

CHARTER SCHOOLS: ^{Today} ^
CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

THE Center for Education Reform



ANNUAL SURVEY
of
AMERICA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS

The Center for Education Reform drives the creation of better educational opportunities for all children by leading parents, policymakers and the media in boldly advocating for school choice, advancing the charter school movement, and challenging the education establishment.

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ANNUAL SURVEY
of
AMERICA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Great public schools are made, not born.

Great public schools offer the public a wide variety of programs, approaches and learning opportunities.

Great public schools are large enough to have variety, but small enough to create the kind of community culture that has been linked to successful education.

Great public schools work hard to serve those who are most in need, and give no excuses for reasons they cannot.

Great public schools can make decisions on their own about fundamental operational issues; how and when the school day and school year are organized; the skills, responsibilities and pay of teachers; the degree to which all staff participate in activities; and how parents can contribute best to the education of their offspring.

Great public schools are fiscally accountable and their operations are transparent to the public.

Great public schools are not easy to make, but they are increasingly available to children in all states, thanks to the introduction of the charter school idea.

By definition, charter schools are great public schools. Some are already there, some are still working at it, and occasionally, some miss the mark altogether. Like any relatively new innovation, however, the kinks are part of the experience that can make all aspects of schooling better. Mistakes are good to learn from, if discovered quickly and corrected.

And that is perhaps the most salient reason that charter schools now serve students in larger percentages than any other single reform of public education to date. This great public education innovation is delivering on the promise of what makes a great public school.

The data reviewed in this year's *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools*, by the Center for Education Reform, tells that story clearly. The unique results of this survey should be educational for the uninitiated, solace for the skeptics, and fodder for the fans.

See for yourself, and tell us if you agree — or not. We look forward to hearing from you.



Jeanne Allen
President

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This survey was sent out to approximately 4,100 schools, with a 20 percent response rate, and presents an intense view into the context for and environment surrounding the operation of the nation's charter schools. The conclusions we draw from the data are consistent with a variety of research and other statistical exercises, which are normally done with a smaller subset. This data provides an overall look at the key factors that influence charter school operations.

The survey is broken out into four sections, designed to get a glimpse into the overall management and environment of charter schools across the country. The four sections detailed in this analysis are: Size and Scope, Demographics, Operations and Management. There is a brief introductory summary of each section, followed by an in-depth analysis using statistics and information taken from the charter schools' responses.

This report gives the most comprehensive look to date at the charter school environment. Key findings include:

- ⊙ States with multiple authorizers create the highest quality and quantity of charter schools. (p. 9)
- ⊙ Charter schools have grown at a rapid pace over the last ten years, but state caps and moratoriums on new schools are now impeding the necessary growth. (p. 7)
- ⊙ Even though they are public schools and should receive the same amount of federal, state and local funds, charter schools receive nearly 40 percent less funding than other public schools. (p. 16)
- ⊙ Despite receiving less money, charter schools are able to offer longer school days, longer school years, and innovative curricula not available in conventional public schools. (p. 15)
- ⊙ Contrary to what charter school opponents have reported for years, charter schools do serve a majority of at-risk, minority and poor students. (p. 11)
- ⊙ States with strong charter laws give charter schools freedom and autonomy to manage their own operations. Eighty-five percent of respondents do not participate in a union or collective bargaining unit, and charters are moving towards performance incentives and merit-based pay. (p. 19)

SIZE AND SCOPE

Steady Growth

In the 2007-08 school year, there were 4,128 charter schools serving over 1.24 million students in 40 states and Washington, D.C. Since the mid-1990's charter schools have experienced double-digit annual growth. This year, however, charter growth dipped by a few percentage points, to nine percent, because of artificial constraints placed on the market in the form of charter school caps and moratoriums on new schools.

Meeting Parent Demands for Smaller Schools

Charter schools tend to be smaller in size, enrolling on average 348 students, nearly 35 percent less than conventional public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2005-06, the average number of students per public school was 521. Studies have shown that smaller schools can be advantageous for learning, creating an intimate environment to better serve the individual needs of students.

As the number of charter schools across the country continues to grow at a rapid pace, the interest in these innovative schools continues to rise. Fifty-nine percent of schools that responded to the survey said they have significant waiting lists, averaging 198 students in length. That means that over the last year, the average size of a waiting list has increased by 33 percent, due to the massive demand for charter schools in the face of slower growth.

The Importance of Multiple Authorizers

As of this survey, 17 states have authorizers other than local school boards that have the ability to approve and manage charter schools. (Georgia added an independent authorizer, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission in spring 2008; it will be operational in the fall). An additional eight states have strong binding appeals processes that allow applicants an open and objective avenue to seek a charter if it initially is denied by an authorizer.

States with multiple chartering authorities have almost four times more charter schools than states that only allow local school board approval. Local boards are also more likely to grant charters when state laws permit multiple authorizers. About 80 percent of the nation's charter schools are in states with multiple authorizers or a strong appeals process. These states are also home to the highest quality charter schools.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Reaching Children Most in Need

It has been suggested by some researchers in their analysis of government data that charter schools serve fewer disadvantaged children than conventional public schools in comparable neighborhoods. Using the free and reduced lunch program to inform their demographic analysis, critics have suggested that charter school achievement is lower than that of similar public schools because charter scores must be adjusted for a lower poverty rate. According to the CER survey, 54 percent of all charter school students qualify for free and reduced lunch; however, 38 percent of charters do not participate in these programs for a variety of administrative, financial and political reasons, and not because their students do not qualify.

Therefore, the prime indicator used by statisticians to determine poverty and compare achievement of like students is flawed. The Center for Education Reform offers evidence that puts to rest the notion that charter students are less poor – and therefore achieving less – than students in conventional public schools. As shown in the achievement statistics at the end of this report, despite being poorer, these students are achieving at a higher level.

Increasing Educational Opportunities for Under-Served Students

It is a recycled myth that charter schools drain only the best students from the local school district. Charter schools are public schools and cannot select their students based on academic performance. According to the data, they teach students who are largely under-served in the conventional public school environment. The majority of charter school students are minority (52 percent), at-risk (50 percent), or low-income (54 percent).

Charter schools are doing an especially good job of targeting services to students at both ends of the instructional spectrum who are being failed by a “one-size-fits-all” education system: teen parents, special education students, English language learners, and gifted and talented students. Conventional public schools often do not provide the individualized attention and tailored curricula that these students need to ensure their success.

OPERATIONS

Academic Accountability

Charter school students are required to take the same state standardized tests as conventional public school students. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents report administering some type of standardized test, most often a state test as well as another academic assessment. Schools where additional testing is not mandatory are often schools that provide alternative learning programs with non-traditional assessments for special populations such as students who have dropped out of school, students with severe disabilities, and students of pre-school age.

Providing Innovative, Quality Choices

Charter schools provide for innovative curricula and options, in response to the demand for more focused curricula that meet the needs of each school’s student population. Of the survey respondents, 79 percent said their school has a particular theme or focus. Some schools focus on specific disciplines such as math, science or the arts, others use well-known methods like Core Knowledge or Montessori, and many charters focus on students’ future plans to attend college or start a career.

One of the most important, yet simple, values provided by charter schools is increased instructional time. It is rare for a conventional public school student to attend school for more 180 days a year or longer than six and a half hours a day. A majority of charter survey respondents have extended the school day, the school year, or a combination of both.

MANAGEMENT

Doing More With Less

Charter schools receive fewer dollars and spend less than conventional schools. Among reporting charter schools, the average amount of per-pupil funding they received was \$6,585, and the average cost per-pupil was \$7,625. According to a 2008 study by the U.S. Census, conventional public schools received \$10,771 per pupil and spent \$9,138 per pupil. Nationwide, charter schools, which are public schools and entitled to the same funding, are only receiving 60 percent of what conventional public schools receive. This inequity forces charters to spend their valuable time and resources looking for outside additional funding sources.

Maximizing Resources

Unlike conventional district schools, charter schools generally do not receive funding to cover the cost of securing and maintaining a facility. Of charter schools that responded, only 25 percent receive some funding specifically targeted towards facilities. Charter schools improvise by converting non-traditional school spaces such as retail facilities, former churches, and warehouses into classrooms, cafeterias, auditoriums and gym space. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents rent their school facility, and are spending a significant portion of their already stretched budgets on rental and maintenance costs.

An effective balance between teachers and administrators is key to ensuring schools meet their primary responsibility, to educate children. Charter schools generally maintain high ratios of teachers to administrative personnel, averaging 20 full-time teachers to four full-time non-instructional staff.

Teachers Have More Independence

In certain locales, collective bargaining agreements nullify the freedoms that define most charter schools. In order to offer novel approaches to teaching and deliver results, charter schools need the autonomy to manage their principals, administrators, and teachers. Eighty-five percent of the schools that responded to our survey said their teachers do not participate in a union or collective bargaining unit. Many that do participate are required to do so by weak state charter laws.

Uniform pay guidelines that follow local or state pay levels at least on a minimum level represent the majority of teacher compensation in our survey. We believe this occurs because district rules and regulations stifle charter school autonomy in management and personnel practices. Charters also must remain competitive in the market to attract the best teachers. However, once one begins teaching in a charter school, performance based pay, contracts based on skills, and other pay incentives, which take considerable work and innovation to develop, are not uncommon in the charter school world. Thirty percent of respondents also said that some of their teachers are certified through alternative programs, which allow charter schools greater flexibility in hiring teachers with specific skills in subjects.

ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY DATA

SIZE AND SCOPE

Charter Schools Generate Increasing Interest And Growth

Since the first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1992, charter schools, which are innovative, accountable public schools, have been growing at a rapid rate. Sixteen years later, there are 4,128 charter schools serving over 1.24 million students across 40 states and Washington, D.C.

The number of charter schools grew modestly until the mid-to-late 1990's, when more state legislatures began to pass charter laws. Since then, charter schools have experienced incredible annual growth, this year being no exception. The number of charter schools increased across the country by nine percent from the previous school year (Figure 1). States with strong charter school laws, such as Minnesota, Florida, Washington, D.C., California and Arizona have experienced some of the largest growth year after year (Figure 2).

Growth in charter schools decreased two percentage points from last year because of artificial constraints

placed on the market in the form of charter school caps and moratoriums on new schools. Caps are preventing new schools from opening in Texas and North Carolina, while recent moratoriums passed by state legislatures and local districts in Ohio and Nevada also have halted growth.

Being held accountable to certain standards is a hallmark of the charter school movement. Unlike conventional schools, charter schools face enormous challenges to open and survive. Of the over 4,000 charter schools that have ever opened, 11 percent have been closed for various reasons. Schools may be closed due to academic, financial or management problems, or in some cases, consolidation or district interference. Charters are held accountable to the same testing and performance standards as every other public school. The consequence of failing is closing the charter school, something that rarely happens to conventional public schools.

Figure 1. Growth in Operational Charter Schools 1992-2007

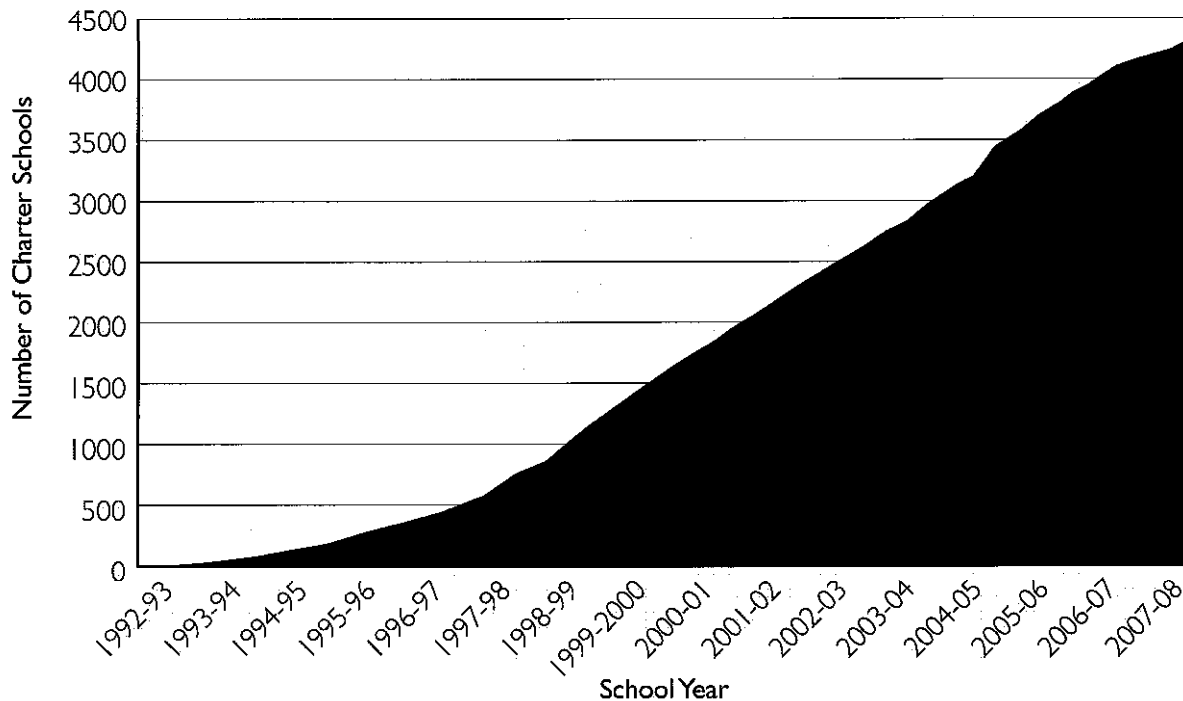


Figure 2. Charter School Enrollment and Closures, by State

State	Opened in 2007-2008	Total Closed Since 1992	Total Operating	Total Enrollment
Alaska	1	5	25	4,998
Arizona	20	90	479	108,659
Arkansas	3	5	18	5,065
California	77	95	703	235,657
Colorado	11	11	140	51,925
Connecticut	1	5	19	3,675
DC	8	16	78	20,642
Delaware	0	2	19	8,512
Florida	23	67	348	99,818
Georgia	7	8	65	32,057
Hawaii	2	0	29	7,137
Idaho	2	1	30	10,262
Illinois	7	9	61	24,647
Indiana	3	2	41	10,146
Iowa	2	0	10	1,292
Kansas	3	9	30	2,686
Louisiana	9	8	54	20,703
Maryland	9	2	30	6,219
Massachusetts	2	6	62	23,482
Michigan	5	26	245	92,647
Minnesota	14	29	148	25,823
Mississippi	0	0	1	367
Missouri	9	6	36	12,785
Nevada	2	5	24	6,767
New Hampshire	5	2	13	1,244
New Jersey	3	18	56	16,467
New Mexico	5	3	66	10,734
New York	4	8	99	25,979
North Carolina	7	30	103*	29,889
Ohio	9	31	295	92,809
Oklahoma	0	1	15	4,708
Oregon	11	10	81	11,165
Pennsylvania	9	11	132	60,532
Rhode Island	0	0	11	2,779
South Carolina	1	10	30	5,850
Tennessee	1	1	12	1,914
Texas	13	32	314	103,183
Utah	7	1	60	20,455
Virginia	0	3	3	239
Wisconsin	51	20	247	38,840
Wyoming	0	0	3	244
TOTAL	346	588	4128	1,243,002

Data current as of April 2008

* North Carolina has a cap of 100 charter schools. CER tracks the number of campuses in each state, some of which may fall under the same charter. Therefore, there are 103 schools operational this year.

Meeting Parent Demands for Smaller Schools

On average, charter schools enroll 348 students, nearly 35 percent less than conventional public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average number of students in a conventional school in 2005-06 was 521. Research has shown that smaller schools may lead to higher achievement and can be more advantageous for learning, in addition to promoting a feeling of safety and security within the school. Parents enjoy the smaller school atmosphere because their children are able to receive additional instruction and attention in areas with which they may struggle.

Over 1.24 million students are enrolled in charter schools across the country, and 59 percent of survey respondents said that

their school has a waiting list for one or more grades. The typical charter school waiting list in 2007 had 51 students. In 2006, the typical waiting list had 40 students, for a 33 percent increase (Figure 3). This increase can be attributed to many states reaching their school cap, a move by charter school opponents to stop growth through any means necessary. Since no new charter schools can open in many regions, the intense demand continues to rise at the schools currently available. In Boston, Massachusetts for example, there were 5,649 applications for only 1,249 available spots in charter schools this past school year. Until the repressive cap is changed, there is no hope for students and parents wanting a better choice.

Figure 3. Charter School Enrollment and Waiting List

	2007	2006
Average Enrollment	348	328
Percentage of Schools with Waiting Lists	59	61
Average Number of Students on Waiting List	198	149
Number of Students on a Typical Waiting List	51	40

Importance of Multiple Authorizers

As of this survey, 17 states had authorizers other than local school boards that may approve and manage charter schools. An additional eight states had strong binding appeals processes, which allow applicants an open and objective avenue to seek a charter if it initially is denied by an authorizer. Other state legislatures are also introducing bills to increase the number of charter school authorizers. Georgia added an independent authorizer, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission in spring 2008, and it will be operational in the fall.

States with multiple chartering authorities, including independent state boards, universities, or nonprofit organizations, have almost four times more charter schools than states requiring only local school board approval. Nearly 80 percent of the country's charter schools are located in states with multiple authorizers and/or a strong appeals process. These states also are home to the highest quality charter schools. One goal of the charter school movement is to give parents many high-quality educational options, and having multiple authorizers helps reach this goal by allowing different avenues for charters to be approved.

States that do not have multiple authorizers create a hostile environment for charter schools. Local school boards often view charter schools as competition and reject applications. Without multiple authorizers, charter school supporters have nowhere else to turn for approval. The local school board monopoly on authorizing prevents states, such as Illinois, Kansas and Maryland, from meeting the growing demand for school choice.

Figure 4 represents various types of authorizers that have approved schools who responded to

our survey. Local school boards still make up the majority of authorizers, because many states only allow school board approval. In other states, such as Idaho, the independent authorizer can only sponsor virtual charter schools or schools previously rejected by the school board. In addition, some states that do have multiple authorizers have reached their arbitrary cap on the number of schools that can be approved. Because of this some of the various authorizers' numbers have decreased a percentage point or two from last year's survey.

Figure 4. Percentage of Charters Approved by Various Authorizers

	2007	2006
Local School Boards	51%	48%
State Boards of Education	28%	28%
State Chartering Boards	12%	10%
Universities/ Colleges	7%	9%
Other (nonprofits, etc.)	1%	3%
Mayor or City	1%	2%

“Our school has recently been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as one of the top seven charter schools in the country for high achievement and closing the achievement gap.”

Carl G. Icahn Charter School, New York

DEMOGRAPHICS

Reaching Children Most In Need

It has been suggested by some researchers in their analysis of government data that the charter schools serve fewer disadvantaged children than conventional public schools in comparable neighborhoods. Using the free and reduced lunch program participation rate to inform their demographic analysis on poverty in the school, critics have suggested that charter school achievement is actually lower than conventional public schools because charter scores, when adjusted for the lower poverty rate, are less than what they would expect from children with more advantages. According to CER's survey, while a majority of charter students qualify for free and reduced lunch, many charter schools do not participate in the program for a variety of administrative, financial and political reasons.

Therefore, the prime indicator used by statisticians to determine poverty and compare achievement of similar students is flawed. The Center for Education Reform offers evidence that

puts to rest the notion that charter students are less poor – and achieving less – than students in conventional public schools.

According to our survey, 54 percent of all charter school students qualify for free and reduced lunch; however, 38 percent of all responding charter schools said they do not participate in the federal free and reduced lunch program for a variety of reasons. Of those who choose not to participate in the program, 23 percent choose not to apply because of the overwhelming paperwork, bureaucratic red tape and other difficulties (Figure 5). Not having the proper facilities, such as full kitchens and cafeterias, is the biggest reason charters do not participate in the program. It is not because charter schools fail to qualify for such programs, but rather because they choose not to participate or cannot due to lack of proper facilities, and feed the children using their own resources.

Figure 5. Why Charter Schools Do Not Participate in Free and Reduced Lunch Program

School does not have the facilities	44%
Other reason (cyber school, half day schedule, etc.)	26%
Chose not to apply because of bureaucratic difficulties	23%
School feeds students with own resources	10%
Not enough eligible students	4%



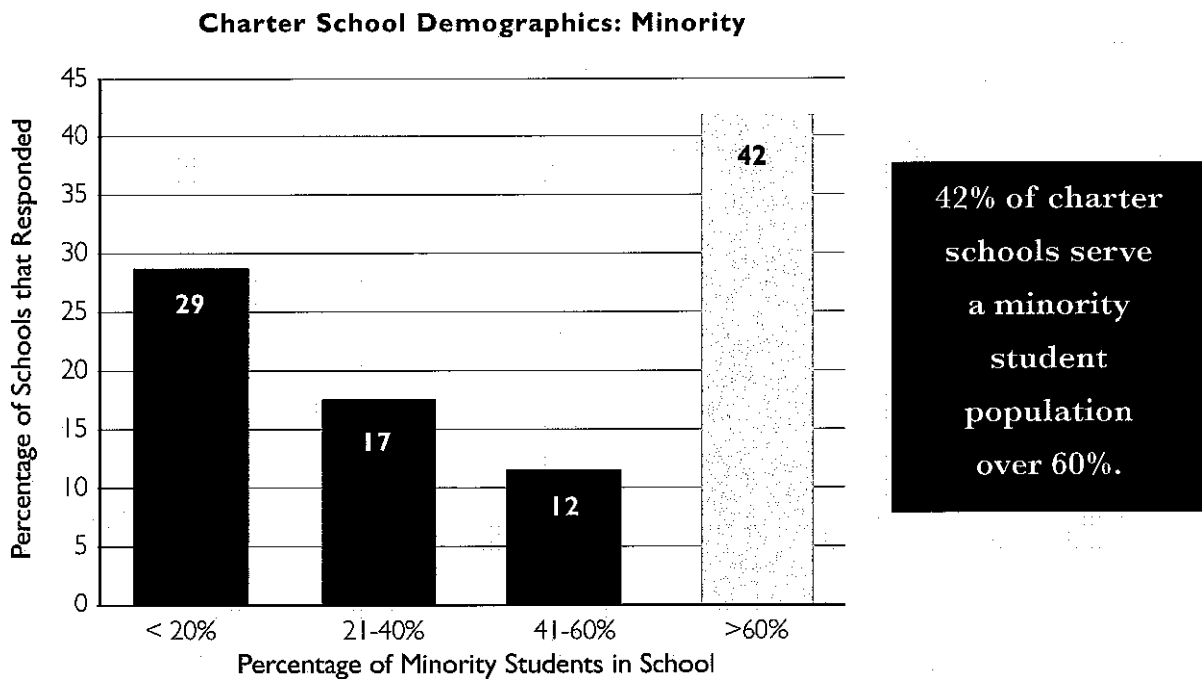
Increasing Educational Opportunities For Under-Served Students

It is a recycled myth that charter schools drain only the best students from the local school district. Charter schools are public schools and cannot select their students based on academic performance. According to the data, charters teach students who are largely under-served in the public school environment. The majority of charter school students are minority (52 percent), at-risk (50 percent), or low-income (54 percent).

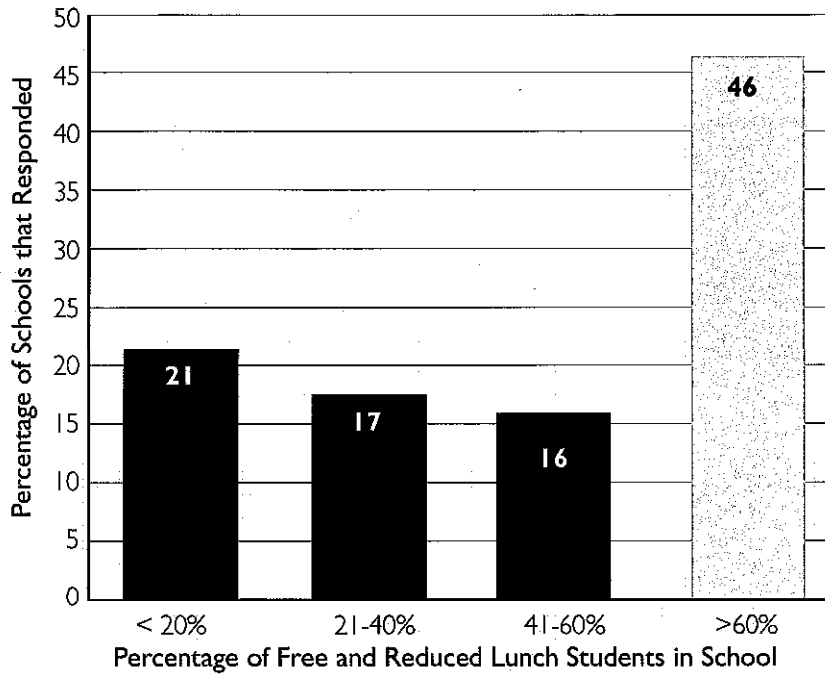
The following charts show that the majority of charter schools across the country serve minority, at-risk, and low-income populations. These populations comprise 40 percent or more of many charters' overall student body (Figure 6). Because of smaller school sizes, innovative instruction and individualized attention, under-served children are receiving the education and services they most need in charter schools.

Charter schools serve a variety of students and are able to use the freedom afforded to them by state law to develop curricula and programs to adapt to their students' needs. Nineteen percent of students are English-language learners, 15 percent have special needs, and eight percent are teen parents. Conventional public schools often do not provide the same type of individualized attention, tailored curricula, and additional after-school programs that charter schools can offer students to improve their chances for academic success.

Figure 6. Demographics: Percentage of Charter Schools Serving Selected Populations

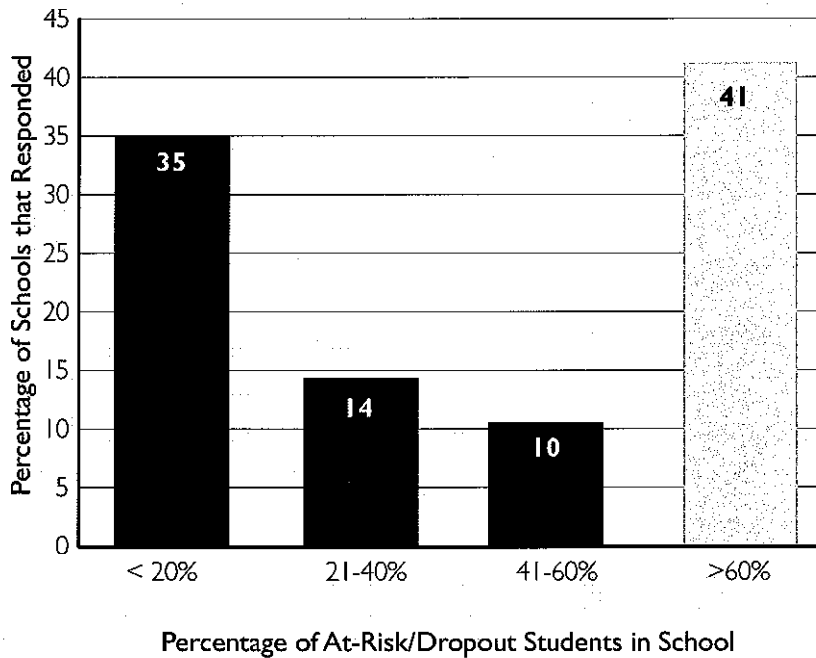


Charter School Demographics: Free and Reduced Lunch



46% of charter schools serve a free/reduced lunch population over 60%.

Charter School Demographics: At-Risk/Dropout



41% of charter schools serve an at-risk student population over 60%.

OPERATIONS

Academic Accountability

Another common misconception about charter schools is that they are not held to the same standards as conventional public schools. Because charter schools are public schools, they must adhere to the same testing requirements of their state and/or district. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents report administering a standardized test, and most schools require tests in addition to the state specific exam. This is the reason the data in the following figure will add up to over 100 percent (Figure 7).

The 14 percent of schools that said they do not require a standardized test likely provide alternative learning programs with non-traditional assessments for students such as at-risk or high school dropouts, special education students, or pre-school age children. Other standardized tests not mentioned by name are often assessments developed by each school to measure the student's progress in subjects such as reading or math to gauge progress over the school year.

Figure 7. Charter School Testing Requirements

	2007	2006
Respondents that administer a specific standardized test	86%	94%
Require a state-specific test	83%	85%
Require the Terra Nova	18%	20%
Require the Stanford 9	13%	15%
Require the Iowa Test of Basic Skills	11%	14%
Require the California Achievement Test	10%	6%
Require the California Test of Basic Skills	4%	3%
Require another standardized test	23%	43%

Providing Innovative, Quality Choices

Charter schools provide for innovative curricula and options, in response to the demand for better and more focused curricula that meet the needs of each school's varying student population. Of the survey respondents, 79 percent said their school has a particular theme or focus (Figure 8). Some schools focus on specific disciplines such as math, science or the arts, others use well-known methods like Core Knowledge or Montessori, and many charters focus on students' future plans to

attend college or start a career. Twenty-seven percent of charters selected "other" as their instructional focus. Some examples are: health and wellness, leadership, experiential learning, environmental education, Chicano studies, and Native American culture. Conventional public schools are less likely to specialize because they tend to have larger student bodies and the instructional methods and curriculum for the entire district usually are centralized.

Figure 8. Curriculum/ Instructional Focus

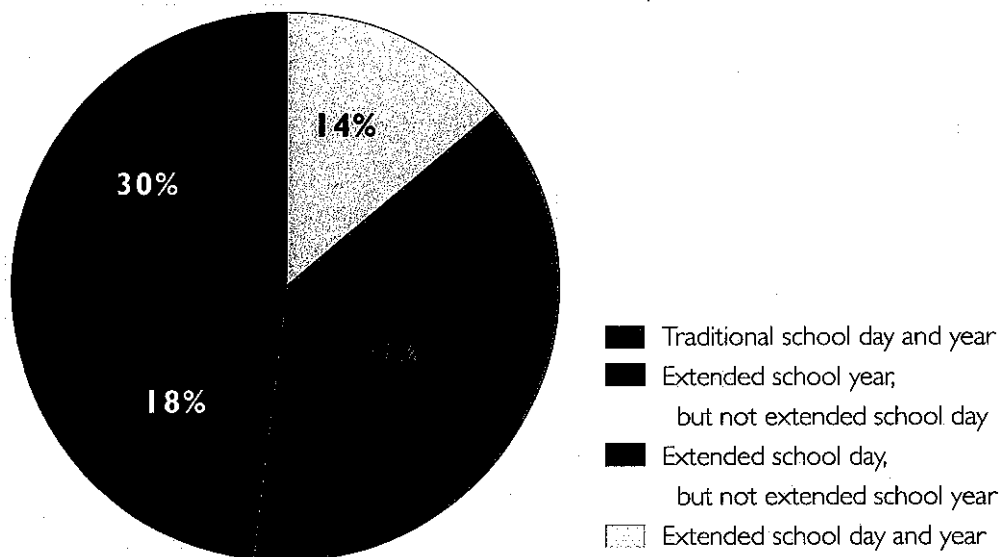
College Preparatory	23%
Back to Basics	11%
Science/ Math/ Technology	10%
Arts	5%
Home/ Independent Study	5%
School-to-Work/ Vocational	5%
Bilingual	4%
Constructivist	4%
GED/ High School Completion	3%
Montessori	3%
Other	27%

Charters Provide More Instructional Time

One of the most important, yet simple, values provided by charter schools is increased instructional time. It is rare for a conventional public school student to attend school for more than 180 days a year or longer than six and a half hours a day. Many charters are able to provide additional instructional time because of their innovative ways of allocating resources (Figure 9). Charters may offer Saturday tutoring sessions, summer sessions, and after-school programs to encourage learning among students and to help create a sense of community in the charter school.

Among survey respondents, 62 percent go beyond the “typical school year” or “typical school day,” an increase of 30 percentage points since last year’s survey. Charter schools across the country have embraced increased instructional time as a method to improve academic performance, help close the achievement gap, and teach students about community and life skills.

Figure 9. Instructional Time



MANAGEMENT

Charter Schools Do More With Less

Charter schools are public schools and should receive the same type and amount of funding as conventional district schools. Strong charter school laws should promote equitable funding for charter schools and traditional public schools, but even states that are “friendly” to charter schools do not fund them equally. Charter schools across the United States are funded at only 61 percent of their district counterparts, averaging \$6,585 per pupil compared to \$10,771 per pupil at conventional public schools, according to a 2008 study by the U.S. Census.

Figure 10 shows four ranges of per pupil revenue, the number and percentage of charter schools that fall in each range, and the average per pupil revenue in each range of those who responded to our survey. Fifty-five percent of the 510 reporting charter schools said that they receive on average between \$4,500 and \$7,000 per student.

Charter schools also spend less than conventional schools, spending on average \$7,625 per pupil, as opposed to \$9,138 per pupil in conventional schools. However, charter schools spend more than they receive, potentially causing financial problems down the road if they cannot cover their costs. In addition to salaries, benefits, supplies and purchased services, total expenditures include capital outlays for school construction and equipment (Figure 11). Forty-five percent of the 455 reporting charter schools said that they spend on average between \$4,500 and \$7,000 per student. Charters are forced to use their valuable time and resources to find additional funding to cover their already low costs because they are shortchanged state and local funding. Charter schools are public schools and should be funded like all other public schools.

Figure 10. Average Revenue Per Pupil Breakdown

Average Revenue Per Pupil: \$6,585

Surveys reporting a per pupil revenue amount between:

Range	Number of Surveys	Average Revenue of Surveys	Percentage of Charter Schools
\$0-\$4,500	54	\$3,855	11%
\$4,500-\$7,000	282	\$5,883	55%
\$7,000-\$9,500	121	\$7,941	24%
\$9,501+	53	\$12,372	10%

Figure 11. Average Cost Per Pupil Breakdown

Average Cost Per Pupil: \$7,625

Surveys reporting a per pupil cost amount between:

Range	Number of Surveys	Average Cost per Pupil	Percentage of Charter Schools
\$0-\$4,500	46	\$3,778	10%
\$4,500-\$7,000	204	\$5,901	45%
\$7,000-\$9,500	121	\$8,174	27%
\$9,501+	83	\$13,195	18%

Maximizing Resources

Unlike conventional public schools, charter schools generally do not receive funding to cover the cost of securing and maintaining a facility. Of charter schools that responded, only 25 percent receive some funding specifically targeted towards facilities. The amount of funding these schools do receive however averages only nine percent of their total budget, not nearly enough to cover the high cost of facilities.

Charter school operators are forced to improvise to save money when finding a location for their school, and often convert spaces such as retail facilities, former and current churches, lofts, or portable trailers into classrooms, cafeterias and gym space. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents rent their school building and only

30 percent own their facility. Charter schools rent their buildings from a variety of people and businesses, wherever there is space. Thirty-seven percent rent from churches and other nonprofit organizations, but 30 percent rent space from private commercial businesses, often spending more money because of the location and the facility owner (Figures 12-13).

An effective balance between teachers and administrators is key to ensuring schools meet their primary responsibility, to educate children. Charter schools generally maintain high ratios of teachers to administrative personnel, averaging 20 full-time teachers to four full-time administrative staff, similar to the results of last year's survey (Figure 14).

Figure 12. Charter School Facility Acquisition

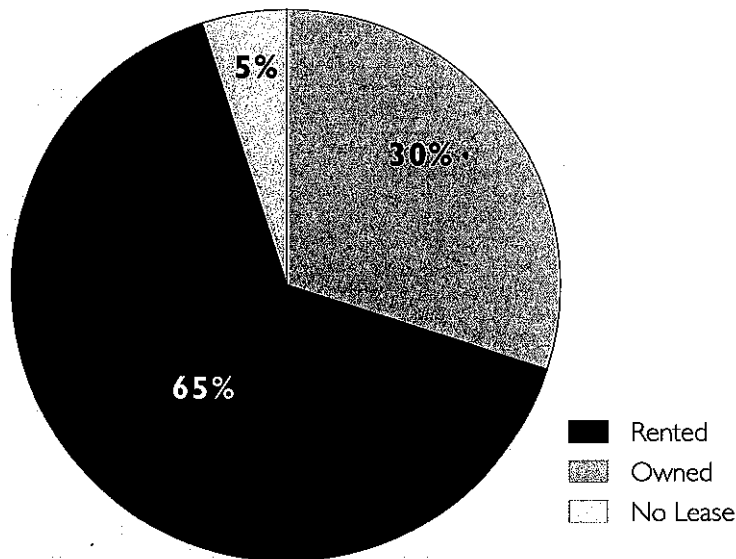


Figure 13. Property Owners of Rented Charter School Facilities

Private Commercial	30%
District	20%
Other Nonprofit (not church)	17%
Church	14%
Individual/ Residential	11%
Other Local Government (not district)	3%
State	2%
University/ College	2%
Federal	1%

Figure 14. Average Number of Employees

Administrative Full Time	4
Administrative Part Time	2
Teacher Full Time	20
Teacher Part Time	5

“Last year, we were one of only 11 schools in a (public school) district of over 221 schools that received a grade of ‘A’ and made AYP. (The Florida Department of Education recognized us) as being in the top 1% of schools who had made the most gains in closing the gap in math for economically disadvantaged students.”

Lakeside Academy, Florida

STAFFING AND COMPENSATION

Teachers Have More Independence

In certain locales, collective bargaining agreements nullify the freedoms that define most charter schools. In order to offer novel approaches to teaching and deliver results, charters need the autonomy to make decisions and manage their principals, teachers, and administrators. Eighty-five percent of our survey respondents said that their teachers do not participate in a union or district collective bargaining agreement. Of the 15 percent that do participate many of these schools are in states where by law charters must remain covered by collective bargaining agreements, unless they seek a waiver. Weak charter school laws make it difficult for charters to fully recognize their independence, because these laws constrict operations, impose burdens, and stifle creativity.

Uniform pay guidelines that follow local or state pay scales at least on a minimum level represent the majority of teacher compensation in our survey, almost 60 percent. We believe this occurs because district rules and regulations stifle charter school autonomy in management and personnel practices. Charters also must remain competitive in the market to attract the best teachers. However, once one begins teaching in a charter school, performance based pay, contracts based

on skills, and other pay incentives, which take considerable work and innovation to develop, are not uncommon. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said their school has contracts based on skills and responsibilities and 20 percent have performance-based pay, which includes incentives for meeting certain benchmarks, such as student achievement improvement.

Thirty percent of our survey respondents said that some of their teachers are certified under alternative certification programs. Charter schools that do not allow for alternative certification are likely located in states with weak charter laws where traditional certification is mandatory. Alternative certification is an effective program that allows professionals who choose teaching after specializing in some other area and do not have a traditional teaching certificate, to earn one without spending lots of time and money. Some alternative certification programs are:

- © American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE).
- © Georgia Teacher Alternative Preparation Program (TAPP).
- © South Carolina's Program for Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE).

*"This is the most vibrant school I have ever been in.
The whole atmosphere radiates with learning and activity."*

Sterling Academy, Kansas

CONCLUSION

The charter school movement began 16 years ago to give parents a public school option that is open by choice, accountable for results and free from most unnecessary rules and regulations governing conventional public schools. The number of charter schools has grown at a rapid pace, currently serving 1.24 million students, with another 300 to 400 schools projected to open next school year. However, as survey results show, artificial constraints in the form of charter school caps and moratoriums are stifling the movement, when demand is at an all-time high. According to CER polling, 78 percent of people supported “allowing communities to create new public schools — called charter schools — that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards/testing requirements as other public schools but not cost taxpayers additional money.”

Analyzing the responses to our survey, there are four key policy decisions needed to improve the charter school movement in this country, and they all involve strengthening state charter school laws.

- Ⓢ Charter school caps and moratoriums on approving new schools need to be lifted.
- Ⓢ Multiple and independent authorizers are needed to ensure charter school quality and growth.
- Ⓢ Charter schools are public schools and should be funded like all other public schools with identical funding amounts and funding streams.
- Ⓢ Freedom from rules and regulations defines charter schools, and they need to be allowed to make their own decisions regarding management and personnel.

Until state legislatures strengthen their charter school laws, or create one in the ten remaining states, charter schools will continue to face these challenges.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA NOTES

In November 2007, CER distributed survey instruments to 4,200 operating charter schools. The survey posed general questions about educational programs and operations, standardized testing, and demographics. Through February 2008, 834 charter schools returned their surveys, representing a 20 percent return rate. CER compiled and tabulated the data presented in this report.

CER maintains and regularly updates a database of information on charter schools. Figures 1 and 2 represent a snapshot of charter school information taken in April 2008. Figures 3-14 are drawn from the most recent survey data.

CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT DATA

All across the country charter schools are continuing to provide parents with an exceptional choice, and children a chance for improved academic achievement. The following data, although just a mere sampling, suggests that charter schools are working to provide high-quality educational options to children on an important scale. Now we need to remove the barriers to charter school growth and enable them to provide the benefits demonstrated by the survey data to a larger number of our nation's children. A few key findings from around the states are:

- Ⓢ Students attending charter schools in **Colorado** are consistently outperforming their peers who attend conventional public schools in math and reading. In 2006-2007 in grades 3-8, 73.3 percent of charter school students performed at or above proficient in reading, as opposed to 67.7 percent of conventional public school students.
- Ⓢ Charter students in **Washington, D.C.** account for 30 percent of all public school students, and they are performing well academically. Charter school elementary students were more proficient in reading over conventional public school students by five percentage points, 43 percent versus 38 percent. The same group of charter students was more proficient in math over conventional school students by nine percentage points, 38 percent versus 29 percent.
- Ⓢ **Idaho's** charter school students outperformed their conventional school peers in both the reading and math portions of the Idaho state test. Eighty-seven percent of charter school students demonstrated proficiency in reading, which topped the statewide average of 81 percent for traditional schools. Also, 81 percent of charter school students achieved proficiency in math, topping the statewide average for traditional schools of 77 percent.
- Ⓢ In 2006-07 on the **Utah** language arts exam, 83 percent of charter students achieved at the proficient or advanced level, whereas only 79 percent of those in conventional public schools reached this standard.
- Ⓢ Eighty-five percent of **Georgia** charter schools made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2006-07, whereas only 82.1 percent of conventional public schools in Georgia made AYP. Also, charter schools boasted a graduation rate of 89.9 percent in 2007, while conventional public school counterparts only graduated 72.3 percent of students. In every content area on the Georgia state tests, charter schools outperformed their conventional school counterparts.
- Ⓢ In **California**, the median Academic Performance Index (API) score for charter middle schools was 767 as opposed to just 726 in traditional middle schools. In districts like Los Angeles Unified, this difference was significantly greater; the average charter school student scored a 729 while his or her peers in a conventional public school scored a 634.
- Ⓢ **Oregon** charter schools are showing tremendous academic achievement growth since 2003. The average percent of charter school students meeting the standard in math increased from 62 to 74 percent, and the average percent of charter school students meeting the standard in reading increased from 68 to 79 percent. According to this same data, 51 percent of charter schools performed better than the state average in both reading and science on the Oregon State Assessment Tests.

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