

# CHARTER SCHOOLS THAT WORK: POLICIES & PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE HIGH-POVERTY CHARTERS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an attempt to improve innovation in education and offer greater school choice to parents, the North Carolina General Assembly recently passed into law a measure that removes the cap on the number of charter schools in the state. Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, have more flexibility in their operation, though this flexibility does not always result in better educational outcomes for students. However, strategic use of flexibility by school leaders benefit the five schools highlighted in this study and their innovative practices have successfully worked to close the achievement gap for traditionally underserved students in high-poverty schools.

Gaston College Prep, KIPP: Charlotte, Maureen Joy Charter, Quality Education Academy, and The Learning Center, operate independently of one another but the following shared practices may point to their success:

- Smaller school size
- Strong, supportive learning environments
- Skills taught for mastery
- Data driven instruction
- Active character education programs
- Culture of high expectations for all students
- Extended school days

Despite the challenges associated with high-poverty schools, each of the schools profiled have “broken the mold” in regard to what is expected for student achievement and continue to grow and adapt to the needs of diverse student learners.

## INTRODUCTION

States have rapidly expanded charter schools in recent decades with the hope that small, autonomous schools will lead to effective educational innovations and improve learning outcomes for students (Hubbard and Kulkarni, 2009; Vergari, 1999). North Carolina’s charter school legislation draws from these broader goals, suggesting that charters should “Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods”, placing “... special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at risk of academic failure...” (NC 115C-238.29A). With the recent passage of NC Senate Bill 8, which lifts the statewide cap on available charters, it is increasingly important for educators and policy makers to understand the factors associated with achieving these goals. This paper examines the practices of five North Carolina charter schools that are achieving consistent success while serving large populations of at-risk students in an effort to spotlight practices and innovations that may aid other schools, both charter and traditional, in improving academic performance.



## PREVIOUS CHARTER SCHOOL RESEARCH

Research conducted on charter school effectiveness has produced mixed results (Hubbard and Kulkarni, 2009). Several studies suggest that charter schools “outperform” traditional public schools academically (Alvarez and Mehan, 2006; Hoxby, 2004; McLure et al, 2005; Zimmer et al, 2003), while others suggest that positive findings are either incorrect or misleading (Nelson et al, 2004; Roy and Mishel, 2005). These results provide encouragement for charter supporters and their opponents alike.

We believe such studies misleadingly assess charter schools. Because charters operate autonomously in terms of administration, curriculum, and pedagogical approaches, it is not appropriate to group charter schools into an aggregate whole for purposes of comparison. Instead, we believe that the best way to study charters is to isolate those schools that are achieving high academic performance and then individually consider the factors leading to their success. This is not to say that the presence of such policies or practices indicates school success or that these are the only schools employing these practices. Other charter and traditional public schools currently use small school size, data driven instruction, uniforms and other methods discussed later to improve student outcomes. We do not attempt to qualify the methods of our selected charters as “better” than those employed at other schools, but merely to describe how they are implemented and used. Even within our study, charters may implement similar strategies in different ways, which makes it impossible to lump the practices of these schools into one singular category for comparison.

## BREAKING THE MOLD

Our study identifies five charter schools that have demonstrated high-growth and improved academic performance while serving large populations of at-risk students. We made these distinctions by identifying the proportion of students participating in free and reduced price lunch (FRL) in each school to measure the proportionality of at-risk populations. Then, using the ABC’s of Public Education we compared growth and academic

performance. The state does not require charter schools to participate in FRL programs; therefore, our analysis only considered the 35 schools that reported FRL numbers for the 2009-10 school year. Of those, we classified 28 as high-poverty schools based on the percentage of students served by FRL programs. We employed the 40% poverty benchmark in accordance with the requirements for Title 1 funding (US Department of Education, 2010). We selected only those high-poverty charter schools that achieved high growth status in three of the past four years for analysis.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the composite test performance of these schools in comparison with other high-poverty charter schools. These data further demonstrate the high level of performance attained in these schools. Three of the five selected charters significantly outperform the average score for high-poverty charter schools. Two others are slightly above average, though they continue achieving growth over the previous year’s scores. Appendices A and B contain comparisons of growth and composite test results for all high-poverty charter schools.

## SCHOOL PROFILES

The schools selected for analysis in this study represent a good snap-shot of North Carolina’s charter schools. As Table 2 demonstrates, they are geographically diverse and represent combinations of all grade ranges. In general, the schools in consideration are small in terms of Average Daily Membership (ADM), though one of the schools is slightly larger than average. The schools range from very new (opened in 2007) to long-established schools in their 14th year of operation.

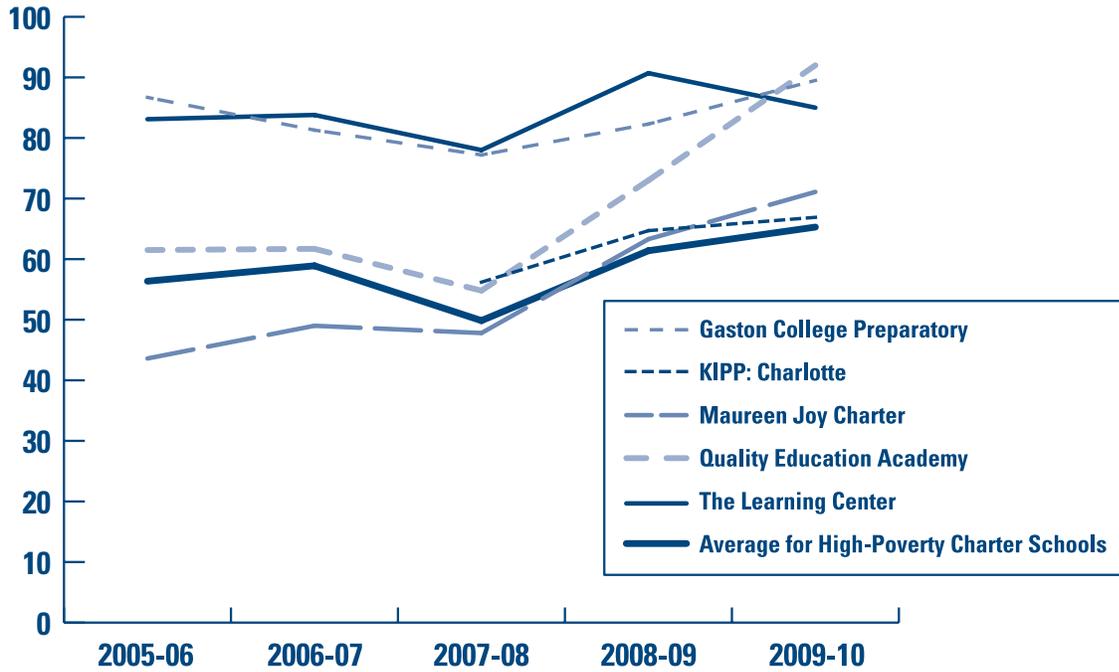
Critics of charter schools argue that their success comes from “skimming off the cream” from area public school. Undoubtedly characteristics of a parent who seeks out and enrolls his or her child in a charter school are different from those that do not. We are not attempting to qualify these differences in any way. Instead, we focus on measurable ways in which these schools are similar or different to others in the district. Table 3 shows the demographic composition of our selected charters. Gaston College Prep and The Learning Center both serve student

**TABLE 1: ABC GROWTH STATUS OF SELECTED CHARTER SCHOOLS (2006-07 THROUGH 2009-10)**

|                                   | 2006-07<br>Growth Status | 2007-08<br>Growth Status | 2008-09<br>Growth Status | 2009-10<br>Growth Status |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Gaston College Preparatory</b> | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              |
| <b>KIPP: Charlotte</b>            | n/a                      | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              |
| <b>Maureen Joy Charter</b>        | Expected Growth          | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              |
| <b>Quality Education Academy</b>  | Expected Growth          | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              |
| <b>The Learning Center</b>        | High Growth              | High Growth              | High Growth              | Expected Growth          |

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Charter Schools

**FIGURE 1: COMPOSITE SCORES OF SELECTED HIGH-POVERTY CHARTER SCHOOLS**



**TABLE 2: PROFILE OF SELECTED CHARTER SCHOOLS**

|                                   | Year Opened | County      | Grades Served | ADM (2009-10) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Gaston College Preparatory</b> | 2001        | Northampton | 5-12          | 703           |
| <b>KIPP: Charlotte</b>            | 2007        | Mecklenburg | 5-7           | 276           |
| <b>Maureen Joy Charter</b>        | 1997        | Durham      | K-8           | 294           |
| <b>Quality Education Academy</b>  | 1997        | Forsyth     | K-12          | 268           |
| <b>The Learning Center</b>        | 1997        | Cherokee    | K-8           | 158           |

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Charter Schools

**TABLE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF SELECT CHARTER SCHOOLS – RACE/ETHNICITY**

|                                      | Percent White | Percent Black | Percent Hispanic | Percent Other | Number of EC Students | Percent Participating in FRL |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Gaston College Preparatory</b>    | 14.94         | 82.93         | 1.14             | 1.00          | 45.00                 | 65.49                        |
| <b>KIPP: Charlotte</b>               | 1.81          | 93.48         | 4.71             | 0.00          | 43.00                 | 70.66                        |
| <b>Maureen Joy Charter</b>           | 0.00          | 86.39         | 12.93            | 0.68          | 38.00                 | 87.05                        |
| <b>Quality Education Academy</b>     | 0.37          | 83.21         | 16.42            | 0.00          | 29.00                 | 83.58                        |
| <b>The Learning Center</b>           | 91.77         | 4.43          | 3.80             | 0.00          | 21.00                 | 62.58                        |
| <b>High Poverty Charter Averages</b> | 18.94         | 67.86         | 6.49             | 6.71          | 37.17                 | 79.96                        |

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Charter Schools

populations that closely resemble the demographic compositions of the districts in which they operate. KIPP: Charlotte, Maureen Joy Charter, and Quality Education Academy, on the other hand, serve a disproportionately large number of non-white students as compared to their districts. Other than Gaston College Prep, located in Northhampton County, each of the schools serves a higher percentage of FRL students than district averages. Given the population of at-risk students served by these five schools, the data suggest that they are “breaking the mold” in regard to academic performance.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOLS

Programs at the selected schools differ in many ways. Charter schools operate with greater flexibility to determine their own policies and procedures than is sometimes available to traditional public schools. For example, charter schools determine how many hours a day students attend school, a luxury not afforded to schools which must operate within state or district requirements. Notably, flexibility in itself does not produce better schools or better results for students. Some charter schools fail to produce positive results despite increased autonomy.

Members of the research team interviewed school leaders by telephone or face-to-face at their school site. Information obtained from interviews provide the bulk of the discussion that follows which seeks to highlight characteristics shared by those schools identified by our study as “breaking the mold” for traditionally underserved students.

### SMALL SCHOOL SIZE

Barker and Gump (1964) were the first researchers to attempt to tackle the question of school size in the United States. In *Big School, Small School*, they study several Kansas schools ranging in size from 83 to 2,278 students. Their analysis revealed that students in the smaller schools enjoyed greater levels of participation, perhaps because all students needed to participate in order for the group to function. These students also reported a greater sense of belonging to the school community. At Maureen Joy Charter School in Durham, Principal Alex Quigley greets every student by name with a handshake as they get off the bus each morning.

With fewer students, schools minimize the chance of a child “falling through the cracks” because every teacher knows every student on campus.

All of the selected schools have smaller than average enrollments when compared to traditional North Carolina public schools enrolling the same grade levels. Each of these schools functions as a small community where all members value each other as an essential part of the team. At The Learning Center located in Murphy, the small school size allows for an innovative garden program where students grow fresh fruits and vegetables



to be served in the school’s cafeteria. The school also hosts an annual “Monster Mash Bash,” a Halloween themed fundraising event which draws on participation from students and their families to be a success. The entire school community works together to plan, create and execute this event. The 2010 theme was “Alice in Wonderland” and came complete with a maze, a costume contest, a pumpkin carving contest, food and games. Even the mayor lent his support to the event.

### Greater Parental Involvement

The small school size also allows for greater contact between teachers and parents. At KIPP: Charlotte teachers conduct conferences with the parents of every student in their grade after the first report card of 5th grade, the year they first enter the school, to update them on the progress of their student and create a plan for achievement in the year. Teachers also collaborate to create a “Monday Folder” which goes home to parents of all 5th graders to show their academic work for the previous week and update parents on any upcoming events they should put on their calendars. Through this system, parents and teachers are in contact on a weekly basis. “It makes a difference when you know a student’s parent by name,” says Tiffany Flowers, a founding teacher and now school leader.

At Gaston College Prep (GCP), located in Gaston, teachers and school leaders encourage parental involvement, and it is not uncommon to see parents volunteering on campus, leading fundraisers, attending athletic events, or organizing clothing drives for needy students. GCP parents also commit to being available to discuss the academic progress of their child with the teacher during two formal meetings; one after the first nine weeks and another at the end of the year. In return, teachers are available by cell phone and email for any concerns a parent may have about his or her child.

Quality Education Academy (QEA), located in Winston-Salem, requests parents volunteer at least four hours per year at the school. Volunteering possibilities can range from assisting in the office to updating the school website. The school also

encourages the community to help support the school in whatever ways possible. For school leader Simon Johnson, community involvement is essential to the success of the school because he sees the school as an extension of the community.

Small school size also allows parents to act as more of a partner in the education of their child. At four of the five schools teachers, parents and students must sign a “Compact” or a “Commitment to Excellence” which lays out the responsibilities and expectations for all parties. These contracts can be reviewed by parents, teachers, and students as needed to remind everyone of the promises they made. Parents and students, for example, promise to ensure that the student comes to school with their homework complete each day. At The Learning Center and Maureen Joy Charter, a student without complete homework from the night before receives an immediate call home to inform parents that their child will need to stay after school to make up the missing assignment, a practice much harder to execute successfully in a large school. Constant communication between the school and parents contributes to an active partnership between home and school.

#### ***If There’s A Problem...***

Small school size allows teachers and school leaders to quickly change course when they feel they are going in the wrong direction. One school leader said, “We are a small school. There is no place for ineffective policies or practices to hide. When something isn’t working, we can all see it.” At The Learning Center, a new behavior system clearly wasn’t working for students or teachers so they met to brainstorm possible solutions and create a plan of action. Each grade consists of one teacher, so changes could be implemented uniformly across the school almost immediately. Other schools echoed the sentiment that a small school makes it more difficult to hide problems, but also that it is easier to find a solution. School leaders indicated that when members of the community believes their feelings and opinions are being heard and taken into consideration it is easier to build consensus.



## **CHARACTER EDUCATION**

While a great deal of character development happens in the home, schools also promote positive character development in students. Researchers specializing in character development see character as a multidimensional aspect of a person’s personality, therefore it is often challenging to pinpoint exactly what character looks like, and what makes it good or bad. How do you teach something when you are not quite sure what it is? Researchers Berkowitz and Bier (2004) find that there are certain factors that make character education more successful, including consistent and full implementation across the curriculum, efforts to bond children to school and teachers, parental involvement in the character building process, adults acting as models of behavior, and opportunities for students to reflect on moral issues.

Teachers and leaders at these schools believe good character is the key to success in schools. Research has shown that programs like the Child Development Project, which focuses on building positive social and emotional skills in elementary age children, have found success in reducing acts of violence and substance abuse in participants later in life (Battistich et al. 2000). Other programs have been shown to reduce risky behavior and improve self-esteem and positive school attitudes. At Quality Education Academy school officials do not tolerate bullying or fighting. While many students believe it may be acceptable to hit someone that hits you, teachers at the school work with students to find solutions to problems using dialogue rather than fists. These interpersonal skills help students communicate better with their peers, teachers, families and communities.

Each of the five schools formally teaches character education to their students. School leaders see building strong character as part of the mission of these schools to create effective and capable citizens. Schools focus on a “trait of the month” and infuse the trait across the curriculum. At The Learning Center, everyone on campus actively teaches the trait throughout the month, including the front office, cafeteria and custodial staff. All adults model the trait and look for students on campus who are displaying that character trait. Students are then recognized by teachers and staff in a school-wide ceremony at the end of each month for their positive choices.

At Gaston College Prep students at the middle school complete a written reflection when they fail to make positive character choices. In these reflections students address the situation and how they could change their behavior in the future to make a better choice. At the high school, students appear before the Honor Counsel, made up of other students, to explain their actions and atone for their mistakes to the school community.

GASTON COLLEGE PREP SLOGAN

***“We are what we repeatedly do.  
Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.”***

***– Aristotle***

School leader Tammi Sutton describes the character education at her school not as a formal curriculum but “everything that we do here. It’s all about character.” Like Ms. Sutton, many school leaders see character education as an essential building block to successful students. Knowledge is worthless without the “habits of mind to use it”, said one school leader.

### SHARED MISSION

Each of the profiled schools has a clear and defined mission shared by all members of the school- teachers, students, parents, and administrators. All five schools serve a large population of low-income students who are traditionally underserved in the classroom. Ensuring these students have the tools they need for success in school and life are central to what they do at their schools.

At Gaston College Prep, school leader Tammi Sutton believes that a common mindset is one of the most important factors in hiring new teachers. For GCP, the belief that all kids can and will learn and be successful in life is paramount to other factors in the decision to hire a teacher. According to many principals this is not a mindset you can teach. Maureen Joy Charter Principal Alex Quigley believes that hiring teachers with this mindset is essential to school success. “When you get the right people everything else falls into place. They call parents, they motivate kids, they constantly work to improve.” A sign in the hallway reading “All of us WILL learn” illustrates the mission perfectly.

### *Supportive and Positive Culture*

Each of these schools has worked hard to build a supportive and positive culture at their school. College pennants, student work, and brightly colored banners with inspirational quotes



KIPP: CHARLOTTE MOTTO

***“I am who I am, because of what we all are.”***  
– African Proverb

and phrases decorate the halls. Talking to students at these schools you get the sense that learning is cool. They will readily tell you about what they are learning in science, the book they are reading, and where they are planning to go to college.

At these schools everyone focuses on learning. In an attempt to reduce distractions, school leaders require students to wear a uniform or adhere to a specific dress code, a policy that serves two purposes. First, what students wear to school is not a distraction to learning because everyone wears the same uniform. Second, students learn what it means to dress in a professional manner each day. Teachers say that this focus on professionalism takes the ambiguity out of the dress code. Instead of focusing on specific rules or regulations regarding school dress they can more easily see if a student is in uniform and if they look professional without sacrificing precious class time. At Quality Education Academy, Wednesdays are “Dress Uniform” days where all students must wear appropriate business suits and attire. School leader Simon Johnson believes professional dress is tied to professional behavior because Wednesdays at QEA have fewer instances of classroom distractions than any other day.

In addition to encouraging professional dress and behavior, school leaders work hard to create a school environment that is safe for all students. That does not mean an increase in security, but rather a zero tolerance policy when it comes to fighting or violence. All five of these schools hold students to a high standard of behavior and small infractions do not go unnoticed. It is not unusual for teachers or administrators to immediately stop instruction when a major event occurs. At one school, the entire 8th grade came together to discuss a situation in which some students were talking about others in their grade who did not pass EOC exams and were in danger of being held back. As a breach of school culture, one in which specific students were being teased for poor academic performance, it was important for everyone to come together and address the issue head on.

In order to support a positive school environment, these schools reward students for positive choices and academic achievement. At KIPP: Charlotte, students must earn “dollars” on their weekly “paycheck” to earn certain rewards, such as field trips. At Maureen Joy Charter, students can earn gold shirts for making good choices or a principal’s list shirt for academic achievement. Teachers at QEA practice a system of small rewards, offering students praise for their accomplishments, no matter how small, throughout the day. All of these practices go a long way in creating an environment that promotes student growth and success.

### *Culture of High Expectations for College*

Each of these schools also shares a culture of high expectations. Each of the five schools expects every child to go to college. To support this college-going culture, students visit various college campuses throughout the school year. At KIPP: Charlotte, students visit a different campus each quarter, meaning that by the time

they leave the school in 8th grade they have visited 16 college and universities. At Gaston College Prep all 9th grade students and teachers begin their school year with an overnight trip to a college campus. This experience gives students a sense of what life is like in college and focuses them towards their goal. For upperclassmen, GCP also offers SAT prep classes, helps students fill out college applications, assists parents in navigating financial aid paperwork, edits college essays, and facilitates trips so that every senior has the opportunity to visit the schools they plan to attend.

At The Learning Center, students participate in an end-of-the-year trip, which gives them the opportunity to visit college campuses. Students who visit the eastern coast of North Carolina are treated to college tours at three Triangle area schools: UNC Chapel Hill, NC State and Duke, on their drive to the coast. School leader Mary Jo Dyre believes that all students should have the opportunity to visit college campuses from a young age to help build a strong sense of academic purpose and achievement. If students have an interest in a particular career field, the school will also work to set up job shadowing opportunities for students.

The Learning Center also has a “no zero” policy which makes it impossible for a student to receive a zero on an assignment. “The only way to get a zero is not to do it and we don’t allow students to not do their work. Even if they stay after school every day, they will get that work done,” says Ms. Dyre. Many school leaders echo this sentiment believing it sends the wrong message and worry that students will think if something is too hard, you can always quit, an attitude that undermines the college-going culture of the school. As such, many schools have adopted a “no excuses” motto when it comes to academics.

## TEACHING FOR MASTERY

With the goal of educating students with the skills they need to be successful in college and in life, proficiency is not enough. Teachers and school leaders at the profiled schools work to build in more time for instruction, build a strong curriculum, use data to drive student learning and assessment practices, and provide wraparound support for students.

### **More Time for Instruction**

For students who have struggled in the past or continue to struggle, schools provide extended time in core classes or remediation. At The Learning Center, students use the Four Block<sup>1</sup> Literacy Model of English instruction with each block lasting 45 minutes for a total of 3 hours each day. At KIPP: Charlotte, struggling students receive 90 minutes of math class plus a one-hour, small-group remediation class each day. Elementary students at Maureen Joy Charter receive 2.5 hours

of reading instruction and more than 2 hours of math instruction each day. Teachers believe extra time in the classroom is essential for attaining mastery in essential skills, especially for those who are behind.

To allow for extra time in classes, students at these schools often attend school more time each day than their peers in other charter or traditional public schools. Students at these schools average an 8.5 hour school day<sup>2</sup> as compared to about 7 hours for their peers in traditional public schools. An extra 1.5 hours each day translates into almost 39 *extra days* in school each year. Two schools even extend their school calendar slightly beyond the 180 days<sup>3</sup> required by the State of North Carolina. Following the lead of some charters and schools in other countries, the General Assembly introduced a bill in the last session that would lengthen the school day and school year in underperforming high schools in North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Legislators were successful in increasing the number of school days to 185 for the 2011-2012 school year, though it contains a waiver provision for schools who can show they have a better plan to “enhance student performance.” It remains unclear exactly how many districts will actually institute the required five day extension into their calendar for the upcoming school year. Pending recommendations from the State Board of Education in January 2012, the General Assembly plans to extend the school year to 190 days for all students in the state.

### **Strong Curriculum Focus**

The profiled schools use the NC Standard Course of Study as the basis for curriculum and supplement with additional standards, such as Advanced Placement (AP) as needed. They also work to include college entrance standards (SAT and ACT tested competencies) into courses serving high school students. If the school’s focus is on college success then students need to be prepared to take college-level classes and complete them successfully. At one school, low AP scores resulted in teachers and administrators looking introspectively at their AP program. Teachers realized that some students did not pick up the requisite skills to be successful in an AP class which should be built up though the curriculum in earlier



<sup>1</sup> The Four Block Literacy Model seeks to break literacy instruction into four key blocks: Guided reading (reading instruction with a teacher), self-selected reading (students choose books for independent reading), writing, and working with words (spelling and decoding skills).

<sup>2</sup> Average based on required attendance hours at the five profiled schools.

<sup>3</sup> Students at KIPP: Charlotte attend school 190 days each year. This includes a two week summer school period. Students at GCP attend school 182 days each year.

<sup>4</sup> Senate Bill 724, Section 5.

grades. As a result, teachers in like subjects across grade levels reworked the curriculum for those classes to build the skills required for success in advanced coursework.

THE LEARNING CENTER

***“We are what we eat.”***

***– Mary Jo Dyre***

While there is not necessarily a standardized method of instruction across the schools, established systems promote collaboration and sharing among teachers. At KIPP: Charlotte and GCP, teachers upload their curricular materials each week to make them available for teachers and administrators. Teachers at The Learning Center enjoy a common planning time during lunch each day which allows for discussion and collaboration. At Maureen Joy Charter, teachers work together in grade-level teams. At each of the profiled schools, school leaders indicate collaboration leads to better resources for all students because teachers can share best practices.

### ***Data Driven Instruction***

At each of the schools, teachers use assessment to monitor student success. In particular, formative assessment<sup>5</sup> practices allow teachers to communicate and reflect with students about their success in meeting standards. If the first real assessment of understanding comes with the unit test teachers and students cannot address misunderstandings surrounding the material until too late. For this reason, school leaders at two of the profiled schools indicated that the major focus for school-wide professional development centered around formative assessment practices. Along with teacher- and administrator-led professional development, schools indicated the materials found on NC FALCON a very good resource for teachers. NC FALCON operates as DPI’s online learning community dedicated to providing teachers with high-quality professional development and resources related to the role of formative assessment in the classroom. School leaders noted that the online format benefited teachers who were able to review the modules as needed. Teachers found it helpful to review materials after they initially completed the training. On demand access better enabled them to incorporate formative assessment practices into their classroom instruction.

Often students and teachers at these schools know if they “got it” before the class ends and can make changes to adjust future learning. KIPP: Charlotte, GCP, and Maureen Joy Charter, for example, use exit tickets, or short mini-quizzes, at the end of each class to gauge student understanding. Some teachers also use more informal means of assessment. When evaluating student success on a “do now” problem, like an EOG practice question, teachers may ask students to move into corners of the room based on the answer they chose, and then have a student representative from each group explain why they believe their answer is correct. This practice requires students



to not only pick an answer, but defend it as well, and gives the teacher a better idea of where students’ misunderstandings occur. Before students leave, they know if they are on the right track to complete homework successfully. If not, they can ask their teacher for help during tutorials at the end of the day.

Each of these schools also participates in formal benchmarking using a variety of software packages, such as Study Island<sup>6</sup>, as well as teacher generated materials and state provided sample and released testing items. Schools in our study indicated they formally benchmark students an average of one time per quarter. Benchmarking allows teachers to see what competencies students have not mastered as a class and make adjustments to the curriculum as needed. It also identifies areas where individual students may need extra practice during tutoring and assists in creating a plan for targeted instruction.

### ***Wrap Around Support***

All five schools understand and act on the belief that education involves more than what happens at school. Situations at home may interfere with the ability of a child to learn and be successful in school. Schools creatively use resources to address the many needs of students. At GCP, the school partners with area social service agencies and non-profits to help families get the assistance they need. The school also partners with counseling professionals in the community who provide volunteer counseling to students.

Budget constraints prevent some charter schools from offering bus transportation to students. Understanding that the lack of transportation can prevent students from attending, two schools work with local public transportation to provide the service. Others enlist parent and community members to create carpools to make sure all students have the ability to get to school. Alex Quigley from Maureen Joy Academy does provide school bus transportation to all students at a great cost<sup>7</sup>. In a time of shrinking budgets Mr. Quigley recently began searching for other options that may cut costs without cutting the service, such as partnering with Durham Public Schools. When asked

<sup>5</sup> Formative assessment is generally informal and can happen at any time during the learning process. A key component of formative assessment is feedback from the teacher or peers which the student then uses to improve learning.

<sup>6</sup> Study Island is an online benchmarking tool used by schools to assess student mastery of NC standards.

<sup>7</sup> Charter schools do not receive money to operate transportation services for students.

if budget cuts meant bus service might not be possible in the future, he responded, “Buses aren’t an option to cut. You have to provide bus transportation. It’s a social justice issue. Cutting the bus service means taking away the ability of low-income students to come to this school.” He pointed out that parents of many students work shifts and cannot always be at the school to pick up their students at 4pm when the school day ends.

Food and nutrition are especially important to the mission of The Learning Center where school leader Mary Jo Dyre works to incorporate healthy eating and wellness into the curriculum. Ms. Dyre believes that a nutritious breakfast is essential to success in the classroom and ensures that all students receive free breakfast each morning before school. In 2002, she won the Oprah “Dream Big” contest which provided support to make the dream of creating a sustainable garden nutrition program a reality. Currently, the school cooks their meals in an onsite kitchen to ensure food quality and healthy cooking techniques. The school also supports parents by making food education and wellness opportunities available to them so that they can continue healthy eating in their home.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH CAROLINA CHARTER SCHOOLS

In an attempt to better understand the policies and practices of all charter schools in North Carolina, we surveyed schools to determine if specific policies were common among all charters or just our profiled schools. Of the 99 currently operational charter schools, 44 responded to the survey. Of the 29 schools identified as high-poverty due to a large population of FRL students, only eight responded to our survey, and three of those schools were profiled in this study; Maureen Joy Charter, The Learning Center, and Quality Education Academy. Due to the low response rate of high-poverty charters, we had difficulty generalizing our data to all high-poverty charter schools. This data may not accurately reflect the true statewide average of charters due to the characteristics of the charters that tended to participate in the survey. In general, the schools who responded tend to perform above average in terms of composite scores, serve a much lower percentage of low-income students, and serve a smaller percentage of minority students than our profiled charter schools. While comparing high-performing high-poverty charters to charters serving more affluent students fails to provide an accurate comparison group, it does provide some interesting insight related to policies of charter schools in general. For example, high-poverty charter schools are more likely to require students to wear a uniform than other charter schools.

When looking at the survey results we do see some interesting trends in the average hours of attendance across different charter groups. Students who attend our profiled high-poverty charters spend an average of 8.5 hours in school each day, while students in all high-poverty charters average 7.25 hours a day in school. The average for all charter schools participating in the survey is about 6.75 hours of school each day. This

suggests that students at our profiled high-poverty schools spend a considerably longer amount of time in school than the average charter school student.

Elementary age students in our surveyed charter schools spent between 45 and 180 minutes in reading, with an average of 96 minutes in reading instruction each day. Students in our profiled charters receive an average of 140 minutes of reading instruction each day. Appendix 3 shows the difference in time spent in math and reading instruction for students in elementary, middle, and high school grades. It also shows the difference between our profiled high-poverty schools, all high-poverty charter schools and all charter schools which participated in our survey. Our results show that students in our profiled high-poverty charters spend more time in reading and math instruction than the average for all charter schools. Future research should use the full population of charter schools to determine if these trends continue to hold true.

## CONCLUSION

Several high-poverty charter schools in North Carolina have instituted innovative practices to improve student outcomes. While our research cannot fully support that these practices are directly linked to student achievement outcomes, they have contributed to shaping and sustaining positive environments for low-income students to learn and develop into productive members of society. Smaller than average enrollment numbers seem to aid the development of the holistic student support model these charter schools appear to adopt. Other practices, such as those aimed at increasing parental participation and character education, also seem better suited for these small learning communities. Future research should consider if these practices directly contribute to increased student academic achievement or if some other factor not considered here is driving student learning gains.

Administrators at other charter schools and traditional public schools serving larger student populations should determine which of the aforementioned practices are most feasible given their school’s demographics and size, as not all may be appropriate for every school. All schools, however, can benefit from helping their students become college and career-ready. Building a culture of high expectations (particularly, expectations for future college attendance) reinforces student confidence in personal ability, and can serve as an effective motivational tool if wielded appropriately. Each of these schools highlighted successful practices to achieve academic results with traditionally underserved populations and improved learning outcomes of some of the neediest students in the state. Still, more must be done to ensure all students in the state of North Carolina are receiving a sound basic education, when many are not. For that reason, we must look to successful schools, both charter and traditional public schools alike, to find practices which better serve the needs of our students.

**APPENDIX A: ABC Growth Status of High-Poverty Charter Schools**

| School Name                  | 2006-07  | 2007-08  | 2008-09  | 2009-10  |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Arapahoe Charter School      | Expected | Expected | Failed   | High     |
| Bethel Hill Charter          | Expected | High     | Expected | Expected |
| Bridges Charter School       | High     | Expected | Expected | High     |
| C G Woodson Sch of Challenge | Expected | High     | Expected | High     |
| Carter Community Charter     | Failed   | High     | High     | Failed   |
| Children's Village Academy   | High     | High     | Expected | Failed   |
| CIS Academy                  | Failed   | High     | Expected | High     |
| Crossnore Academy            | Expected | Expected | High     | Expected |
| Dillard Academy              | Expected | High     | Expected | High     |
| Downtown Middle              | Expected | Expected | Failed   | High     |
| Forsyth Academy              | Expected | Failed   | Expected | High     |
| Gaston College Preparatory   | High     | High     | High     | High     |
| Guilford Preparatory         | Failed   | Expected | Expected | High     |
| Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School  | Failed   | Failed   | Failed   | Failed   |
| Healthy Start Academy        | Failed   | Failed   | Expected | High     |
| Highland Charter             | n/a      | n/a      | n/a      | n/a      |
| Hope Elementary              | Failed   | Expected | Failed   | Expected |
| Kennedy Charter              | Expected | Expected | High     | Expected |
| Kinston Charter Academy      | High     | High     | Expected | Expected |
| KIPP: Charlotte              | n/a      | High     | High     | High     |
| Maureen Joy Charter          | Expected | High     | High     | High     |
| PreEminent Charter           | Failed   | Failed   | Failed   | Expected |
| Quality Education Academy    | Expected | High     | High     | High     |
| Research Triangle Charter    | Failed   | High     | High     | High     |
| Rocky Mount Preparatory      | Failed   | High     | Failed   | Expected |
| Sallie B Howard School       | Expected | High     | Expected | High     |
| Success Charter              | High     | Expected | Failed   | High     |
| Sugar Creek Charter          | Expected | High     | Expected | High     |
| The Learning Center          | High     | High     | High     | Expected |

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Accountability

**APPENDIX B: Composite Test Scores of High-Poverty Charter Schools**

| School Name                  | 2006-07 | 2007-08 | 2008-09 | 2009-10 |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Arapahoe Charter School      | 78.4    | 71.5    | 73.5    | 74.8    |
| Bethel Hill Charter          | 82.9    | 74.6    | 83.0    | 87.7    |
| Bridges Charter School       | 55.1    | 59.2    | 69.3    | 80.2    |
| C G Woodson Sch of Challenge | 57.8    | 43.5    | 56.1    | 60.0    |
| Carter Community Charter     | 50.0    | 46.9    | 72.4    | 63.6    |
| Children's Village Academy   | 66.1    | 60.7    | 58.7    | 50.0    |
| CIS Academy                  | 41.9    | 31.7    | 52.2    | 55.1    |
| Crossnore Academy            | 52.5    | 48.1    | 52.9    | 64.0    |
| Dillard Academy              | 49.4    | 49.1    | 51.9    | 39.4    |
| Downtown Middle              | 67.0    | 44.0    | 57.7    | 55.4    |
| Forsyth Academy              | 74.8    | 60.7    | 68.0    | 75.4    |
| Gaston College Preparatory   | 81.3    | 77.2    | 82.3    | 89.5    |
| Guilford Preparatory         | 60.3    | 52.1    | 61.8    | 69.8    |
| Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School  | 52.6    | 43.0    | 55.7    | 58.5    |
| Healthy Start Academy        | 40.9    | 28.3    | 44.8    | 51.5    |
| Highland Charter             | n/a     | n/a     | n/a     | 60.7    |
| Hope Elementary              | 52.8    | 44.4    | 66.3    | 59.7    |
| Kennedy Charter              | 14.4    | 10.4    | 11.5    | 20.5    |
| Kinston Charter Academy      | 71.6    | 45.8    | 50.1    | 49.4    |
| KIPP: Charlotte              | n/a     | 56.2    | 64.7    | 66.9    |
| Maureen Joy Charter          | 49.0    | 47.8    | 63.3    | 71.1    |
| PreEminent Charter           | 50.0    | 33.0    | 45.5    | 49.4    |
| Quality Education Academy    | 61.7    | 54.8    | 73.0    | 92.0    |
| Research Triangle Charter    | 58.4    | 47.2    | 61.1    | 65.3    |
| Rocky Mount Preparatory      | 57.1    | 52.9    | 66.1    | 79.5    |
| Sallie B Howard School       | 56.7    | 42.6    | 57.7    | 66.6    |
| Success Charter              | 66.5    | 45.2    | 64.3    | 79.2    |
| Sugar Creek Charter          | 57.4    | 46.8    | 64.3    | 73.2    |
| The Learning Center          | 83.8    | 78.0    | 90.7    | 85.0    |

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Accountability

## APPENDIX C: Average Time in Reading & Math Instruction for Surveyed Charters

|                           |         | Average of Profiled High-Poverty Schools | Average of all High-Poverty Charters* | Average of All Charters*  |
|---------------------------|---------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Elementary Grades (K-5)   | Reading | 140 minutes of instruction               | 108 minutes of instruction            | 97 minutes of instruction |
|                           | Math    | 93 minutes of instruction                | 76 minutes of instruction             | 71 minutes of instruction |
| Middle Grades (6-8)       | Reading | 126 minutes of instruction               | 106 minutes of instruction            | 84 minutes of instruction |
|                           | Math    | 88 minutes of instruction                | 91 minutes of instruction             | 72 minutes of instruction |
| High School Grades (9-12) | Reading | 90 minutes of instruction                | 90 minutes of instruction             | 66 minutes of instruction |
|                           | Math    | 105 minutes of instruction               | 70 minutes of instruction             | 65 minutes of instruction |

\*Due to the low response rate, these results are not generalizable to the entire population of charter school.

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