Custom Tailored: *Trends In Charter School Educational Programs*

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How do charter schools attempt to meet their students' needs?

The most well-known studies of charter schools compare their students' performance with the performance of students in traditional public schools.[1] Typically, little attention is paid to the educational programs offered in charter schools. This simple charter versus traditional school comparison might create the appearance that what sets these two types of schools apart is mainly how they are governed. In fact, as this brief demonstrates, charter schools use their freedom from the traditional structure to create distinctive schools. The charter schools examined here are purposefully designing many different aspects of their educational programs to meet the distinct needs of their students.

In this brief we examine the range of curricular, instructional, and student support strategies employed in these charter schools to understand *how, if at all, do charter schools provide their students with customized educational experiences?* Our goal was to get a sense of how charter schools, when released from the restraints placed on traditional public schools, thought about their educational programs and how they tailored them to fit their targeted student populations. We set out to see what types of programs charter schools were conceiving given their relative autonomy. We hope this brief can inform additional research into charter schools and innovation.

Using the rich programmatic data found in charter school applications, we examined five key components of a school's educational program: 1) the schools' target population; 2) the curriculum used; 3) how that curriculum is delivered; 4) how teachers and students are organized within schools; and 5) what types of support services are offered to help

students. Together, these components provide a vivid picture of how charter schools approach teaching and learning, especially vis-à-vis their target student populations.

Previous work on charter school educational programs

To date, research on charter school educational programs has largely focused on questions of innovation. These studies often examine different aspects of charter schools in order to determine whether or not charter schools are doing things that have never before been seen in education, bringing something new to a community or student population, responding to family needs or preferences, or adopting or sustaining existing best practices.[2] In general, these studies have found that charter schools may bring new ways of designing or governing their schools, but do not seem to be inventing new educational programs. Instead they seem to be combining existing programs in new ways,[3] bringing approaches typically found in pri-

vate schools to public school students,[4] or responding to parental desires.[5]

How we classify charter school educational programs

Considering the preliminary findings that charter schools are not so much inventing new educational programs as repackaging existing practices in new ways, we wanted to delve more deeply into the components that made up charter schools' programs. To do so, our analysis took place using an iterative process of coding the charter school applications for 38 charter schools in ten cities in California, North Carolina, and Texas. Applications are a rich source of data because they lay out in detail a school's educational plan and objectives, and most applications contain a wealth of information about each of the five main program components discussed in this paper.[6] Table 1 describes these five key elements.

**Table 1.** Components of Charter School Educational Programs

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Target population	Types of students the program is targeting	At-risk students, the same students who would be attending nearby district schools, students with special interests
Curriculum	Material and content taught to students	College prep, basic skills, technology, performing arts
Instructional approach	How curriculum is delivered to students	Individualized, teacher-directed, project-based
Classroom structure	How children and teachers are organized in the school	Multi-grade grouping, extended school days, teacher teams
Student services	Instructional and personal support services offered to students	Mandatory tutoring, adult education, mentoring

Findings

CHARTER SCHOOLS TARGET SPECIFIC POPULATIONS, ESPECIALLY AT-RISK STUDENTS

Of the 38 schools in our sample, 21 target at-risk students. We included schools in the at-risk category if their application described their targeted students as being at risk of academic failure, English Language Learners, or students who have dropped out of school. Eleven schools in this sample plan to serve students similar to those in nearby district schools. Six schools targeting academically gifted students or students interested in a themed program (such as performing arts or an ethnocentric curriculum) have been classified as "other." Figure 1 shows the proportion of schools in each category.

Figure 1. Targeted Student Population
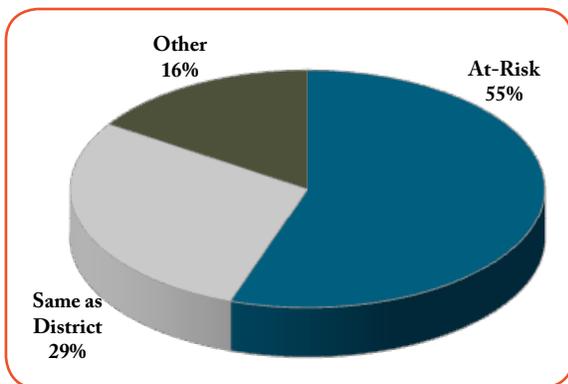
CHARTER SCHOOLS TAILOR THEIR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR TARGET POPULATIONS

We found that the educational programs proposed for these charter schools are designed to their target population's wants and needs. All of the schools in our sample deviate from the stereotype of a traditional school (for example, classrooms with one teacher and 25 kids, teacher-directed instruction, traditional curricular materials, etc.). There are three main ways that these charter schools tailor the elements of their educational programs:

➲ **A DEPARTURE FROM TEACHER-DIRECTED INSTRUCTION:** Instructional approaches seen in most of the charter schools in this study differ from the more traditional, teacher-directed classroom. Thirty of the charter schools in our sample employ more student-centered instructional methods, such as project-based, constructivist, and experiential learning. One school in our sample, Holman College Charter School,[7] creates Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) for all of its students to facilitate and emphasize the individualized nature of their instruction.

➲ **CLASSROOM CONFIGURATIONS:** Thirty-one schools in our sample utilize one or more alternative structures for their classrooms or the school itself. Common changes to the classroom structures include grouping multiple ages or grades together, looping classes of students with teachers over multiple school years, scheduling blocks of time together, or having teams of teachers work together.

➲ **SCHOOL STRUCTURE:** Fourteen schools in this sample employ unique grade-span configurations. Alternatives to the traditional elementary, middle, or high school grade configurations include pre-kindergarten, K–8, 6–12, and K–12. Other common changes to the school's structure include small school size, off-site programs, extended school day or year, or flexible scheduling for students.

Most programs are customized in more than one of these ways, illustrating how schools package the different components of their educational program to meet the needs of their student population. Some schools customize both their instructional approach and classroom structure. Many schools in our sample customize each program component. For example, Valley Charter

High School targets at-risk students, many of whom have dropped out of previous programs. The school offers individualized, project-based instruction, curricula emphasizing state standards as well as workforce readiness and personal development, an extended school day, and additional support including counseling.

CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS USE COLLEGE-PREP AND SCHOOL-TO-WORK PACKAGES TO SERVE AT-RISK STUDENTS

Among charter schools serving high school grades, 13 of 21 target at-risk students. Furthermore, we found that six of these schools offer their students a *college-prep* model typically reserved for high-achieving students. These schools prepare their students to go on to attend a two- or four-year college or university. To do so, they tend to feature educational programs that include individualized instruction, college-prep and study skills curriculum, extended school days or school year, and tutoring and counseling. These schools illustrate how charter schools can tailor their programs using common components to meet the needs of their student populations.

Four of the remaining charter high schools target at-risk students with a *school-to-work* educational program. These high schools offer workforce preparation programs and often also emphasize basic skills and personal development. Some common elements of their programs include individualized or computer-based instruction, workforce training curriculum, self-paced or off-site instruction, career counseling, and non-academic services. Each of these schools targets students who have dropped out of school in the past.

The remaining three high schools that target at-risk students do not explicitly offer college-prep or school-to-work programs. Instead they report offering programs based on state standards that are likely quite similar to standard high school curricula.

Figure 2 shows the curricular offerings of charter high schools for at-risk students.

Figure 2. Programs in At-Risk High Schools
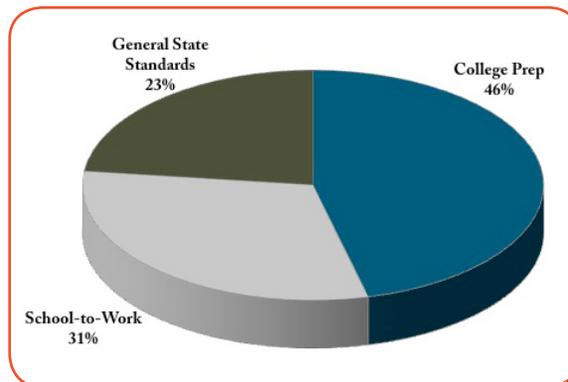
CHARTER SCHOOLS PACKAGE THEIR SERVICES IN A VARIETY OF WAYS TO SERVE STRUGGLING STUDENTS

Instructional support services are common in charter schools regardless of whether they target at-risk students. Typical instructional services include mandatory after-school tutoring, optional tutoring, college or other academic counseling, and post-graduate support. Personal support services are also common, primarily among middle and high schools targeting at-risk students. These services include day care, counseling services, mentoring, health services, and job placement assistance.

Twenty-five schools in this study offer their students some form of instructional support, personal support, or a combination of both as part of their educational programs. Several schools group a number of these services together, combining both instructional and personal support services. For example, Excelsior High School Academy targets at-risk students, including those who have dropped out of previous schools. Excelsior Academy offers extra instructional support in the form of career and college guidance counseling, as well as personal support that includes day care, health services, and personal counseling. A student could theoretically meet with a counselor to resolve a transportation problem, and later attend an extra-curricular pre-employment skills

class. Figure 3 shows what proportion of the twenty-five schools offer plans for instructional supports, personal supports, or both.

Figure 3. Support Services in At-Risk High Schools
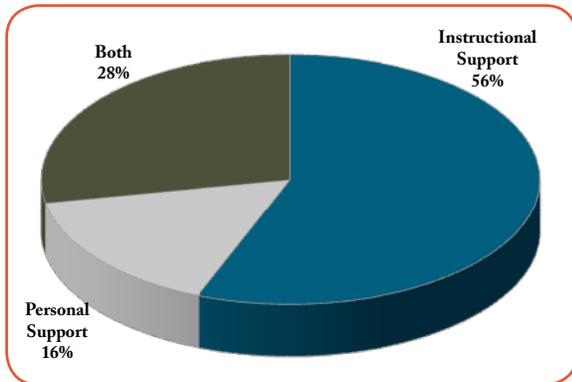
DESPITE THIS VARIETY, STATE STANDARDS DOMINATE CHARTER SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Despite efforts to tailor educational program components to student needs, we do see some convergence in one area: almost all schools in this sample (33 of 38) emphasize state standards as part of their school's curriculum. This is likely the case because most state laws require charter schools to take state exams and comply with state standards. While charter schools do share this common element, many still find a way to customize their curriculum. Twenty-five of these schools incorporate state standards into another curricular program, most commonly study skills or character development (12), college-prep (11), or a brand-name curriculum (6) such as Harcourt Brace. For example, the Pythagoras Academy incorporates the North Carolina state standards into a foreign language and culture-based curriculum.

Implications

This analysis reveals how charter schools create distinct educational programs for their students. The breadth of curriculum, instructional approaches, structures, and services seen in these 38 charter schools indicates that they pick and choose from a wide menu of possibilities and select the features that they think best match their targeted students' needs.

However, it does not appear that these charter schools are developing completely new approaches to educating students. Instead, our findings echo earlier findings that charter schools' innovation is in their packaging rather than inventing novel programs. We find that this packaging extends outside traditional areas of curriculum and instruction and into structural elements, such as utilizing team teaching or flexible scheduling, and supplemental supports, such as day care, job placement, and post-graduate support.

Follow-on research in this area could examine the helps and hindrances charter schools encounter when trying to implement their educational program designs. Does autonomy impact the ability of charter schools to implement their programs? Are there certain barriers, such as funding or expertise, that hinder the full realization of their designs? Also in need of further research is how educational programs in charter schools differ from those at nearby traditional public schools. More data in this area would help us know whether charter schools are in fact introducing new programs or offering alternatives otherwise unavailable in nearby districts. Further investigation of these questions will help us understand what charter schools are doing to meet their students' needs, and the possibility of similar approaches outside of the charter sector.

NOTES

1 For example see, Caroline Hoxby, A Straightforward Comparison of Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2004); Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd, "The Impacts of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: Evidence from North Carolina," Education Finance and Policy 1, no. 1 (2006): 50-90; Henry Braun, Frank Jenkins, and Wendy Grigg, A Closer Look at Charter Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2006); Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Josh Angrist, Sarah Cohodes, Susan Dynarski, Jon Fullerton, Thomas Kane, and Parag Pathakj, Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools (Boston, MA: Boston Foundation, 2009).

2 This literature review draws heavily from Robin J. Lake. 2008. "In the Eye of the Beholder: Charter Schools and Innovation". Journal of School Choice, Vol. 2 No. 2: 115-127. Haworth Press Inc.

3 Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Chartering and Innovating," in Charter Schools Against the Odds, ed. Paul T. Hill (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 2006).

4 Frederick M. Hess, Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

5 Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, Jack Buckley, and Sara Clark, "Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools?" Civic Report (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2000).

6 Relying on applications to assess what charter schools are offering presents two significant limitations. First, applications only tell us what a school set out to do, not what it is actually doing. We expect that most charter schools present an accurate picture of their program when applying for approval from their authorizer, but without data on the program since a school's opening, we cannot be certain. To assess whether or not the information contained in the applications mirrored the schools' operations once up and running, we compared the categorizations we made based on applications to field descriptions of 16 schools from a related study. We found similar descriptions from these two, separate data sources. This methodological step added to our confidence that the educational programs described in the applications match what the schools do once they are up and running. Second, topics discussed and the degree of detail may depend on what authorizers have asked for. Therefore, important aspects of a school might not be covered in some applications. For example, judging from the applications there would appear to be little in the way of programs for English Language Learners in Texas. Meanwhile, California charters appear to devote more thought to this. We suspect that this reflects what types of questions were asked of schools in Texas versus California, rather than an actual lack of programs for English Language Learners in Texas.

7 All school names are pseudonyms. Several of the schools in this study are part of a broader study in which participants were guaranteed confidentiality. To protect their anonymity, we have changed the names of all schools mentioned in this paper.

About the Study

Inside Charter Schools is one of the first systematic studies to focus on the strategies that charter schools are pursuing to establish coherent educational programs supported by high-quality teachers and leaders. It is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) consortium of funders.

*The **Inside Charter Schools** study seeks to answer three major research questions:*

- *What are the academic programs offered in charter schools?*
- *Who is teaching and leading charter school programs?*
- *How do charter schools build a coherent staff, manage growth, and plan for staff and leadership changes?*

NCSRP brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. For information and research on charter schools, please visit the NCSRP website at www.ncsrp.org.

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