
THE Center for Education Reform



SURVEY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS
(2000-2001)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



CHARTER SCHOOLS: *Today*
CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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SURVEY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS, 2000-01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Education Reform (CER) is pleased to present the key findings of its most recent nationwide survey of charter schools, including data compiled from charter schools operating in the 2000–01 school year. The responses represent 346 of the more than 2,030 charters operating as of September 2000 in 34 states and the District of Columbia. They paint a picture of a diverse and vibrant system of charter schools that are held accountable by both traditional and non-traditional means.

CER asked the charter schools general questions about their educational programs and operations, the tests they give, and the populations they serve. The responses repudiate — both explicitly and implicitly — many of the charges made against charter schools by those who fear their growth.

Despite ongoing opposition, charter schools continue to form, continue to thrive, and most importantly, continue to serve their communities by providing the best possible education for the students they teach. Charter schools' success is evident in both student achievement and community response, with increasing examples of success by students who previously were not successful. Nearly two-thirds of charter schools have waiting lists, and the average waiting list is more than 40 percent of the average charter school's enrollment.

While opposition hasn't held back charters, a lack of facilities funding impedes the creation of new charters. Facilities funding is critical because, unlike traditional public schools, charter schools often have to find their own facilities and finance them without taxpayer dollars. Buildings for traditional public schools, by contrast, are paid for from funds that are separate from "per pupil cost" educational dollars. This per pupil cost, an allocation based on student enrollment, is the only government funding most charters receive. In fact, less than one-fifth of charter schools surveyed received any capital budget funds at all, and most of those funds were provided by special state provisions rather than by the school district.

THE SURVEY'S KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE ACCOUNTABLE

Ninety-seven percent of charter schools report administering at least one standardized test, including state tests in those states that have them, and are held to the same standards for those tests as traditional public schools.

More importantly, charters are held to a standards of “ultimate accountability:” If they fail to meet the terms of their charter, unlike traditional public schools, they can be closed.



CHARTERS EDUCATE UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

The data reveal that charters serve students who largely are underserved in the traditional public school environment: at-risk students, minority students, and low-income students. Traditional public schools do not provide the specialized attention and tailored programming that charters offer these students. Charters also are increasingly targeting students who would likely not even be in school without those schools' existence: teen parents, expelled youth, and court-adjudicated youngsters.



SMALL CHARTER SCHOOLS PROVIDE WHAT PARENTS WANT

Average student enrollment in traditional public schools is 700 — nearly three times the average charter school enrollment of about 250. Even among elementary schools, charters are significantly smaller than the average traditional public elementary school: In 1998 (the most recent data available for public schools), average enrollment in charter elementary schools was 253, while average enrollment in traditional public elementary schools was 512. Nearly two-thirds of charter schools have long waiting lists. The average waiting list is 112 students, or 43 percent of the average charter school's enrollment.



MOST CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE START-UPS

More than 80 percent of survey respondents indicate their charter school is a start-up school, reflecting the reality that it often is easier to start from scratch than to transform an existing culture. Parents and teachers want more than a name change: They want better education for their students and children, and they are chartering schools to implement new systems.



CHARTER SCHOOLS PROVIDE INNOVATIVE CHOICES

Charter opponents argue that charters are not exhibiting innovative instructional techniques. Yet, nearly a quarter of charter schools say they are using the “Core Knowledge” and/or “Direct Instruction” curriculum in their schools — far more than in traditional public schools. Their size also is significantly smaller than traditional public schools, providing a closer, more personalized instructional relationship between teacher and student.



MULTIPLE CHARTERING AUTHORITIES LEAD TO MORE CHARTERS

A majority of charter schools are approved by an agency other than the local school board. Local school boards, however, are more likely to grant charters when state laws allow for multiple authorizers. Only 5.6 percent of charter schools are in the 12 states requiring the approval of local school boards, and 94.7 percent of charters are located in states with multiple chartering authority or a strong appeals process.



KEY FINDINGS

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE ACCOUNTABLE

While many critics suggest that charters are not accountable, the data show otherwise: Charter schools answer to the public for student achievement. Ninety-seven percent of charter schools

reported administering at least one standardized test. Anecdotal information in the appendix of this report also provides test results of schools surveyed.

Figure 1: Charter School Testing Requirements

Nearly all charter schools use standardized tests

Charter schools that administer at least one standardized test	97%
Require a state-specific test	73%
Require Stanford 9	42%
Require the Iowa Test of Basic Skills	18%
Require the California Test of Basic Skills	5%
Require the California Achievement Test	5%
Require Terra Nova	8%
Require another standardized test	33%

339 schools responding

CHARTER SCHOOLS EDUCATE UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

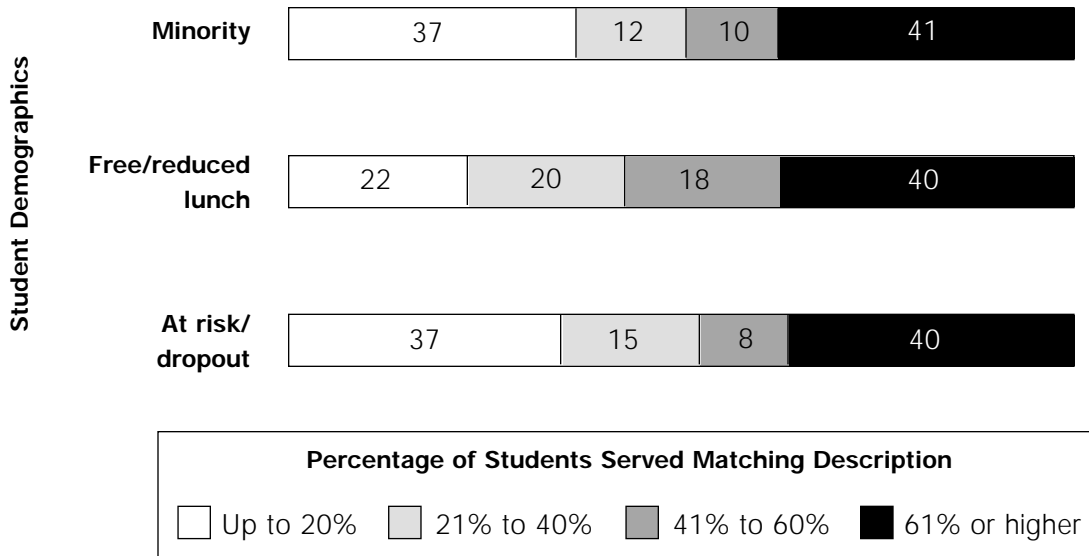
The schools surveyed confirm recent research: Charter schools frequently structure their curriculum, operations and instruction to serve children that are traditionally underserved by the district school systems, such as at-risk, minority and low-income students.

Middle-class majority students also benefit from charter schools, but it's important to recognize that not all of these students are well-served by tradi-

tional public schools. In fact, middle-class majority students who have not been successful in traditional public schools may gravitate toward charters specifically because these schools offer a better path to success. Nearly 10 percent of charters identify "gifted and talented" students as a target population to be served, suggesting the difficulty traditional public schools have in providing education using a "one-size-fits-all" system.

Figure 2: Student populations

Percentage of charter schools serving selected populations



Example: 41 percent of charter schools report serving minority populations of 61 percent or higher.
331 schools responding

In addition, a growing number of charter schools specifically address the needs of students who otherwise might not even be in school, including teen parents, court-adjudicated youth, and those who have been expelled from the traditional public school system.

Twelve percent of charters indicate they view teen parents as a target population to be served, 13 percent target expelled youth, 12 percent target court-adjudicated youth, and eight percent target disabled students.

SMALL SCHOOLS PROVIDE WHAT PARENTS WANT

Research shows that smaller schools lead to higher student achievement. Charter schools deliver the smaller size that produce results — and that parents want. Most charter schools are relatively small, with an average enrollment of about 250 students. The average enrollment in traditional public schools is nearly three times higher, or 700. While a few

charter schools serve larger populations, fewer than 20 percent of charter schools have more than 500 students.

Even among elementary schools, charters are significantly smaller than the average traditional public elementary school: In 1998 (the most recent data available for public

elementary schools was 253, while average enrollment in charter elementary schools is 237.

Nearly two-thirds of charter schools have long waiting lists, illustrating strong parental demand. The average waiting list is 112 students, or 43 percent of the average charter school’s enrollment.

In 1998, CER predicted two factors would lead to shorter waiting lists for charter schools: First, as the number of charter schools rises,

the larger number of schools should better meet demand; and second, charter schools often inspire competition — and improved performance — from other public schools. If parents and students are more satisfied with existing public schools, the demand for charters should decline.

The evidence since 1998 has borne out that prediction, with charter school waiting lists dropping from an average of 141 students to 112.

Figure 3: Charter School Waiting Lists

Large waiting lists demonstrate high demand

	1998-99	2000-01
Average enrollment	253	258
% of schools with waiting lists	67%	63%
Average number of students on waiting list	141	112

346 schools responding

MOST CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE START-UPS

More than 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that their charter schools are start-up schools, reflecting the reality that it often is easier to start from scratch than to transform an existing culture. This contention is supported by four years of trend data, showing that the number of charter school start-ups is growing, while the number of conversions — existing public or private

schools that become charter schools — is declining.

Only 8.6 percent of charters identify the applicant or operator as a “For-Profit Organization.” The remaining applicant/operators are public schools, non-profit organizations, community groups, universities, or a combination of parents and teachers.

Figure 4: Charter School Origins

Most charter schools are start-ups

	1997	1998	1999	2001
Start-ups	56%	70%	77%	81%
Private School Conversions	11%	11%	11%	7%
Public School Conversions	32%	19%	9%	9%
Other public program converts			3%	3%

324 schools responding

Source: 1997, 1998 — U.S. Department of Education
 1999, 2000 — The Center for Education Reform

CHARTER SCHOOLS PROVIDE INNOVATIVE CHOICES

Charter schools provide multiple curriculum options, responding to the demand for better and more focused curricula.

Most charter schools choose a specialized teaching strategy – one the school’s operators believe will best meet students’ needs. The curriculum programs offered by charter schools vary considerably. Some, for example, focus on specific disciplines (such as math and science or the arts), while others are built

around students’ future plans (college preparation or school-to-work).

While comparable data for all public schools is unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests that charter schools specialize more than traditional public schools overall. District public schools are less likely to specialize because the instructional methods and curricula for the entire district usually are centralized.

Figure 5: Curriculum/Instructional Focus

Charter schools use specialized teaching strategies

	1998-99	2000-01
Science/Math/Tech	26%	29%
Core Knowledge	24%	23%
Thematic Instruction	24%	12%
Back to Basics	20%	19%
College Prep	16%	20%
Direct Instruction	14%	22%
School-to-Work	13%	14%
Arts	11%	19%
Outcome-based Education	11%	8%
Home/Independent Study	8%	8%
Bilingual/Foreign Language	5%	12%
GED/HS Completion	5%	8%
Montessori	4%	6%
Waldorf	2%	2%
International Baccalaureate	.3%	.3%
Other*	27%	29%

346 schools responding

* Write-in responses for “other” include various state curricula, subject-based curricula, and other content-specific curricula, including Edison Schools Project, Marva Collins, Paideian philosophy, etc.

MULTIPLE CHARTERING AUTHORITIES LEAD TO MORE CHARTERS

A review of who grants charters illustrates the impact of different state charter laws. Overall, agencies other than local school boards authorize more charter schools than any other chartering authority: 57 percent of charters are granted by authorities other than local school boards. Other findings from the data on charter schools in 2001:

- ✧ Only 5.6 percent of charter schools are in the 12 states that require local school boards to approve charter school applications, with 94.4 percent in the remaining 26 states. In other words, states with multiple authorizers have 17 time more charter schools than states requiring local school board approval.

Figure 6: Percentage of Charters Approved by Various Authorities

	1998-99	2000-01
Local school boards	43%	43%
State Boards of Education	35%	37%
Universities/colleges	13%	8%
Other state chartering bodies	9%	7%
Other*	2%	5%

338 schools responding

*Most “other” responses either listed county offices of education (different from local school boards) or did not specify.

☼ California, Arizona and Michigan, which allow for multiple chartering authorities, have 44 percent of all charter schools in the United States.

☼ States requiring local school board approval of charter schools have an average 9.6 charters per state. States with multiple chartering authorities or a strong appeals process have an average 80.8 charters per state.

ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

Perhaps even more valuable than the quantifiable data are the personal responses charter schools offered to CER's open-ended questions. No issue has so bedeviled the reputation of charter schools as the charge that there is no evidence of academic achievement among students attending charter schools.

In fact, even though charter schools typically educate students performing substantially below grade level, they report strong academic improvements and successes.

Charter schools reported a range of achievements, including gains in reading and math performances; test scores that are higher than district, state or comparable school averages; increased parental involvement; higher attendance and fewer discipline problems. Examples of specific and quantifiable successes include the following:

- ✧ Scores in the top 10 percent of all Arizona schools on statewide norm-referenced tests. Average of two years growth at all grade levels. (**Benjamin Franklin Charter School, Mesa, AZ**)
- ✧ One to three grade level improvements in math and reading; 20-30 percentile points improvement on Stanford 9 between first year at EVA and Stanford 9 scores from the previous year at another school. (**East Valley Academy, Scottsdale, AZ**)
- ✧ From 1997 to 2000, posted a 93 percent gain in Stanford 9 scores. The school's 2000 reading and math scores in all grades are 33 percentile points above those of children in their cluster of neighborhood schools. (**The Accelerated School, Los Angeles, CA**)
- ✧ Growth of five to six percentile points in nearly all grades in SAT 9 reading and mathematics tests. (**Edison-Friendship Public Charter School, Washington, DC**)
- ✧ On ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills), students posted an average 11-month gain; all grades scored above grade level. SABIS exceeded Springfield district ITBS scores in grades 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 and averaged one full year above grade-level proficiency. (**SABIS International Charter School, Springfield, MA**)
- ✧ Fourth grade MEAP (Michigan's standardized test) scores rose from 14 percent satisfactory in 1996 to 54 percent satisfactory in 2000. Math scores rose from 13 percent satisfactory in 1996 to 54 percent satisfactory in 2000. Seventh grade reading scores rose from 21 percent satisfactory in 1999 to 50 percent satisfactory in 2000. (**Colin Powell Academy, Detroit, MI**)

- ☼ Improved rankings on ITBS in grades 3-8 by four to 16 percentile points. School earned 'exemplary school of distinction' in two out of three years. (**Summit Charter School, Cashiers, NC**)
- ☼ Reduced the Native American drop-out rate from 20 percent to zero; 20 percent of graduates from this middle school are on the honor roll in high school. (**Little Singer Community Junior High School, Winslow, AZ**)
- ☼ Ninety-eight percent of KIPP students passed all sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). In writing, KIPP students earned a perfect passing rate of 100 percent; in math, students attained a school-wide passing rate of 99 percent; in reading and science, 98 percent; and 97 percent in social studies. All students took the TAAS exams. (**KIPP Academy Charter School, Houston, TX**)
- ☼ The 22 students in the class of 2000 earned a total of 600 college credits, and one earned an AA degree graduating *cum laude* two weeks before high school graduation. (**Indian River Charter High School, Vero Beach, FL**)
- ☼ One hundred percent of all graduates enrolled in 4-year universities are still enrolled. Nearly 20 percent of graduates are employed in technical fields (pharmacy tech to network administrator). (**Washtenaw Technical Middle College, Ann Arbor, MI**)

For some charter schools, however, success is measured merely in being able to help students move forward with their lives and become constructive citizens in the 21st century. Nowhere is this more accurate than among those students participating in charter high schools where high school graduation and acceptance at college are not the expected outcome, as they are for most middle-class majority students. Among these successes are the following:

- ☼ Over 235 graduates. Computer repair program that enabled students to earn A+ certification. 75 percent passed reading portion of AIMS (Arizona's standardized test), 66 percent improvement in Stanford 9 results over last four years. (**Academy with Community Partners, Mesa, AZ**)

Respondents used a number of methods — including state-mandated assessment measures, which are required by most charter school laws — to assess, monitor and report on their students' development. These methods included teacher evaluations; competency-based curriculum; student portfolios; site-developed assessments; independent outside evaluations; and standardized tests such as Stanford 9 (SAT9), Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS).

CHALLENGES

The greatest challenges facing charter schools are funding and facilities issues. Only 17.6 percent of schools report receiving district, state, or federal assistance in meeting their capital budgets, including purchase or renovation of facilities. Other challenging areas include relations with the local school

district or school board (often a source of financing difficulties), enrollment and attendance, communications and public relations, special education, staff and governance issues, transportation, and state regulations and paperwork.

NOTES ON SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Not all schools responded to all questions. For each question, percentages are based on total responses to that particular question, not on the 346 total schools that responded to the survey.

For some questions, total responses may add to more than 100 percent because many schools gave more than one answer to each question.