions, and contextual factors such as demographic characteristics. In addition, the study examined how

KEY FINDINGS:

- The rate that teachers leave the profession and move between schools is significantly higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools.
- Charter schools that are started from the ground up experience significantly more attrition and mobility than those converted from traditional public schools.
- Differences in teacher characteristics explain a large portion of the turnover gap among charter and traditional public school teachers.
- Dissatisfaction with working conditions is an important reason why charter school teachers are significantly more likely to switch schools or leave the profession.
- Involuntary attrition is significantly higher in charter schools.

Turnover and School Quality

In this study, turnover is defined as both voluntary and involuntary attrition from the profession and mobility between schools. High turnover is expected to have detrimental effects on school quality for a number of reasons:

1. Teachers with strong academic backgrounds are most inclined to leave the profession (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Manski, 1987; Monk, 1994; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991; Podgursky, Monroe, & Watson, 2004), presumably because they have marketable skills and knowledge outside the field of education.
2. Attrition is highest among teachers who are new to the profession (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, & Hamilton, 2003), before they have developed into optimally effective teachers. Moreover, exiting new teachers often are replaced by similarly inexperienced teachers, and, consequently, students in schools with high turnover may rarely be exposed to experienced teachers.
3. Turnover affects many of the organizational conditions important to effective schooling, such as instructional cohesion and staff trust.

1 The SASS is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics to a stratified random sample of public and private schools and teachers.

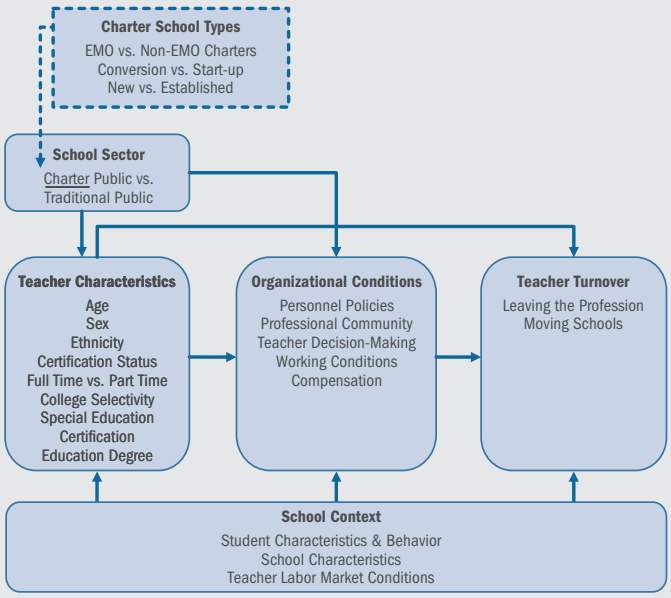
2 The TFS is administered to a sample of teachers that participated in the SASS in the previous year, some of whom switched schools or left the teaching profession. In this study, the TFS sample was used solely for descriptive analysis of the reasons given by teachers for leaving the profession or moving between schools.

turnover varies within the charter school sector.[3] Central questions of the study were:

- How does the rate of teacher turnover differ between charter schools and traditional public schools?
- How do teacher turnover rates vary within the charter school universe, and which types of charter schools have higher/lower turnover rates?
- To what extent are the differences in turnover rates between charter schools and traditional public schools explained by differences in teacher characteristics?
- To what extent are the differences in turnover rates between charter schools and traditional public schools explained by differences in organizational conditions and contextual factors?
- What reasons do charter school teachers give for leaving the profession or moving between schools, and how do these reasons differ from those given by traditional public school teachers?

The study ultimately was interested in the relationship between school sector (charter school and traditional public school) and teacher turnover (attrition and mobility). Researchers hypothesized that the difference in turnover between sectors ("the turnover gap") was due partly to systematic differences in the characteristics of charter and traditional public school teachers. They also hypothesized that the turnover gap was due partly to differences in the organizational conditions of charter schools and traditional public schools, which may stem from charter schools' autonomy from many of the rules and regulations that govern traditional public schools. In addition, they expected turnover to be affected by the context of the school.

Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between School Sector and Teacher Turnover



Charter school teachers leave the profession and move between schools at significantly higher rates than teachers in traditional public schools. The odds of a charter school teacher leaving the profession versus staying in the same school were 130 percent greater than those of a traditional public school teacher. Similarly, the odds of a charter school teacher moving to another school were 76 percent greater.

Charter schools that are started from the ground up experience significantly more attrition and mobility than those that are converted from traditional public schools. Teachers at start-up charter schools were almost twice as likely to leave the profession and almost three times as likely to switch schools as teachers at conversion charters. This finding aligns with Buddin and Zimmer's (2005) conclusion that conversion charter schools behave more like traditional public schools than start-up charter schools. EMO-managed charter schools did not have significantly different turnover rates than their non-EMO counterparts. There also was not a significant difference in teacher turnover between new charter schools and those that have operated for more than three years.

Differences in teacher characteristics explain a large portion of the gap in turnover rates among charter and traditional public school teachers. Charter school teachers were on average younger than traditional public school teachers, which makes them more likely to leave the profession or change schools. In addition, charter school teachers were more likely to be part time and less likely to have an education degree or state certification of any type. The odds of an uncertified teacher leaving the profession were 200 percent greater than those of certified teachers, and part-time teachers were found to be twice as likely to leave teaching as their full-time

3 The study postulated that turnover rates will vary depending on (1) whether the school has contracted with a for-profit education management organization (EMO), (2) whether it was converted from a traditional public school or was a start-up charter school, and (3) whether it is a new school (in its first three years of operation) or an established school.

peers. Simply put, charter schools tend to hire people who are at greater risk of both leaving the profession and switching schools.

Dissatisfaction with working conditions is an important reason why voluntary teacher mobility is significantly higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools. The most common reason given by charter school teachers for voluntarily leaving the teaching profession was that they were dissatisfied with the school.[4] Furthermore, 47 percent of charter school teachers who voluntarily switched to different schools did so because they were dissatisfied with either the workplace conditions[5] or administrator support in their previous schools. The data lend minimal support to the claim that turnover is higher in charter schools because these schools are leveraging flexibility in personnel policies to remove underperforming teachers. Rather, most of the turnover in charter schools is voluntary by teachers and dysfunctional (i.e., detrimental to the school) rather than functional (i.e., beneficial to the school). These findings support those of Miron and Applegate's (2007) study of charter school teacher attrition, which found that charter school teachers were "voting with their feet" and leaving charter schools because of dissatisfaction with workplace conditions of the schools.

Involuntary attrition is significantly higher in charter schools. This finding may stem from the fact that charter schools have fewer regulatory barriers to dismissing poor-performing teachers but also may be due to other factors, such as school closings due to charter revocations or the dismissal of uncertified teachers in order to comply with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's Highly Qualified Teacher mandate.

Policy and Research Implications

Teacher turnover is a critical issue within K–12 public education. High turnover is expected to have detrimental effects on school quality and to result in substantial financial costs to schools and districts. These expenses arise from a range of activities, including moving the teacher from the school, recruiting and hiring a new teacher, and training the new teacher. Therefore, it is important to understand the nature of turnover as well as the factors that explain why it is higher in some schools than in others.

Collectively, the findings from this study illuminate a critical challenge facing charter schools and may explain in part why they do not systematically outperform their traditional public school counterparts. The rates of both attrition and mobility for charter schools are high by any standard. Although this study found minimal evidence that charter schools are taking advantage of their more flexible personnel policies to remove underperforming teachers, the greater cause of the higher attrition and mobility rates in charter schools is teachers choosing to leave out of dissatisfaction with the school and/or its working conditions. The organizational disruption caused by this high level of dysfunctional turnover likely makes it more difficult for charter schools to develop and sustain high levels of instructional quality from year to year.

4 Although not causally linked to teacher dissatisfaction, 54 percent of charter schools were located in urban areas, compared with 31 percent of traditional public schools. Charter schools served slightly more economically disadvantaged students than the sample of traditional public schools. In addition, 62 percent of traditional public schools enrolled more than 500 students, compared with only 21 percent of charter schools.

5 Teachers in schools where the average work week is more than 60 hours are 61 percent more likely to leave the profession than stay in the same school. The data also show that charter school teachers were more inclined to leave the profession or switch schools in search of better salaries or benefits.

References

Bifulco, R., & Ladd, H. (2006). The impacts of charter schools on student achievement: Evidence from North Carolina. *Education Finance and Policy, 1*(1), 50–90. Retrieved May 20, 2010, from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/edfp.2006.1.1.50

Booker, K., Gilpatric, S., Gronberg, T., & Jansen, D. (2004). *Charter school performance in Texas.* Unpublished manuscript, Texas A&M University–College Station.

Buddin, R., & Zimmer, R. (2005). Student achievement in charter schools: A complex picture. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 24*(2), 351–371.

Hanushek, E., Kain, J., & Rivkin, S. (2004). Why public schools lose teachers. *Journal of Human Resources, 39*(2), 326–354.

Hanushek, E., Kain, J., Rivkin, S., & Branch, G. (2005). *Charter school quality and parental decision making with school choice* (NBER Working Paper No. 11252). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Henke, R., Chen, X., & Geis, S. (2000). *Progress through the teacher pipeline: 1992–93 college graduate and elementary/secondary school teaching as of 1997* (NCES 2000-152). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 20, 2010, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000152.pdf

Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002). Teacher sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24*(1), 38–62.

Manski, C. (1987). Academic ability, earnings, and the decision to become a teacher: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. In D. Wise (Ed.), *Public sector payrolls* (pp. 291–316). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCaffrey, D., Lockwood, J. R., Koretz, D., & Hamilton, L. (2003). *Evaluating value-added models for teacher accountability.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved May 20, 2010, from http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG158.pdf

Miron, G., & Applegate, B. (2007). *Teacher attrition in charter schools.* Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Research Unit and Boulder, CO: Education and the Public Interest Center. Retrieved March 26, 2010, from http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPSL-0705-234-EPRU.pdf

Monk, D. (1994). Subject area preparation of secondary mathematics and science teachers and student achievement. *Economics of Education Review, 13*(2), 125–145.

Murnane, R., Singer, J., Willett, J., Kemple, J., & Olsen, R. (1991). *Who will teach? Policies that matter.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Podgursky, M., Monroe, R., & Watson, D. (2004). The academic quality of public school teachers: An analysis of entry and exit behavior. *Economics of Education Review, 23*(5), 507–518.

Sass, T. (2006). Charter schools and student achievement in Florida. *Education Finance and Policy, 1*(1), 91–122.

Solomon, L., & Goldschmidt, P. (2004). *Comparison of traditional public schools and charter schools on retention, school switching, and achievement growth.* Phoenix, AZ: The Goldwater Institute. Retrieved May 20, 2010, from http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/file/3285/download/3285

This brief is supported by the National Center on School Choice, which is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (R305A040043). All opinions expressed in this paper represent those of the authors and not necessarily the institutions with which they are affiliated or the U.S. Department of Education. All errors in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors. For more information, please visit the Center website at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/.

The NCSC is funded by a five-year, $13.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Its lead institution is Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The center is housed on the campus of Peabody College, one of the nation's top graduate schools of education.

National Center on School Choice

Box 459 GPC, 230 Appleton Place
Nashville, TN 37203
Phone: 615-322-8107

Website: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/

NATIONAL CENTER ON School Choice

VANDERBILT ® PEABODY COLLEGE

4413_06/10

Conducting innovative, independent research on school choice in all its forms