



Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES:

School leadership without a safety net

Recent research and media reports have raised serious concerns that teacher turnover rates in charter schools are alarmingly high. By some accounts, charter schools lose between 20 and 25 percent of their teachers each year. But it isn't exactly clear why teacher turnover rates might be high in charter schools: is it a consequence of their less regulated labor market (charters rarely have unions and in some cases can hire non-certified teachers), or is it the types of students and neighborhoods where they tend to operate? School leaders and policymakers need a better understanding of the nature and scope of the problem in order to assess its significance and design possible policy remedies.

This policy brief summarizes an Inside Charter Schools study on the nature of teacher turnover in charter schools.¹ The study tracked the careers of 956 newly hired charter school teachers and 19,695 newly hired traditional public school teachers in Wisconsin between 1998 and 2006.

1. B. Gross and M. DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns: Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools, Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010.*

Although not representative of the charter school sector overall, the study's analysis of Wisconsin's charter school sector highlights two findings that provide some important clues about the nature of teacher turnover in charter schools.

1. High teacher turnover rates in Wisconsin's charter schools are mostly a function of teacher characteristics and school contexts, rather than a "charter effect."

When CRPE researchers examined the careers of charter school teachers and traditional public school teachers in Wisconsin, they found unsurprisingly that, on average, charter school teachers were far more likely to leave their schools than their counterparts in traditional public schools. But with more controlled comparisons, researchers found that the high rates of teacher turnover in charter schools are largely a function of the types of teachers those schools hire (young and inexperienced) and the types of students and localities they serve (poor and urban).

When we control for sector only	Charter teachers are 40%** more likely to leave and 52%** more likely to exit
When we control for teacher characteristics	Charter teachers are 32%** more likely to leave and 41%** more likely to exit
When we control for teacher and school characteristics	Charter teachers are 6% more likely to leave and 14% more likely to exit

2. Charter schools in Wisconsin are relatively better at retaining teachers in urban schools.

When they examined teacher turnover rates in urban and non-urban schools across both sectors, researchers found that teachers in urban charter schools were less likely to leave their schools than similar teachers in urban traditional public schools. (Teachers in urban charter schools were also less likely to leave than similar teachers in non-urban charter schools.)

It's not clear why urban charter schools in Wisconsin appear to be better at retaining teachers, but one speculation is that they might do so by explicitly seeking out teachers who are committed to working with disadvantaged students in schools dedicated to improving urban education. Unfortunately, without survey data on teachers in Wisconsin (the above analyses relied on personnel records), it is hard to know why teachers stay (or leave).

To better understand teachers' motivations for leaving and staying, researchers turned to national data from the U.S. Department of Education's 1999–00 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and 2000–01 Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS)². A descriptive analysis of the SASS-TFS highlights the study's third finding.

2. B. Gross and M. DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns: Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools, Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010.*

3. Teachers who leave charter schools are more dissatisfied with their terms of employment and the nature of the job than teachers who leave traditional public schools.

The SASS-TFS asked traditional public school teachers and charter school teachers who left their schools why they left.³ In response, teachers in both sectors pointed to a lack of administrative support, poor working conditions, and low salaries. But compared to traditional public school teachers, charter school teachers were more likely to say that they left because of a lack of job security and the expansive nature of their work.

TOP FIVE REASONS FOR MOVING SCHOOLS AND EXITING THE PROFESSION

CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS' TOP FIVE REASONS FOR MOVING SCHOOLS	TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS' TOP FIVE REASONS FOR MOVING SCHOOLS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of administrator support Workplace conditions Teaching assignment Job security Salary/benefits 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching assignment Lack of administrator support Workplace conditions Change of residence Salary/benefits
CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS TOP FIVE REASONS FOR EXITING THE PROFESSION	TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS TOP FIVE REASONS FOR EXITING THE PROFESSION
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Another career Family or personal reasons Salary/benefits Pregnancy/child rearing Dissatisfaction with job description/duties 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Retirement Family or personal reasons Another career Salary/benefits Pregnancy/child rearing

3. The 2000–01 TFS sample included 4,156 public school teachers and 1,050 charter school teachers.

Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools

31%

Teachers working in urban charter schools are 31% less likely to switch schools than similar teachers working in traditional public schools.

24%

Teachers working in urban charter schools are 24% less likely to exit the system than similar teachers working in urban traditional public schools.

Implications

Some of the results of this study might quiet fears that charter schools are particularly susceptible to teacher turnover, simply by virtue of being charter schools. But the findings do not suggest that charter school turnover rates are nothing to worry about—they just aren't unique.

For charter school leaders and policymakers who are concerned about teacher turnover in charter schools, the study has the following implications:

Don't ignore concerns about job loss and workload

Job security and workload are clear concerns for charter school teachers. School leaders can help address these concerns in a number of ways, through more transparent and consistent systems of evaluation, promotion, and dismissal, as well as by paying careful attention to how teachers are coping with the demands of the job and the formal and informal supports they need. Leaders might also experiment with alternative contracts that provide more stability and predictability for their strongest teachers.

Diversify experience levels

A long line of research on traditional public schools suggests that the types of teachers who typically work in charter schools—young and inexperienced—are more likely to leave their schools and the profession. Charter school leaders who are worried about turnover should try to pursue a balance of experience and inexperience on their teaching faculties.

Look for solutions that benefit both sectors

Despite some differences in why teachers say they leave their schools, controlled comparisons of Wisconsin's charter schools and traditional public schools over time suggest that the “charter effect” may not be a big driver of teacher turnover. Instead, turnover in charter schools appears to be driven by the same factors at work in traditional public schools—a combination of inexperienced teachers and demanding teaching environments. Although this observation likely stems from some of the particulars of Wisconsin's charter school context, it nevertheless suggests that policymakers might help all public schools by better targeting resources (both financial and human capital) to schools that arguably need them the most—those that enroll the most underserved students—be they charter schools or traditional public schools.

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INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS from research to practice

ABOUT THE STUDY:

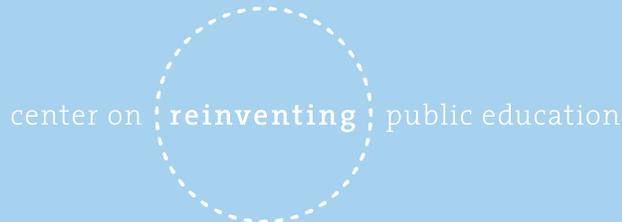
Inside Charter Schools is one of the first systematic studies to focus on the strategies that charter schools are pursuing to establish coherent educational programs supported by high-quality teachers and leaders. It is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Charter School Research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

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.

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?

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