

## Charter Schools Evaluation Synthesis

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# Charter School Evaluation Synthesis: Reports I, II, and III

## Unique Context of the Inaugural Charter Schools

The charter schools that were initiated in 1997-98 are in a unique historical context. They not only had the usual challenges of any first-year charter school; they also had to contend with the implementation of a new **statewide charter school “system.”** There were numerous issues to clarify and questions to answer about this system that added confusion to their task of opening a school that other charter schools will not have to face in future years. For example, uncertainty about whether teachers in charter schools could participate in the state retirement system kept some experienced teachers from going to charter schools, making it more difficult for these “inaugural” charter schools to find fully licensed staff.

**Transition from Year 1 to Year 2 is dramatic** for all the case study schools. The second year started much more calmly, students are familiar with a new school culture and expectations, and schools are more focused on instruction. The outcomes and impact of charter schools will not be seen for *at least* two or three years. The added complications from the new statewide system may have caused difficulties for these initial charter schools that will not be seen in subsequent charter school openings. Only follow-up of new charter schools in future years will inform policy about the extent to which the system problems contributed to the school openings.

## Purposes of Charter Schools

While charter schools vary widely in their purposes, most of them are organized around a **distinctive mission or vision.** Over 80 percent of the directors indicated that a primary reason for starting the charter school was to “realize an educational vision.” This sense of mission provides a core value around which commitment is formed and all parties can coalesce. Throughout the turmoil that many schools experienced this first year, this sense of mission and purpose seemed to sustain their movement. In open-ended comments on the Directors’ Survey, many school administrators cited the commitment, support, and dedication of parents, faculty, board members and the community – in that order - as a primary cause of their opening success.

From the case studies, two general purposes were identified for most schools: (1) to offer a better educational alternative, offering good instruction, a moral setting, and small classrooms and (2) to serve a population perceived to be inadequately served in other public schools (e.g., at-risk, abused, African American, and gifted students). The case study schools often justified their missions in terms of what the local school district was not able to accomplish. A number of these inaugural schools believed that the needs for certain students were not adequately met in the local school district; others resulted from dissatisfaction expressed by businesses with the local school district. At least two schools intended to continue or reclaim a school or community tradition jeopardized by local school closings.

Many charter schools cited as a primary focus an **individualized or personalized approach to education.** Charter schools purposely have smaller class size (average 15.5 students to 1 teacher), making it possible for teachers and students to develop the caring relationships seen as necessary for student discipline and learning. This was true regardless of the curricula and pedagogy sponsored by the schools.

## Leadership Skills Needed to Open and Run a Charter School

**Administrative skills needed for first-year charter schools are complex.** A combination of entrepreneurial skills useful in initiating a small business, knowledge and skill in running an educational enterprise - including knowledge of instruction and educational regulations, and interpersonal skills are all required. One director noted that one of their biggest barriers in implementation was that they were always

negotiating with some group. One individual is not likely to possess all of these skills. In fact, turnover in leadership and faculty was noted as a frequent problem for many charter schools. One director noted that she was the fifth director the first year.

Some directors, especially those without an education background, were overwhelmed by what they needed to - but did not - know. For example, one response on the survey questions about the most important barriers encountered was “Everything we needed to know!” On the other hand, another school’s first director - who was a skilled educator – quit because she had to spend so much time on organizing, fund-raising, and building community relationships.

Schools that successfully negotiated the initial year seemed to have leaders who had multiple sets of skills or were able to parcel out these roles in various ways. For example, in one school a management group provided the administrative structure; in another a community or business group provided the work on fundraising and business aspects and left the educational program to the school director.

## What Charter Schools Look Like

One hallmark of charter schools is that “**no two are alike.**” Their diversity makes it difficult to summarize trends and themes across them. However, there are some general characteristics of these inaugural schools.

School Size and Grade Levels. Charter schools are smaller than other public schools and even smaller than the first-year charter schools in the national study samples. Eighty-five (85) percent of charter schools had fewer than 200 students in 1997-98 compared to fewer than nine percent of other public schools. They have non-traditional grade level configurations. Almost half the charter schools had grade levels across levels of schooling (e.g., elementary/middle; middle/high; k-12) compared to only 10 percent of other public schools.

Small Class Size. Class size (16.1) and student-teacher ratio (15.5:1) are somewhat lower in charter schools than other public schools (about 18 for both). Only three charter schools had class sizes over 20.

Programs and Instructional Strategies. Consistent with their diverse missions (from serving at-risk students to providing real-life/applied education), curricula and instructional strategies varied widely across schools. However, most schools noted intent to provide personalized or individualized education based on the needs of each student.

Core knowledge is a curriculum focus for at least one-fifth of the schools. Instructional strategies designed to encourage complex thinking and application of knowledge (e.g., project-based/problem solving; thematic/integrated instruction, experiential/hands-on learning) are referenced by several (5-6) schools. Several schools noted use of more structured/direct instruction such as Saxon Math and SRA Reading.

Based on responses to the Director’s Survey, first-year charter schools have somewhat fewer computers for instructional use than other public schools. The higher student-computer ratio likely reflects lack of funds to purchase computers, as several case study schools noted a desire to have more and to use them better in the future.

Student Demographics. Students in charter schools are disproportionately Black compared to the 25 LEAs in which they are located; other ethnic groups are under-represented. However, percentages vary widely among schools, from 100 to three percent nonwhite. Charter schools have a slightly higher percentage (4%) of male students than other public schools, perhaps caused by an emphasis on at-risk students across a number of schools. While the overall percentage of exceptional children is lower than other public schools, difficulty in learning the reporting system and dates resulted in some schools not counted in the December 1 headcount. Therefore, further analysis in the 1998-99 school year may yield

more accurate results. The Exceptional Children Division is conducting audits of 13 inaugural charter schools in 1998-99, which should provide information about the quality of services to exceptional children.

Teacher Salary and Certification. Salaries in charter schools are typically lower than other public schools, although a few schools have higher salaries than the state average. Lower salaries, in addition to other factors (e.g., lack of clarity about inclusion in the retirement system, poor leadership, and geographic location), often made it difficult for charter schools to attract fully licensed teachers in the start-up year. Reports run for other public schools to determine the licensure status for teachers do not appear to be as accurate *by the end of the year* for charter schools as for other public schools. Therefore, the Department of Public Instruction is requesting this data from charter schools directly for the current school year. However, initial data and observations from the case study evaluation indicate that, for a number of reasons, many schools had difficulty finding licensed teachers the first year of operation. Schools likely have improved on this situation in their second year. Licensure status information for the current year will be shared with the State Board of Education as soon as it is available.

## Parent Involvement and Satisfaction

Consistent with parents choosing these particular schools, charter schools reported a **high level of parent involvement**. A few schools require a certain amount of volunteer time from parents; however, most did not report such a requirement. Even so, half of the charter school directors estimated that over half of their parents were actively involved in their children's learning. The average amount of parent volunteer time in charter schools was estimated at 15 minutes per student per week (ranging from 72 minutes to zero). Thus, a school of 300 students would have an average of 75 parent volunteer hours per week.

As noted above, parent commitment and time was a key factor cited by directors in the school opening. The fact that parents were actively involved in the opening of the inaugural charter schools would suggest that this commitment would carry through the school year.

## Implementation Issues

Time. All case study schools, and many directors on the Director's Survey, reported that the time between receiving the charter and opening school was not sufficient to procure facilities, materials, and personnel and to put a program in place. Most of the case study schools indicated that the **option of another year** to plan would have been helpful.

Facilities and Funding. Procuring an adequate facility and lack of capital funding was clearly the **dominant issue** in implementation for the case study schools and was frequently mentioned on the Director's Survey. Many schools started the year without a permanent facility and with students scattered among several locations. Repair and maintenance costs to new and current facilities are high. Growth in numbers of students and grade levels means moving or expanding current facilities. Lack of capital funds is an issue for most schools.

Transportation. Transportation continues to be an issue, especially for schools serving low-income students or a large geographic area.

School District Support. A number of schools reported that **lack of support** by the school district affected implementation. The nature of this lack of support ranged from "no communication" to outright "hostility." One school started with local district support that waned, leading to significant increases in funds allotted to transportation. Several schools reported districts were slow to transfer records and were uninterested in cooperative programs. One school noted that the slow transfer of records resulted in an unexpected benefit; they learned that several of their students who were progressing well both academically and behaviorally had been identified as emotionally handicapped by the local school district.

On the other hand, several charter schools noted that a **positive relationship with local school districts** had been a facilitating factor. A couple of districts provide lunch and cooperate with transportation. Others had been helpful in answering questions. Future evaluations should look at the difference in schools and local school districts that report positive relationships as opposed to negative and adversarial ones.

Leadership and Faculty. Leadership and staff were **both a negative and a positive**. As noted earlier, many initial directors or principals lacked some of the knowledge or skills necessary to start and run a charter school. Internal strife, bids for control among board members and the like added to the first-year stress for at least a few schools. Board training appeared to be minimal. The start-up year confusion, low salaries, and lack of experienced teachers in the local area combined to produce turnover and inhibit hiring of experienced teachers for a number of schools. The turnover between Year 1 and Year 2 potentially represented both a problem with continuity and an opportunity to employ staff better able to deliver the distinctive mission of the school. Effects of turnover will need to be assessed over time.

While legislated minimums of certified teachers were difficult for some schools to achieve, several case study schools noted the value of experienced teachers and their ability to be self-sufficient in the classroom. Caring teachers was repeatedly cited as a key resource for the schools. Also, committed board members, leadership and faculty were cited as strong factors in successful implementation by some of the charter schools.

Paperwork and Reporting. Many schools reported that **complying with state regulations** involved considerable paperwork as well as travel costs and time. “We have the same reporting as LEAs without the staff to do it.” Several directors cited ISIS and other state reporting mechanisms to be some of the implementation barriers they faced. On the other hand, several other directors noted on the survey that **assistance from the Department of Public Instruction**, including ISIS, had been among the most helpful implementation factors.

Distraction from Instruction. The various implementation concerns and the extent of time just getting the charter school into operation **reduced the time schools could focus on their instructional program**. Most of the case study schools noted that they were much more focused on implementing instruction consistent with their mission with the beginning of this second year. This lack of instructional focus may explain some of the relatively poorer performance overall for charter schools on the ABCs Accountability results.

Outside Support. **Training by the Department of Public Instruction** was repeatedly acknowledged for enabling the schools to meet regulatory requirements and to anticipate issues to be addressed. Schools with **sponsoring organizations** or outside management group had considerable support with the application, implementation, curricula and management functions. **Community support** was considered the most vital resource; it enabled fund raising, collaboration with other agencies, and partnerships with a wide range of organizations.

## **Impact on and Relationships with Local School Districts**

The majority of charter schools and LEAs reported **limited or no contact** with each other. Although there have been a few very hostile relationships, most of the LEA respondents indicated that the quality of the relationships that did exist were *good* or *excellent* (58%). Only three LEAs said *poor*. Charter schools tended to agree, although six schools said relationships were *poor*; however, it is not known if these schools duplicated school systems.

Both charter schools and LEAs agreed that there had **not been much change** in local districts or schools due to the charter school. The highest rated change was in “numbers and distribution of students across grade levels” (74% LEAs, 52% charters). More LEAs than charter schools noted a “redistribution of administrative time” for LEAs because of charter schools (36% vs. 5% indicated *some change*); still the majority of LEAs indicated *no change* in this area. While most LEAs indicated **little or no change in**

**programs**, four LEAs did indicate some program change. Their comments about these changes included: “A stronger PR program than ever before.” “The district decided to implement a K-2 program with a similar philosophy as the charter school concept. The idea was to give the school as much flexibility as possible but still operate as a X county school.” “We have focused more on the standard course of study to make sure we are covering the objectives for *all of our students*.” “There is one XX project school; parents select into the school.” In final survey comments, one school noted that while their system was doing some of these things, they were not the result of the charter school. The vast majority of LEAs and charters noted **no change in school district diversity** (race, gifted students, at-risk students, special education students, and economically disadvantaged students). One-third of the LEAs indicated that the school district had enhanced public relations efforts and media coverage.

The **greatest concern for LEAs about impact was financial**. Two-thirds of the LEAs indicated that the charter schools had impacted them financially; 40 percent of the charter schools thought the LEAs had been impacted financially. Comments from some of the LEAs about this issue were quite strident.

More time and further study will be required to examine how relationships between charter schools and LEAs change over time and under what circumstances. Whether the existence of charter schools will encourage innovation and change in LEAs will also be a longer-term study.

## **Selected Promising Practices**

While it is probably too early to identify “best” practices, the case study looked at promising practices in relation to the schools’ own instructional program. Strategies of potential interest and use to other schools were noted. Ultimately, practices will be determined as “best” when they can be shown to lead to desirable outcomes.

Most schools had rather **traditional instruction**, and this was part of their attractiveness to the parents who chose those schools: a structured approach to instruction with strong discipline. Some schools believed direct instruction was required for at-risk students, while others believed it was appropriate for everyone. Other schools offered more **discovery-oriented instruction**.

The case study report noted several practices that may have applicability regardless of instructional approach. There were several examples of helping **students to be responsible for their own learning**. For one thing, students could usually articulate the school’s distinctive mission. Other examples include: (1) learning logs to specify goals and track progress that parents periodically reviewed and signed; (2) a student planner for students to create their schedule -- students were responsible for attendance at events and timely completion of work; and (3) student organized service learning programs.

**Parents are involved** in a wide range of activities from providing instruction to serving meals, driving vehicles, and fund raising. **Board members** from specific professions provided *pro bono* services. **Teacher autonomy and significant control** over the instructional program were both cited as reasons for high morale.

Case study schools had **strong moral emphases**, although the nature of these emphases varied. Various strategies to create a **safe and orderly environment** was found in all of these schools, including examples of two full time behavior mentors, clear rules and standards, uniforms and dress codes, small class size, and community support. Schools saw uniforms or dress codes as contributing to moral values and reducing competitiveness among students.

**Reduced class size** was a practice shared by all the case study schools, and data from the Director’s Surveys suggest that this practice was common across all first-year schools. Small school size contributed to development of a **team or family-like atmosphere** among staff and parents as well as with students.

## School Outcomes

The inaugural charter schools did not do as well overall on the **ABCs Accountability results** as other public schools. The general confusion during the inaugural year, the need to focus on facilities and just opening school reduced the emphasis on the instructional program. All schools indicated that they were much more able to focus on their instructional goals and program this second year to a far greater extent. Thus, the real measure of achievement gains for students will be assessed during the second and third years the schools are open.

Other outcomes, while preliminary, were suggested from the case studies. The schools believed that they were **reaching the students they served**. In fact, as noted earlier, students could usually articulate the school's distinctive mission. Students often recounted high expectations for their learning and the absence of racial prejudice and competition. For schools emphasizing innovative curricula, students discussed their involvement in designing their instructional experience and their responsibility for their own learning. Students also had complaints: "mean" teachers, lack of sports, and lack of or uninteresting meals. Even so, students saw themselves doing better academically and behaviorally in the charter schools.

At this point, **schools can be considered an outcome in and of themselves**. They are the outcome of the communities that started them. In the future, it will be possible to better discern what outcomes the schools themselves are creating.

## Charter School Hopes for the Future

When case study schools were asked about their hopes for the future, their comments fell into two categories: (1) commitment to fulfilling their distinctive missions and (2) overcoming political, pragmatic, and fiscal issues in order to successfully implement their purpose or mission.