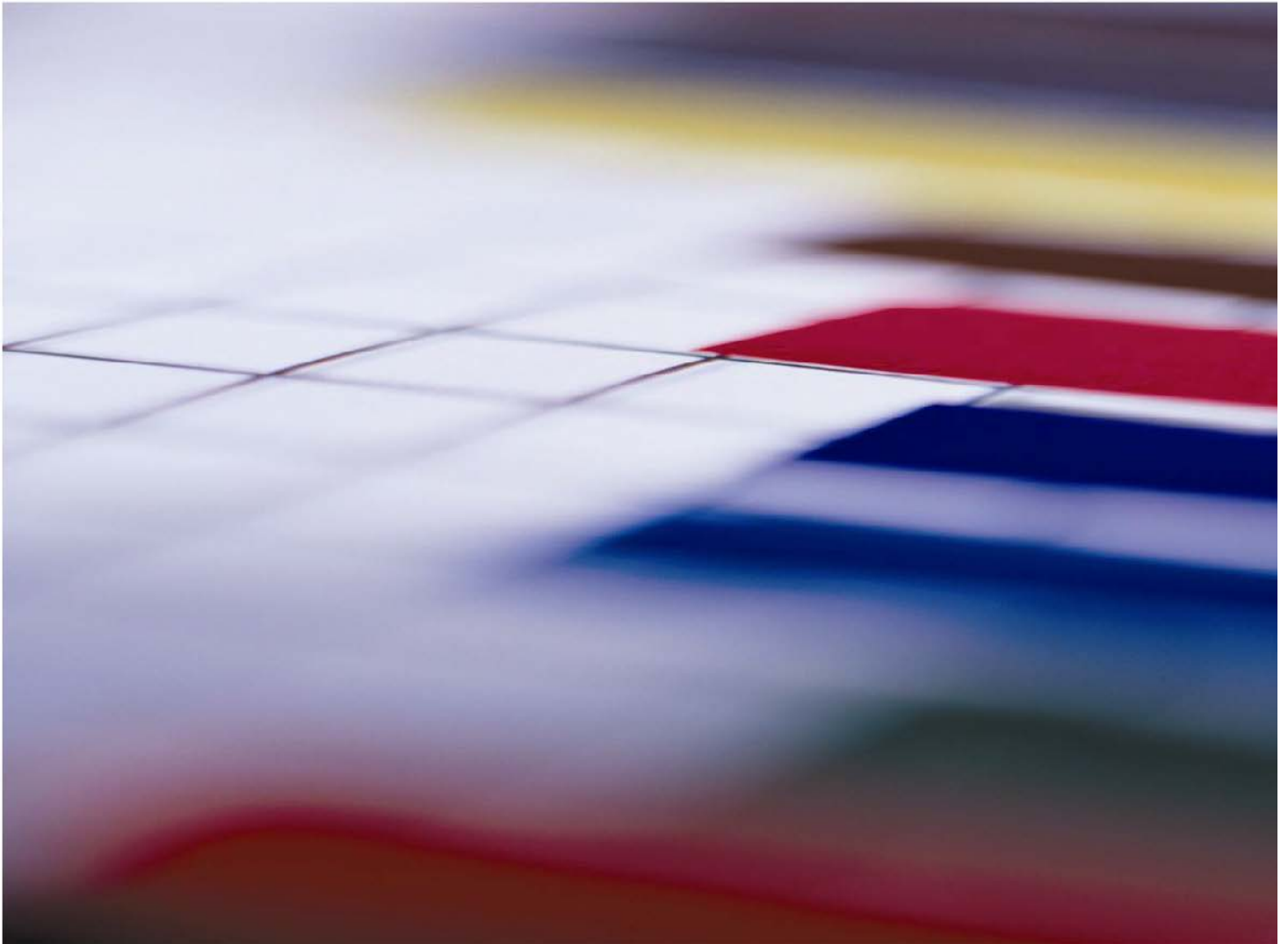




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Fourth Year Evaluation of Tennessee Charter Schools 2006-2007





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January 2008

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Preface

In 2002, Tennessee passed its first Public Charter School legislation. Four schools were successful in gaining approval to begin operating in the 2003-2004 academic year. The second cohort of three charter schools began operation during the 2004-2005 academic year, with the third cohort of five schools starting-up during the 2005-2006 academic year. No new schools were added during the 2006-2007 academic year. According to the charter school law, these charter schools were granted “maximum flexibility” to achieve alternative ways for public schools to educate school children. Though the flexibility granted to these schools is considered an advantage, previous research on charter schools has demonstrated mixed results in their success.

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the charter schools. A “mixed-methods” design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed. The questions upon which the evaluation methods are based relate to the progress of individual schools and the overall group in implementing desired strategies for curriculum, instruction, and organization, and in attaining the goals of No Child Left Behind by bringing every child to proficiency in reading and mathematics on the TCAP by 2014. It should be noted that student achievement will be more fully examined in a supplemental report when student-level data become available.

The work was conducted by the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), a state of Tennessee Center of Excellence, located at The University of Memphis.

Executive Summary

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the Tennessee charter schools. Six evaluation questions guided the methodology for this study. Student achievement results (Question 1) are addressed in a separate report. The following evaluation questions (2-6) are addressed in this report.

2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?
3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?
4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?
5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?
6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

Overview of the Charter Schools

An overview of the schools is provided in the following table. A description of each school is provided in the full evaluation report.

School	Cohort	Level	Grades (06-07)	Enrollment (06-07)	Location
Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA)	1	Elementary	K-5	120	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS)	1	Middle	6-8	270	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Science & Engineering (MASE)	1	Secondary	6-10	560	Memphis
Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA)	1	Elementary	K-4	174	Nashville
City University of School of Liberal Arts (CityU)	2	Secondary	9-11	240	Memphis
Star Academy	2	Elementary	K-4	200	Memphis
Yo! Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts	2	Secondary	9-12	160	Memphis
KIPP Academy Nashville	3	Middle	5-6	120	Nashville
Memphis Business Academy (MBA)	3	Middle	6-7	115	Memphis
Promise Academy	3	Elementary	K-1	115	Memphis
Soulsville Charter School	3	Middle	6-7	120	Memphis
Southern Avenue Charter School for Academic Excellence	3	Elementary	K-2	103	Memphis

Cohort 1 started in 2003-2004

Cohort 2 started in 2004-2005

Cohort 3 started in 2005-2006

No new schools were added in 2006-2007

Method

A mixed methods design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed. The instruments used in the data collection were: (1) School Observation Measure (SOM[®]), (2) Rubric for Student Centered Activities (RSCA[®]), (3) School Climate Inventory (SCI[®]), (4) principal interview, (5) teacher focus group, (6) student focus group, (7) Charter School Teacher Questionnaire, (8) Charter School Parent Questionnaire, and (9) Program Implementation Benchmarking.

A “site researcher” from CREP was assigned major data collection responsibility for each charter school. This individual and support research staff visited the assigned school several times during the year to conduct the observation visits, administer the questionnaires, and conduct the interview and focus groups. In addition, the site researcher worked with the school leadership team to develop “implementation benchmarks” describing beginning, intermediate, and full implementation phases and associated evidence indicators. At the end of the year, the site researcher met again with the leadership team to determine and identify the phase that had been achieved for each benchmark. Data from all instruments were then used to prepare individual school formative evaluation reports indicating status and progress during the year.

Results

Question 2¹. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?

As was true in previous years, teacher-centered instruction was the dominant orientation across schools, grade levels served, and cohorts. For many schools the time spent in direct instruction increased and mostly surpassed the percentages observed in this category for elementary and secondary school classrooms nationally. Most charter schools were not considered to be strong in the category of student-centered instruction. Half of the schools were rated as moderate in this category, and five of the 12 schools were rated as low. In terms of higher order instruction (i.e., higher order questioning and feedback), no schools were rated as strong in this category, with the large majority rated as low (8 of the 12 schools). Although the presence of higher-order strategies was not extensive in the national samples, the charter schools did not tend to compare favorably in terms of frequency or strength of application to support students’ higher-order learning. The results for technology usage were similar to those obtained in previous years in that it was the least prevalent category of instruction across charter schools. Of the 12 schools, 11 were rated as low in this category. In most cases the levels of technology use and the strength of its application to support learning did not compare favorably with national norms.

Question 3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?

Overall, school climate remains a clear strength of these charter schools. The quantitative SCI data indicated that 8 of the 12 schools were rated as strong and the remaining four were rated as moderate. The moderate ratings were due to declines in school climate scores or scoring at or below the national averages. The qualitative data also suggested a favorable school climate, with strong to moderate ratings for all 12 schools. Those schools with moderate ratings tended to have discipline or student absence/tardiness problems that impacted order in schools. With respect to other trends across time, we found some decline (from strong to moderate) in school climate among five of the charter schools (MAHS, MASE, CityU, KIPP, and Southern). As noted previously, much of the decline was due to problems with student discipline and order.

Question 4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?

¹ Question 1 is addressed in a separate report.

Patterns of results by cohort were detected. Not surprisingly, the most advanced levels of implementation were observed among 1st and 2nd cohort schools in their 4th or 3rd years of operation, respectively. Patterns across categories were also detected. Across all schools, the strongest levels of implementation tended to be for benchmarks targeting curriculum, organization, and evaluation. Findings related to these benchmarks were encouraging and progress was apparent. The lowest levels of implementation were associated with the category of instruction. The benchmark documents featured lofty goals, and leadership teams commonly judged that these instructional goals had been achieved. However, observation data did not support these accomplishments. Several schools increased grade levels, enrollments, or moved to new buildings, compounding the challenge of achieving long-term goals.

Question 5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?

In general, teachers' reactions to and experiences with these charter schools have remained favorable across years. In particular, responses related to teachers' understanding of the educational mission, support for the program, and expectations for student success have been extremely positive. This trend was evident in both the quantitative and qualitative data resulting strong ratings for all charter schools in this category. Teachers also view their professional development experiences as adequate and described a wide array of professional development initiatives to support student learning. Perceptions of resources were more varied with most charter schools evaluated to be moderate in this category. Typically schools had high ratings on some resources and low ratings on others, with several schools identifying technological resources as inadequate. Teachers' reactions to support provided to their charter school tended to be less favorable than in other categories. In nearly all cases, a perceived lack of support from the State Department of Education and local educational agencies (e.g., the school districts) was apparent. Across categories, no clear findings by cohort were detected.

Question 6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

Parent satisfaction was strong in 11 of the 12 charter schools. Both parent rating scale data and their open-ended responses supported these findings. Recurring strengths identified across schools included the small class or school environment, high expectations for student success, a challenging curriculum, and high caliber, caring teachers. Although most responses were favorable, some common themes related to resources were identified as in need of improvement. Parents cited the need for transportation, more extracurricular activities, specialized classes, additional grade levels served, and building expansion or renovation. With respect to parental involvement, the findings suggest that strong levels of satisfaction do not necessarily correspond to high levels of involvement. As was true in previous years, ratings in the category of involvement were more varied. There were no patterns in results detected by years of operation (cohort).

Recommendations

Due to a consistent pattern of findings across years, the recommendations are similar to those presented in previous reports. Based on the overall findings, the following recommendations apply to the charter schools as a group and not necessarily to individual schools.

The first recommendation is for these charter schools to adopt a wider array of effective instructional orientations or strategies closely aligned with corresponding I implementation benchmarks. The integration of technology into the classrooms to enrich learning and foster higher-ordering thinking may be a good starting point. More focus on a variety of effective pedagogical strategies in professional development initiatives might be beneficial for diversifying instruction.

Second, although school climate was a commendable strength of the charter schools, order and discipline could be improved at some schools. School leadership teams may want to re-evaluate and perhaps revise policies related to student conduct, discipline procedures, and attendance. Benchmark

indicators targeting order might be developed to better formalize strategies. Professional development initiatives might also target classroom management and discipline strategies.

The third recommendation is to continue efforts to increase active parent involvement or participation. Furthermore, the definition and types of parental involvement might be reconsidered. In some school improvement plans, involvement translates into support for and understanding of the mission and educational program or maintaining regular contact. In others, it specifies more active participation in parent organizations, school activities, and the provision of academic support for students. Both are necessary and important, and both might be included on benchmark documents that identify more specific strategies used to encourage involvement coupled with more objective evidence to indicate their effectiveness.

The fourth recommendation is to prioritize, coordinate, and secure more resources. The selection of targeted resources would be guided by the school improvement plan. Any planning for the garnering of additional resources related to technology might include an emphasis on how to incorporate technology in support of classroom instruction. To be prepared for 21st Century careers, charter school students should have more exposure to technology, particularly in developing application skills. Additional resources may be obtained by working toward achieving a collaborative, supportive relationship with the school district, state educational agency, and external partners, which leads to our next recommendation.

The sixth recommendation is to continue efforts to develop supportive, collaborative relationships with the school district and external partners. Strategies include having more open channels of communication and holding meetings to clarify policies, procedures, and available resources. Furthermore, representatives of charter schools should continue to seek the support and assistance of various external partners. Publicity and notices in the form of newsletters, invitations to school functions, and community events might be used in conjunction with direct requests for assistance to promote more involvement from businesses, community groups, colleges, and parents.

Finally, benchmark documents need to be modified to better align with objective indicators and available data. In particular, more objective indicators that are more easily measured would better help determine whether goals have been realized. Results and data from this report, independent classroom observations, and student outcome results exemplify more objective evidence that might be provided to document goal attainment. An honest, accurate appraisal of the extent to which benchmarks have been successfully implemented will enhance school improvement efforts.

Fourth-Year Evaluation of Tennessee Charter Schools (2006 – 2007)

This report presents results from the evaluation by the Center for Research in Educational Policy of the charter schools operating in the State of Tennessee. The first cohort of four schools began operation in the 2003-2004 academic year and have completed their fourth full year of operation. The second cohort of three schools completed their third academic year, and the third cohort of five schools completed their initial year of operation during the 2005-2006 academic year. No new schools opened during the 2006-2007 academic year. By way of historical background, the passage of the first charter school law and establishment of the first charter school occurred in Minnesota in 1991. As of September 2007, approximately 4,100 charter schools were operating in the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2007). Additionally, under the No Child Left Behind legislation, children who attend schools identified as needing improvement have the opportunity to enroll in charter schools located within their district (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

In 2002, the state of Tennessee passed its first public charter school legislation. According to this law, charter schools were intended to receive “maximum flexibility” to achieve alternative ways for public schools to educate school children. Although this legislation marks an important precedent in Tennessee policy, it is equally important to determine and document the effectiveness of charter schools relative to traditional schools in promoting effective educational practices and raising student achievement.

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the Tennessee charter schools. A “mixed-methods” design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed, as will be described in the following sections. The questions upon which the evaluation methods are based relate to the progress of individual schools and the overall group in implementing desired strategies for curriculum, instruction, and organization, and in attaining the goals of No Child Left Behind by bringing every child to proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014.

In the following section, evaluation questions and the assumptions from which they were derived are presented. Table 2 shows each question with associated data collection tools, which in turn will be described in more detail in the Methodology section.

Charter School Assumptions and Associated Evaluation Questions

1. Assumption: The major goal of school reform (i.e., specifically the creation of a charter school) is to raise student achievement and improve educational outcomes (attendance, socialization, etc.).
 - Question: What are the immediate and long-term impacts of the charter school implementation on student achievement?
2. Assumption: High student achievement is fostered by effective teaching.
 - Questions: (A) What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools? (B) What is the frequency of usage of selected instructional strategies associated with best practices? (C) How do charter instructional practices compare to those reflected in national norms?
3. Assumption: Positive educational outcomes at schools are fostered by positive school climate.
 - Questions: (A) What is the level of school climate at each charter school? (B) Does school climate improve over time? (C) How do charter school climate outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?
4. Assumption: To impact schools positively, educational reforms must be properly implemented.

- Question: To what degree and levels of quality are the identified goals and strategies of each charter school being implemented?
5. Assumption: To be implemented effectively, educational reforms must have teacher support, sufficient professional development, and adequate resources.
- Questions: (A) What are teacher reactions to and experiences in TN charter schools? (B) What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and needed resources?
6. Assumption: The effectiveness and sustainability of educational reform and intervention programs are enhanced when students' families are supportive and involved.
- Questions: (A) What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with TN charter schools? (B) To what degree and in what ways are caregivers involved with each charter school?

Methodology

Description of the Charter Schools

As noted, four schools comprise the first cohort, three comprise the second cohort, and five schools were included in the third cohort. Table 1 presents an overview of the schools by cohort. A more detailed, narrative description of each school follows the table.

Table 1. Overview of Schools

School	Cohort	Level	Grades (06-07)	Enrollment (06-07)	Location
Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA)	1	Elementary	K-5	120	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS)	1	Middle	6-8	270	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Science & Engineering (MASE)	1	Secondary	6-10	560	Memphis
Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA)	1	Elementary	K-4	174	Nashville
City University of School of Liberal Arts (CityU)	2	Secondary	9-11	240	Memphis
Star Academy	2	Elementary	K-4	200	Memphis
Yo! Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts	2	Secondary	9-12	160	Memphis
KIPP Academy Nashville	3	Middle	5-6	120	Nashville
Memphis Business Academy (MBA)	3	Middle	6-7	115	Memphis
Promise Academy	3	Elementary	K-1	115	Memphis
Soulsville Charter School	3	Middle	6-7	120	Memphis
Southern Avenue Charter School for Academic Excellence	3	Elementary	K-2	103	Memphis

Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA). COSLA is an urban school located in Memphis that emphasizes literacy and fine arts. COSLA enrolled a total of 120 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. All were African American, and most (80%) were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. COSLA's staff consisted of six fulltime teachers, one part-time teacher, a curriculum coordinator, and five teacher assistants. The student to teacher ratio was 10:1 (including assistants). COSLA follows the Memphis City Schools calendar.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS). MAHS served approximately 270 students in grades 6-8. All students were African American, with the majority (86%) eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The school employs 18 fulltime teachers, with a student to teacher ration of 15:1. An extended day (7:30 – 4:00) is utilized. The curriculum is a standards-based, interdisciplinary program that incorporates interdisciplinary projects and experiential learning centered on a health science theme. The school moved to another facility in 2006-2007, and now operates at Heritage Baptist Church in the Berclair community in northeast Memphis.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE). During 2006-2007, MASE was housed in two separate campuses, serving middle and high school students, respectively. A total of 560 students in grades 6 – 10 attended MASE. The students were predominantly African American (96%) The students were served by 29 fulltime teachers, a guidance counselor, a dean of students, assistant principal, and academic intervention officer. The student to fulltime teacher ratio was 19:1. The school day was 8:00 – 5:30.

Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA). Smithson-Craighead Academy is an urban school located in Nashville. The school is housed in an older building which previously served as an elementary school within the Nashville Metro District School System. Approximately 174 students in grades K – 4 attended the school. The students were predominantly African American (99%) and eligible for free or reduced price lunch (97%). The school maintained a staff of ten full-time teachers, two part-time teachers, and 10 paraprofessionals. The student to fulltime teacher ratio was 18:1. The mission of the school is to meet the academic and social needs of at-risk children through mastery of basic academic skills, student self control, obedience, and diligence. Smithson follows the same calendar as the district and continues to offer a summer school session. The school also offers several popular after-school programs and a variety of extra-curricular activities.

City University School of Liberal Arts (CityU). CityU is located in a Baptist church in an urban area of Memphis. The school enrolled 311 students in grades 9 - 12. Most (93%) of the students were African American, and 62% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The school's faculty consisted of 15 fulltime teachers and two part-time teachers. The student to teacher ratio was 26:1. The curriculum developed and employed at CityU is a rigorous college preparatory program rooted in the Kolb Theory of experiential learning. Students attend school from 8:00 – 3:15, with 9th grade Academy students staying to 4:15 four days per week.

Star Academy. Star Academy is located in northeast Memphis. The school is housed in a former preschool building on the grounds of a Baptist church. Approximately 200 students in grades K – 4 attended the school. The student population was predominantly African American (99%), with approximately 88% qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. The school maintained a staff of 10 fulltime teachers, one part-time teacher, and four paraprofessionals. The student to fulltime teacher ratio was 20:1. The primary focus of Star Academy is “back to basics,” with an emphasis on literacy and mathematical competencies. The school operates from 7:30 – 3:00 three days per week and 7:30 – 4:00 on two days.

Yo! Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts. Yo! Academy of Visual and Performing Arts is located in southwest Memphis in an industrial warehouse site, a facility used as part of the Yo! Memphis youth opportunity program, originally funded by the U. S. Department of Labor. The school served 160 students in the ninth through twelfth grades. All students were African American and 92% were eligible for free or reduced price meals. The school maintained a staff of 10 fulltime teachers, two part-time teachers, and two paraprofessionals. The student to fulltime teacher ratio was 11:1. The mission of the school is to provide at-risk students with a safe environment to pursue rigorous academic preparation while incorporating the visual and performing arts. The school's program includes longer days with performing arts classes scheduled in the latter part of the day. The school day is from 8:00 – 2:45.

KIPP Academy Nashville. KIPP Academy is located in a high-poverty section of east Nashville in a previously abandoned building owned by the Metropolitan Nashville Public School System. The school served 120 students in grades 5-6. Most (95%) of these students were African American and 85% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The school maintained a staff of seven fulltime teachers, two part-time teachers and one speech pathologist. The student to teacher ratio as reported by KIPP Academy was 17:1. The school was chartered as a Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and lists its characteristics and unique school features as “Work Hard,” “Be Nice,” and “Be Honest.” The school is distinguished by several extensions to the typical school calendar: extended school hours; Saturday school held two weeks out of each month; and an extended school year with a four week summer program.

Memphis Business Academy (MBA). MBA is located in downtown Memphis. The school served 115 sixth and seventh grade students. Almost all (99%) were African American and 92% were eligible for

free or reduced price lunch. The school employed eight full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, and one paraprofessional. The student to teacher ratio was 19:1. The school incorporates business education, entrepreneurship and financial responsibilities into the core curriculum. The standard school day is from 7:30 – 3:15.

Promise Academy. Promise Academy is located in Memphis and currently housed in St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Of the 115 students served in grades K – 1, 97% were African American and 90% were eligible for free or reduced price lunches. Six fulltime teachers served the students, with a student to teacher ratio of 20:1. The school's mission is "to prepare children to excel in the nation's most rigorous high schools. Our central and only work is to teach and inspire the mind, body and spirit of our children so that they can succeed in any academic or cultural setting." The educators at Promise Academy want their students to learn and excel and want to provide that opportunity in a unique atmosphere that the students would not experience in most elementary schools. The school day is from 7:30 – 4:30.

Soulsville Charter School. The Soulsville Charter School is located on the same property as the historic Stax Museum of American Soul Music, known as Soulsville, USA. The school served 120 students. All students were African American and 90% qualified for free or reduced price lunch. Seven fulltime teachers were employed, resulting in a student to teacher ratio of 20:1. The school incorporates a concentration on orchestra and musical skills development into the core curriculum developed by Memphis City Schools. The school's plan includes extended school days (8:00 – 5:00) and half-day Saturday classes.

Southern Avenue Charter School for Academic Excellence. Southern Avenue Charter School for Academic Excellence is located in Memphis and housed at Greenwood Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, near the University of Memphis campus. The school served 103 students in grades K – 2. In addition to the basic curriculum, "kaleidoscope" activities such as art, music, ballet and tae kwon do are offered. The school also offers Spanish once a week. The school calendar and school days are extended at Southern Avenue, with "kaleidoscope" classes beginning at 3:00 in the afternoon. The school supplements the students' education with reading and math tutorials during an after school program, which runs from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm.

Instrumentation

Instruments used for data collection were developed and validated by the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP). A description of each instrument is provided below. A summary of the instrumentation employed to address each research question is provided in Table 2. The standard data collection schedule is shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Evaluation Questions by Instrument

Evaluation Questions	Instruments
1. What are the immediate and long-term impacts of the charter school implementation on student achievement?	Analysis of achievement data
2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative instructional strategies? What is the quality of usage of selected instructional strategies associated with best practices? How do charter school outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?	SOM RSCA
3. What is the school climate at the charter school? Does school climate improve over time? How do charter school climate outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?	School Climate Inventory (SCI) Teacher Focus Group Student Focus Group Principal Interview
4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?	Implementation Benchmarks Teacher Focus Group Principal Interview CSTQ SOM RSCA
5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?	CSTQ Teacher Focus Group Principal Interview
6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school? To what degree and in what ways are caregivers involved with the school?	Parent Survey Principal Interview Teacher Focus Group Student Focus Group

Table 3. Data Collection Outline

Instrument	Timeline	Description
Benchmark training, development, revision	Fall	Train school Principal and Staff; develop draft document; refine existing document
SOM	Fall Spring	6 three-hour observations
Rubric for Student-Centered Activity (RSCA)	Fall Spring	Same as SOM Data Collection
Principal Interview	Spring	1 hour interview
Charter School Teacher Questionnaire (CSTQ)	Spring (Faculty Meeting)	Teachers complete the questionnaire (part-time faculty can also complete)
School Climate Inventory (SCI)	Spring (Faculty Meeting)	Professional staff complete inventory (part-time faculty/staff can also complete)
Parent Survey	Spring	Parents/caregivers complete the survey
Teacher Focus Group	Spring	1 hour group interview
Student Focus Group	Spring	30-50 minute group interviews
Benchmarking Review	Late Spring	Principal/Staff review progress

School Climate Inventory (SCI).

The School Climate Inventory (SCI) was developed by researchers at the Center for Research in Educational Policy, at The University of Memphis in 1989. Since that time, the instrument has been used for school-based improvement planning in schools and school districts in several states, and has proven to be especially valuable for the monitoring and management of change initiatives.

The SCI consists of seven dimensions logically and empirically linked with factors associated with effective school organizational climates. Each scale contains seven items, with 49 statements comprising the inventory. Responses are scored through the use of Likert-type ratings [strong disagreement (1) to strong agreement (5)]. Each scale yields a mean ranging from 1 to 5 with higher scores being more positive. Additional items solicit demographic information.

Face validity of the school climate items and logical ordering of the items by scales were established by the research team during the development of the inventory (Butler and Alberg, 1991). Subsequent analysis of responses collected through administration of the inventory in a variety of school sites substantiates validity of the items. Scale descriptions and current internal reliability coefficients, obtained using Cronbach's alpha, appear in Table 4.

Table 4. School Climate Inventory Internal Reliability and Scale Descriptions

Scale	Internal Reliability	Description
Order	$\alpha=.8394$	The extent to which the environment is ordered and appropriate student behaviors are present
Leadership	$\alpha=.8345$	The extent to which the administration provides instructional leadership
Environment	$\alpha=.8094$	The extent to which positive learning environments exist
Involvement	$\alpha=.7582$	The extent to which parents and the community are involved in the school
Instruction	$\alpha=.7453$	The extent to which the instructional program is well developed and implemented
Expectations	$\alpha=.7275$	The extent to which students are expected to learn and be responsible
Collaboration	$\alpha=.7417$	The extent to which the administration, faculty, and students cooperate and participate in problem solving

School Observation Measure (SOM).

The SOM was developed to determine the extent to which different common and alternative teaching practices are used throughout an entire school (Ross, Smith, & Alberg, 1998). The standard, or whole-school, SOM procedure involves observers' visiting 10-12 randomly selected classrooms, for 15 minutes each, during a three-hour visitation period. The observer examines classroom events and activities descriptively, not judgmentally. Notes are taken relative to the use or nonuse of 24 target strategies. At the conclusion of the three-hour visit, the observer summarizes the frequency with which each of the strategies was observed across all classes on a data summary form. The frequency is recorded via a 5-point rubric that ranges from (0) Not Observed to (4) Extensively. Two global items are used to rate, respectively, the level of academically-focused instructional time and the degree of student attention and interest.

The SOM strategies include traditional practices (e.g., direct instruction and independent seatwork) and alternative, predominately student-centered methods associated with educational reforms (e.g., cooperative learning, project-based learning, inquiry, discussion, technology use as a learning tool). The strategies were identified through surveys and discussions involving policy makers, researchers, administrators, and teachers, as those most useful in providing indicators of schools' instructional philosophies and implementations of commonly used reform designs (Ross, Smith, Alberg, & Lowther, 2004).

To ensure the reliability of data, observers receive training, a manual providing definitions of terms, examples and explanations of the strategies, and a description of procedures for completing the instrument. After receiving the manual and instruction in a group session, each observer participates in sufficient practice exercises to ensure that his/her data are comparable with those of experienced observers. In a reliability study (Lewis, Ross, & Alberg, 1999), pairs of trained observers selected the identical overall response on the five-category rubric on 67% of the items and were within one category on 95% of the items. Further results establishing the reliability and validity of SOM are provided in the Lewis et al. (1999) report. In a reliability study using Generalizability Theory, Sterbinsky & Ross (2003) found reliability at the .74 level for 5 SOMs conducted at a school. Reliability increased to .82 with 8 SOMs and to .85 with 10 SOMs conducted at a school.

Rubric for Student-Centered Activities (RSCA).

The Rubric for Student-Centered Activities was developed by CREP (Lowther, Ross, & Plants, 2000) as an extension to SOM. The RSCA is used by observers to more closely evaluate the degree of learner engagement in seven selected areas considered fundamental to the goals of increasing student-centered learning activities (cooperative learning, project-based learning, higher-level questioning, experiential/hands-on learning, student independent inquiry/research, student discussion, and students as producers of knowledge using technology). These strategies reflect emphasis on higher-order learning and attainment of deep understanding of content, and whether or not technology was utilized as a component of the strategy. Such learning outcomes seem consistent with those likely to be engendered by well-designed, real-world linked exercises, projects, or problems utilizing technology as a learning tool.

Each item on the RSCA includes a two-part rating scale. The first is a four-point scale, with 1 indicating a very low level of application, and 5 representing a high level of application. The second is a Yes/No option to the question: "Was technology used?" with space provided to write a brief description of the technology use. The RSCA was completed as part of SOM observation periods.

To ensure the reliability of data, observers receive training consisting of terms, examples, and explanations of the target strategies, and a description of procedures for completing the instrument. After receiving the manual and instruction in a group session, each observer participates in sufficient practice exercises to ensure that his/her data are comparable with those of experienced observers.

Charter School Teacher Questionnaire.

This questionnaire was designed to assess teacher perceptions about the school in the areas of professional development, support, pedagogical change, and outcomes. Included on the questionnaire are 20 closed-ended items using a five-point Likert-type scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree), and the following four open-ended questions: What do you see as positive or most successful aspects of your charter school?; What do you consider to be negative aspects or areas in need of improvement at your school?; In your opinion, what makes a charter school (like this one) different from a regular public school?; and, Any other comments you would like to make regarding your experiences as a charter school teacher?

Charter School Parent Questionnaire.

This instrument was designed to obtain parent perceptions of the school in areas such as instruction, curriculum, communication, and opportunities for involvement. Included on the questionnaire are 17 closed-ended items using a five-point Likert-type scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree), and the following four open-ended questions: What are the strengths of this school?; What would you like to see improved at this school?; In your opinion, what makes a charter school (like this one) different from a regular public school?; and, Any other comments you would like to make about this school or charter schools in general?

Focus groups and interviews.

To supplement the survey data, site researchers at each charter school conducted a principal interview, a teacher focus group, and a student focus group. The time period for each was approximately 30 – 60 minutes for each interview. Teacher and student participants were randomly selected to participate. A semi-structured protocol, involving standard questions with flexibility for follow-up on selected responses, was used. In all three protocols the basic questions concerned experiences during the year, differences from regular (non-charter) schools, reactions to major school components (e.g., teaching methods, curriculum, parent involvement), perceived strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement.

Procedure

A “site researcher” from CREP was assigned data collection responsibility for each charter school. This individual and support research staff visited the assigned school several times during the year to conduct the SOM visits, administer the questionnaires, and conduct the interview and focus groups. In addition, the site researcher worked with the school leadership team to develop “implementation benchmarks” describing beginning, intermediate, and full implementation phases and associated evidence indicators for major school components in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and organization. At the end of the year, the site researcher met again with the leadership team to determine and identify the phase that had been achieved for each benchmark. Data from all instruments were then used to prepare individual school formative evaluation reports indicating status and progress during the year, as well as the present evaluation report.

Results

In this section, the findings are organized by research question. First, the findings from the 12 charter schools by cohort are summarized separately for each question. The findings are then integrated across schools and cohorts to address each of the research questions.

Question 2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?

Data collected via the School Observation Measure (SOM) and the Rubric for Student-Centered Activities (RSCA) were used to gauge the frequency with which various traditional and alternative instructional strategies were observed in the charter schools. More specifically, patterns in results were organized under four different categories of instructional orientation and strategies: teacher-centered, student-centered, higher-order instruction, and technology usage. Independent seatwork was considered a more traditional, teacher directed orientation because students are primarily doing work prescribed by teachers and often in combination with direct instruction. The findings from the observations conducted in the charter schools were compared to the national normative data available for the SOM and RSCA. For reference purposes, these norms are provided in Appendix A. In addition to comparing the observational data to norms, we also noted trends in the results across years. All charter schools were in their second (Cohort 3), third (Cohort 2), or fourth year (Cohort 1) of operation, which defines their membership in different cohorts.

Cohort 1.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. Direct instruction was the most prevalent instructional strategy or orientation observed at COSLA, and this finding is consistent with results obtained in the previous three years. It was observed extensively to frequently 67% of the time. This percentage is comparable to the percentage reported for the national sample of elementary schools. The teacher acting as coach or facilitator was either frequently or extensively observed 17% of the time but occasionally observed 83% of the time. The percentages in these categories were higher than those obtained last year, but somewhat lower than the rates reported in the normative data, particularly in the frequently or extensively observed categories. The only other strategy observed frequently or extensively was student discussion (17%) and this rating was comparable to the national sample (14%). More notable was the instructional strategies or orientations not observed. Strategies targeting technology usage and higher-order instruction were not frequently observed. This finding is supported by RSCA data that showed small percentages in somewhat strong or strong application of higher-order and student-centered strategies. The findings for COSLA in these categories do not compare favorably to either SOM or RSCA national norms.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. Instructional strategies and orientations were similar to those reported in previous years. The teacher-directed approaches to instruction have remained high at MAHS. The use of direct instruction was rated as frequent or extensive in all observations (100%). Independent seatwork, another more traditional strategy, occurred frequently or extensively during 83% of the observation visits. Both percentages obtained at this charter school were higher than those of the national comparison group. Neither the SOM nor RSCA data revealed regular use of student-centered or higher-order strategies supported with technology integration. Computer use for instructional delivery was occasionally observed during one-half of the visits, may not have supported higher order learning outcomes due to weak application as evidenced in the RSCA data. Rates and application of student-centered and higher-order teaching strategies observed at MAHS were lower than those reported in the national samples.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. More traditional, teacher directed orientations were predominantly observed at MASE. Both direct instruction and independent seatwork were extensively or frequently observed 67% of the time. However, these figures are similar to those observed in the national sample of middle and secondary schools. The tendency to rely on these traditional strategies has been consistent across years. In terms of changes in practices, there were declines in the frequency with which the teacher acted as coach/facilitator (from 50% to 0% in frequent and extensive categories) or provided higher-level instructional feedback (33% to 0%) when compared to the previous year. RSCA data supports somewhat strong application of higher-level questioning strategies in about 8% of the observations, yet these strategies were rarely (50%) to occasionally (33%) present. Student-centered approaches or uses of technology were observed infrequently and at low levels of application. When compared to the normative

data, MASE outcomes tended to be lower in all categories of instruction with the exception of teacher-centered orientations.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. In comparison to last year, there were changes in the instructional strategies observed at SCA. Although direct instruction was observed extensively or frequently 100% of the time, it was often augmented with team teaching or parent/ community involvement in learning activities (67% in frequent or extensive categories for both strategies). There were also increases in cooperative learning and teacher acting as coach or facilitator, which often go hand-in-hand (33%, for both strategies). There were smaller increases in experiential, hands on learning and individual tutoring, (17% in frequent or extensive categories for both strategies). These percentages, including the percentage obtained for direct instruction, were higher than those reported in the normative sample of elementary school students. However, there was rare to occasional use of higher-order strategies related to questioning and feedback, and these percentages were lower than those observed nationally. RSCA data did not indicate strong application of higher-order strategies. Technology was occasionally used as a learning tool or resource, but its application was weak in supporting higher-order learning. Computer use for instructional delivery was not observed.

Cohort 2.

City University School of Liberal Arts. There was very little change in the instructional orientations or strategies observed at CityU when compared to the previous year. Direct instruction was occasionally (50%) or frequently observed (50%), but never extensively. The amount of time students spent in independent seatwork remained consistent across years (67% frequently or extensively observed). The percentages for both of these orientations were somewhat lower than those reported in the normative sample for secondary schools. No other strategies or orientations were frequently present, but there was occasional use (50%) of ability groups, higher-level instructional feedback, and teacher acting as coach or facilitator. With the exception of ability grouping, the corresponding frequencies of these strategies were lower than those observed in the normative data. Technology used as a learning tool or resource was occasionally employed a small percentage of time (17%). RSCA data confirm the rare use of technology to support learning, but also indicate limited to weak application of technology or higher-order strategies. These latter findings do not compare favorably with national norms.

Star Academy. A large percentage of instructional time at Star Academy was devoted to teacher-centered direct instruction. Direct instruction continued to increase in the third year of operation (from 83% to 100% in the extensively or frequently observed categories). The prevalence of independent seatwork remained high (frequently observed 83% of the time). These rates surpassed those observed in the normative group of elementary students. However, increases in direct instruction were coupled with increases in student-centered instruction, most notably cooperative learning (frequently observed 83% of the time). The frequency with which students were observed in cooperative learning at Star was much higher than reported in the national norms. The percentage of time teachers acted as coach or facilitator showed a decrease when compared to previous year but remained high in an absolute sense (67% extensively or frequently observed) and when compared to the national sample. Perhaps more impressively, the RSCA results revealed somewhat strong to strong application of cooperative learning (over 30% in these categories), which also surpassed normative averages. The data indicate occasional to frequent use of higher-order feedback and questioning, and the percentages tended to be higher than those reported in the normative data. Technology use was rarely or occasionally present but at rates lower than those found in the normative data.

Yo! Academy. Although last year's data indicated a decrease in direct instruction, an increase in this type of teacher-centered instruction was observed at Yo! this year (from 67% to 83% in the frequent or extensive categories). The time spent in direct instruction exceeded the national norms for secondary schools. There was a decline the use of independent seatwork this year. The only other strategies frequently observed were the multi-age grouping of students (frequently observed 67% of the time) and teacher acting as coach or facilitator (frequently observed 33% of the time). The percentage of time teachers devoted to coaching or facilitating was lower than the national norm. SOM and RSCA data

provided scant evidence for the presence of higher-order strategies or the use of technology. A decline in the use of higher-order strategies was apparent when compared to the previous year's findings.

Cohort 3.

KIPP Academy Nashville. The predominant instructional strategies observed at KIPP were teacher directed instruction and independent seatwork (both 100% in the frequent and extensive categories). These percentages were high when compared to the normative elementary school data and to last year's findings, particularly for independent seatwork (from 16.7% to 100%). RSCA data showed a notable decline from the previous year in the strength of application for higher-level questioning (41.1% to 2.0% in strong or somewhat strong categories). However, the frequencies still surpassed those in the normative sample. There was also a decline in the percentage of time that teacher acted as coach or facilitator (from 33% to 0% in frequent or extensive categories). This frequency was lower than observed in the national sample. Although students were rarely or occasionally involved in cooperative learning, the strength of application was somewhat strong when it was observed. As was the case last year, no technology was used in classroom instruction.

Memphis Business Academy. There was large increase in the amount of time devoted to direct instruction at MBA when compared to last year. It was frequently or extensively observed 100% of the time at rates higher than the national norms. There was also an increase in the frequency that teachers acted as a coach or facilitator (from 16.7 to 50% frequently observed), suggesting the presence of some student-centered work that is comparable to the normative sample. However there was little evidence of strong application for student-centered strategies based on RSCA data. The use of higher-level questioning strategies was occasionally observed 50% of the time, which is comparable to national norms. However the findings for the use of other higher-order strategies and technology were only rarely or occasionally observed.

Promise Academy. The percentage of time spent in direct instruction at Promise remained high when compared to the previous year. Direct instruction was frequently observed about 83% of the time, which is higher than national elementary school norms. The percentage of time spent on independent seatwork showed some decreases (used more occasionally than frequently but still totaling 100% in these categories across years), but these figures remained somewhat higher than national norms. However, there was also some evidence to indicate use of student-centered and higher-order strategies. Higher-level instructional feedback and teacher acting as coach or facilitator were observed occasionally or frequently over 80% of the time. Extensive use of experiential, hands on learning was observed about 17% of the time. Cooperative learning and higher-level questioning were both occasionally seen about 33% of the time. In most cases, these rates exceed those in the national sample. The RSCA data suggest strong to somewhat strong application of experiential learning (12% of the time). Use of computers for instructional delivery was rarely or occasionally (83%) observed, whereas there was no observed usage of technology as a learning tool or resource.

Southern Avenue Charter School of Academic Excellence. Whereas a good mix of both teacher and student-centered orientations was observed at this charter school last year, this year the instruction observed was predominantly teacher-centered and traditional. Direct instruction and independent seatwork were both frequently or extensively observed 100% of the time. These percentages were higher than those reported for the normative sample of elementary schools. The only other strategy observed frequently was the teacher acting as coach or facilitator (17% extensively and 83% occasionally), and these percentages were higher than national norms. There was occasional (33%) to rare (67%) use of work centers, but the rates were lower than those observed in the previous year. There were little data to support the use of any other higher-order or student-centered strategies, and the frequencies did not compare well national norms. Even when the strategies or orientations were observed, they were not strongly applied to support student learning. Computer use for instructional delivery was occasionally (33%) or rarely observed (67%), but technology use as learning tool or resource was rare (17%). Even though technology use decreased relative to the previous year, it is similar to national norms.

Soulsville Charter School. Although teacher-centered strategies were frequently present at Soulsville, higher-order strategies were also frequently observed. The results were similar to those obtained last year. Direct instruction was observed frequently to extensively (83% in these categories), and this percentage was high relative to the normative sample. Students occasionally (33.3%) or frequently (50%) engaged in independent seatwork, but these figures were more comparable to national norms. Higher level questioning occurred occasionally or frequently during all observations (100%), and higher-level feedback was occasionally (50%) to frequently (17%) observed. These figures surpassed those reported in the national sample. Teacher acting as coach or facilitator was somewhat characteristic of classrooms observed (occasionally to frequently observed in 50% of the visits), which was comparable to norms. However there was little evidence for the frequent use of other student-centered strategies or the use of technology. RSCA data indicate weak application of student-centered instruction, higher-order strategies, and the use of technology to support student learning. Technology use declined compared to the prior year.

Summary Findings Across Schools.

Table 5 presents the summary findings by school in four major categories associated with instructional orientation and strategies. As was true in previous years, teacher-centered instruction was the dominant orientation across schools, grade levels served, or cohorts. For many schools the time spent in direct instruction increased and mostly surpassed the percentages observed in this category for elementary and secondary school classrooms nationally. Only City U was rated as moderate in this category because the findings suggested less extensive or frequent use of both direct instruction and independent seatwork at levels lower than those reported nationally. One would expect a moderate level of direct instruction to be coupled with corresponding increases in student-centered instruction at City U but this was not the case. Levels of student-centered instruction were low in an absolute and relative sense at this charter school.

Most charter schools were not considered to be strong in the category of student-centered instruction. Half of the schools were rated as moderate in this category, and five of the 12 schools were rated as weak. In fact, there were decreases in the frequency with which student-centered strategies were noted in some schools. The declines appear to correspond to the increases in teacher-centered instruction. The one exception was Star Academy, which was rated as strong in this category last year. At Star, direct instruction was augmented with periods in which the teacher acted as coach or facilitator while students worked in cooperative or collaborative groups. One might expect a pattern of results detectable by cohort to occur, with charter schools moving from more traditional to more student-centered strategies with time. However, the charter schools, much like traditional schools, are under heavy pressure to perform well on the state achievement assessments. The schools, therefore, may have good intentions of using student-centered approaches but rely increasingly on teacher-directed approaches to ensure coverage of the broad curriculum tested.

The pattern of findings was less favorable in the category of higher-order instruction. That is, no schools were rated as strong in this category, with the large majority rated as weak (8 of the 12 schools). Again there was a decline in the frequency with which these strategies were implemented when compared to previous years at most schools. Although the presence of higher-order strategies was not extensive in the national samples, the charter schools did not tend to compare favorably in terms of frequency or strength of application to support students' higher-order or active learning. Surprisingly, those schools that were rated as moderate in these areas (Star, KIPP, Promise, and Soulsville) were those in the second or third cohorts, but these results do not reflect increases among these cohorts as much as decreases among the schools more generally. Even within the third cohort of schools, the frequency of implementing higher-order strategies seemed to decrease. For example, KIPP moved from a rating of strong to moderate in this category.

The results for technology usage were similar to those obtained in previous years in that it was the least prevalent category of instruction across charter schools. In some schools, no technology use was observed, whereas in others technology was rarely used to support learning. None of the charter schools were considered to be strong in this area, and only one was rated as moderate (Southern). Of the 12

schools, 11 were rated as weak in this category. Again, there were year-to-year declines in technology use noted. In most cases the levels of technology use and the strength of its application to support learning did not compare favorably with national norms. It appears that charter schools are not expending resources or instructional time on the integration of technology in their classrooms.

Table 5. Summary Ratings for Schools on Teaching Orientations

School	Teacher-Centered	Student-centered	Higher-order Strategies	Technology usage
<u>1st Cohort</u>				
COSLA				
MAHS				
MASE				
SCA				
<u>2nd Cohort</u>				
CityU				
Star				
Yo!				
<u>3rd Cohort</u>				
KIPP				
MBA				
Promise				
Southern				
Soulsville				

Question 3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?

To address this research question, we primarily relied on the data obtained from the School Climate Inventory (SCI). Because we compared the SCI results for the charter schools with national norms, the national averages for elementary and secondary schools (middle and high schools) are presented in Table 6. The interpretation of SCI data was augmented by the qualitative responses obtained from teacher and student focus groups and principal interviews. Any themes related to the dimensions of school climate were identified and used to illuminate the quantitative findings.

Table 6. School Climate Inventory (SCI-R) Dimension Averages for Elementary and Secondary Schools

Dimension	COSLA (n=11)	SCA (n=18)	Star (n=9)	KIPP (n=4)	Promise (n=6)	Southern (n=6)	Elementary Norm
Collaboration	4.61	4.36	4.17	4.50	4.29	4.02	3.88
Environment	4.48	4.55	4.35	4.11	4.36	3.83	3.96
Expectations	4.69	4.48	4.60	4.36	4.74	3.95	4.04
Instruction	4.65	4.48	4.47	4.39	4.45	4.48	4.17
Involvement	4.65	4.44	4.27	4.14	4.24	4.40	3.91
Leadership	4.70	4.70	4.48	4.46	4.52	4.07	4.08
Order	4.48	4.19	4.16	3.82	3.88	3.46	3.50
OVERALL	4.62	4.46	4.36	4.25	4.35	4.03	3.93

Dimension	CityU (n=13)	MAHS (n=12)	MASE (n=22)	Yo! (n=10)	MBA (n=8)	Soulsville (n=7)	Secondary Norm
Collaboration	4.39	4.27	3.65	4.37	4.04	4.06	3.71
Environment	4.19	4.17	3.82	4.41	4.07	4.29	3.73
Expectations	4.34	4.48	4.14	4.60	4.09	4.57	3.82
Instruction	4.20	4.29	4.19	4.33	4.27	4.24	4.06
Involvement	4.20	4.13	3.58	4.29	4.02	3.84	3.63
Leadership	4.43	4.33	3.75	4.44	3.76	4.29	3.94
Order	3.79	4.11	3.61	4.33	3.00	4.63	3.26
OVERALL	4.22	4.25	3.82	4.40	3.89	4.27	3.73

Cohort 1.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. As in previous years, school climate has been a clear strength at COSLA. The mean ratings ranged from 4.48 to 4.70 and well exceeded the elementary school norms on each dimension. The overall mean across dimensions was 4.62. The means have remained high across the 4 years of operation and even show a small increase in Year 4. The current SCI averages (2006-2007) are the highest obtained at COSLA.

The qualitative interview data supported the quantitative ratings. Comments from the teachers, students, and principal were overwhelmingly favorable with respect to climate. A recurrent theme was that COSLA offered a safe, nurturing environment in which mutual respect characterized relations among students, teachers, and administrators. Teachers commented that the climate “was the result of a caring staff and safe environment. Kids feel loved.” Students talked about teachers having high expectations for their achievement and success. Reflecting this view, one student said, “At my old school, the teachers didn’t care about your education. At this school, teachers care. Teachers here get us ready for the future.” Responses related to supportive leadership as well as achieving an orderly, disciplined environment were also apparent. The only negative comments came from a few students who objected to the discipline policies at times. These comments were balanced by more positive statements such as, “Here we don’t fight in the hallways, but at my old school, kids fought.” Another student noted that “teachers supervise the students more” at COSLA when compared to other schools they had attended.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. School climate has improved at MAHS relative to the previous year (2005-2006). In the current year the overall mean rating was 4.25, noticeably up from the mean of 3.93 obtained last year. The largest gains were observed on the Order (3.50 to 4.11) and Environment dimensions (3.69 to 4.17). Overall, the means ranged from a low of 4.11 (Order) to a high of 4.48 (Expectations). The mean values surpassed the means reported in the national sample of secondary schools on all climate dimensions.

The qualitative data shed some light on the improved SCI scores. The students were particularly laudatory in their comments. They appreciated the caring and high expectations demonstrated by teachers and the principal. "Our principal cares about us. Teachers push us to the limit" with respect to learning. They felt safe, challenged, supported and nurtured. Apparently students here do not mind the strict discipline codes because they view it their advantage. As one student put it, "Our principals and teachers try their best to keep us safe. They try not to have drugs or weapons on campus, so it is pretty much safer here than in other school where teachers don't care what our students do." Furthermore, they appreciated the activities, meals, and before- and after-school programs that keep them motivated, healthy, and "off the streets." Climate may have also been affected both positively and negatively by the move to a new building. On the positive side, teachers appreciated having more space. Conversely, more space means "students can find more places to hide and many people are concerned about the building's security." Although the teachers concurred that they had good relations with other teachers and students, they noted that their heavy workload was contributing to "burn-out." They cited the need for more breaks, resources, common planning time, schedules, and better communication with the administration. The principal admitted that the time spent on the physical plant and fundraising may have detracted from his role as instructional leader, and that the transition to the new building may have been tough on teachers. Despite this he described school climate positively.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. School climate at MASE appears to be on the decline when compared to findings reported in prior years. The mean SCI scores are lower on each dimension this year compared to last, and in some cases, substantially so. The greatest declines were observed on the Involvement (4.32 to 3.58) and Order (4.39 to 3.61) dimensions. An examination of individual items helps pinpoint the more troublesome aspects of the climate on these dimensions. On the Involvement scale, only 36% of respondents agreed that information about school activities was communicated to parents on a consistent basis, and only 41% agreed that parents were invited to serve on school advisory committees. Problems on the Order scale included only 27% agreement that student misbehavior did not interfere with the teaching process, and 46% agreement that student tardiness or absenteeism were not major problems. The mean ratings ranged from 3.58 to 4.19, with an overall mean rating of 3.82. This mean is similar to the overall mean rating obtained nationally for secondary schools.

The decline in school climate perceptions may be related to the fact that MASE expanded to include high school grades housed in separate buildings. This challenge was complicated by higher teacher turnover (about 25%), long days, and scheduling and communication difficulties. The principal noted that MASE does not have the facilities or extracurricular activities that other high schools have, and this adversely affects satisfaction of students. "We're building buildings, but we're not building community." The students echoed this sentiment and complained about lack of organization, communication, and activities. When asked to describe the school, a student wrote, "unorganized. The extracurricular activities are not what were advertised. Report cards are late. Textbooks just arrived last week, so we have been working from handouts. The uniforms were late." Other students complained about the strict discipline policy and the administration more generally. On a more positive note, students described teachers as caring, with high expectations for their achievement. The teachers themselves were more positive than students in their comments related to climate and described it as a safe, collaborative environment that fostered learning and clear expectations. They cited long hours, lack of planning time, and little communication with administration as more negative aspects of the school

Smithson-Craighead Academy. After the gains in school climate noted last year, the findings for the most current year (2006-2007) remained positive and steady. In fact the overall mean rating (4.46) was identical to the mean scored last year. The only marked difference in means was observed for the Order dimension, which increased from a mean of 3.70 to 4.19. The mean of the Order dimension was lower

than other dimensions at SCA, but higher than those reported for other elementary schools nationally. The highest mean was observed for the Leadership dimension (4.70). All means exceeded those reported nationally.

The interview responses related to school climate were predominantly positive, supporting the quantitative results. Teachers described positive relationships among teachers and students, high expectations for student success, a supportive principal, and fewer discipline problems compared to previous years. "Positive relationships have been established and are being nurtured at the school. A family atmosphere exists and all teachers and staff share a common goal: the success of the student." They went on to describe high student motivation and enthusiasm that have steadily improved. Many of these comments reverberated in student and principal responses. Students indicated that they liked SCA better than other schools they had attended because they learn more and receive more individual attention from teachers and the principal. According to the principal, "the overall climate of the staff is supportive and positive, where learning is considered a top priority." She noted that discipline and teacher collaboration have improved and said SCA "offers a safe environment for learning, and the students trust the staff for help and guidance."

Cohort 2.

City University School of Liberal Arts. There was a decline in the school climate ratings at City U from the second to the third year of operation on all dimensions, but in most cases the decreases were small. The overall mean obtained in the third year (2006-2007) was 4.22 as contrasted with 4.49 in the prior academic year (2005-2006). The largest decline was observed on the Order dimension (4.21 to 3.79). The results for two items on this scale largely explain the relatively low ratings. Less than 54% of respondents agreed that student misbehavior does not interfere with teaching and that student tardiness or absence is not a major problem. Nevertheless, the ratings surpassed those reported for the national sample of secondary schools on all dimensions, including Order.

Qualitative responses support a positive school climate but also help illuminate some of the lower scores reported. The principal and teacher described behavioral and motivational problems, particularly among 9th grade students. The principal commented that, "there has been some resistance from 9th graders because they have never been in such a structured environment". He also noted that because of the student resistance, some teachers are becoming frustrated or disillusioned. On a more positive note, teacher collaboration was characterized to be very positive by both the principal and the teachers themselves. Teachers noted that teachers collaborate "without being forced to work together. They have support from each other." Several major changes may have also impacted the school. CityU moved to new campus that provided more space and 11th grade was added, with the school now serving grades 9-11. More space was appreciated but was accompanied by some maintenance problems (air conditioning, ventilation, pests) that could have affected student behavior. Students lamented the lack of varied extracurricular activities but did appreciate their relationships with their teachers, the academic challenge, and the motivational speakers.

Star Academy. Although a small decrease in mean SCI scores was detected when compared to previous year, the findings continue to reflect a positive school climate. The overall mean rating was 4.36 for the 2006-2007 academic year, compared to 4.63 in the previous year. The mean scores ranged from a low of 4.16 on the Order dimension to a high of 4.60 on the Expectations dimensions. All mean ratings were higher than those reported in the national sample of elementary schools.

The modest decline in school climate may be associated with "growing pains" as the school added a 4th grade and more classroom space. According to the principal, the biggest challenge "is to complete the expansion of the physical plant and the addition of new classrooms." The biggest accomplishment, however, was the development of a positive relationship between teachers and parents as well teacher collaboration and their general support of the school. In return, teachers appreciated the support provided by the principal who was described as "encouraging, receptive to ideas, and having an open-door policy." Both the principal and teachers described students as more academically focused and disciplined. As one teacher noted, "The students seem to be more challenged at STAR than they were at other schools. They

are thinking about their actions and engage in more self-control.” One teacher characterized the climate as a “family atmosphere” and that the positive relationships among teachers and the principal “are carried over to the relationships formed with the students.” The students themselves echoed this sentiment about the caring nature and high expectations of teachers. They also appreciated having a safe and secure environment.

Yo! Academy. The SCI data revealed a continued positive climate at Yo! The mean scores were very similar to those obtained last year overall as well as on individual climate dimensions. The overall mean score obtained for their third year of operation was 4.40 contrasted with 4.37 obtained in the previous year. The highest mean score was observed on the Expectations scale (4.60) and the lowest scores were observed on the Involvement scale (4.29). These high scores exceed those reported in the national sample of secondary schools.

Although the teacher and principal interview responses reinforce the quantitative ratings, the student responses were more mixed. Teachers characterized their charter school as a “familial” yet also “collegial” environment where teachers are treated and behave as professionals who collaborate with one another to boost student achievement. One teacher said of the faculty, “It is tight knit group and they look out for one another.” Teachers argued that the students might “be different people” if they were at another school. Discipline and expectations for appropriate behavior are clearly articulated at Yo!, which contribute to a safe and orderly campus. The principal cited the high attendance rate as evidence for student motivation. She went on to describe the positive relationships among and students and staff as well as teacher leadership and professional collaboration as strengths of the school. As noted, the student responses were mixed and sometimes contradictory. Whereas one comment suggested the school was academically challenging, others described the curriculum as more limited and behind grade level. “I catch on very fast but feel they do not offer enough. I am in the 10th grade doing 9th grade work.” The students seemed to concur that Yo! offered a more safe and orderly environment when compared to public schools. A common lament was the lack of extracurricular activities and a sense of having fewer events or opportunities than their peers in large public schools.

Cohort 3.

KIPP Academy Nashville. The SCI data available suggest a somewhat lower school climate scores this year compared to last. However, the sample size was even smaller (n=4) for the second year of operation than it was for the first year (n=5). Therefore, these results should be interpreted cautiously. The overall school climate mean dropped from a 4.45 first year to 4.25 in the second year. This is not a large decrease overall, but there were notable declines on two dimensions: Order (4.43 to 3.82) and Expectations (4.89 to 4.36). An examination of responses on Order items showed that only 25% of respondents agreed that student misbehavior does NOT interfere with teaching. On the Expectations scale, half of the respondents agreed that low-achieving students are given opportunity for success at this school. In contrast, a notable increase was observed on the Involvement scale (3.79 to 4.14). In general, the school climate scores reported for KIPP were very similar to the national norms reported for elementary schools.

Interview responses from the principal and teachers were predominantly positive with respect to school climate, but student responses were more varied. The somewhat lower ratings on two dimensions are not explained in the qualitative findings. A theme throughout the principal interview was a culture of high expectations and improved discipline. He also frequently noted increasing teacher collaboration as an important contributor to climate. Many of the same themes emerged in teacher responses. They described student behavior as “improved from last year and many are growing in character; learning to express themselves better socially and personally with a sense of dignity.” Teacher comments about leadership support the rating scale data. They appreciated the “constructive feedback and unfailing support from the principal.” Whereas, some students praised their teachers, others were not as positive. For example, one student said the “teachers make you work hard but help you more.” Others thought teachers were unduly harsh, but these comments were related to discipline and high standards. Other student complaints related to the school building.

Memphis Business Academy. The overall SCI mean of 3.89 for school climate represented a small increase in climate when compared to the previous year (3.76). This most current mean value is just above overall national mean for secondary schools. By dimension, the highest mean value was obtained on the Instruction items (4.27). Most results were similar to last year's findings even though the sample size doubled from 4 to 8 respondents. As occurred last year, the lowest means were found on the Order (3.00) and Leadership (3.76) scales, both of which were lower than the national norms. The data for individual items on the Order scale suggest that student misbehavior interferes with the teaching process (0% agreement that this was not a problem). Low levels of agreement (less than 40%) were also observed on items related to consistent enforcement of rules, fair and appropriate discipline, and tardiness or absences not interfering with teaching. On the Leadership scale, only half of the respondents agreed that the goals of the school are reviewed and updated regularly.

The interview responses from the principal and teachers were largely positive with respect to climate, but the student responses highlight some of the difficulties reflected by the low scores on the Order dimension. When students were asked about what they liked least about their school, most responses were related to conflict and discipline. Students talked about fighting in the school but pointed out that gang violence was not a problem as it was in other schools. "Teachers need teacher assistants to monitor students pushing and hitting each other." The principal only made reference to discipline by saying she would like, "parents to enforce discipline practices at home." The principal cited the dedication and support of teachers as a positive aspect of school climate. This was evidenced teachers' level of involvement in school programs and extracurricular activities, as well as the fact that there was no teacher turn-over. The principal also noted the "team spirit" and positive relationships among students afforded by a small school and small classroom environment. Teachers were also laudatory about collaboration and peer support as well as higher levels of student confidence, effort, and enthusiasm. However, communication with school administration was a limitation. Teachers were not certain who was officially the principal and had not been notified about the change in administration.

Promise Academy. Although the number of respondents was low ($n = 6$), the school climate at Promise appeared to be favorable in its second year of operation. The overall mean was a 4.35 compared to a 4.48 obtained in the previous year. The mean values exceeded those reported nationally, with the exception of Order (3.88), which was nearly identical to the national average for elementary schools (3.85). Notably, on the Order scale, none (0%) of the respondents agreed that student tardiness or absence is NOT a major problem. The highest mean rating was obtained on the Expectation dimension (4.74), with 100% of the teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing to items on this scale.

Most interview responses related to school climate support the largely positive SCI ratings. The principal was very candid in describing strengths as well as remaining challenges. Strengths related to climate included teacher support, dedication, and professionalism coupled with high expectations for students. One teacher also volunteered, "Teachers are much more dedicated here. They are there for what is in the best interest of the kids." According to the principal, the teachers feel a lot of ownership in the school, and they appreciate the latitude to make choices in their instructional programs and being treated as professionals. Challenges this year included the school building and facilities, which reportedly hampered recruitment efforts, the implementation of numerous instructional programs, a void in leadership when the principal was on leave, and the loss of a teacher and teaching assistant. Teachers were mainly positive in their description of climate at Promise. They described the overall climate as "positive, warm, sunny, good and light." The teachers have noted improvements in student behavior, motivation, and enthusiasm. According to one teacher, "The program has fostered relationships between students through team building. There is a group identity in learning communities and teams." These teachers expressed a strong desire to remain at this charter school. The comments among the young students were elementary but favorable. They seemed to like the teachers and other staff, playing at recess, and learning various subjects.

Southern Avenue Charter School of Academic Success. Although the sample size was small ($n = 6$), the SCI ratings obtained for Southern were largely similar to those reported in the national sample of elementary schools. The overall mean obtained at Southern (4.03) was just slightly higher than the national overall mean (3.93). The overall mean did decrease in the second year of operation compared to

the first year (4.39 overall mean in 2005-2006). The biggest drops in scores were observed for Environment (4.43 to 3.83), Expectations (4.50 to 3.95), and Order (3.96 to 3.46). The lowest scores were found on the Order dimension, with low levels of agreement on items related to consistent enforcement of student rules, fair and appropriate discipline, student misbehavior not interfering with teaching, and the assumption of joint responsibility for student discipline among teachers, administrators, and parents. On the Expectation scale, items also related to the construct of Order received lower ratings. Only half of respondents agreed that school rules and expectations are clearly communicated and that students are held responsible for their actions. The highest mean values were reported on the Instruction (4.48) and Involvement (4.40) dimensions, and these values surpassed those reported nationally.

The interview responses help explain the moderate decline in school climate at Southern. Teachers describe climate as “pretty good.” Although they felt that teacher interactions and support were positive, student discipline was a problem. According to one teacher, “There is no in-school suspension and no way to deal with kids that are acting out.” Discipline was especially a problem in second grade. As one teacher said “students are fighting more” because there were “no incentives for students to cooperate and behave well.” On the other hand, some students seemed more academically motivated, particularly in the lower grade levels.

Teachers stated that they worked long hours without a break and needed planning time. Finally, the teachers all liked the principal, but said “he had little authority because there was an administrative director.” According to the principal, a positive school climate was evidenced in the productive collaboration among teachers, the enthusiasm of students, and the close interaction with and among students, which is a clear benefit of small school settings. Student comments were mixed with respect to climate but they must be interpreted cautiously due to their young age. Some said Southern is “nicer” and they are “smarter,” but others seemed to prefer their old school.

Soulsville Charter School. Findings suggest an increasingly positive school climate at Soulsville. It should be noted that the sample size nearly doubled from 4 to 7 respondents, which may have impacted the results. The overall mean rating was 4.27. This figure represented an increase in scores when compared to the overall mean of 3.79 obtained last year at Soulsville and the mean of 3.73 reported in the national sample of middle and secondary schools. The highest ratings were found on the Order dimension (4.63), which well exceeded the normative data on this scale. Scores on the Expectation scale were also high (4.57). Ratings on the Involvement dimension (3.84) were notably lower than on the other scales. The item-level responses on the Involvement scale show that less than half of the respondents (43%) agreed that parents were invited to serve on the advisory council or that parents were used as volunteers whenever possible.

The qualitative data support the SCI findings. An emergent theme related to climate from the principal interview was improved discipline, safety, and the academic engagement of students. The orderly environment has also positively affected teachers and their ability to provide effective instruction. Specifically, the principal indicated, “The school has impacted teachers in that they enjoy the opportunity to teach here. They can do a lot of teaching because there are less disciplinary problems.” Not surprisingly, student reactions to the strict disciplinary policies were not uniformly positive. They appreciated the safe environment but seemed to chafe a bit at the enforcement of rules. One comment was, “It was hard to get used to the rules and getting fines for everything.” On the other hand, they felt pushed and challenged to learn. According to teachers, having high expectations of students has promoted academic motivation among students as well as better relationships among teachers and students. The teachers felt that climate was initially diminished because “students thought we were mean and rude. But now they know that the teachers care, so the climate can be described as warm.” Another recurring theme in the teacher responses was the collaboration, support, and development of friendships among teachers.

Summary findings across schools.

Table 7 depicts the summary results based on SCI ratings and qualitative data collected for each of the 12 charter schools organized by cohort. Overall, school climate remains a clear strength of these charter schools. The quantitative SCI data indicated that 8 of the 12 schools were rated as strong and the

remaining four were rated as moderate. The moderate ratings were due to declines in school climate scores or scoring at or below the national averages. With the exception of MASE, moderate rather than strong school climate ratings were found among the 3rd cohort schools (KIPP, MBA, Southern). The qualitative data also suggested a favorable school climate, with strong to moderate ratings for all 12 schools. Those schools with moderate ratings tended to have discipline or student absence/ tardiness problems that impacted order in schools. Problems with student discipline or order more generally are not unique to charter schools, particularly those serving at-risk populations.

With respect to other trends across time, some decline (from strong to moderate) in school climate was indicated among five of the charter schools (MAHS, MASE, CityU, KIPP, and Southern,). In three schools (MAHS, CityU, and KIPP), the decline was only in one category (climate rating or qualitative data), but others (MASE, Southern) showed declines in both. As noted previously, much of the decline was due to problems with student discipline and order. However, as the schools expand in terms of grade levels and physical space, some “growing pains” may be expected which would impact school climate. In one school (Soulsville), an increase in school climate was found across dimensions. This encouraging finding suggests that some of the problems that may have affected climate were successfully addressed in the second year of operation.

Table 7. Summary Results for School Climate

School	School Climate Ratings	Qualitative Responses
Cohort 1		
COSLA		
MAHS		
MASE		
SCA		
Cohort 2		
CityU		
Star		
Yo!		
Cohort 3		
KIPP		
MBA		
Promise		
Southern		
Soulsville		

Question 4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?

Data obtained from implementation benchmarks, the teacher questionnaire, teacher focus groups, principal interview, and classroom observations (SOM and RSCA) were used to address this evaluation question. To facilitate summarization of findings, the goals and strategies were divided into five major categories: curriculum, instruction, organization (leadership, governance), support (resources and professional development), and evaluation (accountability, assessment). See Table 8 for summary findings.

Cohort 1.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. In its fourth year of operation, COSLA's designation of most benchmarks to be in the third and final phase of implementation was not unexpected. In the content areas, the curricular initiatives seem fully implemented. According to the principal, a character education program has been recently launched at COSLA and is showing early signs of success. This component of the curriculum should be incorporated into the benchmarks at a more preliminary stage. In the category related to instruction, the school would seem to be at a more intermediate phase as currently designated in its benchmark document. Observation data would support this designation since teachers were employing a variety of instructional strategies in their classroom, but more student-centered instructional strategies and the integration of technology would advance efforts in improving instruction. In the categories of organization, support, and evaluation, COSLA was at more advanced stages. Although the findings from data sources used in this report suggest high levels of parent support and involvement, the leadership team indicated that COSLA was in the intermediate phase. Their indicator for parent involvement at Phase III was that 90% of parents have logged a minimum of 20 volunteer hours. This indicator may not have been achieved partly because of the benchmark indicator was very ambitious.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. As was the case last year, findings across various sources suggest intermediate stages of development for most benchmarks. The leadership team also placed most benchmarks at similar levels of implementation. In benchmarks addressing curriculum, there is surprisingly little detail or explanation about the integration or focus on health sciences. Description of the integration of health sciences was also absent in the principal and teacher focus group interviews, but teachers did mention a new focus on integrated subjects. However, observation data indicated rare integration of subject areas that one might expect for a school with a health science theme. The category of instruction was judged to be in fairly preliminary phases of development. Observational data showed primarily direct instruction with low use of other instructional strategies. Support and organization were considered to be moderate or intermediate. Whereas teachers considered some resources and support from external sources to be inadequate, they viewed support from teachers and parents more favorably. They identified the lack of communication from administration as a limitation. Furthermore, teacher questionnaire data indicated a moderate level of agreement on the item addressing whether teachers are adequately involved in decision-making. Based on teacher survey data (interviews and questionnaires), evaluation and assessment as well as organization were strong components of the educational program at MAHS. Over 90% of teachers agreed that their staff regularly reviewed academic and non-academic goals to evaluate progress.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. Although the leadership team judged most benchmarks to be in the final, third phase of development, the present findings suggest that implementation of most benchmarks are in the intermediate phases of development. In focus groups, the principal and teacher described a strong standards-based curriculum that included the integration of technology, a new engineering program with a lab, and interdisciplinary and project based learning. However, some of these components were not apparent when observations were conducted. In the category of Instruction, the Phase III designation on benchmarks related to the application of higher-order thinking skills, subject integration, project-based learning, and the use of technology was not supported by SOM and RSCA data. Survey data suggest some limitations related to support from state and local educational agencies, parental involvement, professional development, communication with administration, and resources that would

affect progress made in the categories of support and organization. Only 36% of teachers agreed that they were adequately involved in decision-making. However, most (77%) teachers agreed that goals were reviewed regularly to evaluate progress. The leadership team might consider adding benchmarks related to evaluation, assessment, and accountability in the next version of the document.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. Last year, the majority of benchmarks were evaluated to be in the third and final stages of implementation, yet this year the leadership team has designated them to be in the initial phases of development. Based on the evaluation findings, a designation of Phase II seems more appropriate when considering the categories used to organize results in this report. Observation data suggested at least moderate use of student-centered strategies that include cooperative learning with the teacher acting as a coach or facilitator. Team-teaching and parent community involvement were also commonly observed in classrooms. There were few observations of higher-order learning strategies or integration of technology into classrooms. In focus groups, the principal and teachers described several curricular programs in place across all content areas. The principal described the curriculum as scientifically based and well aligned with TCAP standards. However, teachers noted that some programs, particularly in science and social studies, are weak, and they are in the process of exploring other options. Teachers reportedly supplement the curriculum by bringing in their own material to support the instructional programs. The survey data reveal mostly favorable impressions of organization and resources available at SCA. Support from teachers was high, yet perceived support from external agencies and levels of parent involvement were more moderate. The benchmarks and survey data suggest at least an intermediate phase of development in the category related to evaluation. All teachers agreed that goals to evaluate progress were regularly reviewed by school staff. In addition, the benchmark document is replete with several sound indicators of school success at all phases of development, which seems indicative of strategic use of assessment and evaluation data.

Cohort 2.

City University School of the Liberal Arts. Whereas the leadership team indicated either intermediate or strong levels of implementation, findings from other data sources varied somewhat from these designations. Although the leadership team placed benchmarks related to instruction in the third and final phase of development, the observation data suggest a more preliminary phase of implementation. Traditional, teacher-directed instruction was most prevalent, with little observational evidence to support the use of student-centered activities, higher-order strategies or the integration of technology. According to the principal and teachers, there was a lack of resources and support in some areas. As noted in previous years, the school's efforts to evaluate its progress at least partially depend on benchmark document itself. Some of the indicators are difficult to measure or objectively assess. For example, the indicator for Phase III under external support and assistance states that, "all decisions made by personnel at CityU are in the best interest of our scholars and programs." The evidence for this indicator includes list of recommendations and feedback from the president, professors, parents, and scholars. Thus, some benchmark indicators might be revised and better aligned with more objective evidence (e.g., student test scores, school climate data) and written with more distinct gradations across Phases, culminating in more challenging long-term goals. Most teachers did agree that goals were regularly reviewed by school staff, and the principal described efforts to monitor their success in across academic programs. Benchmarks addressing organizational components seemed to be in a more advanced phase of development than designated by the leadership team. Both the principal and teacher survey data were very favorable with respect to these categories.

Star Academy. With the exception of the full Phase III implementation of the curriculum, the consensus of the leadership team was that the implementation of most goals and strategies were in Phase II of development. The evaluation findings corroborated these designations. Both the principal and teachers concurred that their programs were fully implemented and aligned with TCAP standards. They are using the McGraw Hill series across content areas, with reading and math as the curricular focus. The only limitation may be the detail and length demanded by lessons, which may need fine-tuning. Progress was apparent in the implementation of benchmarks targeting instruction. Cooperative learning, direct instruction, and teacher facilitation were highlighted in the school's goals and were frequently observed during observations. Higher-order strategies were also observed but less frequently. The indicators for

benchmarks related to organization and support were considered to be in Phase II, and survey data support this ranking. Teachers responded positively about their involvement in decision-making, the leadership more generally, and various areas of support and resources. The exceptions were low levels of agreement to the items about assistance from educational agencies or external partners and the adequacy of technological resources. As also noted last year, goals related to evaluation could be improved by revising the document to include benchmarks related to evaluation, assessment, and accountability as well as more benchmarks in the category of support. Nearly all teachers did agree that goals were regularly reviewed to evaluate progress.

Yo! Academy. In the school's benchmark document, levels of implementation were all identified to be in Phase III, yet these designations may have been too optimistic in the categories of instruction, curriculum and support. Specifically, there was an increase in direct instruction when compared to the prior year, and there was little use of subject area integration and no project-based learning, which would be expected given the school's focus of an art-infused, integrated curriculum. The teacher acting as coach or facilitator and multi-age grouping were frequently observed, but the use of higher order strategies and technology were largely absent. And as noted last year, the benchmark document was not very specific about what curricula or instructional strategies were targeted. Evaluation efforts would be improved by more thorough detail concerning the alignment of curriculum with instructional strategies. The principal and teachers spoke favorably about the curriculum, but few specifics or details were provided. They did say that they have successfully integrated art throughout the curriculum and implemented a tutoring program. Whereas teacher and parent support remains high, support from external sources and the availability or adequacy of resources leave room for improvement. The strong implementation of benchmarks related to organization and evaluation are supported by the survey findings.

Cohort 3.

KIPP Academy Nashville. Given that KIPP was in its second year of operation, one would expect the implementation of benchmarks to be in earlier phases of development. Accordingly, the leadership team judged all benchmarks as being in Phase I or Phase II of development, and these rankings were largely supported by the evaluation findings. In the area of instructional strategies, the benchmarks and indicators emphasized cooperative or collaborative learning and higher order strategies, and school leaders indicated an intermediate level of development defined as students working in teams on a regular basis. However observation results indicated a decrease in the use of cooperative groups and an increase in the use of direct instruction and independent seatwork when compared to last year. Higher order instruction was frequently used but there was a decrease in the strength of application. The principal and teachers favorably described their curricular programs as focused on literacy and college preparation, but observation data indicate that the integration of curriculum specified on the benchmark document remains in a preliminary phase. Support-related goals were also considered to be in the initial stages. Teachers noted the need for more resources and support from state and local educational agencies. Focus group and teacher questionnaire data point to intermediate phases of development for organization and evaluation. Teachers spoke favorably of the leadership and all agreed that they received adequate professional development and were involved in decision-making. On the benchmark document, however, organization is entirely defined as having extended blocks of common planning time for teachers. Only half of the teachers agreed that they were given sufficient planning time. In reference to evaluation, 75% of teachers agreed they regularly reviewed their school goals to evaluation progress. A modification of the benchmark document to include better specification of the curricular program, a wider array of instructional strategies, and a broader definition of organization would help improve planning and evaluation.

Memphis Business Academy. As would be expected for a school in its second year of operation, most benchmarks were judged to be in Phase I or Phase II implementation. During interviews, the principal described several curricular programs that incorporated the business model and teachers noted that curriculum is closely aligned with standards with integration of core subjects. Although curriculum implementation might be considered to be in Phase II or III, benchmarks for instruction were more clearly in Phase I. If a variety of innovative, research-based strategies were consistently employed (as indicated), more higher-order strategies and integration of technology would be expected during classroom observations. Organization, particularly as it relates to leadership, was in the first phase of development.

In the focus group, teachers indicated that communication with administration was problematic, and they were not informed about key decisions made by the school's leadership. On the teacher questionnaire, less than 40% of teachers agreed that they were adequately involved in decision-making. The questionnaire data further suggest that benchmarks related to support are also in the initial phase of implementation due to a lack of resources and support from external agencies and parents. With regard to evaluation benchmarks, just over 60% of teachers agreed that school staff regularly reviewed their goals to evaluate progress. There were no indicators provided for parent and community involvement, which hinders evaluation efforts in these areas.

Promise Academy. The leadership team at Promise Academy judged the school to be at Phase II for nearly all benchmarks. The evaluation findings corroborated the designation of an intermediate level of implementation for most benchmarks. With regard to curriculum, several programs and associated strategies were identified during interviews, and the principal said that implementation was going well, yet it was difficult for teachers to learn so many new programs. The teachers concurred, stating that the curricular programs could be "cumbersome" and the time allotted for implementation was not always practical. SOM and RSCA data show progress in employing a wider array of effective instructional strategies. There is evidence for strong internal support from teachers, but evidence for external support and parental involvement was more mixed. Questionnaire data further support progress and a Phase II designation in the category of organization. In focus groups, teachers spoke highly of the leadership, and the school seems to be progressing well in terms of the coordination of resources. Even more progress was evident in the category of evaluation where there has been an emphasis on accountability, assessment, and the use of objective findings to gauge student success. The benchmark document itself has improved with respect to evaluation, although some improvement in the provision of more objective indicators related to other benchmarks would improve planning and accountability efforts.

Southern Avenue Charter School of Academic Excellence. As was the case in their initial year of operation, the leadership team may have been too optimistic in evaluating their progress in meeting their goals and benchmarks. Whereas the benchmark document designates most benchmarks to be in the third and final phase of development, the data suggest that although progress has been made, many benchmarks remain in earlier phases of development. In their focus group, teachers confided that the educational materials to supplement their curricular programs were not ordered or delivered, limiting enrichment activities. Teachers highlighted the need for common planning time to more effectively implement the curricula. Questionnaire results support this comment in that less than 17% of respondents agreed that they had sufficient planning time. Data also signaled room for improvement in the categories of organization and support. For example, the teachers mentioned that they were not involved in the selection of programs, and only half agreed that they were adequately involved in decision-making. Their comments about the principal were positive, yet they felt he had little authority because there was an executive director and assistant. Teacher questionnaire data further signal some need for additional resources and support from state and local educational agencies.

The benchmark document also designates instructional strategies as being in third and final phase of development. The observational data, however, show that direct and student-centered instruction were more frequently employed, but higher-order strategies and technology integration were less common. Also, the findings do not support Phase III indicators that characterize instruction as fully differentiated and used by all teachers. With respect to the evaluation category, some of the benchmarks targeting curriculum could be improved to better support evaluation and assessment.

Soulsville Charter School. Overall findings suggest that this charter school is in intermediate phases of development, as seems appropriate for its second year of operation. The curricular programs include Read 180, Saxon Math, and Think Link. Though Renaissance Math was to be implemented in 2006-2007, there was no indication that it was part of the curriculum for this academic year. In focus groups, teachers described some advantages as well as disadvantages of these programs. For example, though students were very enthusiastic about Read 180, they suspect that some students are "just going through the motions and not really learning." The benchmark document indicated, "teachers routinely and skillfully use research-based teaching strategies the majority of the time in all classes" (Phase III). This activity was not evidenced in the SOM and RSCA data that showed predominant use of direct instruction and rare use

of higher-order strategies or the integration of technology. Survey data support the findings that benchmarks under the categories of support, organization, and evaluation are in Phase II of development. Teacher questionnaire results suggested the need for more faculty and staff, the ability to meet the requirements of special needs students, and more adequate support from state and local educational agencies. The leadership team designated benchmarks related to having measurable goals and objectives in an intermediate phase, and benchmarks related to evaluation as in the final phase of development. Nearly 86% of teachers agreed that the school staff regularly reviewed goals to evaluate progress.

Summary findings across schools.

Table 8 provides the summary ratings for the level of implementation of goals and strategies in five broad areas. Patterns of results by cohort were detected. Not surprisingly, the most advanced levels of implementation were observed among 1st and 2nd cohort schools. However, there were a few exceptions to this trend. Among first cohort schools MAHS, MASE, and CityU were considered to be in the preliminary stages with respect to benchmarks related to instruction. These schools have made less progress in the implementation of more varied and effective instructional practices. The exception to the trend of more preliminary and intermediate designations among 3rd cohort schools was the strong implementation of benchmarks in the category of curriculum at MBA. At this charter school, the strong rating in the area of curriculum can be contrasted with beginning stages of implementation in the categories of instruction, support, and organization.

Patterns across categories were also detected. Across all schools, the strongest levels of implementation tended to be for benchmarks targeting curriculum, organization, and evaluation. Findings related to these benchmarks were encouraging and progress was more apparent. The lowest levels of implementation were associated with the category of instruction. The benchmark documents featured lofty goals, and leadership teams commonly judged that these instructional goals had been achieved. The observation data did not support these accomplishments. The contradiction between judged success and the data might be reconciled by developing more objective indicators and realistic expectations.

Overall, it was predictable that all charter schools have not fully implemented all benchmarks because it is a multi-year process. Several schools increased grade levels, enrollments, or moved to new buildings, compounding the challenge of achieving long-term goals. Continued improvement is implicit in the schools' development goals.

Two caveats important for the interpretation of these findings should be noted. First, the summary ratings are at least partially affected by the benchmarks themselves, with some schools setting the bar higher than others in terms of indicators and evidence. Second, the categories used to help organize results and compare schools, mapped on to some benchmark documents and corresponding data better than others.

Table 8. Summary Ratings for Implementation of Goals and Strategies

School	Curriculum	Instruction	Support	Organization	Evaluation
Cohort 1					
COSLA					
MAHS					
MASE					
SCA					
Cohort 2					
CityU					
Star					
Yo!					
Cohort 3					
KIPP					
MBA					
Promise					
Southern					
Soulsville					

Question 5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?

The Charter School Teacher Questionnaire (CSTQ) and teacher focus group data were used to address teachers’ reactions to and experiences in the charter school, including their responses targeting professional development and resources. The responses were organized into four categories. The first category (Program/Mission) encompassed two broad areas: teachers’ understanding of the mission and support of the educational program, and their perceptions that the program would result in successful student outcomes. The second category was professional development. The third category, resources, included whether teachers had adequate planning time, educational materials, technology, and a sufficient number of faculty and staff. The fourth and final category was support from the community, parents, and state and local educational agencies. See Table 9 for summary findings.

Cohort 1.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. Teachers’ understanding of and support for COSLA’s mission and program has remained strong across years. This is evidenced by unanimous agreement with CSTQ items pertaining to this category. For example, all teachers agreed that they have a thorough understanding of the mission, that the program positively affects student outcomes, and teachers are supportive of the educational program. These ratings were bolstered by the open-ended comments. One teacher wrote, “Our school provides every child the best opportunity possible to learn.” Teacher perceptions of the adequacy of professional development were also unanimously positive. In the focus group, teachers noted that the school “has geared professional development to meet the teachers’ needs and interests.”

There was relatively less agreement about the adequacy of technological resources (64% agreement) and common planning time (73% agreement). Two teachers cited technology as an area in need of improvement, but noted that the need is common to all schools. It should be noted that though these levels of agreement are lower than those obtained on other items, they are still primarily positive. Perceptions of support from the community, parents, and state and local agencies were all favorable, with 80% or higher agreement on these items. In fact, marked increases were observed on items about receipt of effective assistance from the State Department of Education (33% to 82%), the Local Educational Agency (0% to 91%), and external partners (50% to 91%) when compared to the previous year.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. Across all four years of operation, quantitative ratings and qualitative responses reveal strong teacher support for the educational mission and program at MAHS as well as the belief that they are positively impacting student success. The findings for perceptions about professional development are contradictory. Based on CSTQ data, professional development has improved at MAHS. The percentage of agreement on this item increased from 60% and 64% in the previous two years to 83% this year. However, focus group responses tend to contradict this positive perception because teachers indicated that they received no professional development or special training as they had in previous years. In particular, new teachers felt the need for more effective mentoring and orientation. "New teachers have to learn everything on their own." Whereas one special education teacher had received training from the local school district, other teachers said they were not well informed about opportunities provided by the district and that workshops were provided when school was still in session. In the category addressing the adequacy resources, responses were neutral or mixed. Only half of the teachers agreed that educational materials were readily available and less than half (42%) agreed that technological resources were adequate. Although most teachers agreed that the school had a sufficient number of faculty and staff (75%) and that teachers were provided ample planning time (67%), the lack of funding, materials, planning time and staff were cited as areas in need of improvement in the open-ended questionnaire items and focus group responses. Perceptions of support continue to be least favorable when compared to other categories. Only 33% of the teachers agreed that the school received effective assistance from state and local agencies. Just over half (58%) of teachers agreed that MAHS receives effective assistance from external partners. Qualitative data support this pattern of results and also highlight the need for more parent involvement.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. In contrast to scores obtained last year, there was an overall decrease in scores for MASE's fourth year of operation. However, teacher understanding of the mission, support for the program, and shared expectations for student success remained strong (77% to 100% agreement on these items). Teachers' experience with professional development was more neutral or mixed. Only 41% of teachers agreed that they received adequate professional development, but the focus group comments seemed neutral in tone. Teachers simply described various professional development opportunities and informal mentoring for new teachers. Compared to last year, there was less agreement on most items related to the adequacy of resources. Half of the teachers agreed that educational materials were readily available (compared to 95% last year), and 64% agreed that there was a sufficient number of faculty and staff (compared to 100%). Ratings on other resource items showed smaller declines but were still largely positive. Decreases and low levels of agreement levels were found on items pertaining to the support from the State Department 70% to 36%), assistance from local education agencies (70% to 55%), active partnerships with parents (100% to 59%) and other opportunities for parental participation (80% to 59%). The questionnaire and focus group data pertaining to areas in need of improvement point to a lack of effective communication and organization at MASE that arguably led to more moderate ratings in the areas of professional development, resources, and support.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. In general, teachers' reactions to and experiences at SCA have continued to improve across years. The rating scale data reveal unanimous or nearly unanimous support for the educational program, understanding of the school mission, and expectations for student success at this charter school. Most teachers also had positive experiences with professional development. This was evidenced by 90% agreement on the item targeting the adequacy of professional development opportunities, as well as focus group responses indicating that they received regular in-service training at the school. However, 2 of 10 teachers identified professional development as in need of improvement on open-ended questionnaire items. Turning to resources, a larger percentage of teachers agreed that the

school had a sufficient number of faculty and staff members (100% compared to 55% last year). High levels of agreement were also observed on items focusing on sufficient planning time (100%), availability of educational materials (90%), and adequacy of technological resources (80%). The only resource item that showed less agreement pertained to whether the school adequately met the requirements of special needs students (60%). Mixed responses were apparent in the category of support. All teachers agreed that they received effective assistance from external partners, enjoyed a positive perception from the community, and provided substantial opportunities for parental participation. In contrast, low levels of agreement were found on items pertaining to support from the state and local educational agencies (30% for both items) and on whether parents were active partners with the school (50%). The percentages obtained on these latter three items were similar and even a bit higher than the percentages observed in previous years. Open-ended questionnaire data suggested a need for more parental involvement but the focus group suggested that parental involvement was strong and increasing.

Cohort 2.

City University School of Liberal Arts. Teachers continue to be supportive of the school's program, understand its mission, and believe that students will be successful at CityU. There was unanimous or near unanimous endorsement on these items. However, fewer teachers agreed that professional development was adequate (69%) when compared to the previous year (83%). The decline in ratings was not illuminated by teacher focus group responses which characterized numerous professional development efforts as "very informative." According to teachers, the adequacy of some resources continues to be problematic at CityU. The lowest levels of agreement were observed for adequacy of technological resources (39%), which reflected a large decrease from the percentage reported in the prior year (83%). The sufficiency of staff (54%) and educational materials (62%) had somewhat higher percentages of agreement, but respondents most frequently identified these resources as limited in open-ended comments on the CSTQ. The resource viewed most positively was having sufficient planning time (85% agreement). Teachers' perceptions of support were mixed. They tended to agree that community perception of their schools was positive (77%), parents had ample opportunity for participation (100%), and parents were active partners (77%). On the other hand, there was less agreement that the school received effective or adequate support from the State Department (31%), local educational agencies (23%), and external partners (31%). In the teacher focus group, comments about parental involvement in particular were also mixed, with parents of 10th and 11th grade students depicted as supportive, but parents of 9th students described as unsupportive.

Star Academy. Teachers' support of Star's mission remained very positive across years. There was uniform agreement on CSTQ items that reflected support for and understanding of the school's educational program, and the promotion of student achievement. Based on results from rating scale items, most teachers also considered professional development to be adequate (78%). In the focus group, teachers described professional development as mostly delivered "in-house" as well as extra support provided to new teachers. In reference to resources, teachers perceived resources related to planning time (78% agreement), number of faculty or staff (89%), and meeting the requirements of special needs students (89%) more favorably than technological resources (44%) or the availability of educational materials (67%). The lack of technological resources was repeatedly noted in response to open-ended questions on the CSTQ. The lowest levels of agreement were found on items related to support, with little agreement that the State (33%), local educational agencies (22%), or external partners (11%) effectively assisted the school. Although teachers unanimously agreed that parents were given the substantial opportunities for participation, fewer agreed that parents were active partners (67%). In the teacher focus group, parents were described as less involved than in previous years.

Yo! Academy. Questionnaire data indicated very positive teacher reactions related to support and understanding of the educational mission at Yo!. There was complete agreement on all items related to support for the educational program and high expectations for student success. Reactions to professional development (80% agreement) were positive, as they were in the second year of operation. During focus groups, faculty described a wide array of professional development activities including the implementation of technology, different types of assessment, classroom management, meeting the needs of IEP students, and mentoring for new teachers. Turning to resources, all teachers agreed that they are given sufficient

planning time and most (90%) agreed that the school has a sufficient number of faculty or staff. Compared to the previous year, the percentage of agreement reported for whether the school had adequate technological resources (60%), or adequately addressed the requirements of special needs children (50%) declined (from 90% and 78%, respectively). The percentage of agreement on whether educational materials were readily available remained modest (60%). The open-ended CSTQ comments supported the results obtained from the rating scale data. Teachers commented that lack of funding led teachers to take on more responsibilities and contributed to “burn-out.” They cited faculty/staff turnover and resources for special education as limitations. Perceived support from parents and the community remained high, but there was a drop in the percentage of agreement on items related to parent support (from 100% on both items to 80% on opportunities for participation and 70% on parents as active partners). In the focus group, teachers commented that parental support differed by grade level, with involvement decreasing as their children advanced in grades. There was less agreement on items pertaining to assistance from the State Department of Education (30%), local education agencies (50%), and external partners (50%).

Cohort 3.

KIPP Academy Nashville. Teacher responses to the CSTQ reflected strong support and understanding of the school’s educational program and mission. They also believed that the educational program was positively impacting student achievement and encouraging high academic standards. There was 100% agreement on items related to these categories, which were nearly identical to the findings obtained in the previous year. Teachers uniformly agreed that professional development was adequate. In the focus group interview, teachers described the in-service training at school in addition to attending conferences and workshops sponsored by KIPP. There was a decrease in agreement pertaining to the availability and adequacy of resources related to having sufficient faculty and staff, technological resources, and educational materials when compared to the previous year (percentages ranged from 25% to 50% in current year). The largest drop was observed for whether the program adequately addressed the requirements of special needs students. Whereas, 80% of teachers agreed with this item in the prior year, no teachers agreed with this item in the current year. In the category of support, mostly favorable responses were obtained on items addressing parental, community and external partner support. Percentages ranged from 75% to 100% on these items. Little to no agreement was found on items related to the provision of effective assistance from either the State (25%) or local (0%) educational agencies. One teacher wrote that the “division between public and charter schools makes it extraordinarily difficult to achieve basic county-based tasks (e.g., special education, communication, etc.)” The extent of agreement was nearly identical to that reported in the previous year across support items.

Memphis Business Academy. The rating scale data revealed a strong commitment to the educational mission and expectations for student success at MBA. All or nearly all teachers agreed with items pertaining to understanding and supporting the program as well as its positive impact on student achievement. Teachers were more moderate in their ratings of professional development opportunities, with 63% agreement that these opportunities were adequate. Several professional development activities were described during the focus group. Teachers attended workshops and conferences on grant writing and financial planning, and in-house development covered lesson planning, student referrals, cooperative learning, and multiple intelligences. Reactions to these initiatives were favorable yet considered to be “works in progress.” Teachers’ ratings were also moderate in reference to the adequacy of resources. The lowest ratings, which also showed the greatest decrease when compared to the first year, were found for adequacy of technological resources (37% agreement compared to 100% in Year 1) and addressing the requirements of special needs students (13% compared to 75%). Whereas all teachers agreed that they were given sufficient planning time, only half agreed that educational materials were readily available or that the school had a sufficient number of faculty or staff. Ratings and open-ended data further indicated a perceived lack of support for this charter school. Only 25% of teachers agreed that their school received effective assistance from the State Department of Education, local educational agency or from parent acting as partners with the school. The lack of parent support and involvement was frequently cited as a limitation in CSTQ comments. Teachers did agree that the community’s perception of MBA was positive (88%), yet only half agreed that they received effective assistance from their external partners, including community groups.

Promise Academy. The pattern of results obtained for the second year of operation was very similar to that reported for the first year. That is, teachers have very positive perceptions about their school across categories. There was 100% agreement on 14 of the 20 items, indicating very favorable reactions to the educational program, expectations for student success, professional development, and resources. As was true last year, an exception to this pattern of uniformly high ratings was discovered on items reflecting assistance from state (50% agreement) and local educational agencies (67% agreement). Somewhat low percentages of agreement were also found on item reflecting an active partnership with parents (67%) and meeting the requirements of special needs students (67%). The qualitative responses from the focus group and CSTQ comments were primarily favorable. Teachers expanded upon their ratings by identifying resources and support for their educational mission, particularly in relation to having high expectations for student success. In the focus groups, teachers characterized professional development initiatives as “informative” and “great.” Parental involvement was one limitation noted on the questionnaire. Three of the six teachers who responded directly mentioned parents, and one cited communication problems more generally.

Southern Avenue Charter School of Academic Excellence. Of the six teachers who responded, nearly all agreed to items related to support for the educational program and high expectations for student success. However only 67% agreed that they had a thorough understanding of the school’s mission, which can be contrasted with the 100% agreement observed last year. Declines in ratings related to professional development and resource items were also found. The extent of agreement on the adequacy of professional development declined modestly from 75% to 67%. Teachers described in-service classroom management and learning strategies workshops provided early in the year and indicated that professional development initiatives entailed “some teachers implementing some of the classroom management strategies from the early year workshops.” They further indicated that they were not involved in any new teacher induction efforts. The decline in agreement with resource items was larger. Compared to last year, fewer teachers agreed that they had sufficient planning time (from 50% agreement in the first year to 17% agreement in the second), had adequate technological resources (100% to 50%), had readily available educational materials (100% to 67%), or that the school had sufficient faculty and staff (100% to 67%). While these declines should be interpreted with caution given the sample sizes (4 in the first year to 6 in the second), they may reflect less favorable reactions among teachers, particularly toward resources. Of the four teachers who identified negative aspects of their school, all mentioned the lack of planning time. Items related to support were more positive, with an increase in agreement observed on two items. The largest increase was on assistance provided by external partners (from 50% to 83%), followed by assistance provided by the State Department of Education (from 50% to 67%). A decrease in agreement was found on the item stating that the community’s perception of the school was positive (100% to 67%). Teachers unanimously agreed with the parent support items in both years.

Soulsville Charter School. Overall, teacher reactions to their experiences at Soulsville improved. In comparison to the first year, agreement levels improved across all rating scale items. It should be noted that though the sample size increased from 4 to 7, the sample remains small and sensitive to variations in scores from one or two individuals. The highest ratings (100% agreement) were found on items related to support for the mission, programs, and high expectations for student success. These ratings represent modest increases across the two years (from 75% to 100%). A larger percentage of teachers also endorsed the item related to adequacy of professional development. This finding is supported by focus group data, which provided ample description of various professional development initiatives. The findings related to resources and support were mixed, even though increases were observed. High or unanimous rates of agreement were reported on the items addressing the availability of educational materials, technological resources and sufficient planning time. However, less than 30% of teachers agreed that the school has a sufficient number of faculty and staff, or that the educational program adequately addressed the requirements of special needs students. No teachers agreed with these items in the previous year. Four of the seven CSTQ comments also identified the need to better meet the requirements of special needs students, and one respondent called for hiring a special education teacher. A similar pattern of findings was observed on support items. There were increases, but the levels of agreement remained low on items pertaining to assistance from state (57%) and local educational agencies (43%), and the provision of opportunities for parents to participate in the education of their children (57%).

Summary findings across schools.

In general, teachers' reactions to and experiences with these charter schools have remained favorable across years. Table 9 presents the summary findings by school in four major categories associated with teacher perceptions. In particular, responses related to teachers understanding of the educational mission, support for the program, and expectations for student success have been extremely positive. This trend was evident in both the quantitative and qualitative data resulting in all charter schools rated as strong in this category. Teachers also view their professional development experiences as adequate and described a wide array of professional development initiatives to support student learning. Seven of the 12 charter schools were rated as strong in this category and the remaining schools were judged to be moderate. Perceptions of resources were more varied with most charter schools evaluated to be moderate in this category. Typically schools had high ratings on some resources and low ratings on others, with several schools identifying technological resources as inadequate. Only COLSA, SCA and Promise appeared to be strong in terms of technological resources. KIPP was the only charter school considered to be weak in the category of resources due to relatively low ratings across resource items with confirmation by qualitative findings. Teachers' reactions to support provided to their charter school tended to be less favorable than in other categories. All but one school (COSLA) was rated to be either moderate or weak in the category of support. In nearly all cases, the lack of perceived support from the State Department of Education and local educational agencies (e.g., the school districts) was apparent. Across categories, no clear findings by cohort were detected. One might expect schools that have been operating longer to have more positive findings based on teacher perception, but this was not the case. Teacher turnover, the addition of new grade levels, and moves to other buildings may have affected their perceptions. Additionally, the findings should be interpreted with some caution because the sizes of the faculty tended to be small, particularly in Cohort 3 schools. With very small samples, results are sensitive to variations among one or two individuals, and anonymity or candor may be threatened.

Table 9. Summary Ratings for Teachers' Reactions

School	Program/mission	Professional development	Resources	Support
Cohort 1				
COSLA				
MAHS				
MASE				
SCA				
Cohort 2				
CityU				
Star				
Yo!				
Cohort 3				
KIPP				
MBA				
Promise				
Southern				
Soulsville				

Question 6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

To address this final evaluation question, we relied primarily on quantitative and qualitative data collected on the parent questionnaire. It should be noted, however, that the return rate for parent questionnaires was low for some schools, which is not unusual among schools serving low socioeconomic areas. Thus, the sample data may not be generalizable to the parent populations at the respective schools. When we divide the number of completed parent questionnaires by the number of students enrolled, the response rates range from a low of 9% (MAHS) to a high of 60% (Yo!). The estimates provided using this percentage may be a bit low because a parent might have more than one child attending the school but would respond to only one questionnaire. Nevertheless, the response rates will be reported for each school because they are important for interpretation of findings. The parent questionnaire results were augmented by the teacher questionnaire, teacher focus group, and the principal interview. For ease of expression, we refer to “parents,” but our use of this term also encompasses caregivers and guardians. The findings are organized into two categories: parent satisfaction and parent involvement.

Cohort 3.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. The 29% parent response rate at COSLA was somewhat low, but available data suggested that satisfaction ratings and comments remained positive across years on most questionnaire items. Very high levels of agreement (89% to 100%) were found on 16 of the 17 rating scale items. In positive open-ended comments parents most frequently cited the low teacher-to-student ratio that afforded more individual attention and interaction as well as the high quality of teachers more generally. They also appreciated the level of parent involvement, particularly via the Parent Teacher Advisory Board (PTAB). Many of the parent comments were intense and emotional in their praise of COSLA. For example, one parent wrote, “I thank God for schools like this. I wish more public schools could offer the same.” The largest increase in ratings when compared to last year pertained to principal leadership. Over 90% of parents agreed that the principal was a good leader compared to 57% in the previous year. Other increases in ratings were more modest. The only exception to the uniformly high ratings was less favorable parent ratings on the adequacy of transportation item (63% agreement), which has been consistent across years.

Data obtained from teachers, the principal, and students all point to a high level of parent involvement at COSLA. This finding has also been consistent across years. Parent involvement is promoted by signed parent contracts in which they agree to regularly attend the Parent Teacher Advisory Board (PTAB) and participate in other volunteer activities. According to the principal and teachers, there is a new PTAB executive board called the Village Collaboration, and parents are responsible for different areas of governance in their child’s class. Teachers characterized the Village Collaboration as “outstanding.” One teacher noted that, “Parental involvement has increased and is a better quality involvement.” Students indicated that parents helped teachers in classrooms, helped with newsletters, and received awards at programs.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. The parental response rate was rather low (n = 25 or approximately 9%), so interpretations should be made with caution. The parents that did return the survey were generally satisfied with the school. The results were similar to those obtained last year. Over 75% of responding parents agreed or strongly agreed with 16 of the 17 rating scale items. In open-ended comments, parents cited the academically challenging curriculum, high expectations of students, principal leadership, discipline, safety, and quality instruction. The only item reflecting less parental agreement addressed the attractiveness of classrooms and hallways (60% agreement). Physical appearance and the need for better communication emerged as suggestions for improvement in open-ended comments. However, it should be emphasized that most parent comments were very favorable in their evaluation of MAHS.

The evidence pertaining to parental involvement was mixed. On rating scale items, parents and teachers both largely agreed that parental involvement was encouraged at MAHS, but in the focus group, teachers indicated that although parents sign a contract, most do not fulfill the hours promised. Other teachers commented that parents are not usually involved unless their child is failing and then teachers are blamed for that failure. In parent open-ended comments, suggestions to improve communications with teachers were cited. The principal did not address parental support, but students did comment that parents volunteered to help teachers, and some helped with tutoring and reading. "Every time we need help, parents will come out and bring others. Parents show their concern."

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. A total of 116 parents completed the survey, but it is very important to note that these were all parents of high school grade students. The parents of middle grades students did not complete the survey. The overall response rate was 21%, but again this does not represent parents of students at all grade levels. Levels of agreement were 69% or above on 12 of the 17 items. The percentage of agreement exceeded 80% on only two items, those addressing maintenance of school grounds (85%) and having high expectations for student achievement (88%). In response to the open-ended question regarding strengths of this charter school, most parents cited the challenging curriculum, high academic standards, school safety, discipline, small classes, and dedicated teachers. The items receiving the lowest levels of agreement pertained to principal leadership (60% agreement), parents regularly informed about their child's progress (37%), encouragement of parental involvement (59%), and adequacy of transportation services (40%). These themes also emerged in reference to areas in need of improvement. Parents most frequently described as limitations the lack of report cards or progress reports and little communication from the school. The lack of information about their children's progress seemed symptomatic of the larger communication problem. Principal leadership more generally as well as a lack of extracurricular activities and books were also frequently cited limitations.

There seem to be some barriers to parental involvement at MASE. As noted, parents consider the lack of communication a problem. They commented that the principal was less than responsive to their requests for information and they were not treated respectfully. Problems in communication among the administration, staff and parents were also the most frequently identified limitation in teachers' open-ended questionnaire comments. The teachers' levels of agreement on items related to parents being active partners or being encouraged to participate were low compared to other items (59% agreement on both items). When interviewed, the principal stated the parent involvement has decreased with fewer parent meetings. He considered parent involvement to be better in the middle than high school grades. The teachers only described their efforts to communicate with parents, but did not address the success of these efforts or the extent of parent involvement at MASE more generally. Although students described ways in which parents were involved, such as driving on field trips or chaperoning dances, they noted that parents were less active this year "because events are not planned well." There was no mention of or evidence for parental contracts at MASE.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. As has been the case in previous years, both quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data indicate very high levels of parent satisfaction at SCA. The response rate at SCA was high (55%) relative to other schools. The levels of agreement ranged from a low of 76% to a high of 98% on all rating scale items. The dominant theme to re-emerge from parent comments about the school's strengths was their appreciation of the teachers and principals, who were described as dedicated to their children, caring, and personable. Other strengths noted were smaller class sizes, challenging curricula, and a safe, nurturing climate. Responses to areas in need of improvement reinforced parents' overall satisfaction with the school. Most parents said "nothing" needed improvement, and that "everything was great." When suggestions were made, they mostly centered on transportation (scheduling), and extending the number of grade levels served.

In contrast to the high levels of parent satisfaction, teacher data suggested that parental involvement was more moderate. Only half of the teachers agreed that parents were active partners in the school. By comparison, all teachers agreed that parents were offered substantial opportunities to participate in the education of their children. Of the 10 teachers who provided open-ended responses, two mentioned that parental involvement needed improvement. In focus groups, the principal and teachers concurred that parent involvement was increasing, and described specific efforts to enhance

communication with parents (newsletter, calendars, weekly notes with announcements). Students, on the other hand, noted that “many parents were not able to be present and assist at the school,” but some were able to assist the children with their homework. There was no mention of having any type of formal contracts with parents.

Cohort 2.

City University School of Liberal Arts. Although parent perceptions seemed to have improved at CityU, it should be noted the only 16 parents responded for a response rate of 7%. The items showing most improvement in comparison to the previous year addressed the adequacy of transportation services (36% to 74% agreement), maintenance of school grounds (41% to 75%), the attractiveness of hallways (41% to 69%), and teacher availability to parents (from 64 to 94%). Levels of agreement on all remaining items ranged from 80% to 100%, suggesting parent satisfaction across most areas. Strengths identified in the open-ended comments centered on the high quality instruction from caring teachers and the challenging college curriculum to help prepare the students for college. In response to the question about what could be improved at CityU, parents identified the need for more extracurricular activities or programs and the need for texts for each student for class and homework.

There is some evidence to suggest a decrease in levels of parental involvement when compared to last year. The principal explained that parental involvement decreased due to the school’s move to a new building combined with the provision of transportation for students. They don’t see the parents as often because they no longer drop their children off to school. This cost some “intimacy” or “closeness” in the school’s relationship with parents. On the teacher questionnaire, a small drop in agreement from the previous year was observed regarding whether parents were active partners (100% to 77%). In focus groups, the teachers noted that while parents of 10th and 11th graders were supportive, parents of 9th graders were not. Both teachers and the principal described various ways in which they kept parents informed including a website linked to an on-line program that parents can access to obtain updates, announcements and descriptions of volunteer opportunities as well as information on their child’s progress and homework assignments. Students described parent through the PTA and coming-in to speak with the students. There was no mention or evidence of any type of formal contract with parents.

Star Academy. Similar to previous years, rating scale data indicated very high levels of satisfaction on parent questionnaire items. A total of 81 parents completed the questionnaire, yielding a 40% response rate. With only one exception, percentages of agreement on items ranged from 94% to 100%. Adequacy of transportation services was the only item that received a lower level of agreement (72%), but this percentage is still somewhat high in an absolute sense. Parent open-ended comments were overwhelmingly positive. Among the numerous strengths noted were high expectations for students, a strong basic curriculum, low student-to-teacher ratios, teacher dedication, principal leadership, parental involvement, and a safe environment for their children. Several parents commented on how the school leadership, teachers and parents all worked in tandem to help ensure the success of their children. When asked what they would like to see improved at the school, many parents responded with “nothing” or “everything is wonderful.” Some recurring suggestions were to add more physical space that would afford larger classrooms, a cafeteria, a library, more grade levels, transportation, and more extracurricular activities. A few suggestions were directed at improving parent involvement, and communication with parents, but these comments were in the minority.

Although Star continues to require signed contracts from parents, the parent involvement seems to have decreased when compared to the previous year. In their focus group, teachers described parents as less involved in school activities this year and have observed a decrease in their attendance at Parent Teacher Organization meetings. On the teacher questionnaire, the percentage of agreement declined on the item addressing whether parents were active partners with the school (82% to 67%). Of the nine teachers who responded to the open-ended questionnaire item about areas in need of improvement, three identified the need for more parental involvement. However, the principal and students characterized parental involvement as frequent and “good”, describing a host of ways in which parents are involved. Findings pertaining to parental involvement at STAR were contradictory and dependent on source.

Yo! Academy. Questionnaire data suggest that parents are very satisfied with the education their children are receiving at Yo! Academy. The 60% response rate (n=96) was very respectable and represented a nearly fourfold increase in the number of parents responding in comparison with last year. The rating scale findings were similar to those obtained in the previous year, with percentages of agreement ranging from 62% to 94%. The exceptions were a modest increase in the extent to which parents agreed that rules were consistently enforced (67% to 86%), and decreases in the extent to which they agreed classrooms and hallways were attractive (78% to 62%), and transportation services were adequate (72% to 65%). In terms of parent comments, the most frequently identified strengths of the school were the emphasis on performing arts, high expectations for students, the curriculum, and the smaller school/ class environment that afforded more attention from qualified, caring teachers and staff. Less frequent but recurring strengths noted were regular communication between parents and teachers, the familial atmosphere, and a safe orderly environment. Perceived areas in need of improvement focused on resources to fund more textbooks, technological resources, additional classes, sports programs, and transportation. Parent expressed some dissatisfaction with leadership, teacher turnover, and selection and retention criteria for students.

The level of parent involvement did not appear to be as strong as the level of satisfaction. The principal indicated that mandatory parent meetings were held four times a year, but did not elaborate on parental involvement besides describing opportunities to transport students to performances and having online access to grades. In the focus group, teachers explained that the level of parent involvement depends on the grade level of the child, with the most involvement from parents of freshman students. Teachers also described several avenues for informing parents and encouraging involvement. The questionnaire data showed that 80% of teachers agreed that parents were offered substantial opportunities to participate in the education of their children, but slightly fewer (70%) agreed that they were active partners with the school. Students' only comment about parent involvement was they helped with their frequent performances.

Cohort 3.

KIPP Academy Nashville. Similar to findings reported last year, questionnaire data suggest that parents are very satisfied with nearly all aspects of their children's education at KIPP. A total of 57 parents completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 48% response rate. Most percentages of agreement were above 90% and ranged from 67% to 97% agreement. Parents' qualitative data supported the quantitative rankings. They particularly appreciated the dedication of teachers, strong leadership, challenging curriculum, and high expectations of students. Parents also appreciated caring, committed relationships among parents, teachers, and administrators. One parent noted, "Kippsters work as a family and team." The suggestions for improvement focused on reducing the long school hours, renovating the building, and offering more classes and extracurricular activities.

Data suggested increasing levels of parent involvement. In focus groups, the teachers and principal concurred that parental involvement was on the rise. The principal stated that, "parental involvement had been increasing, especially among 5th grade parents." Teacher questionnaire data provide some support for this assertion. Three of the four teachers agreed that parents were encouraged to participate in their child's education and were active partners with the school. Students simply said that parents help students at home with their homework.

Memphis Business Academy. Findings revealed continued parental satisfaction at MBA. The response rate this year was 30%, with a total of 34 parents who completed the questionnaire. The results were very similar to those reported last year. With only one exception, the percentages of agreement ranged from 82% to 100%. The exception was their apparent dissatisfaction with transportation services (38% agreement), which showed a decline when compared to the previous year (48%). The parents' open-ended comments reinforced the favorable rating scale data. Small class sizes that afforded more individual attention for students was most commonly cited, but other strengths included the strong leadership, caring teachers, high expectations for students and a strong curriculum. Although the positive comments outweighed the negative, parents most frequently suggested providing transportation, foreign language classes, and more extracurricular activities as ways to improve this charter school.

Parents do not appear to be actively involved in the school. Even though most teachers agreed that the school offered substantial opportunities for parental participation (88%), few agreed (25%) that parents were active partners in the school. Of the seven teachers who identified negative aspects or areas in need of improvement, three described a lack of parent involvement, visibility, or support. Teachers said that parental support has increased but the school's new location made it more difficult for parents to be involved. The principal also described increased parental involvement and said "parents continue to show progress." Students reported minimal parent involvement. There does not appear to be a formal contract between parents and the school that would require their involvement.

Promise Academy. As was true last year, parents' reactions to the education provided at Promise were clearly favorable. A total of 33 parents completed the questionnaire for a 29% response rate. With one exception, the levels of agreement to items continued to be high, ranging from 79% to 100%. The only exception to this pattern of uniformly high ratings was regarding whether transportation services were adequate (55% agreement). In open-ended comments the parents praised the relationships that teachers had with students and parents. They perceived the teachers to be dedicated to the promotion of learning, as well as maintaining communication with parents. As was indicated by the relatively low rating on the transportation item, parents most frequently suggested having busses.

The findings pertaining to the level of parental involvement were mixed. There was a decrease in teacher questionnaire agreement that parents were active partners in the school when compared to the prior year (100% to 67%). The need to improve parent involvement was also noted by 2 of the 6 teachers who responded to the questionnaire item asking about areas in need of improvement. However, in teacher focus groups, parent involvement was described as increasing. To quote one teacher, "Parent involvement has increased some since the beginning of the school year." The principal's response was essentially identical. "The level of parent involvement has increased since the school opened." The young students indicated that parents liked various aspects of their school, but did not describe any involvement. Efforts to involve parents include sending students' homework folders home each day, newsletters, flyers, calendars, and information posted on their new website. There was no indication of having any formal contracts with parents.

Southern Avenue Charter School of Academic Excellence. Although there was a drop in rating scale scores from the first to the second year of operation on several items, the overall findings still point to high levels of parent satisfaction. A total of 40 parents returned completed questionnaires for an estimated response rate of 39%. The largest declines were observed on items addressing the principal's leadership (88% to 70% agreement), adequacy of transportation (36% to 23%), whether their child likes attending the school (94% to 75%), and whether they are pleased that their child is attending is the school (94% to 75%). The remaining percentages of agreement were more similar to the figures reported in the previous year and ranged from 78% to 95% agreement. Parent comments highlighted the strengths of Southern Avenue. They especially appreciated the small classroom/ school environment, the strong curriculum and programs, high expectations for student success, and the extracurricular activities. Parents provided several, varied suggestions for improving the school. They were concerned with school leadership and its affect on teacher turnover. School discipline was viewed as problematic and in need of improvement. They also suggested a change in procedure for dropping off and picking up their children, which is apparently cumbersome. Finally, they noted that parking was a problem at this school.

Findings suggest high levels of parent involvement. All six teacher respondents agreed that parents were active partners and offered substantial opportunities to participate in the education of their children. In the focus group, teachers stated that parent involvement has increased since the school opened, especially after they instituted special awards for high performing students. However, the teachers asserted that it was the same group of parents who were regularly involved and "not the ones that really needed to be involved." The principal explained that the increase in parental involvement was due to the requirement that all parents tutor at least 10 hours a year. Several students said their parents came to the school to help with class parties or for tutoring. The formal parent engagement contract may account for higher levels of parent involvement, at least for a core group, at this charter school.

Soulsville Charter School. The questionnaire data suggest that parents continue to be largely satisfied with nearly all aspects of the education provided to their children at Soulsville. The 36 respondents (a 30% response rate) expressed high levels of agreement to 14 of the 17 rating scale items. On these items, the level of agreement ranged from 80% to 97%. The three exceptions were responses on items pertaining to whether parent involvement was encouraged (69% agreement), whether teachers were available if parents needed to talk to them (75%), and the adequacy of transportation (56%). In open-ended comments, parents described strengths as the challenge of the curriculum, the high expectations for student achievement, high caliber teachers, and the structure or discipline at the school. They most frequently identified parental involvement and maintaining communication between parents and the school as areas in need of improvement. Whereas many parents considered discipline or structure to be a strength, some suggested improvement in disciplinary procedures. Finally, some parents suggested the inclusion of more athletic activities and sports programs.

Although parents seemed satisfied with most aspects of their children's education, the findings pertaining to parental involvement were contradictory. As described in the preceding paragraph, parents themselves repeatedly cited the lack of parental involvement as in need of improvement. In contrast, the teacher and principal focus group responses suggested that parent involvement was good and on the rise. On the teacher questionnaire, a little over half (57%) of respondents agreed that parents were offered substantial opportunities to participate in education of their children, but 71% agreed that parents were active partners in the school. In open-ended questionnaire comments, 2 of the 7 teachers identified parental involvement as a limitation. The students' only comment pertaining to parent involvement was that "they came in to watch us." The teachers and principal described efforts to keep parents informed and feel welcome at the school, but there was no formal contract to further encourage their participation.

Summary findings across schools.

Parent satisfaction was strong in 11 of the 12 charter schools (See Table 10). With the exception of a moderate rating assigned to MASE, these findings mirrored those obtained in previous years. Clearly, the parents had primarily favorable reactions to these schools. Both parent rating scale data and their open-ended responses supported these findings. Recurring strengths identified across schools included the small class or school environment, high expectations for student success, a challenging curriculum, and high caliber, caring teachers. Although most responses were favorable, some common themes related to resources were identified as in need of improvement. Parents cited the need for transportation, more extracurricular activities, specialized classes, additional grade levels served, and building expansion or renovation. As noted earlier, findings from schools with low response rates should be interpreted more cautiously because they may not generalize to all parents at a particular charter school. Specifically, there may be a tendency for parents who are more satisfied with the schools to complete the questionnaires.

With respect to parental involvement, the findings suggest that strong levels of satisfaction do not necessarily correspond to high levels of involvement. As was true in previous years, ratings in the category of involvement were more varied. The three schools judged to be strong in this category (COSLA, KIPP, and Southern) served elementary grades, and two (COSLA and Southern) had formal parent contracts that appear to have directly encouraged more participation. The two schools evaluated as low in this category served middle (MBA) or secondary grade levels (MASE), and neither had formal parent contracts. The pattern of decreasing involvement with advancing grade levels is commonly reported and was noted some by teachers and principals. The remainder of the schools was rated as moderate, often because the findings pertaining to the extent of parent involvement were contradictory or vague. There were no patterns in results detected by years of operation (cohort).

Table 10. Summary Results for Parental Satisfaction and Involvement

School	Satisfaction	Involvement
Cohort 1		
COSLA		
MAHS		
MASE		
SCA		
Cohort 2		
CityU		
Star		
Yo!		
Cohort 3		
KIPP		
MBA		
Promise		
Southern		
Soulsville		

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions by Evaluation Question

The present study used a variety of data sources to address the questions guiding the fourth-year evaluation of Tennessee charter schools. There were a total of 12 charter schools evaluated. The first cohort of four schools was initiated in the 2003-04 school year and has completed its fourth year of operation. The second cohort of three schools began operating in the 2004-05 school year and has completed its third year. The final and third cohort of five schools began in 2005-06 and just completed its second year. As noted earlier, the first evaluation question, which pertained to student achievement outcomes, was addressed in a separate report.

The second evaluation question focused on instructional orientation and strategies used in these charter schools. The findings were similar to those obtained in previous years. Traditional, direct instruction remained the dominant pedagogical practice across charter schools. The rates were comparable to national norms in many cases, but still reflect limited success by the schools to implement the more innovative or student-centered pedagogy described in benchmarks and instructional plans, or to take advantage of some of the unique conditions afforded by their charter status. Commonly cited features of the charter schools were smaller class sizes and more challenging instruction and curriculum. One might expect, therefore, to observe more student-centered, higher-order strategies implemented in these instructional environments. This expectation was reinforced by the schools' own benchmarks calling for a wide array of alternative, productive strategies in the areas of curriculum and instruction. Overall, observation findings suggested low to moderate employment of student-centered and higher-order strategies. The integration of technology into classroom teaching was minimal. In some schools, the lack of technology integration may be due to a lack of resources, but in others the availability of technological resources was perceived as sufficient. The availability of technology does not equate with its effective use for promoting learning in classrooms. RSCA data show that even when technology was employed in classrooms, its application to support higher-order thinking was limited.

The third evaluation question addressed school climate. As reported in previous years, a favorable school climate continues to be an impressive strength of these charter schools overall. On all dimensions, the SCI ratings obtained for the charter schools were higher than national norms. Still, as true in the national sample, scores on Order tended to be lower than those on other dimensions. Schools receiving moderate or average ratings all had relatively low Order scores that were commonly traced to problems with student misbehavior, discipline, inconsistent application of rules, and absenteeism or tardiness. Furthermore, the schools that had problems related to Order tended to be middle or secondary schools. This trend by grade level is observed among schools nationally. There was also some decline in perceptions of school climate noted in about half of the charter schools. This pattern may be partially explained by school expansion in terms of grade levels, physical space, and new staff. Such "growing pains" may plausibly affect climate.

The next evaluation question addressed the degree and level of quality with which the goals and strategies of the charter school were implemented. Not surprisingly, the levels of benchmark implementation were related to cohort or year of operation. First and second cohort schools were either in intermediate or full phases of development across categories. Ratings for the implementation of goals and strategies tended to be beginning or intermediate for 3rd cohort schools in their second year of operation. Patterns across categories were also detected. The strongest levels of implementation tended to be for benchmarks targeting curriculum, organization, and evaluation. Findings related to these benchmarks were encouraging and progress was more apparent. The lowest levels of implementation were associated with the category of instruction. The school leadership teams seemed to overestimate the extent of progress they had made in the implementation of the various benchmark goals and strategies, particularly as they related to instruction. Although some improvements in the benchmark documents were noted, this tendency to overestimate progress signals a need to (a) revise the benchmark document where goals are too lofty and (b) become more comfortable with formative evaluation as a means for accurately assessing status and school planning.

The next question focused on teachers' reactions to and experiences in the charter schools. Our findings suggest that teachers continue to be primarily favorable in these areas. As reported in previous years, teachers were overwhelmingly positive about their school's mission and programs as evidenced by strong ratings in this category among all 12 schools. Teachers also tended to view their professional development experiences as adequate and described a wide array of professional development initiatives to support student learning. Perceptions of resources were more varied with most charter schools evaluated to be moderate in this category. Typically schools had high ratings on some resources and low ratings on others, with several schools identifying technological resources as inadequate. With regard to perceptions of support or assistance from educational agencies, teachers' ratings and comments were less favorable. They consistently reported a lack of effective assistance provided by state and local educational agencies.

One might expect schools that have been operating longer to have more positive teacher perceptions, but this was not the case. No clear pattern of findings by cohort was detected. Teacher turnover, the addition of new grade levels, and moves to other buildings may have affected the perceptions assessed on the teacher questionnaire and school climate measures.

The final question addressed in this report pertained to parent reactions to and experiences with charter schools. Parent satisfaction was another definite strength of all charter schools across all years. Recurring strengths identified across schools included the small class or school environment, high expectations for student success, a challenging curriculum, and high caliber, caring teachers. Although most responses were favorable, some common themes related to resources were identified as in need of improvement. Parents cited the need for transportation, more extracurricular activities, specialized classes, additional grade levels served, and building expansion or renovation. These limitations are often difficult for schools to address because they require substantial resources. More generally, there may be a trade-off between benefits associated with small school environments, such as individual attention and a sense of belonging or community, at the expense of the full range of extracurricular activities, services, and more specialized curricula offered at large schools. The levels of parental involvement were more varied across schools. One might predict that those schools requiring parent contracts would have higher levels of parent involvement, yet only two (COSLA and Southern) of the five schools with parent contracts were judged to be strong in this category. The definition of what constitutes parental involvement remains elusive and may contribute to variations in perceptions. It appears that some schools were equating satisfaction and support with involvement that entails more active participation in school and their children's education. The difficulty associated with encouraging and maintaining high levels of parent satisfaction and involvement is not unique to charter schools, and arguably these charter schools have been more successful in this endeavor than many public schools serving similar types of students.

These conclusions should be tempered with the recognition of the limitations associated with the evaluation data. For some charter schools, small sample sizes and low response rates diminish the validity of the findings. When making comparisons across years, the fact that there were different groups of respondents may have contributed to the changing trends across time. We also relied heavily on self-report data that is subject to social desirability effects (i.e., perceived pressure to react more positively than negatively). Finally, we based some results on the benchmark documents, which varied in quality and were prepared by the leadership team, not the evaluators. Every effort was made to base the findings on multiple data sources.

Recommendations

Due to a consistent pattern of findings across years, the recommendations are similar to those presented in previous reports. Based on the overall findings, the following recommendations apply to the charter schools as a group and not necessarily to individual schools. The recommendations specific to each school can be found in the individual school reports.

The first recommendation is for these charter schools to adopt a wider array of effective instructional orientations or strategies closely aligned with corresponding benchmarks. Whereas there was

improvement noted in some schools, there was little change in other schools or even an increase in more traditional instructional approaches. Many research-based practices and the schools' own benchmarks call for the implementation of more student-centered strategies that entail higher-order thinking and technology integration. Teacher led, direct instruction can be an effective orientation, but a better balance among a variety of effective pedagogical practices might be achieved. The low teacher-to-pupil ratios, perceived to be strengths of these charter schools, would seem to be an ideal environment for achieving this balance. Having a wide array of effective strategies may be particularly effective for a population of students considered at-risk because they may better promote enthusiasm and interest. The integration of technology into the classrooms to enrich learning and foster higher-ordering thinking may be a good starting point. The themes of many of these charter schools (e.g., performing arts, business or health sciences) seem particularly well suited to the integration of subject areas as well as experiential and project based learning. More focus on a variety of effective pedagogical strategies in professional development initiatives might be beneficial for diversifying instruction among these charter schools.

Second, although school climate was a commendable strength of the charter schools, order and discipline could be improved at some schools. School leadership teams may want to re-evaluate and perhaps revise policies related to student conduct, discipline procedures, and attendance. A consistent policy and clear expectations for student behavior both within and outside of school might be the first step. Fostering a closer partnership with parents in supporting appropriate behaviors and rules of conduct might help in this effort. To maximize success, administrators, teachers, parents and even students themselves must consistently communicate expectations and consequences for behaviors. Benchmark indicators targeting "order" might be developed to better formalize strategies. Professional development initiatives might also target classroom management and discipline strategies. Obviously, order is also problematic in public schools serving similar populations of students, and charter schools may well be addressing order and discipline more effectively than these schools. Yet, there is still room for improvement.

The third recommendation is to continue efforts to increase active parent involvement or participation. Although parental involvement was evaluated to be high in few schools, in most it was at moderate or low levels. Furthermore, the definition and types of parental involvement might be reconsidered. In some school improvement plans, involvement translates into support for and understanding of the mission and educational program or maintaining regular contact. In others, it specifies more active participation in parent organizations, school activities, and the provision of academic support for students. Both are necessary and important, and both might be included on benchmark documents that identify more specific strategies used to encourage involvement coupled with more objective evidence to indicate their effectiveness. Two schools (COSLA and Southern) both required formal contracts with parents and had higher levels of parent involvement, but three others (MAHS, Star, and Yo!) had contracts but were evaluated as moderate in this category. Formal contracts, in and of themselves, may not be sufficient for encouraging participation and may depend on the contents and expectations delineated in the contracts. Each school needs to determine what types of parent participation are most desired and how to realize those goals.

The fourth recommendation is to prioritize, coordinate, and secure more resources. Because the specific type of resource needed varied by individual schools, resources are broadly defined. The selection of targeted resources would be guided by the school improvement plan. However, the need for more technological resources was the most consistent theme across the charter schools. Any planning for garnering additional resources related to technology might include an emphasis on how to incorporate technology in support of classroom instruction. Admittedly, this recommendation is difficult to achieve. Additional resources may be garnered by working toward achieving a collaborative, supportive relationship with the school district, state educational agency, and external partners, leading to our next recommendation.

The next recommendation is to continue efforts to develop supportive, collaborative relationships with the school district and external partners. Across cohorts, the present findings have consistently indicated a perceived lack of effective assistance from local and state educational agencies and, in some cases, external partners. The educational reform literature clearly emphasizes the importance to the sustainability of school change of having close connections to the parent school district. Strategies include

having more open channels of communication and holding meetings to clarify policies, procedures, and available resources. Furthermore, representatives of charter schools should continue to seek the support and assistance of various external partners. Publicity and notices in the form of newsletters, invitations to school functions, and community events might be used in conjunction with direct requests for assistance to promote more involvement from businesses, community groups, colleges, and parents. However, we also recognize that the schools' potential progress in establishing and furthering such relationships is directly dependent on the degree of involvement desired and investment made by the respective external organizations.

Finally, benchmark documents need to be modified to better align with objective indicators and available data. Continued improvement in developing and then attaining benchmarks was noted for some charter schools. However, in other schools, benchmark development might still be improved. In particular, more objective indicators that are more easily measured would better help determine whether goals have been realized. Results and data from this report, independent classroom observations, and student outcome results exemplify more objective evidence that might be provided to document goal attainment. Benchmark documents are intended to be a dynamic tool used for school improvement. Planning, evaluation, and ultimately improvement can be facilitated by a sound, ambitious, and long-range benchmark document. An honest, accurate appraisal of the extent to which benchmarks have been successfully implemented will enhance school improvement efforts. An initial step in modifying the benchmark document might be to address the recommendations presented in this report.

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Appendix

SOM Data Summary National Norms for Elementary Schools

Number of School Observation Visits: N = 688

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Instructional Orientation					
Direct instruction (lecture)	3.0	10.4	23.7	34.8	28.1
Team teaching	49.8	32.3	11.9	5.6	0.4
Cooperative/collaborative learning	38.1	41.8	13.1	5.2	1.9
Individual tutoring (teacher, peer, aide, adult volunteer)	44.6	31.8	16.1	5.2	2.2
Classroom Organization					
Ability groups	36.3	22.5	15.7	12.7	12.7
Multi-age grouping	70.1	15.7	7.5	4.1	2.6
Work centers (for individuals or groups)	27.3	27.7	26.2	15.4	3.4
Instructional Strategies					
Higher-level instructional feedback (written or verbal) to enhance student learning	28.0	36.2	26.5	7.1	2.2
Integration of subject areas (interdisciplinary/thematic units)	58.3	30.7	7.6	3.0	0.4
Project-based learning	75.4	15.8	5.0	3.8	0.0
Use of higher-level questioning strategies	19.5	32.7	32.0	12.4	3.4
Teacher acting as a coach/facilitator	7.1	20.2	28.5	34.5	9.7
Parent/community involvement in learning activities	75.3	18.4	6.0	0.4	0.0
Student Activities					
Independent seatwork (self-paced worksheets, individual assignments)	4.1	13.7	39.6	31.1	11.5
Experiential, hands-on learning	30.5	36.4	24.9	6.3	1.9
Systematic individual instruction (differential assignments geared to individual needs)	64.9	26.5	5.6	2.2	0.7
Sustained writing/composition (self-selected or teacher-generated topics)	56.0	32.8	7.8	2.2	1.1
Sustained reading	43.3	31.9	18.5	4.1	2.2
Independent inquiry/research on the part of students	82.8	13.1	2.6	1.5	0.0
Student discussion	46.0	24.5	16.6	9.1	3.8
Technology Use					
Computer for instructional delivery (e.g. CAI, drill & practice)	35.2	37.1	20.6	6.7	0.4
Technology as a learning tool or resource (e.g., Internet research, spreadsheet or database creation, multi-media, CD Rom, Laser disk)	49.6	29.9	16.4	3.4	0.7
Assessment					
Performance assessment strategies	66.4	16.4	9.9	5.7	1.5
Student self-assessment (portfolios, individual record books)	72.9	18.7	5.7	2.7	0.0
Summary Items					
High academically focused class time	0.4	1.5	17.1	38.3	42.8
High level of student attention/interest/engagement	0.4	3.0	20.1	48.3	28.3

Note: One school observation visit equals approximately 10 individual classroom visits.

SOM Data Summary National Norms for Secondary Schools

Number of School Observation Visits: N = 370

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Instructional Orientation					
Direct instruction (lecture)	1.6	8.7	19.0	44.0	26.6
Team teaching	64.1	30.3	5.4	0.3	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	35.7	36.5	23.2	4.4	0.3
Individual tutoring (teacher, peer, aide, adult volunteer)	76.5	17.8	1.9	3.0	0.8
Classroom Organization					
Ability groups	40.1	29.8	13.3	7.3	9.5
Multi-age grouping	53.7	10.6	8.9	17.1	9.8
Work centers (for individuals or groups)	69.4	23.0	7.3	0.3	0.0
Instructional Strategies					
Higher-level instructional feedback (written or verbal) to enhance student learning	25.1	24.9	25.7	18.1	6.2
Integration of subject areas (interdisciplinary/thematic units)	66.1	21.7	8.9	1.4	1.9
Project-based learning	51.1	35.1	10.6	2.4	0.8
Use of higher-level questioning strategies	19.2	29.0	32.8	17.1	1.9
Teacher acting as a coach/facilitator	3.8	16.3	27.9	28.5	23.6
Parent/community involvement in learning activities	93.0	6.0	1.1	0.0	0.0
Student Activities					
Independent seatwork (self-paced worksheets, individual assignments)	1.1	9.8	26.0	39.6	23.6
Experiential, hands-on learning	44.0	36.4	14.7	4.6	0.3
Systematic individual instruction (differential assignments geared to individual needs)	76.1	20.9	2.7	0.3	0.0
Sustained writing/composition (self-selected or teacher-generated topics)	54.5	33.2	10.4	1.6	0.3
Sustained reading	52.5	36.0	10.7	0.8	0.0
Independent inquiry/research on the part of students	67.7	24.5	7.1	0.8	0.0
Student discussion	65.7	17.2	8.7	4.6	3.8
Technology Use					
Computer for instructional delivery (e.g. CAI, drill & practice)	49.6	40.1	8.1	2.2	0.0
Technology as a learning tool or resource (e.g., Internet research, spreadsheet or database creation, multi-media, CD Rom, Laser disk)	45.5	37.9	11.9	4.6	0.0
Assessment					
Performance assessment strategies	59.2	26.3	11.8	2.7	0.0
Student self-assessment (portfolios, individual record books)	77.7	17.1	4.1	1.1	0.0
Summary Items					
High academically focused class time	0.0	1.6	23.4	59.4	15.5
High level of student attention/interest/engagement	0.0	3.3	42.0	46.9	7.9

Note: One school observation visit equals approximately 10 individual classroom visits.

Rubric for SOM Scoring

(0) None:	Strategy was never observed.
(1) Rarely:	Observed in only one or two classes. Receives isolated use and/or little time in classes. Clearly not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
(2) Occasionally:	Observed in some classes. Receives minimal or modest time or emphasis in classes. Not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
(3) Frequently:	Observed in many but not all classes. Receives substantive time or emphasis in classes. A prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.
(4) Extensively:	Observed in most or all classes. Receives substantive time and/or emphasis in classes. A highly prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.