



Charter School Data: What States Collect

State data and implications for research

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During the 2005-06 school year, over 3,600 charter schools were serving more than 1 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. In several states, these schools are a well-established, strong presence, but in others, charter schools are a relatively new phenomenon and remain at the margins of their states' educational environment. Efforts to collect data may be complicated by the relative newness and small size of many charter schools and the challenges faced by staff to meet reporting requirements.

While it can be time consuming for schools to complete data requests, data collection remains essential. Careful monitoring of performance will help schools improve over time, and data can provide solid answers to critics and supporters alike. Simply put, if charter schools are to move into mainstream public education, thorough data collection is a necessary step.

To gain a better sense of the data states collect from charter schools, we asked several questions of the office in each state responsible for charter school

oversight and/or data collection.¹ Our inquiries yielded two general findings.

- ✓ Rigorous research on charter school performance requires good, extensive data, but only 21 states reported having access to individual student-level data from schools. Knowing each student's performance is a crucial element of a good charter evaluation.
- ✓ Late or incomplete reporting of data is widespread among states. This problem affects both charter and traditional public schools, but seems to be more prevalent among charters.

FINDINGS

MOST STATES DO NOT COLLECT ENOUGH DATA TO CONDUCT ADVANCED ANALYSES

Looking state to state, the first and most basic questions one might ask are how many charter schools are open, and how many students are they serving?

This type of school-level data gives a sense of the scope of charter schools, but not much more.

Every state that responded to our survey collects some sort of school-level data. The most frequently cited items were grade span, enrollment by grade, enrollment by race/ethnicity, enrollment by gender, and teacher characteristics. Table 1 shows which school-level data elements states reported collecting.

Availability of student-level data is more limited among states (see box for an explanation of how student-level data can improve evaluations). Twenty-one states, about 60 percent of those that responded, have access to some individual student-level data. Table 2 shows the states that reported having access to individual student-level data, and what is collected.³

In general, the states in our study have some access to data describing basic student characteristics, such as gender, race/ethnicity, date of birth, and free/reduced-price lunch eligibility. Fewer states have deeper information on disciplinary incidents, absences, courses taken, credits earned, or grades. Only three states maintain information on the composition of students' families. All of this has implications for the ability of states to monitor the quality of their charter schools. Individual standardized test score data is an important quality indicator, and is relatively common among states. However, it would also be beneficial to know what courses students take, grades earned,

frequency of absences, and whether a student graduated, transferred, or dropped out.

STATES ENCOUNTER PROBLEMS GETTING TIMELY, COMPLETE, AND ACCURATE DATA

A necessary component of effectively monitoring charter school quality is access to timely, accurate charter school data. Several states reported that the most significant challenge with data from charter schools is that it is submitted late or incomplete, and often both. Eighteen states mentioned such problems. Timeliness, completeness, and accuracy were typically cited together as issues and were typically attributed to relatively lean staffing, and to higher staff turnover at charter schools compared to traditional district schools.

THE DATA GOLD STANDARD

To conduct a more complete evaluation of charter school performance, data on individual students are needed.² The most basic individual data allow for measurement of student test performance over time using individual test scores and basic demographic information. The studies that yield the most complete picture of charter school performance require at minimum a unique student identifier to track the student from year to year, even if he or she moved between schools. More sophisticated analyses require data on individual students' family background, courses taken, teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and more. Richly detailed background data enable analyses of how the effects of charter schools vary among different types of students.

This problem is not always unique to charter schools.

One respondent said that almost all districts and schools have trouble submitting data on time. Other respondents characterized it as an issue for all understaffed schools, charter or otherwise. Charters, though, were commonly described as having a greater tendency toward overstretched staff than district schools. As one respondent noted, "traditional public school districts typically have dedicated staff to perform administrative functions." Commonly, problems with data were associated with how much experience school staff had in complying with requirements. As long as reporting

requirements remain fairly consistent, a school that has been open for several years will have little problem meeting reporting deadlines and submitting accurate data. Meanwhile, overseeing data collection is also a challenge for state staff. One respondent remarked that as the number of charter schools grows, the number of staff in the state charter office remains the same.

No matter the cause of poor reporting, data shortcomings pose a threat to a state's ability to monitor school quality, in terms of simple oversight of enrollment and assurance that proper funding follows, and whether or not the schools are fulfilling basic requirements. Further, it hinders deeper research of how charter schools are performing relative to traditional public schools.

STATES DISCOURAGE POOR REPORTING IN A VARIETY OF WAYS

States respond to problems with data quality in different ways. In some cases, follow-up phone calls and requests are enough to obtain missing data. In other cases, the charter's authorizer may be asked to intervene. When these methods fail, some states penalize schools financially by withholding a portion of their state aid if they do not comply with data requirements on time. This is not always effective. In some smaller schools, the amount of state aid received might be so small that any fraction withheld is not a sufficient incentive to fulfill burdensome requirements. If the source of the problem is overstretched school staff, state-level solutions are rather limited. At some state departments of education, those working with charter data have accepted that they simply must provide ongoing information and training to school and district staff about data submission requirements and procedures. At least one state has responded by creating a charter school

data submission guidebook to assist school staff in understanding and complying with requirements. Others attempt to post clear guidelines for the data submission process online to give schools easy access to any information they need. But providing extra assistance with submission procedures is not always enough to help schools supply timely, quality data. In some cases, schools simply lack the staff to get everything done on time, and reporting is not their highest priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that it is too often difficult to find good information on charter schools. The availability of key elements of charter data is inconsistent. This is an obstacle to fair assessments of charter schools, which will require active effort in each state to overcome. **Both charter schools and state agencies have roles to play:**

CHARTER SCHOOLS: DO A BETTER JOB OF REPORTING

With their number on the rise, and some states reaching the maximum number currently allowed, charter schools are under an increasing amount of scrutiny and pressure to demonstrate that they are doing the job they set out to do. In this environment, it is crucial to be accountable and transparent. Moreover, it is important that quality research on charter schools be carried out, both by the organizations that oversee them and independently. The essential ingredient to enable all of this is accessible, extensive, and up-to-date data.

STATES: BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE, AND ENFORCE DATA COLLECTION REQUIREMENTS

It is important that states take the lead in investing in the infrastructure to maintain strong school data. Good research on school outcomes requires longitudinal student data, as well as detailed information on schools and teachers. A statewide student ID system allows tracking of key data elements from every student over time. Some of the charter offices we spoke to have plans underway to enhance their current systems, and some have a demonstrated commitment to maintaining extensive school data. A good statewide database is reliant on schools to report accurately and on time. Without consistent enforcement, a statewide data collection system will fall far short of its potential.

NOTES

1. In most cases, respondents worked in the charter schools office of their state's department of education. In other cases, they were with the state's board of education. Through questionnaires and conversations, we compiled some basic state-by-state information for the 2005-06 school year on what types of data are being collected. Our questions were answered completely by 35 states and Washington, D.C. Five states did not participate.
2. Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel, *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines*, National Charter School Research Project White Paper Series, No. 2 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006).
3. In this case, the state is not necessarily collecting the data. The task of collection may fall on authorizers, districts, or schools, but the state can access the data.

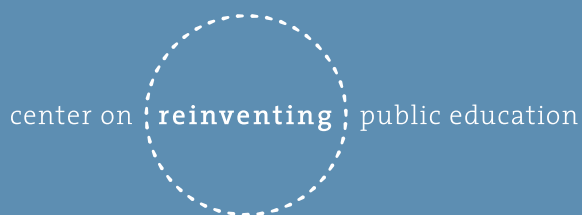
ABOUT THE DATA

The data in this brief was collected as part of the research for the National Charter School Research Project's 2006 edition of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*. To read the full report, please visit www.ncsrp.org.

ABOUT NCSRP

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. NCSRP's goals are to 1) facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools, and 2) provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

For more information and research on charter schools, Please visit the NCSRP website at www.ncsrp.org



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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.

Table 2. STUDENT-LEVEL DATA COLLECTED BY STATE, DISTRICT, OR AUTHORIZER

key: ■ = collected by a state agency ○ = uncertain if collected blank cell = not collected by a state agency

	Unique numeric identifier	Date of birth	Home address	Student gender	Race/ethnicity	Language status	Special education status	Courses taken	Grades	Credits earned	Standardized test scores	Disciplinary incidents	Absences/tardiness	Final status (graduate, transfer to other school, drop out)	Free/reduced-price lunch eligibility	Family composition
ARIZONA	■	■		■	■	■	■				■	■	■	■	■	
ARKANSAS	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
CONNECTICUT	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■		■	■	
WASHINGTON, D.C.	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
DELAWARE	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				■	■		■	■	
FLORIDA	■	■	■	■	■	■	■							■	■	
HAWAII	■			■	■	■	■				■			■	■	
IDAHO		■		■	■	■	■		■		■				■	
INDIANA	■	■		■	■	■	■				■				■	
KANSAS	■	■	■	■	■	■	■					■		■	■	
LOUISIANA	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■
MASSACHUSETTS	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■		■	■			■	
MICHIGAN	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				■	■		■	■	
MISSISSIPPI	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
MISSOURI	■	■		■	■	■	■		■		■					■
NEW JERSEY		■		■	■	■	■				■	■	■		■	
NEW YORK		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
TENNESSEE	■	■		■	■	■	■	■			■				■	
UTAH	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				■	■		■	■	
VIRGINIA	■										■					
WISCONSIN	■	■		■	■	■	■				■	■	■	■	■	

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