

Charter Schools Case Studies

Cross-Site Analysis

1997-98

Report III of the Charter Schools Evaluation

Public Schools of North Carolina
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North Carolina Charter School Evaluation:
Case Studies Cross-Site Analysis

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Acknowledgements

Special appreciation is extended to the 10 charter schools that allowed the case study teams to visit them for two days, observing classrooms as well as interviewing the director, teachers, other staff, parents, board members, students, and in some cases community members. These schools allowed team members to see their successes, their frustrations, and to learn from their first year of implementation. These case studies were not designed to monitor any particular school, but to learn from them as a group. Their willingness to participate allowed the evaluators to have a richer qualitative context from which to learn.

<u>School</u>	<u>Grade Levels 1997-98</u>
Arapahoe Charter School	K-8
Chatham Charter School	K-8
Communities in Schools Academy	6-8
Exploris	6
Healthy Start	K-2
Nguzo Saba Charter School	K-8
Right Step Academy	6-12
Rocky Mount Charter School	K-5
Summit Charter School	K-8
United Children's Ability Nook (UCAN)	K-6

Appendix A lists the names of the evaluation team, including all case study team members. Special thanks are given to the charter school staff and the local education agency staff who took time away from their duties to participate on these teams. Their participation was essential to ensuring a balanced perspective in the charter case study evaluation.

NORTH CAROLINA CHARTER SCHOOL EVALUATION
CASE STUDIES CROSS-SITE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

One component of the Charter School Evaluation Plan was case studies of ten of the first year charter schools. The case studies were designed to understand: (1) purposes of the schools; (2) implementation issues that emerged; (3) resources available to the schools (4) best practices that the schools have to offer; (5) school outcomes, (6) hopes the schools have for the future. A sample of Charter Schools was chosen to reflect the diversity among the first year schools. The case study schools vary in mission, geographical location, size, grades served, population served, conversion and new schools, instructional focus, results on the State accountability tests, management by an external management organization and percent of teachers that were certified teachers. All the selected schools agreed to participate.

The case studies were conducted using standard case study methodology (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). The teams consisted of 4 persons with varying perspectives. Each team consisted of representatives from universities (experienced researchers who served as team leaders) in the UNC system, the Department of Public Instruction, Charter schools, and public schools. This collaboration was important in insuring that the case studies gave a full and fair account of the schools studied. After a brief training process, the teams visited the schools. There they collected documents from each site, observed instruction and other school activities, and interviewed a wide range of people including Board members, the school director, teachers, students and those who collaborated with or were partners with the school. Teams visited the selected schools for 8 person/days each. The teams took notes and gave these, and their ideas and interpretations, to the team leader who drafted the case. The draft was reviewed by the schools

and by other team members. Schools varied in the amount of feedback they gave to the written case. Some offered specific criticisms and alternative explanations; others offered little or no feedback. The draft cases were then analyzed for shared themes and differences among the schools. This report is the result of that cross-case analysis.

The cross-case analysis presents findings across the ten schools, but an important caveat in this must be noted. These schools are in the process of making significant changes. What was learned this fall (1998) is likely to change as the schools gain experience. The case study schools share a dominant context of implementing legislation with a short timeline and with few supports in place. In subsequent years, it will be possible to determine the lessons of Charter Schools independent of the conditions under which they were implemented.

The cross-case analysis is arranged in sections drawn from the larger Charter School Evaluation Plan that the case studies were designed to explore. Each section examines a set of topics that reveal the similarities and differences among the schools. These topics are interrelated. When taken together they capture the first year's experience of these schools.

PURPOSES

As is to be expected with Charter Schools, the ten schools varied widely in their purposes. Some were offering an innovative curriculum, while others offered a traditional curriculum. Some had a moral purpose, while others were to educate those unsuccessful in the public schools. Some had commercial instructional programs, while others developed their own. Some serve minorities and the poor to a greater extent, while others tend to serve the white middle class. Moreover, different purposes were combined in different ways in different schools. It is difficult to summarize such diversity. Yet it is clear that among the 10 schools there were four basic purposes that schools used to construct a **distinctive mission**. The

first two were present in some form in most of the schools. About half of the schools were able to add the third and/or fourth purpose to their distinctive missions.

1. To offer a better educational alternative, offering good instruction, a moral setting and small class size.
2. To serve a population inadequately served in other public schools, including at-risk, African American and gifted students.
3. To promote community development, redressing the closings of community supported schools as part of desegregation and district consolidation.
4. To promote economic development, using the schools to help revitalize neighborhoods or as a marketing device for recruiting new businesses.

All had struggled to live up to their distinctive mission, and most had made considerable progress on this. There were a number of **challenges to the distinctive missions**. For some, the **logistics** of getting the school started interfered with developing the instructional program that was consistent with their mission. Most made changes after the first year to improve the correspondence between the purpose for the school and the instructional program. All the schools recognized that they have more to do to fully achieve their purpose. A number of the schools planned to expand the grades served over time, and thus these schools will be addressing both expansion of services and better fulfillment their instructional and/or moral missions in existing classrooms and grades.

All of these schools justified their missions in terms of what the local school district was not able to accomplish. This takes various forms. A number of the case study schools serve populations that are at-risk of failure in the other local schools. Some are the result of dissatisfaction expressed by businesses with the local school district. These Charter Schools are to provide schools that will help recruit new businesses to the area. At least two of the case study schools are intended to continue or reclaim a school/community tradition that the local schools jeopardized by school closings. This justification, of course, means that these schools get **little support from the school district**. Other challenges to the

purposes of these schools reportedly came from the media. The media have focused occasionally on the implementation issues faced by the schools and in some cases have misrepresented the mission of the school, implying that the schools in question were intended to be racially segregated. **Media misrepresentations** have taught the schools that distinctive missions can be politicized.

Finally, the Charter Schools purposely have smaller class size (often 1 teacher to each 15 students), 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. Even with low teacher salaries, the **expense of small class size** was high especially when the schools needed funds for facilities and/or transportation.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

For all the case studies schools, the **time** between the passage of the legislation and the fall school openings was insufficient for the schools to develop an application, and procure facilities, materials and personnel. Schools that were able to get financial or management backing from other organizations made better progress, but all thought that a funded planning year would have helped. With more planning, facilities, meals, transportation, curricula, instruction and personnel selection and training could be in place when the school opened.

Procuring **an adequate facility** was clearly the dominant issue in implementation. Schools struggled to find an appropriate space at a price they could afford. The result was that many students started the year in temporary and inadequate facilities. The case study schools found that old school buildings, church education buildings, and unused commercial space were the primary alternatives available and that these needed repairs and remodeling. Modular construction of a facility meant one school had a new space, but also required that a backer guarantee the debt. Facilities remain a large issue with these schools. The costs and efforts to repair and maintain older facilities are high. Growth in

numbers of students and expansion of the number of grade levels means either moving or expanding current facilities even when current facilities are adequate.

Transportation continued to be an issue for the schools. As budget items, transportation and facilities compete with the instructional budget to the extent that the schools have fewer instructional materials than public schools. Transportation was a more important issue for schools serving low-income students or a large geographical area.

Implementation was affected by **the lack of school district support and negative media attention**. One school began with strong support of the school district but this has somewhat waned over time, and led to the Charter School having to significantly increase the funds allotted to transportation, adversely affecting the instructional budget. Many schools reported local districts were slow to transfer student records (and in some cases local funds) and were uninterested in cooperative programs.

Many of the schools had significant **turnover in leadership and teachers**. Many initial Directors or Principals lacked either the knowledge of school management or interpersonal skills. Both were necessary to start and maintain a charter school. The turmoil of implementation, low salaries, initial leadership problems and the lack of experienced teachers in the local area combined to both produce turnover and inhibit hiring of experienced teachers. While the legislated minimums for certified teachers were difficult to achieve for some schools, many schools learned the value of experienced teachers. Most experienced teachers could work relatively self-sufficiently in the classroom and understood school operations. They also found that the relative freedom in charter schools to make decisions and to determine classroom practice enabled them to act more professionally. Less experienced teachers often created teacher-centered classrooms, more traditional teaching and struggled with classroom discipline in the first year of implementation. The turnover in teachers 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. The effects of the turnover will need to be assessed over time.

Finally, the schools reported that complying with state regulations involved **considerable paperwork and travel time**. The schools thought they needed their leaders focusing on other issues.

These **implementation issues distracted schools from their instructional programs**. Schools that had commercial instructional programs were less affected by the turmoil of the implementation year. Such programs helped new teachers organize their instruction and develop common instructional approaches across all teachers. Experienced teachers generally had less need for commercial programs. The more innovative curricula in the case studies schools took longer to develop but are impressive accomplishments. The Charter Schools that focused on at-risk students have found that these students take more attention and materials than was planned. They have learned what school districts have always argued: it costs more to educate at risk students.

RESOURCES

These schools found many resources helpful in the first year of charter schools in North Carolina. While only one school of these 10 began the process with the **support of the local school district** and continued to have lunches transported from a nearby district school, all the schools have found that **community support** is the most vital resource. Without this, little would have been possible. Community support enabled **fund raising, collaboration** with other agencies and **partnerships** with a wide range of organizations. Community support is the basis of charter schools. Since parents make a choice to send their children to charter schools, the schools need a constituency to survive and grow. A constituency enables charter schools to survive challenges to their mission. **Early leadership by board members** was essential to the school being started, in developing and maintaining a constituency for the school and for ongoing fiscal development. **Parents** helped repair facilities prior to the opening of the school and continue to serve in a range of instructional and other ways. They serve lunch, drive vehicles, photocopy, teach and tutor. Their involvement is a key resource for the school.

Caring teachers was repeatedly cited as one of the key resources for the schools. Parents were interested in their students' academic performance but all saw this as the result of caring and attentive teachers. The parents, students and teachers argued that charter school teachers were able to develop relationships with children and to use these relationships to help the children perform academically and behaviorally. Small class sizes helped to make this possible.

There are other outside supports for charter schools. **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 **outside management groups or sponsoring organizations** had considerable support with the application, implementation, curricula and management functions. Other schools struggled to create these for themselves and only began to achieve these in the second year of implementation.

Even with the above resources, all schools struggled to arrange adequate financial support for their schools. Some had constituencies and/or sponsoring organizations that enabled considerable **supplementary funding**, but all schools were struggling to organize sufficient funding. Used busses were a way to hold down first year transportation costs, but this has tradeoffs in safety and future maintenance and repair costs. Developing adequate facilities and sufficient teacher pay while maintaining small class sizes are ongoing fiscal challenges.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Defining "best" practices is problematic; what is "best" from one view may not be "best" from another. Ultimately, best practices may be defined when they can be shown to lead to various types of desirable outcomes. Until that information is available, charter schools can be examined for promising practices and positive aspects of the charter school and the implementation process during this start-up phase.

Given the variety of the case study schools and the changes they have undergone, there is not one consistent set of best practices concerning curricula and instruction. Each school has its own instructional program; and thus their best practices are related to their own instructional program, but not necessarily other charter schools. It should be said that most schools had rather traditional instructional programs. Not unlike many other public schools, this instruction was teacher-centered, direct instruction in which recitation and practice were common activities for students. Some traditional instruction was the result of logistics, and issues of implementation meant schools were able to focus on instruction as much as necessary during their first year. The beginning of the second year shows all case study schools focused on developing their instructional programs. For many of the Charter schools, traditional instruction, however, was a part of their attractiveness to parents. These parents wanted a more “structured” approach to instruction as well as strong discipline. Some schools believed direct instruction was required for at-risk students, while others believed it was appropriate for everyone. Some schools offered more discovery-oriented instruction to attract parents and students. These classrooms were more student-centered and project based. These schools also worked to integrate the curricula so that learning is more like the “real world.”

There were a number of best practices that may have applicability almost regardless of instructional approach. For example, there were examples of helping students to be responsible for their own learning. **Learning logs** asked students to specify their goals and to track their progress. Parents were asked to review and sign the logs at regular intervals. The teacher reviewed and commented as well. A student **planner** was given to each student at one school. Students created their schedule and were held responsible for attendance at events and timely completion of work. Some schools found starting the day with a **whole school assembly** reinforced community, promoted values and set the tone for the day. It was also clear that **students knew and could articulate the school’s distinctive mission**. In some schools, students had organized **service learning** programs where students would either work for charitable causes or work in local businesses. This “giving back” promoted both learning and self-esteem. Schools with

uniforms or dress codes saw them contributing to moral values and reducing status differences and competitiveness among students.

The case study charter schools had relatively similar organizational structures of Board, School Director, often one or more professionals focusing on instruction, business management or other specific assignments, teachers and students. Yet there was some concern about clarity of roles, especially since people had overlapping roles and especially the roles of teacher, parent and Board member. **Board members from the professions** such as law, accounting, and education had relevant knowledge and sometimes could provide *pro bono* services. What is interesting in the organization of these schools is the role of parents. **Parents are involved** in a wide range of ways from providing instruction, to serving meals, driving vehicles, fund raising and have considerable impact on the school. Parents and community members at one school provide a half-day of instruction per week to provide teachers with instructional planning and professional development time. Moreover, parents are represented on the Boards and have direct access to teachers and principals. In as much as the school's survival depends on keeping parents satisfied with the school, parents have more power than in other public schools. Teachers also reported that they were satisfied with their roles. **Teacher autonomy** in the classroom and **significant control over the instructional programs** were both cited as reasons for high morale.

There were a number of best practices in school policy. A number of schools had **diagnostic testing and instructional programs** that tracked student learning and directed instructional planning. One school had created a **common schedule** across all grades so students could be grouped by performance instead of grade level. **Schoolwide discipline policies** helped clarify expectations and create consistency between classrooms. In the area of personnel, a **hiring interview process** was seen as central to promoting and maintaining a distinctive mission for the school and hiring promising teachers. Similarly, **bonuses** tied to annual evaluations helped with mission and encouraged quality teaching. One school had **parent involvement contracts** that required parents to work four hours per week at the school, while at another **teachers pursued parents** to discuss their children's schoolwork or behavior. The case

study schools had also a number of **collaborative arrangements**, including speech and hearing screenings by nursing students, direct instruction from a range of community agencies, and even purchasing meals from the school system.

The case study schools had **strong moral emphases**, although the nature of these varied. Parents found the moral emphases a strong reason to attend the school, contributing to the **safe and orderly environments** they valued in these schools. One school found it valuable to have two staff members assigned as **behavior mentors**. These mentors moved about the school helping students with appropriate behavior. Schools that had **uniforms and dress codes** found they reduced status differences among students, reducing related student misbehavior. One teacher posted a **“No Hunting” sign** that students reported reduced students picking on each other. The schools found that **respect for teachers** was essential for learning and discipline. **Relative small size, caring teachers and parent and community support** also helped create safe and orderly environments.

Reduced classroom size is one best practice that was shared by all the schools. Small classrooms enable teachers to provide individual attention and to develop caring relationships with students. Small size also made student behavior management easier. The small size of many of the schools also meant that it was easier to develop a **team or family-like atmosphere** among staff and parents as well as with students.

Given the strong role of teachers in the instructional program, the charter schools tried to provide them with time for **teacher planning and professional development**. This was especially important since there was little time for professional development before the schools opened. Some schools were more successful than others at this. One school used **parents and community members as instructors** for a half-day of instruction per week to provide time for this. Another school found that having **an extensive summer planning session** between the first and second years allowed for the development of a complex and innovative curriculum. A **preschool staff meeting** at one school was used to link long term

planning to daily practice. Some of the **commercial instructional programs** also include professional development and ongoing feedback mechanisms that were seen as quite helpful by teachers.

SCHOOL OUTCOMES

By design, the case study schools were selected varied on test results on North.Carolina's ABCs Accountability system. The case study schools, however, all believed that they were **reaching the students** they served. The most important outcome of the case study schools is the student experience that the schools create. Different missions, of course, have students reporting different experiences. Yet as noted earlier, students could articulate the distinctive missions and what these missions meant for them. For schools with strong moral emphasis, students would articulate the virtues that characterized the school. For schools emphasizing innovative curricula, students discussed their involvement in designing their educational experiences and their own responsibility for their learning. For schools emphasizing a better education for at-risk and minority students, students recounted the high expectations for their learning and the absence of racial prejudices. Students in case study schools largely reported a safe and orderly environment, better self-esteem, caring relationships with teachers, and teachers who were interesting, attentive and dogged in their determination that students learn and behave appropriately.

Students also had complaints such as “mean” teachers, lack of sports, and lack of or uninteresting meals. Even with these complaints, students generally saw themselves as doing better academically and behaviorally in the charter schools.

As noted previously, there are a number of accomplishments of these schools. To reiterate, these include **a moral and safe environment, caring relationships among teachers and students, community support and parent involvement, team or family-like atmosphere, small size, relative teacher autonomy, and a distinctive mission and constituent group.** For many of the schools, **waiting lists of students and enrollment growth** in the second year were key indicators of the schools being effective.

One school created an environment reportedly **free of racial prejudice**. Another school was consciously designed to **disseminate innovative educational practice** and will begin that this year. Other schools were intended to have outcomes of **community and economic development**.

These charter schools have had **little impact on the LEAs**. (Related to this issue, see Charter School Evaluation Report II.) In the competition for students, some LEAs were hostile to the charter schools while others were merely uncooperative. The one school that had some measure of LEA support had begun with cooperative agreements between county-level agencies. The school was developed after these were in place. Other impacts on LEAS included the LEAs beginning to emphasize a similar instructional program to that of the charter schools.

At this point in their development, it must be remembered that these schools are 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

Interviewees were asked what their hopes were for their charter school. The hopes reflect both the commitments and concerns of the case study schools. Their commitment to their students are reflected in such hopes as the following:

1. To be allowed to continue the mission to assist at risk students.
2. For students to understand virtues—responsibility, manners, character, and social development.
3. To teach students to be resourceful, independent learners and critical thinkers.
4. To continue to be successful.

Their concerns lead to such hopes as the following:

1. A new site.
2. Added grades levels, but cost make it a distant hope.
3. To build a positive relationship with the school district.
4. The school district will realize these students can be helped—that it can be done!
5. The media will notice the positive things about this school.

The first set of hopes reveals that the case study schools have committed to fulfilling their distinctive missions. The second set reveal that the case study schools are still in the process of implementing their mission and have political, pragmatic and fiscal issues to overcome if they are to fully implement the distinctive missions.

REFERENCES

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Appendix A

Members of the Charter School Evaluation Team

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