



Charter High Schools Target the Dropout Epidemic

CER Analysis
February 11, 2005
[Link to document](#)

With federal and state attention being focused on high school improvement, CER examined efforts to teach the most challenging high school demographic – those students designated "at-risk." Students with this classification are, for personal and historical reasons, teenagers that are most likely to drop out of school without ever receiving a high school diploma or its equivalent. The drop out rate in this country is a staggering 30 percent. **The Scope of the Problem** High school has persistently been considered "unfixable." Much attention has been given to grades K-8 with the assumption that if the quality of early grades is enhanced the latter years will simply follow suit. While intuitive, this assumption has not come to fruition and the United States does not have the luxury of letting entire generations pass through the secondary school system while waiting for substantive reforms to take root in primary education. Consider that on a recent internationally administered math exam, American 15 year-olds scored behind students from 23 other countries. The Program for International Studies Assessment (PISA) exam also showed that the US trailed most nations when assessing the value for dollars spent, meaning, academic achievement is far behind what one might expect given the amount of money that is spent on education in the US. It should come as no surprise, then, that policy makers, educators, administrators and the like stay away from tackling the high school giant but years of being gun-shy has lead to what can only be considered a dropout epidemic. **The Dropout Epidemic** In addition to the 30 percent drop out rate, President Bush recently cited statistics that show that only 68 out of 100 9th graders will graduate high school on time and only 18 of those will go on to college. This does not bode well for the 22,000 plus high schools in the United States. Nationwide only half of America's black and Hispanic students graduate, the consequences of which are far more damaging for them, as studies show they suffer the loss of continuing education opportunities or better jobs. Even when students do graduate from high school many are ill prepared for the demands of higher education. "Twenty-nine percent of freshman who arrived at U.S. colleges in the fall of 2002 enrolled in at least one remedial course. In 2001-2002, seventy-five percent of institutions of higher learning offered remedial courses." **A Solution** The federal Department of Education and the National Governors' Association have already turned the national eye on improving high schools through increased calls for standards and measurements. Ostensibly these reforms will affect the graduate rate but one of the most effective ways to combat this epidemic is to create new public charter schools with the specific purpose of teaching at-risk students. The Minnesota public school system, for instance, has long employed this strategy through alternative schools for students that have previously dropped out of the school system. Likewise, 12 percent of the nation's charter high schools were created with the specific intent of teaching an "at-risk" student population. These schools teach nearly 20,000 teens in 22 states. Some states, such as Rhode Island and North Carolina, have charter laws that are more favorable to those wanting to establish a school for at-risk youths. However, this component alone does not ensure a higher percentage of specially designed schools. Ohio has the most charter high schools targeting at-risk students with 19. Arizona is second with 11 such schools. Yet nationally, charter high schools are few in number when compared with the majority of charter schools that serve elementary and middle school grades. While the number of charter high schools has increased as a function of demand, it still represents a very small percentage overall, especially given the inordinate number of at-risk minority youth - the very population that charter high schools are successful in teaching. Obviously, more operators should be encouraged to open schools designed to teach these needy students. Currently, of the 80 charter high schools nationwide that target at-risk kids, one group, White Hat Management, an Ohio-based firm with schools in more than five states, operates 30 percent of the schools. This represents over half of all students enrolled in these schools. The group has graduated 5,300 students to date. White Hat not only equips their students with a recognized high school diploma, but also with a job, which results in 15-20 percent of the schools' population graduating every six months. Programs like this can and should be replicated, and a renewed focus on charter high schools is worth the attention of policymakers. There is no question that high schools should be rich in content, and highly accountable to ensure that our nation graduates well-prepared and well-rounded students. However, while developing such schools, immediate attention needs to be focused on the 4 million students that are under-educated and currently at-risk of never completing their high school education. **Charter Schools and At-Risk Students: Highlights**

- There are approximately 3,300 charter schools in the nation.
- 51 percent of the charter schools serve K-8.
- 21 percent of charter schools exclusively serve grades 9-12
- 80 charter high schools nationwide target at-risk kids
- White Hat Management operates 24 schools aimed at dropout prevention
- Excel



Education Centers operates 4 charter schools targeting "at-risk" students • The remaining 52 charter schools targeting "at-risk" students list no formal affiliation

###

[The Center for Education Reform \(CER\)](#) creates opportunities for and challenges obstacles to better education for America's communities. Founded in 1993, CER combines education policy with grassroots advocacy to foster positive and bold education reforms. For more information, contact CER at (202) 822-9000 or [send us email](#).

