

Some Emerging Issues/Trends/Lessons Presented at the November 1998 SBE Meeting

As evaluation results are completed and analyzed and conversations occur about these results, overarching issues, trends, and/or lessons will be shared. These issues or lessons are in addition to specific findings in the evaluation reports. Several observations are included with these first two reports. Additional issues may be included with the final evaluation report on the 1997-98 charter schools to the December 1998 State Board meeting.

1. We are looking at charter schools in a particular historical context: the inaugural year of charter schools in North Carolina. Thus, schools opening in 1997-98 were caught, not only in the web of opening a charter school, but the inauguration of an entire charter school system for the state. Many of the first-year "system" issues added to or perhaps confounded normal start-up challenges due to issues that rose from lack of clarity in aspects of the legislation, unexpected issues that no one anticipated, and the like. We likely will not know the true "lessons" of charter schools until we get through the "getting-up-and-running" stage.
2. The transition from Year 1 to Year 2 is dramatic. The beginning of school in 1998 is nothing like the beginning in 1997, according to most charter schools. There seems to be a much greater sense of direction, organization, and a school culture that students are coming to understand.
3. It is probably helpful for a school to organize around a distinctive mission. Such perceived missions might be saving a community school, serving a particular target group of students, commitment to a particular curriculum/instructional program, or a belief that certain students' needs are not being met in the public schools. This mission gives a focus and provides a core value around which commitment is built. It might be useful to explore how a particular sense of mission might benefit other public schools.
4. The issue of leadership and administration for charter schools bears further study. It may take a different kind of person to initiate an entrepreneurial venture like a charter school as opposed to running an actual school. Some schools experienced considerable turnover in directors; one director who returned the Director's Survey noted that s/he was the fifth director the first year. It is hard to imagine any learning taking place in that atmosphere. Also, directors who are not educators seem especially overwhelmed by all there is to learn and to know about essential education laws, much less teaching and learning. Expectations may be unrealistic. Yet with small budgets, typical charter schools cannot afford many administrative staff. Schools that managed this challenge seem to have parceled out these roles in various ways: e.g., a management group provided the instructional and management program; a community or business group provided the work on the fundraising and business aspects and left the educational aspects to an education director.

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5. Most charter schools believe they are vehicles for district-wide change; LEAs are less convinced. A national study on the impact of charter schools found that true substantive change in school programs was directly related to the amount of financial impact the charter school had on the school system involved. Milder financial impacts resulted only in cosmetic changes or better “advertising” for the public schools. The majority of North Carolina charter schools and LEAs report some initial financial impact by charter schools, with LEAs expressing serious concerns about the financial implications. However, neither group reports impact on school programs to any extent at this point in time. However, anecdotes provide some evidence of attention to programs based on the “threat” of charter schools. In one district, the LEA offered an optional summer workshop on the same type of instruction used in the charter school that it opposed. Another LEA is starting “charter-type” schools. Other schools observed that public schools in their districts seemed to work really hard this year resulting in higher ABCs results.
6. Feelings about charter schools among local education agencies have ranged from support to hostility. Several charter school directors noted that poor LEA relationships were one of the most significant barriers they faced. A few directors cited the LEA as a key facilitator in implementing their charter school. In addition to fear about the financial impact on the LEA by charter schools, evaluators noted that one key to better relationships may be communication between the charter school and the LEA. A related issue may be a sense of ownership. For example, one district had no contact with the first-year charter school but is sponsoring its own charter school this year; the difference in attitude and affect is dramatic.
7. Charter schools might be thought of as representing a physical and/or philosophical community. Such a community can be a compelling call to support and commitment from staff, parents, students, and the broader community. However, the call for community schools, however that term might be defined, may lead to the disproportional ethnic representation that is found in many North Carolina charter schools. This issue also will exist for other public schools as parents call for community schools or other public schools of choice. The two policy directions of racial equity and “community” schools may often conflict, presenting enormous tension for policy makers.