



CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS: ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO GRADUATION



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*A report from the National Charter School Research Project's **Inside Charter Schools Initiative***

NCSRP White Paper Series, No. 3
November 2009

Center on Reinventing Public Education

University of Washington Bothell

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The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSRP:

- ✓ Identifies high-priority research questions.
- ✓ Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.
- ✓ Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.

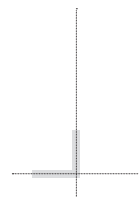
The Project is an initiative of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

We would like to thank our current and past funders for their generous support:

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INTRODUCTION

This report explores alternative pathways to high school graduation that charter schools make possible. By using their autonomy, charter high schools can provide attractive alternatives to conventional high school programs by:

- ▶ providing a more highly focused mission and educational program,
- ▶ tailoring services and instruction to student needs,
- ▶ focusing intensively on college preparation,
- ▶ seeking out teachers with the ability to motivate and connect,
- ▶ aggressively restructuring the conditions of employment,
- ▶ using small school size and class size to build community, and
- ▶ experimenting with unusual grade and administrative configurations.

At the same time, the charter sector faces serious challenges in delivering quality high schooling. Despite many examples of high-achieving charter schools across the nation, quality is far too uneven. Starting a new charter high school is a daunting challenge and there are barriers when trying to attract and retain effective high school leaders and teachers. Even among the highest performers, few charter schools have deviated much from the traditional American notion of high schooling.

This paper concludes with recommendations for new investments in truly innovative high school models that would maximize the effectiveness of current charter high schools, find ways for charter schools to bridge college and career readiness gaps, and examine the viability of replacing low-performing high schools with charter high schools.

If states and the federal government are serious about goals to graduate and send to college a much higher portion of American students, it will be critical to have a greater variety of effective public schooling alternatives for high school-aged students. Many of today's urban high school students are severely behind academically and face challenging social and emotional circumstances. These alternatives need to be able to motivate youth who do not see graduation as a meaningful goal and who do not see today's public high schools as relevant to their experiences.

Unfortunately, school districts troubled by persistent dropout rates and mediocre or poor academic outcomes at the high school level have few options for leveraging change. Some have tried district-wide curriculum alignment, others have focused on improving professional development for teachers, and still others have moved in the direction of decentralization. In an attempt to expand this narrow set of options, districts, foundations, and policymakers are increasingly interested in designing alternative pathways to graduation that involve choices among a variety of effective programs and delivery of services to students.

The charter sector cannot meet all public high school needs, but the approaches charter schools have taken to high school education offer valuable lessons for all high schools to consider.

Believing that it was impossible to reach easy conclusions about charter school effectiveness until more was known about variations in charter schools—and how these shape the work of adults and children in the classroom—CRPE’s National Charter School Research Project embarked on an ambitious research agenda called Inside Charter Schools to study the people and work of charter schools.

INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS

The first focuses on the skills, background, roles, and turnover of the people who lead and teach in charter schools. The second focuses on the academic programs and school environment of charter schools, with a special emphasis on how low-income students are taught. These studies are structured to make comparisons not only between charter schools and traditional public schools, but also within and across the charter sector. Key research questions for the studies include:

- ▶ Who is teaching and leading charter schools today, and how did they get there?
- ▶ What causes some charter schools to decline due to leadership change, while others remain stable or improve?
- ▶ Do charter schools use teacher time and skills differently?
- ▶ Do charter schools offer options that were not previously available to the students they serve?
- ▶ How do state and authorizer policies influence charter school educational structures and strategies?

To explore these questions, the Inside Charter Schools initiative conducted three kinds of ongoing analyses:

- ▶ A survey of 766 charter school directors and 214 public school district human resource staff in six states: Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas.
- ▶ Site visits and interviews at 24 schools in six cities in California, Hawaii, and Texas.
- ▶ An analysis of federal data in the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey.
- ▶ An exploration of tenure and mobility in charter school faculty based on reviews of state personnel files in North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS AS ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO GRADUATION

It has become increasingly apparent to many educators and policymakers that the public education system in the United States must re-imagine high school education in a way that supports more than one avenue to a diploma. In a 2003 working paper, Michael Wald and Tia Martinez look at past trends and offer the hopeful prediction that in ten years, over 90 percent of today's 14-year-olds will be successfully connected to the labor force and will have the support they need to maintain the connection. However, their prognosis for the remaining 200,000 to 300,000 youth is enormously troubling. They predict that this group will experience extremely high rates of unemployment and incarceration for males, young single motherhood for females, and poverty across the board. And the characteristic connecting the vast majority of these disconnected young adults? The lack of a high school diploma.¹


Amid brewing concern over this crisis of secondary school disengagement, community groups, foundations, policymakers, and business and education leaders in cities from Portland to Chicago to New York have joined forces to discuss and now implement what has been called the “Multiple Pathways to Graduation” approach. The essence of the reform is that, in terms of a route to high school graduation, one size does not fit all of today's students. As originally conceived, the idea was to recognize and provide a meaningful and relevant educational experience for the broad diversity of high school students, from the young mother to the gifted but bored teenager to the chronically delinquent special education ninth-grader to the well supported, motivated, and stable senior.

This paper explores one source of new pathways, the charter high school. While state charter school policies already provide a valuable set of freedoms and flexibility that have generated new routes to graduation, this policy approach has the potential to make a dramatic difference in the landscape of American high school students. Charter high schools can be a valuable strategy in the effort to build a public high school system that creates a place for every student in a diverse nation, and moves all of them toward high standards and graduation.

At their best, charter high schools offer what one young woman in Texas found in hers—the right fit. A senior who had dropped out of a conventional school, she attends a charter school focused on students who have dropped out or been kicked out of traditional public schools. In a journalism class she takes there, she is editor of the school newspaper. This is how she describes the school in her most recent “Editor's Corner”:

[This school] has given its students a place to go other than the hallway ... Some children simply do not thrive in a [traditional] public school atmosphere. And for many of those kids, [this school] is a sanctuary—where they can be free to excel where opportunity wasn't presenting itself before ... I learned more at [this school] than I did anywhere else. This is also why [this school] likes to classify itself mostly as a second chance school, sending a message that speaks directly to kids with all kinds of cultural differences ... I for one am proud to be nearly graduating from this awesome school. Who's with me?

1. Michael Wald and Tia Martinez, *Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds*, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Working Paper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003).



The example of this successful urban Texas charter high school highlights what may be the beginning of a shift in public school secondary education. When the modern public high school was first conceived over a hundred years ago, it was designed to prepare students to meet the workforce needs of an agricultural and newly industrializing society. It was never expected that every student who entered would leave with a diploma. Indeed, it was not until shortly after World War II that a majority of students began to complete high school. Within this system, a diverse student population was brought into a common institution and then separated into different training tracks, presumably to prepare them for various sectors of the labor market. In this way, public education was designed to meet the assorted demands of an industrialized economy that was capable of providing gainful employment both for those who earned a diploma and those who did not.²

Clearly, the workforce demands of a 21st century economy are dramatically different than those of a hundred years ago. The failure of a high school to prepare its graduates for college or a career—or the failure of a student to complete high school at all—carries more severe consequences today. For those without high school diplomas, the availability of living wage work continues to plummet.³

As President Barack Obama stated in his first major address to Congress, “In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, yet the United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. Meanwhile, half of the students who begin college never finish, many doubtless hampered by poor secondary school preparation.”⁴

The challenge of today’s high school reform agenda is to take the system we have inherited and turn it into a system that serves the enormous diversity of needs and abilities of today’s high school student, and advances them all toward ambitious opportunities in the 21st century. However, even districts exploring creative options for how to adapt to the changing demographics are faced with severe financial and regulatory constraints. Charter schools appear to be one of a handful of options for districts enabling them to provide parents and students with an alternative to the traditional public high school.

In terms of pure numbers, charter schools comprise a significant piece of the urban high school picture. Nationwide, approximately 1600 charter schools provide high school level instruction (grades 9–12) to 486,000 students.⁵ In some large urban districts, charter schools serve a substantial portion of district high school students. For instance, in Columbus, Ohio, 30 percent of public high school students attend a charter school; in Washington, D.C., over 20 percent; in Detroit and Philadelphia, about 15 percent; and in New Orleans, it is more than 40 percent. By leveraging student choice, curriculum autonomy, and regulatory freedom to create specialized and strategic schools, charter schools are demonstrating that they can provide alternative pathways to graduation.

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2. Mary Ann Lachat, *Data-Driven High School Reform: The Breaking Ranks Model* (Providence, RI: The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2001).
 3. Gary Orfield et al., *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004).
 4. From President Barack Obama’s Address to Joint Session of Congress on Tuesday, February 24th, 2009; http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/.
 5. United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, 2006–07.

This paper offers some initial impressions of how chartering has helped to provide educational experiences that are distinct from those offered by traditional public schools. It analyzes some of the advantages of the charter school model, describes the challenges that prevent some charter high schools from reaching their promise, and makes recommendations on how to strengthen a portfolio of chartered high schools.

In doing so, the paper draws on several data sources from the Inside Charter Schools initiative (NCSRP's ongoing examination of charter schools). These sources include: (1) case studies from 16 charter high schools in three states;⁶ (2) surveys of charter school administrators and directors, including a survey of district human resources staff about teacher hiring and another survey of charter directors on school leadership;⁷ and (3) a sample of 20 applications to state authorizers for approval to create charter high schools. The paper also draws on data from the 2003–04 and 2005–06 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)—a nationally representative sample of schools, both charter and traditional, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.⁸

THE POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS

It is virtually impossible to describe the “typical” charter high school. While many charter high schools are almost indistinguishable from a traditional public high school, others look very different. Some may focus on intense efforts to get dropouts back on track to graduation, while others offer advanced vocational programs, or high level college-prep coursework. Charter high schools, perhaps more than charter elementary or middle schools, resist easy categorization because of the diversity and range of their offerings and approaches. While this diversity is arguably what one would expect from a policy intended to encourage experimentation and innovation, it creates challenges in the study and comparison of charter high schools.

ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENT CHOICE, CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS OFTEN HAVE MORE FOCUSED AND STRATEGIC MISSIONS


Many charter schools, by design or consequence of enrollment, serve a distinct subgroup of public high school students. Some serve a niche-population or a type of student, such as Spanish-speaking students or dropouts. Others focus on a specific type of instruction such as distance learning, foreign language immersion, self-paced instruction, or ungraded classrooms.

The 2003–04 SASS shows that 17 percent of charter high schools report having a special academic focus, compared to 5 percent of traditional public schools. Although charter schools are public schools and are open to all students, their tailored approach eschews the traditional notion that American public high schools should try to be “comprehensive” schools, trying to meet the needs of all students. As one charter high school dean said when describing why some students left his school, “We are not all things to all people.”

6. Research field visits were conducted in the following states: CA, HI, and TX.

7. Both original surveys were conducted in the following states: AZ, CA, HI, NC, RI, and TX.

8. The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) data used in this report are restricted to urban high schools. Because many charter schools do not use traditional grade configurations, schools offering any of grades 9–12 have been included as high schools. Schools in urban contexts have different opportunities and resources and also serve different types of student populations than schools in rural areas. To account for these differences, we present results from a restricted sample limited to only schools in urban centers and their surrounding fringe areas.



While the strategic focus of many charter schools makes it difficult to make broad characterizations when assessing the “typical” features of charter schools, it provides a critical advantage to both schools and students: a charter school’s particular emphasis gives the school a coherent mission and is the basis on which students and parents make a decision to attend, or not. As Anthony Bryk and colleagues argue, “shopping mall” schools that lack instructional focus make the school’s program diffuse and less effective.⁹

The vast majority of charter high school directors and teachers visited in the course of this research expressed deep and personal investment in the school’s mission. This mission was often described in terms of how the school’s programs should focus on the students, their specific academic needs, cultural background, and special interests. It is significant that, of the 16 charter high schools in the field study, half set out to serve a specific group of students such as African American, Spanish-speaking Hispanic, Native populations, and high school dropouts, while 3 more had adjusted their programs to better serve a distinct group of students in their surrounding district.

Other schools (4 out of the total 16) focus on specific types of instruction rather than on specific student populations. These charter schools employed a specialized instructional method, such as project-based learning, because the founders believed in the method and saw the charter option as an opportunity to fully explore its potential in ways not possible within the traditional public high school setting. One school principal described what he saw as the distinguishing characteristics of his schools instruction as follows:

We are a project-based-learning school so we don’t let tasks and textbooks drive our curriculum. We ask kids authentic, open-ended questions or present problems that they have to solve. And they create products that have an authentic purpose. ... They’re not just learning it ‘cause it’s in the standard’ or ‘cause it’s November and we’re in Chapter 3 in the textbook.’

This example and others like it show how a focused curriculum can set a high school apart from schools that are driven by standardized curriculum. Sometimes overlooked, schools that offer a specific instructional approach is another important example of the diversification of options that results from chartering and school choice.

MORE LIKELY TO TAILOR INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AND CURRICULUM TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEEDS

In addition to focusing their curriculum to serve a particular type of student or to provide instruction using a specialized approach, many of the charter high schools visited also took advantage of the freedom to deviate from district curricula to craft programs that were specifically tailored to meet the school’s mission. These specialized high school academic programs are as diverse as the missions they take on, reflecting a wide range of approaches and curriculum.

Cultural Focus to Make Learning Relevant. One of the most compelling examples of tailored approaches to curriculum can be seen in high-performing culturally based charter high schools.

9. Fred M. Newmann et al., “Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement Policy,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23, no. 4 (2001): 297.

Some charter schools with culturally or ethnically distinct student populations have designed programs to integrate that group's unique history, traditions, and community into the students' daily academic work. For example, a few charter schools in Hawaii are working to incorporate traditional Hawaiian language and agricultural industry (including a small fish farm, taro field, and garden) into the school's curriculum. These efforts are envisioned as a way to connect the students' academic growth to the agricultural, economic, and cultural legacy of the local Hawaiian community. Other schools serving predominantly inner-city African American students integrate African American history, culture, and arts into the curriculum, covering everything from life skills to literature specific to that heritage. Tailoring the cultural focus of the academic program to the student population is seen as a way to motivate students to engage meaningfully with the educational program while connecting academics to local communities and industries.

In some cases, culturally focused charter high schools pay too little attention to academic rigor, but in the schools we've visited where students' sense of belonging and cultural pride is combined with high academic expectations, the academic payoff is significant.

Consistent with the tendency to be more focused, the charter high schools in our case studies do not (and likely could not) offer a wide assortment of specialized programs (such as International Baccalaureate, Advancement Placement, school-developed honors programs, or partnerships with community colleges that allow students to take college-level courses in high school) to their students. Instead, they tend to emphasize college programs that put students on the path toward more general postsecondary options.

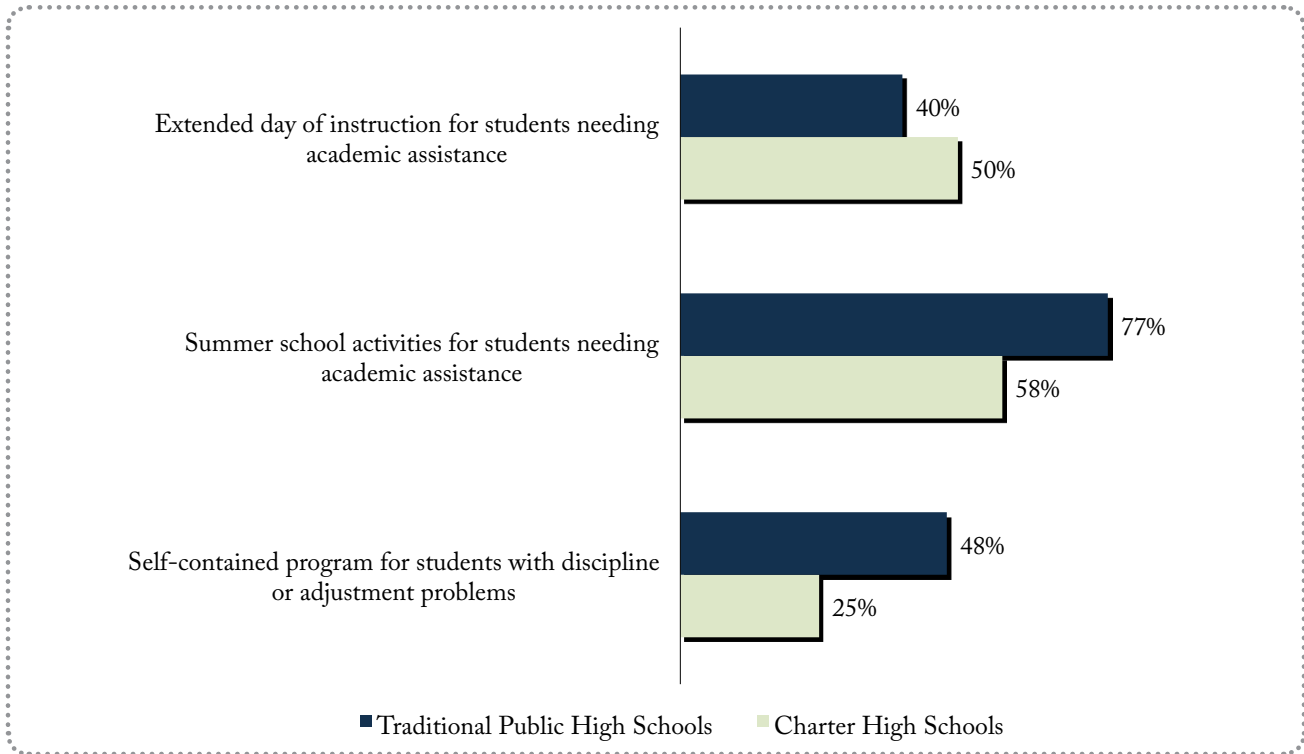
Support for Struggling Students. When serving student populations with distinct needs, many charter high schools approach this challenge by tailoring distinctive programs around those needs. For example, schools that work with students who have dropped out of school might provide specialized programs and extra instructional support, such as flexible scheduling, evening classes, or a teacher to provide home instruction for new mothers. Several of the schools we visited have put such programs in place, seeking to mitigate some of the causes behind students dropping out in the first place. In the case of students with behavioral or cognitive challenges, we saw examples of targeted help in the form of dedicated staff who provided job placement assistance for special education graduates.

When challenged by the restrictions of a tight budget, charter schools were capable of finding creative ways to provide enhanced services to their students. For example, one group of charter schools, faced with rising costs and a drive to provide better support for a growing number of special education students, joined together to create a network that shared the cost of additional services. Another school used local university connections to provide expertise and individualized attention to needy students.

While a large (non-charter) high school might offer similar types of support and services for these populations of students, such programs are typically piecemeal and add-ons to an institutional curriculum. They do not provide the more comprehensive, focused approach to common behavioral and academic challenges that a charter school can offer.

There were indications of these differences in the SASS data as well. For students in need of academic assistance either due to cognitive or behavioral challenges or a history of dropping out of school, charter schools demonstrate quite different patterns of services from those offered by traditional high schools, as shown in figure 1.¹⁰

Figure 1. Programs for Students Needing Extra Assistance



As figure 1 indicates, both types of high schools offer similar programs—self-contained programs for students with discipline or adjustment problems, summer school activities, and extended instructional days. But traditional public high schools are nearly twice as likely to provide self-contained programs as are charter schools; charter schools, on the other hand, are more likely to use an extended-day approach and less likely to provide summer school activities.¹¹

MORE LIKELY TO FOCUS ON COLLEGE PREPARATION

Although many charter schools work with populations of students that have been under-represented in higher education, including at-risk, low-income, or minority students, many do not back away from expectations that their students will go to college. In fact, the research team found that urban charter high schools with concen-

10. SASS 2005–06.

11. It is possible that some of these programming differences reflect different populations of students requiring special services. Other research conducted by CRPE suggests that charter schools overall enroll a slightly smaller percentage of students with disabilities than traditional public schools (about 10 percent versus 12 percent) and that charter students may, based on evidence in California, enroll students with less severe disabilities. (See Lauren Morando Rhim, *Special Education Challenges and Opportunities in the Charter School Sector*, NCSRP working paper 2008-12 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

trated minority populations are considerably more likely to offer these college-prep programs than are similarly enrolled traditional public schools. Looking at small urban high schools (those enrolling fewer than 700 students), Gross and Pochop found that:

Two-thirds (66 percent) of charters versus 48 percent of traditional public schools reported offering at least one college-focused program. By contrast, 73 percent of charter schools offered a school-to-work curriculum while 86 percent of traditional public schools did so. Even more striking is the fact that 41 percent of traditional public schools offered only school-to-work learning while only 19 percent of charter schools reported offering school-to-work without a college-focused option, suggesting that charter schools are much more likely to press minority students to be college-focused.¹²

A recent RAND report indicates that this college focus may be paying off, at least in terms of enrollment in higher education. In the city of Chicago and the state of Florida, the two locations studied, RAND researchers found that students attending charter high schools were more likely to enroll in college than their peers in traditional public schools by a statistically significant margin of 8 to 10 percentage points.¹³

Schools visited during NCSRP's fieldwork bring these numbers to life. Case study schools frequently provide a college-preparatory curriculum to students who otherwise may not have access to demanding secondary school courses. One school, for example, is serving recent immigrant, non-English-speaking students; another is working with low-income African American students. A third school enrolls a student body that is more than 90 percent indigenous Hawaiian—a population in which, traditionally, only 15 percent of adults have earned a bachelor's degree.¹⁴ In each of these examples, the schools doggedly nurtured the expectation within the community—and within the students themselves—that most graduates would become the first in their families to attend and complete college. One charter high school we visited energetically pushes college readiness for recent Latino immigrants and hires teachers less on credentials and experience and more for how strongly they connect with this mission. When asked what she hopes for in terms of the school's graduates, one teacher told us:

I would like for them to have the vision that after leaving (this school) that there is no other choice except continue, go to school. And I do that in my classroom by encouraging them. I want them to be ready to go to college in reading and writing, because college is about reading and writing, no matter what class you take.

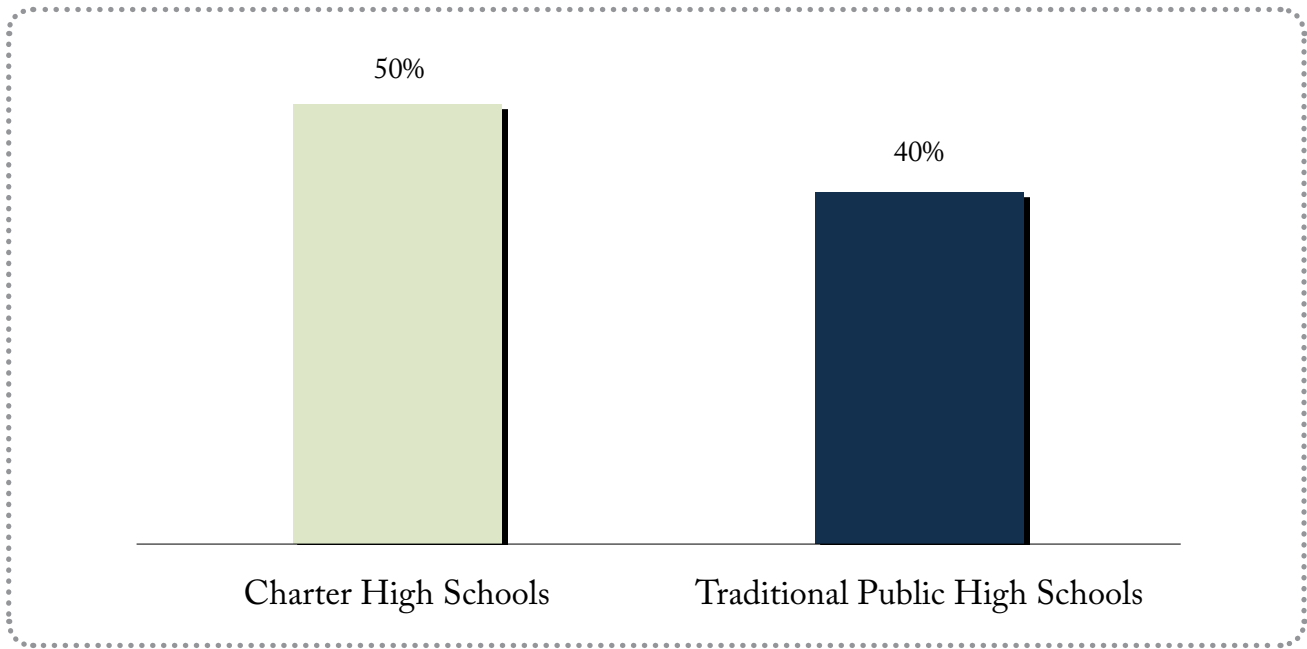
For those charter schools in the field study that foster the expectation that students leave high school and enter college, there was often an articulation of a two-tiered approach. Both teachers and administrators recognized

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12. Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop, "How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2008*, Robin J. Lake, ed. (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).
 13. Ron Zimmer et al., *Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition* (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, 2009).
 14. Paul Ong and Melany Dela Cruz-Viesca, *Pacific Islanders Lagging Behind in Higher Educational Attainment: Analytical Brief of New Census Data* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2006).

the importance of not only rigorous academic preparation but also the need to address head-on the community and cultural mores that may work against a student’s inclination to attend college.

Academic Preparation. Because it is so common for students to enter with weak academic preparation, many charter high schools provide extra academic support. Some schools add Saturday classes and extend their school day to increase preparatory curriculum coverage. This is more common in charter high schools than in their traditional counterparts.

Figure 2. Percentage of Schools Offering Extended-Day Program



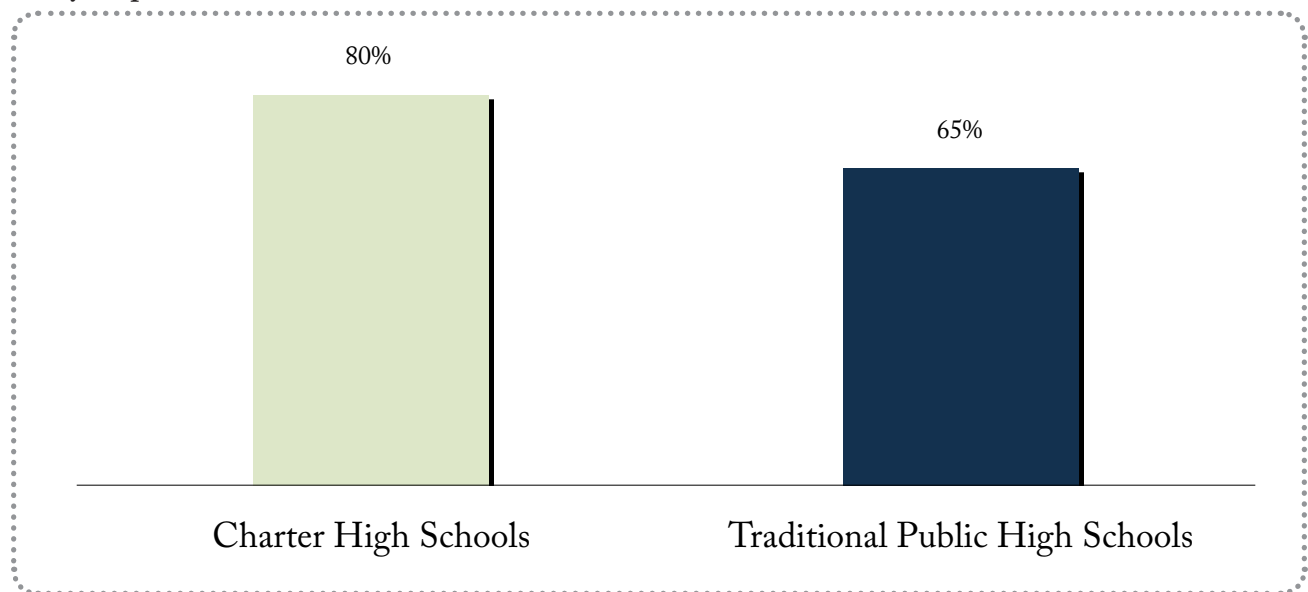
About 50 percent of all charter high schools offer an extended-day program providing instruction for students in need of academic assistance, as compared with 40 percent of traditional public high schools. Some schools stress professional development that trains teachers to identify students in need as well as a school-wide willingness to adapt practices and programs quickly in response to changing student needs.

Building College Expectations. While college-prep charter schools clearly believed in and emphasized academic rigor, several of the schools we visited described the concrete steps they take to address entrenched cultural barriers and low expectations that can plague high-poverty, immigrant, or minority communities. Common among these schools is an absolute and unwavering belief in the student’s ability to reach this goal—a conviction that permeates staff meetings, curriculum development, hiring policies, and professional development. However, the range of approaches these schools take is as diverse as the schools themselves. One school offers “College Readiness” classes that cover such topics as how to complete a college application, how to apply for financial aid, and appropriate language and behavior when interacting with college professors. Other schools made frequent field trips to local college campuses, hung college banners in hallways, and encouraged students to wear college jerseys to class. One even dedicated a full-time staff position to guiding students through the selection of and application to colleges, and borrowed classroom space at a local university, just so students could envision themselves in a college setting and be less inhibited to apply.

TENDENCY TO SEEK OUT TEACHERS WITH THE ABILITY TO CONNECT


The charter high school directors contacted in this study were keenly aware of the importance of finding the “right” teacher for their schools. While some schools struggled to attract teachers, nearly every director had a clear idea of what types of teachers would be a good fit with their school’s mission. Without exception, the directors interviewed took advantage of the flexibility they had in certification and job descriptions to look beyond the traditional pool of certified education school graduates. These directors hired, and kept, teachers who identified with and understood their targeted population, whether or not the teacher had previous teaching experience or credentials.

Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Ranked Explicit Experience with Similar Students as “Very Important”



For example, the director of a high school serving at-risk African American students explained that he purposefully recruited African American male teachers (sometimes wooing them away from other careers) because he recognized the importance of strong male role models for young men in this community. Our survey of charter school directors indicates that this director’s concern is widespread. Among respondents, 80 percent of charter high school directors feel hiring a teacher with explicit experience with students like those served in the school is “very important.” Just 65 percent of their traditional public school counterparts (in the same districts in which these charter respondents were located) gave the same rating.

The survey found that, in addition to valuing a teacher’s ability to relate to the student population, charter high school directors also value non-teaching experience. They seem to look for a broad range of interests or some type of outside avocation when selecting prospective teachers. One charter high school director put it this way: “I want teachers that are passionate; not just in their academics and in their education, but passionate about life, so they have varied interests and hobbies that they can weave into the curriculum.” To illustrate this, she used the example of a math teacher in her school who was hired after he demonstrated how he could teach an entire lesson using the mathematics involved in rock climbing, an avid hobby of his and something the director knew would interest her school’s students.



While aligning teacher hiring with mission and student population was important across charter schools of all levels, it may be most crucial in a high school setting. As students age and begin forming an identity, they begin to separate themselves from the adults around them, provoking an increased need for the high school teacher to connect with his or her students. One study of adolescents found that within the school, the connection to the teacher was the strongest predictor of increased achievement in math scores for adolescents from low socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁵ Many of the charter high schools visited during field work were well aware of the student achievement and retention benefits of hiring teachers who can make that connection. However, finding those teachers comes with its own challenges, as charter directors made clear during interviews. Sometimes there were simply not enough teachers with the desired qualifications within the pool of candidates.

Fortunately for these mission-oriented schools, the field research shows that the focused mission of the charter school often attracts certain types of teachers. Several of the teachers interviewed ranked the targeted population or focused instructional approach high on their list of reasons why they applied for a position at that charter school. During the first of three field visits, NCSRPs researchers asked each teacher why they chose to teach at this school; the overwhelming majority of the time, they reported that the school's mission played a key role in their decision. One teacher told us:

My desire was to give something back to the African American community . . . because after being in the public and the private schools, I could see the needs of the African American students weren't really being met, that they were being clumped together and stereotyped and I could identify with students . . . Because the people that are educating them really don't understand the culture, the children are either stereotyped or accused or blamed and I didn't think that was fair. So that was why I took this job.

This teacher was one of many who had actively sought out positions in the charter school (sometimes leaving traditional high schools) because of the potential for deep connections with students and colleagues around a mission in which they were personally invested. They saw the opportunity to integrate their avocations with their vocation as a unique advantage of working in a charter school setting. So while the pool of candidates may be smaller when trying to match a teacher with a particular mission, it is possible that candidates who feel strongly about a school's mission will be drawn to apply to that particular school just as the students are. As another teacher put it:

My goal when I got out of college was to teach in an underprivileged environment. I want to teach inner-city kids and [this school] definitely allows me to do that. And so I stayed because I love working here. The staff that I work with, I feel, really care about our mission and what it is we want to do for our students.

AGGRESSIVELY RESTRUCTURED CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

The pressure to provide students with nonacademic or extracurricular activities is much stronger for a high school than for an elementary school. This is particularly challenging for the charter high school, which tends to be smaller and operating on a tighter budget. Again turning to a nontraditional resource, most schools that

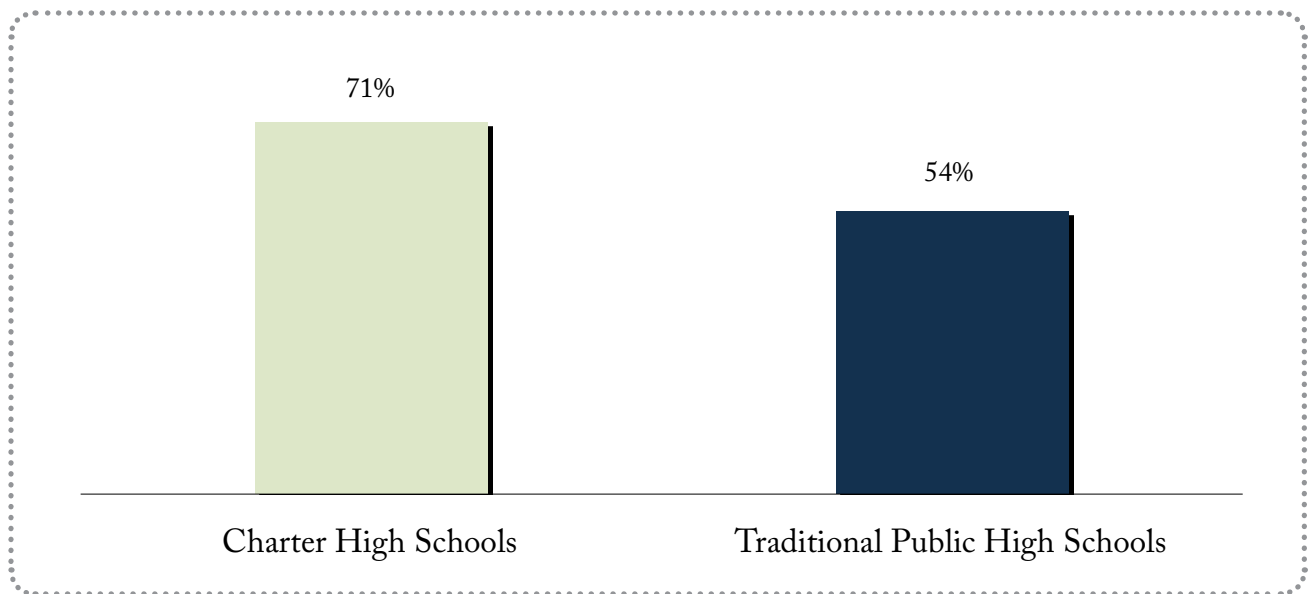
15. Anne Gregory and Rhona S. Weinstein, "Connection and Regulation at Home and in School: Predicting Growth in Achievement for Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 19, no. 4 (2004): 405.

NCSRP researchers visited took advantage of the diverse experiences of teachers by asking them to incorporate their backgrounds into instructional projects, or to lead extracurricular activities, which often took the place of more traditional arts and athletics programs. By capitalizing on teachers' outside interests, schools were able to provide students offerings such as surfing, hip hop, hula, drama, chess, and rock climbing, with little or no impact on their budget. The ability to ask and even expect that teachers will take on these added responsibilities, sometimes without providing them with additional compensation, would be difficult or even impossible for the traditional public school subject to collective bargaining agreements of teachers unions.

It is also thanks to this freedom that charter schools, more than traditional schools, have been experimenting with compensation and contractual arrangements that value performance over tenure.¹⁶ Most teachers in the study sample hold annually renewable individual contracts with their schools. In nearly every one of these schools, directors reported that they use the contract renewal cycle to evaluate and dismiss those teachers who have not performed well. One director described his use of the contract renewal as follows:

When a (teacher) comes in they all sign a one-year contract . . . When I get somebody in, the first year is more of a test because with the size of the school I can take care of any deficiencies that are present with the other veteran (teachers) that we have around them. . . . We will see the process of the new teacher and how willing they are to attend trainings and to apply what we are talking about, and their willingness to capture the spirit of what we are doing. If they don't capture the spirit of what we're doing, they they're just not offered a job next year.

Figure 4. Percentage of Respondents Who Were Able to Successfully Remove Poor-Fitting Teachers



16. Michael Podgursky, *Teams Versus Bureaucracies: Personnel Policy, Wage-Setting, and Teacher Quality in Traditional Public, Charter, and Private Schools* (Nashville, TN: National Center on School Choice, 2006). Prepared for the National Conference on Charter School Research at Vanderbilt University on September 28, 2006.

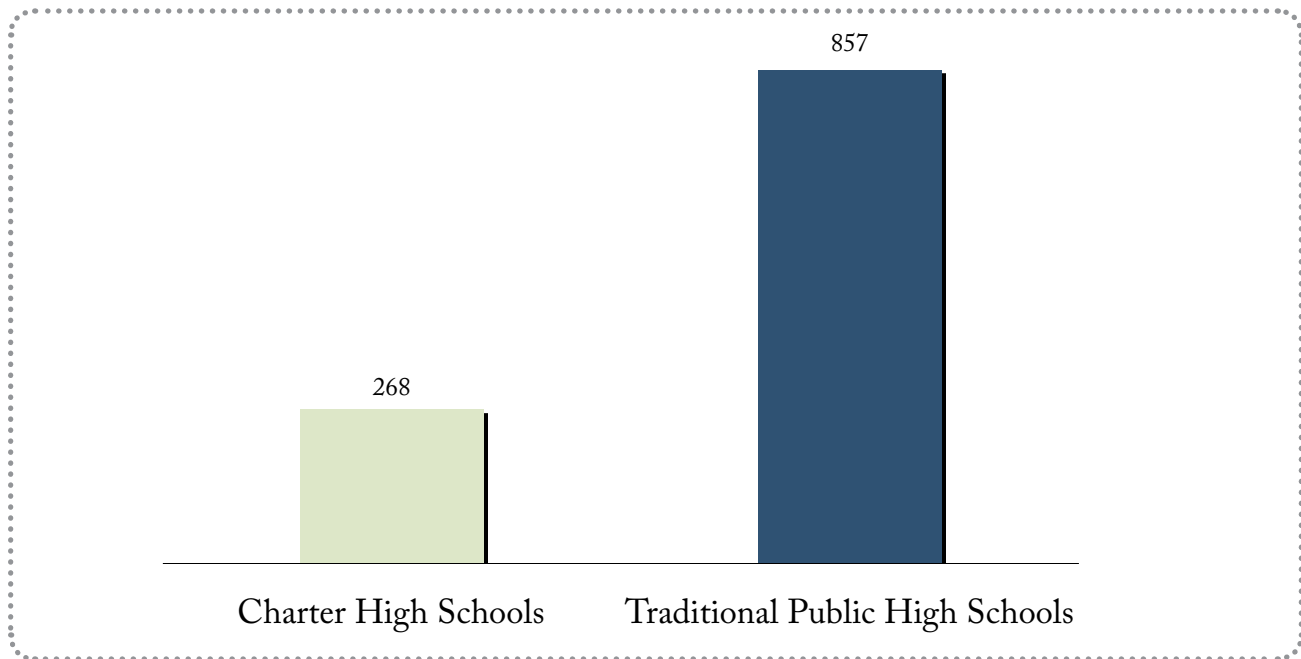
In fact, most of these directors cited the ability to manage the quality of their staff through dismissal as a key advantage of operating as a charter school. The field study suggests that the flexibility of the teacher contract is of critical importance to charter schools' ability to respond quickly, and both the NCSRP survey and the SASS confirm this impression across a large sample of charter schools. For example, 71 percent of charter high school directors responding to NCSRP's survey successfully removed every teacher they considered to be poor performing or ill-suited for their job, compared to only 54 percent of school district human resource officers.

Furthermore, the SASS data reveal that charter schools are both more likely to remove teachers who are not successful and more likely to offer financial rewards to their best teachers in the form of performance bonuses.¹⁷ The field study suggests that charter school directors, free from the constraints of collective bargaining, are able to make flexible work arrangements for highly valued teachers. Part-time appointments and on-site child care for parents are two creative benefits that some of the charter schools we reviewed were able to provide for their teachers. One school also was able to offer extended leave in lieu of resignations from burnt out teachers.

USING SMALL AND RELATIONSHIP-BASED SCHOOLS TO BUILD COMMUNITY

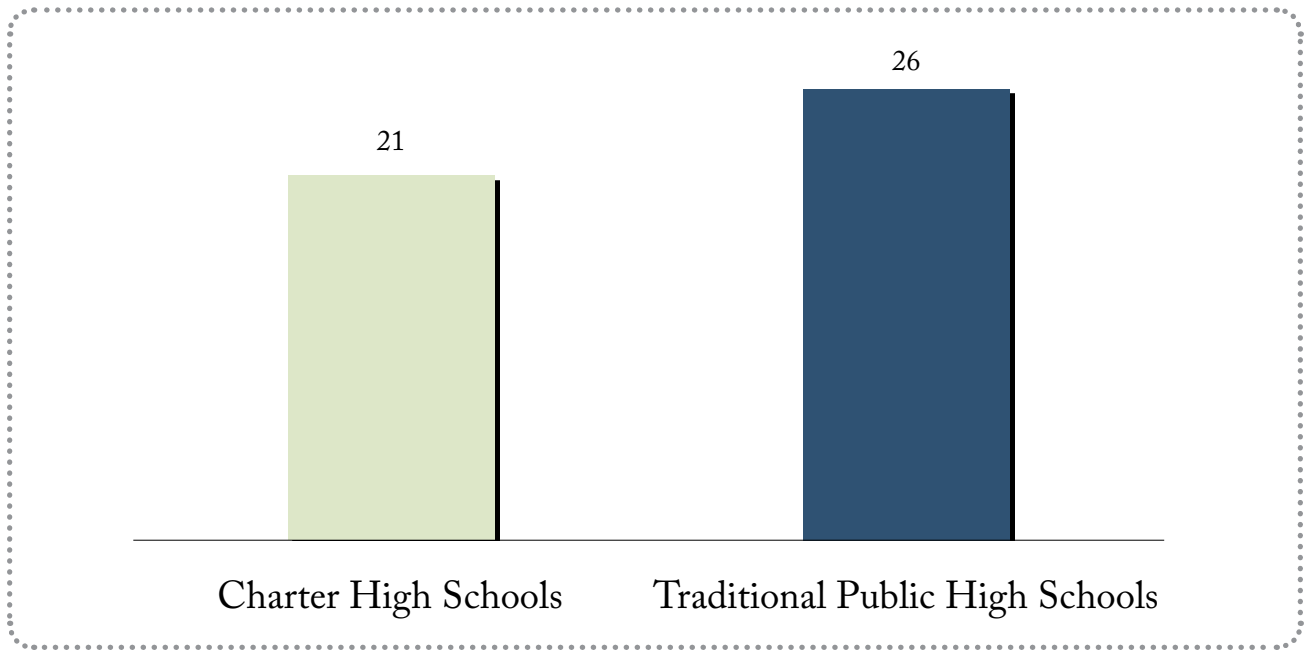
Charter high schools are, on average, smaller and better positioned to address some of the more challenging educational issues posed by adolescents. The average number of students at a charter high school is 268 versus 857 at a traditional public high school. The average class size in charter high schools is 21 students, compared with 26 in traditional public high schools. The charter high schools in the sample were, for the most part, aware of this advantage and maintained the smaller numbers deliberately, in order to support tight-knit communities and focused programs.

Figure 5. Average High School Enrollment



17. SASS 2003–04.

Figure 6. Average Class Size for High School Students



In the interviews, those working in the charter schools cited the small size of the school as a key advantage allowing them to counteract challenging high school issues such as student disengagement, absenteeism, and teenage pregnancy, all of which are highly correlated with student dropouts. In one example, a new director in one inner-city school for returning students was concerned with high student absenteeism and instructed his teachers to get to know each student. Thanks to the size of the school, teachers enjoyed relatively small class sizes and were able to conduct a more than cursory check-in with students. As a result, these teachers learned about the challenges that were preventing their students from coming to school and, in many cases, they were able to help their students overcome these challenges. Shortly after the school director put this policy in place, the school's absentee rate plummeted to well below the district average.

In a second example, this school also took advantage of its relatively small enrollment to provide temporary home-based instruction to students who recently gave birth. An instructor for this program explained:

I provide homebound services to our students that are on maternity leave, our girls who have gotten pregnant and have babies . . . I go out and see them approximately four hours a week . . . And I keep them up on their homework. The whole goal is for them to not feel the need to drop out.

Another possible advantage of small size is the ability to establish a safe learning climate. A 2007 CRPE report found that teachers and directors in urban charter schools reported a safer environment than their district counterparts, with fights, theft, vandalism, weapons possession, bullying, gang activities, and abuse of teachers oc-

curing less frequently.¹⁸ Teachers and directors in the field study often remarked that their size, which allowed one-on-one connections with students and parents, allowed them to maintain order and discipline

EXPERIMENTING WITH UNUSUAL GRADE AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONFIGURATIONS

The freedoms inherent in chartering a school are numerous. They include those mentioned above such as the freedom from collective bargaining, the ability to hire teachers outside the reach of many traditional public schools, the opportunity to let go of teachers who aren't a good match, and an option to tailor curriculum to mission or students. These advantages (which can sometimes pose challenges), coupled with the freedom to alter a school's grade configuration and completely reinvent its administrative structure, allow the charter high school to fundamentally change the traditional school-student relationship.

To build a strong and ongoing relationship between students and the school, and to improve the preparation of students, several charter high schools serving struggling students or focusing on college-prep curriculum (or both) were among the first to expand their schools to serve younger students. Even more common was the elementary school that grew into a junior high and high school. Students in these combined schools have a very different schooling experience and relationship to their school than do those students who transition to new schools two, three, or even four times throughout their K-12 education.

As mentioned, a traditional urban high school average enrollment is 857. Such a high number of students allows for a large administrative staff, a practice that often dictates a clear division between the administration and teachers. During fieldwork, it became apparent that some case study schools are using the freedoms afforded by a smaller size and less regulation to experiment with alternative forms of administrative structure. Several charter high schools we visited described a flattening out of the administrative team by distributing key leadership tasks and decisions to interested and capable teachers. In one case study school, this was particularly apparent as teachers, through regular meetings and consensus, were given full responsibility for curriculum development and teacher evaluation, as well as most school policy and teacher hiring decisions. As was seen in this charter high school and others, professional development can flow from these changes as teachers are challenged to grow in ways they would likely not be in a traditional high school setting. In addition, a teacher's tie to the school may be strengthened by their new role and investment. Although NCSRП researchers were unable to measure this given the nature of the field visits, there is new research to show a potential benefit to sharing administrative tasks in terms of increased achievement¹⁹ and decreased turnover.²⁰

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18. Paul T. Hill and Jon Christensen, "Safety and Order in Charter and Traditional Public Schools," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2007*, Robin Lake, ed. (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).
 19. Janet H. Chrispeels, ed., *Learning to Lead Together: The Promise and Challenge of Sharing Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004). See also Kenneth Leithwood and Blair Mascall, "Collective Leadership Effects on Student Achievement," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2008): 529.
 20. Virginia Davidhizar Birky, Marc Shelton, and Scot Headly, "An Administrator's Challenge: Encouraging Teachers to Be Leaders," *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin* 9, no.2 (2006), 87. See also Roland S. Barth, "The Teacher Leader," *Phi Delta Kappan* 82, no. 6 (2001): 447.

CHALLENGES TO CREATING VIABLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION VIA THE CHARTER SECTOR

As the examples above suggest, the flexibility and freedom granted to charter schools offer great potential to expand the number of valuable alternative pathways to a high school diploma. But even when charter schools are able to craft an effective program and attract students and parents, a great many obstacles still stand in the way to building the school that the founders, leaders, and teachers envision. Some of these barriers are outside the control of the schools themselves and exist in the form of state, federal, or other external entities that can prevent charters from realizing their potential. Other—sometimes hidden—barriers exist within the school itself and although the power to overcome them is within reach, they can be no less daunting.


The Long Arm of Regulation. Although the freedom from regulation is essentially what separates the charter school from the traditional public school, there are still, of course, multiple government restrictions that impact the running of the individual charter school. Perhaps foremost in the minds of many charter high school directors is the reluctance of many state officials to match funding formulas to the complexity of high school education. This includes the often enormous barrier of funding a well-equipped high school facility—much more difficult than funding an elementary school building. Charter high schools must compete for students and parents who expect science labs, large gyms, a band room, and space for extracurricular activities such as sports or after-school clubs.

Human resources barriers: Another source of frustration for principals is the difficulty many charter high schools face in terms of human resources. Given the complexity of the work as compared to what is required in a district high school and often coupled with reduced pay, finding a capable and well-qualified charter high school principal can be an extreme challenge. Once hired, the director in turn must tackle the next human resources hurdle: the work of recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-quality teachers. Limited budgets, district competition, more demanding work, and specific school missions are just some of the things that can stand in the way to finding good teachers. While these issues affect charter schools at all levels, they pose a particular challenge for charter high schools, as they also need to find teachers with advanced content knowledge who are willing to work with all the aforementioned challenges. This is a tall order in fields like math, science, and technology, where the supply of teachers is limited and industry offers higher salaries.

Creatively, some schools invest heavily in professional development to get uncertified or green teachers up to speed. This strategy, however, is being compromised by the impact of the “Highly Qualified Provision” of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Under this provision, charter school directors feel forced to seek out and hire traditionally certified teachers.

As Larry Rosenstock, founder of High Tech High, describes the problem:

The No Child Left Behind Act required that teachers in public schools be “highly qualified.” While that seems a laudable concept, the definition of “highly qualified” was limited to having a teaching credential or being in a credential program. But we had brilliant teacher applicants, many with advanced degrees and extensive experience in their disciplines, who lacked teaching credentials. Many were still paying off their student loans, and though they



had a burning desire to teach, they were reluctant to go back to graduate school and assume additional debt. We came to see the “highly qualified” definition as a barrier to attracting aspiring teachers to work in our schools. Ironically, this barrier was erected during a time of massive teacher shortages, particularly in math and science.²¹

High Tech High, thanks to its size and generous philanthropic backing, was able to take matters into its own hands. Leaders there created their own in-house credentialing program that not only satisfied the requirement of *No Child Left Behind*, but also served to train new teaching staff in their project-based pedagogy.

Barriers from Within. In the U.S., the high school as an institution is a deep and long-standing tradition. Whereas reformers have re-envisioned the elementary and middle school grades over and over again, the image of the public high school has remained virtually unchanged until recent efforts to build small high schools. Everyone from parents to students to universities to employers has some idea of what a “good” high school looks like, and their idea is usually modeled on that historic institutional ideal. New charter high schools that survive only by enrollment must compete directly with this historic ideal to recruit students and parents, many skeptical about departing from tradition. Moreover, charter high schools, in part due to their smaller size, often have limited resources to devote to recruitment. They must try to entice students, even though they may not offer programs many students find attractive—including advanced placement, intramural and interscholastic sports programs for men and women, cheerleading, drama, voice, music, and band.

High standards for student performance are critical at all levels, but because high school is the public school launching point, the charter high school is often saddled with the burden of proving their legitimacy by certifying that their graduates can compete with and even surpass their district peers. Appropriate assessment and measurement of these standards, of course, presents its own set of challenges—not to mention the accompanying responsibility to both support students who fall behind and to find the fortitude to delay students who fail. Further complicating matters, charter high schools must face these challenges against the backdrop of the reality that many students come to their school already behind in skill level. This is especially true for the chronically low-performing district school that has been converted into a charter high school. But even the start-up charter high school must strike a delicate balance between battling a historic and pervasive culture of low expectations with some compassion and sensitivity while maintaining high academic standards. And lastly there is the singular state of adolescence. Unlike the elementary school student, high schoolers are at the age where they are inclined to challenge institutions and can, if they choose, not only switch schools but opt out of education entirely. For schools whose mission it is to bring the most challenged students to graduation, these issues can present large obstacles to maintaining high standards.

Yet, if charter high schools are to provide effective pathways to graduation, these challenges cannot be excuses. Pressure to change regulations that unfairly burden the charter high school must continue, just as those schools must maintain high standards for students despite all that works against this. Charter high school authorizers too must overcome the difficulties of performance assessment and measurement of schools and, in turn, must have the will and capacity to close schools that fail to meet those high standards.

21. Larry Rosenstock, “Why We Did It,” *Unboxed: A Journal of Adult Learning in Schools*, Issue 1 (San Diego: High Tech High Graduate School of Education, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This review of charter high schools reveals a number of good reasons why policymakers may want to think of the charter mechanism as a way to increase the publicly provided options for high school students. They include the tendency of charter schools to tailor their missions and instructional strategies to their students, their ability to provide college preparation for inner city youth, and their history of using their autonomy to create unusual grade level or administrative structures to meet diverse student needs.


At the same time, charter schools are, strictly speaking, opportunities for improving student achievement, not guarantees. Although the best charter high schools are serving high-needs communities and making academic gains that many never thought possible for the students they serve, not all charter high schools are effective.

A community contemplating using charters as a means for increasing quality public high school offerings should think carefully about a strategy for developing a strong supply of effective charter high schools and then overseeing them to promote continued excellent performance. Nationally, the charter sector would do well to consider how to more specifically support charter high schools to better meet diverse needs, especially for those schools serving inner-city youth.

Reconsider Innovation. Despite the potentially important innovations in governance and instruction discussed above, most charter high schools look strikingly traditional. Students spend the vast majority of their school year in the school building where instruction is delivered by the instructor, in traditional subject areas, in a class of about 30 students. For the charter sector to fully contribute to a range of alternative pathways to graduation, communities may need to become more imaginative about how to use the autonomy and adaptability of chartering to better meet high school students' needs in the next 20 years. They need to consider how to make better use of technology to save on labor costs. They also need to integrate charter programs with other educational programs by allowing students to take courses at local colleges, other high schools, or online courses in exchange for credit. Such an approach could both reduce overhead costs for charter schools and better serve a diverse student body.

In the coming year, NCSRP will convene a group of practitioners and scholars to consider new charter high school models. It may be for example that a new high school level charter management organization would not run schools in the way we think of them, but would instead manage student portfolios of coursework.

Take Mission to a New Level. Another key area in which charter high schools can flex their autonomy is by developing a focused mission, yet to date, many schools take mission only as far as developing a theme, such as "math and science" or "environmental education." To fully realize the potential of mission-driven schools, charter schools should be ruthless about insisting that all teachers in the building coordinate their instruction and act as a seamless team in support of student needs. This is an especially challenging task for high schools where teachers traditionally are organized by subject area, not grade levels, and tend to plan and teach independently. There is ample evidence, though, that the most effective schools, charter or not, are those that have reconfigured



these traditions.²² Charter high schools, with their higher levels of autonomy to hire their own staff and their imperative for accountability, have no excuse for lack of coordinated action.

Become True Alternatives to Failing Schools. Although there has been much discussion in the context of NCLB about the potential for charter schools to replace long-failing district high schools, there are only two nonprofit charter organizations in the country that are prepared to do this systematically: Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles and Mastery Public Schools in Philadelphia. Both organizations report that takeovers require far greater attention to social services and special education services than most charter high schools face. The takeover strategy also requires extremely well-developed strategies to get seriously academically deficient kids up to speed quickly and intensive work to build a new culture of behavioral and academic expectations.²³ These challenges are daunting and will require charter schools to work with each other as well as with successful traditional public schools to figure out what works.


In order for the charter sector to represent itself as an effective alternative for all high school students, it must become more of a player in serving students currently enrolled in our nation's most troubled schools. While it is clear that there is large variation in quality among charter schools, there are plenty of examples of successful and high performing charter high schools that should be supported and used as models for an important alternative pathway to high school graduation.

22. See for example, Valerie E. Lee and Anthony S. Bryk (1989), Paul T. Hill, Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler (1990), Kathleen Cotton (1995), and Pam Sammons, Josh Hillman, and Peter Mortimore (1995).

23. From presentations by Green Dot and Mastery officials at the NewSchools Summit in Pasadena, CA, May 2009.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Center on Reinventing Public Education wants to express its appreciation to the U.S. Department of Education and the coalition of funders, both current and past, for their support of the National Charter School Research Project and its work: the Achelis & Bodman Foundations, Annie E. Casey Foundation, an anonymous donor, the Daniels Fund, the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Rodel Charitable Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. In addition, many people contributed to this report other than those whose names appear as authors. We appreciate their critical eyes and constructive ideas. Specifically, our thanks go to our colleagues at the Center, including reviewers James Harvey and Robin Lake, and Julie Angeley and Debra Britt for their superb production, editing, and support. We are also grateful to the Center's funders and advisory board members for supporting and shaping our work. Despite the important contributions of those acknowledged here, however, any opinions, omissions, or errors are the authors' alone.

The contents of this report were developed in part under a grant from the Department of Education (#U282N060007). However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.