

# Hopes, Fears, & Reality

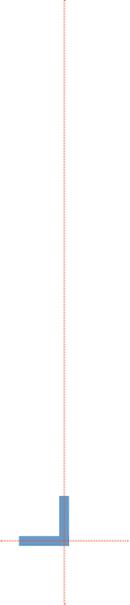


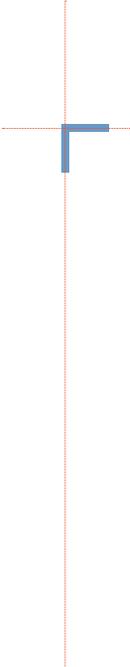
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN  
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN **2007**

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DECEMBER 2007





# About NCSRP

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.

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## CHAPTER I

# The National Charter School Landscape in 2007

*Jon Christensen and Robin J. Lake*

*Number of charters continues to grow, but rate of growth slows and growth concentrates in certain states.*

Like the death of Mark Twain, report of limits on the growth of charter schools appear premature. Even *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* in 2005 worried that future growth of charter schools would be “limited in many states by legislative caps on numbers and/or locations of charters.”<sup>1</sup>

“Under current state caps,” said the National Charter School Research Project two years ago, “there is room for just 725 more schools nationwide . . . Most states are clearly bumping up against their caps, making it likely that, barring legislative changes, charter school growth in these states will grind to a halt in the next few years.”<sup>2</sup>

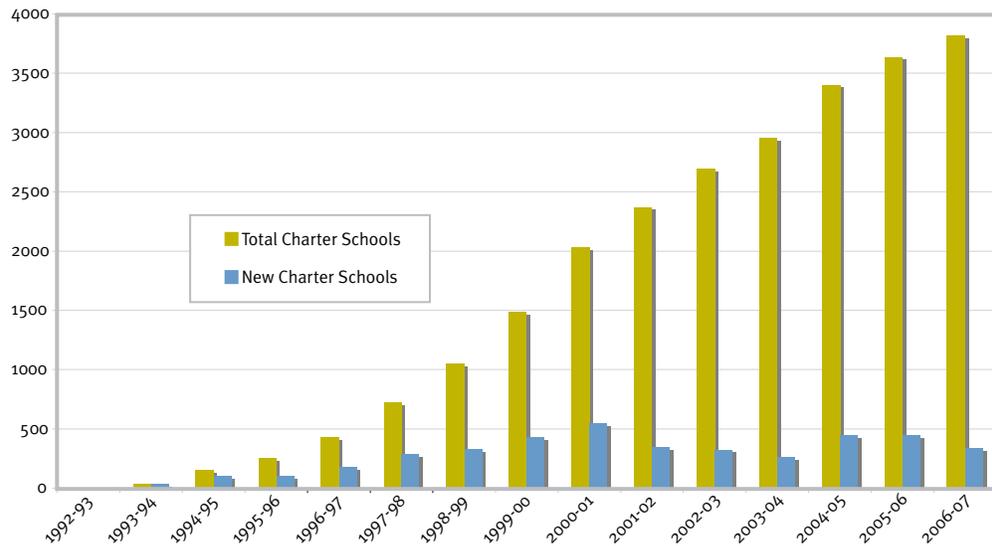
But in the last three years (2004–2007), more than 1,200 new charter schools have opened (see figure 1). In just the past year a single state, New York, doubled the number of charter schools authorized, from 100 to 200.<sup>3</sup> So, as cap limits are reached, it seems clear that state governments are reacting to provide some breathing space.

Nationally, hundreds of new charter schools still open each year. By the autumn of 2006, more than 3,800 charter schools were operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Charter schools now account for about 4 percent of total U.S. public schools and 2 percent of all public school students. Enrollment exceeds one million (1,119,599).<sup>4</sup>

## GROWTH RATES SLOWING

Still, the rate of new school openings has slowed. Some 336 new charter schools opened in 2006, down from the 450 that opened in each of the previous two years and well below the 2000–2001 high-water mark of 546 new charter schools (figure 1). Steady state growth in raw numbers has become hard to maintain.

**FIGURE 1. CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH: NEW & TOTAL CHARTER SCHOOLS, 1992–2006**



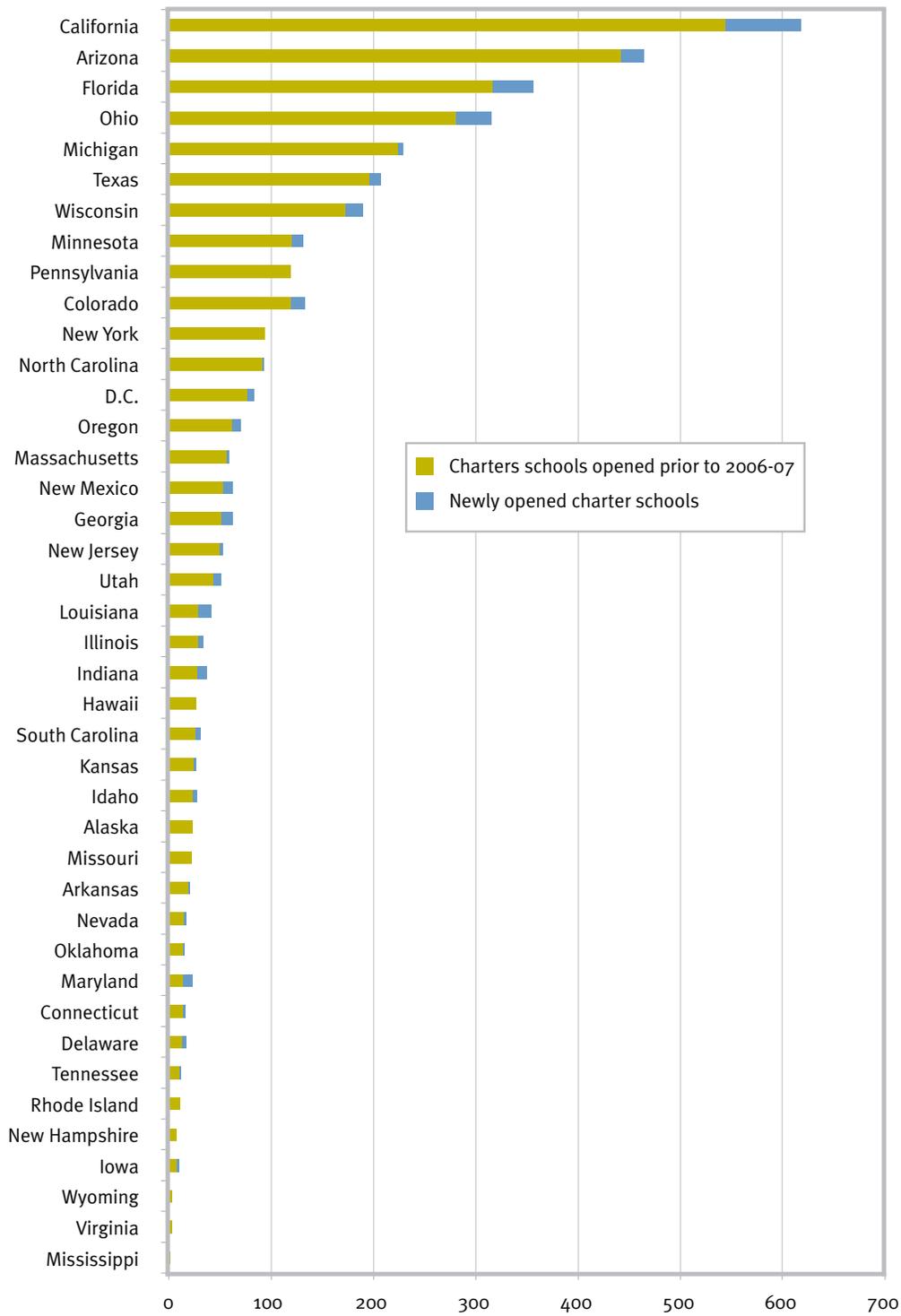
**SOURCE:** The numbers of charter schools from 1992-2004 are from the Center on Education Reform. The numbers of charter schools from 2004-2006 come from NCSRP's annual survey of state charter school offices conducted between June and September 2007.

As a consequence, while the number of charter schools increased ten-fold between 1994 and 1999 (increasing from 100 schools to slightly more than one thousand), the number increased just about two and a half times between 1999 and 2003 (from 1,050 to 2,695). Since then the rate of growth has slowed even more. Between 2004 and 2005, the number of schools operating grew by 7 percent, and the following year the growth rate declined to about 5 percent. However, as with all national charter school figures, national totals and averages conceal almost as much as they reveal. Important variations are included in those numbers.

## NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH CONCENTRATED IN CERTAIN STATES

As NCSRP reported in 2005, some states are experiencing exceptionally rapid growth, while others are growing more slowly or not at all. Figure 2 reveals the variation in charter school growth rates by state.

FIGURE 2. CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH BY STATE, 2006-07



The gap between “booming” states (such as California, Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin) and other states with charter laws is widening. The number of charter schools in California, Florida, and Ohio grew by about 11 or 12 percent in 2006–2007. Meanwhile, growth in two of the other states with the largest number of charter schools, Michigan, and Texas, has slowed considerably. Michigan, with 234 charter schools in 2006–2007, opened only 5 last year, while Texas, with 196 schools, opened just 11. By contrast, growth rates in Delaware and Maryland were robust, but on top of very low bases. Delaware, with just 13 charter schools, opened 4 new ones; and Maryland added 9 new charters to the 14 it had. Eight states (Mississippi, Virginia, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Missouri, Alaska, and Hawaii) added no new charter schools to the handful they already had.

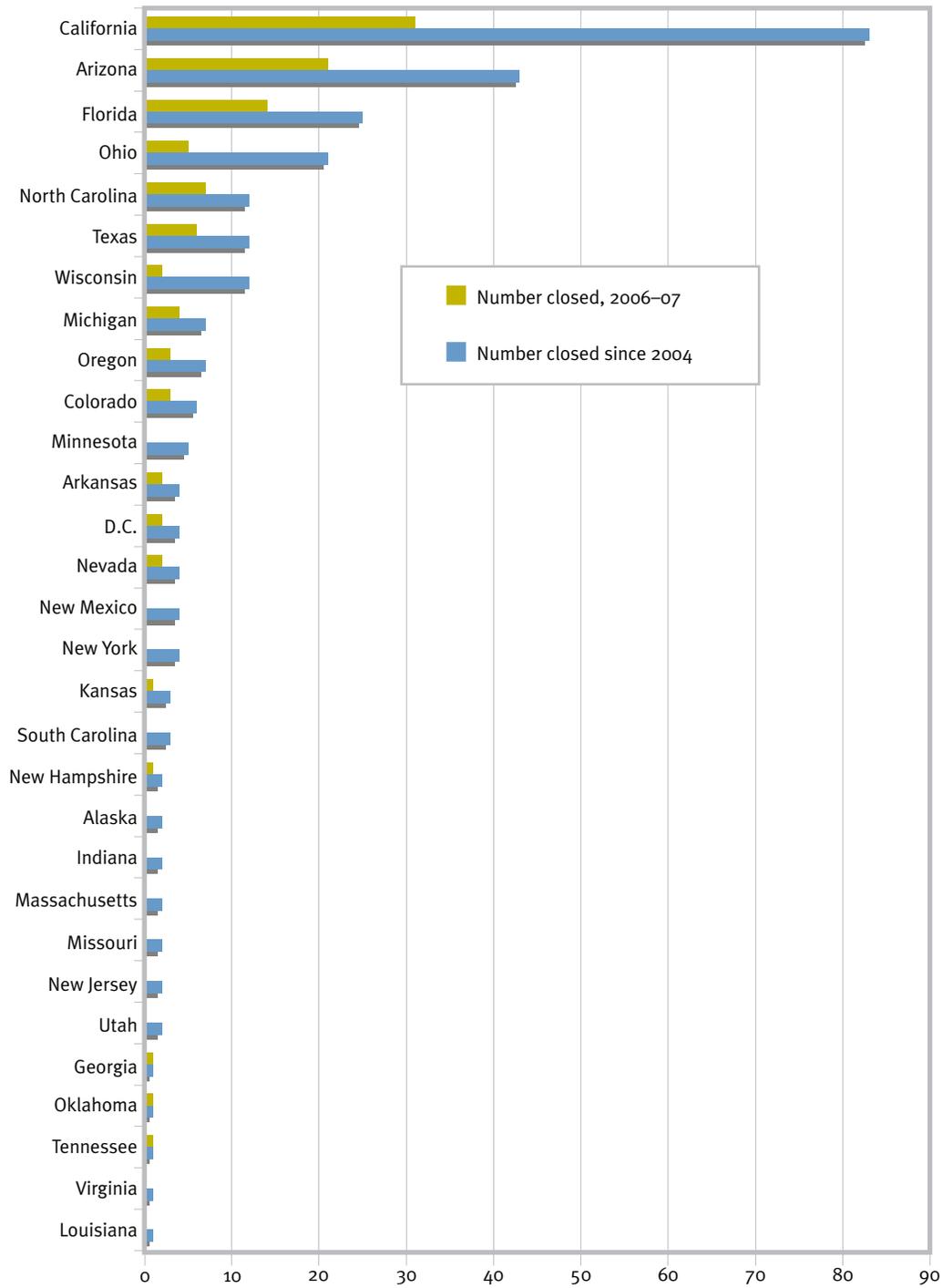
Most of the variation among states can be explained by restrictive laws and caps. But a number of other factors are also in play.<sup>5</sup> Artificially low per-pupil allotments, lack of funding for facilities (in the form of either capital grants or assistance with leases and rents), challenges in locating high-quality leaders or teachers, and lack of appropriate facilities are problems in many communities and contribute to slow growth.

#### **CHARTER SCHOOL CLOSURES REMAIN IMPORTANT ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM**

While the rate of increase has been declining, the number of charter schools closing each year has risen since NCSRP began tracking national charter statistics. While disappointing on one level, on another it is a sign of the success of the movement, perhaps even of its health. Charter schools are supposed to close if they do not meet needs in their communities. Although NCSRP does not track the reasons charter schools close, some likely fail due to inability to attract students or are closed by their authorizing agency for low performance or financial problems.

During the 2006–2007 school year, 107 charter schools closed, almost the same number as closed the year before (106), but a far higher number than the 65 reported for 2004–2005. Most closures occurred in states where new charter schools opened, suggesting the possibility that these states have highly active authorizers, engaged in considering new applicants as well as holding existing schools accountable. Consistent with past years, California, Arizona, and Florida closed a much higher number of schools in 2006–2007 than did other states, accounting for about 60 percent of all closures (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS CLOSED, BY STATE



NOTE: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming had no charter school closures during these years.

## NEW STATE LEGISLATION FOCUSED ON CAPS, OVERSIGHT AND FUNDING

Charter schools have always been legislative and political battlegrounds, with complex and frequently contentious legislative and electoral battles over whether to authorize charter schools, how many to allow, and to whom they are to be accountable.

In some ways, 2006–2007 was no different, including a highly contentious dispute over caps in New York.<sup>6</sup> Some 20 states reported passing laws affecting charter schools. Another six states reported that legislation was proposed but did not pass. Legislative activity affecting charters took place in some of the major charter states, such as Arizona, Florida, and Ohio, as well as in many states with a smaller charter presence.

On the other hand, new legislation this year mainly addressed issues of growth and increased effectiveness (for example, caps, oversight, and funding), not fundamental questions about the existence of charter schools. No states actively considered creating a charter school law for the first time or abolishing charter schools altogether.

Three states raised their caps on charter schools, though only New York added large numbers.<sup>7</sup> Iowa doubled its limit on charter schools from 10 to 20.

Legislation increasing charter school caps was considered but not passed in Illinois and North Carolina. Utah moved in the opposite direction, placing a limit on how much total charter school enrollment could grow each year. A number of states increased the amount of funding to charter schools, including Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Colorado and Indiana, on the other hand, acted to decrease charter school funding.

While the charter policy direction among states differs, the message seems to be pretty clear: a few years ago it was an open question of whether charter schools would remain part of the public school landscape; the issue now seems to be the conditions under which they will exist, not their existence itself.

## INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS

What is behind the numbers? One of the promises of charter schools was that they would staff and organize themselves differently. To expand our understanding of charters as schools, NCSRP examined data from the National Center on Education

Statistics 2003–2004 School and Staffing Survey (SASS). This database includes responses from principals and teachers in both traditional and charter public schools, permitting easy comparisons of their responses on a variety of factors.<sup>8</sup>

What emerges, in brief, is a picture in which charter schools are more likely to use non-traditional approaches to school structure and are more oriented to “at-risk” students. Charter schools are also likely to employ younger teachers, without traditional teaching credentials, who report that they work about the same number of hours as teachers in traditional schools, but seem to have more influence on school practice and policy. Based on responses in the SASS data, charter schools seem to be fulfilling some of their early promise for innovation around instruction, teacher hiring, and professional practice.

### NONTRADITIONAL CURRICULUM AND SCHOOL STRUCTURE

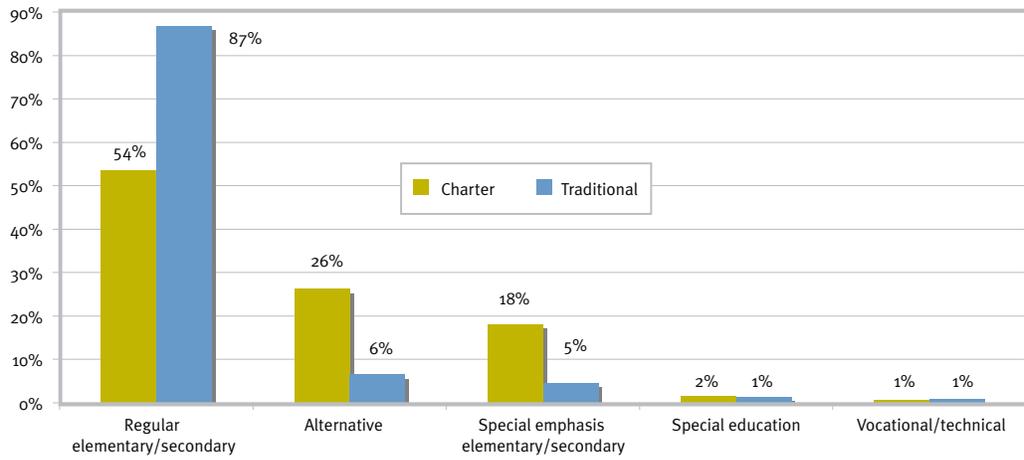
In 2005, NCSRP observed that charter schools appeared to structure themselves in different ways from traditional public schools. They were typically smaller and tended to offer unconventional grade configurations, such as K-8 and K-12, options not as common in traditional public schools.<sup>9</sup>

Only half of charter school principals surveyed identified the schools they led as “regular” elementary or secondary schools, compared to about 87 percent of traditional public schools. Charter school principals are also more than four times as likely to describe their schools as “alternative” schools, meaning they offer a nontraditional curriculum (26 percent versus 6 percent).<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, nearly four times as many charter principals identify their schools as special emphasis schools (for example, science or the performing arts) than do traditional school principals (18 percent versus 5 percent).

There is virtually no difference in the rates at which charter school principals and traditional public school principals report an emphasis on special education or vocational/technical education.

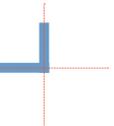
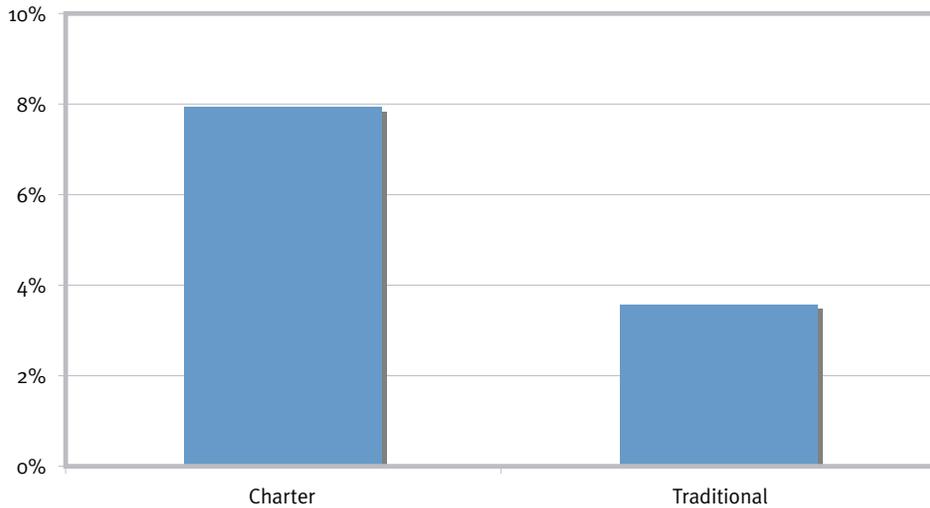
**FIGURE 4. HOW SCHOOLS IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES**



**GREATER FOCUS ON STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS**

One fear put forth by charter school opponents was that these schools would “cream” students in an effort to avoid dealing with students facing the most severe educational challenges. As NCSRП showed two years ago, charter schools nationally are mainly urban and serve proportionate numbers of minority and low-income students.<sup>11</sup> The SASS data show that charter schools are also more likely to target youth with severe behavioral problems (see figure 5).

**FIGURE 5. PROPORTION OF SCHOOLS SERVING PRIMARILY STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS**

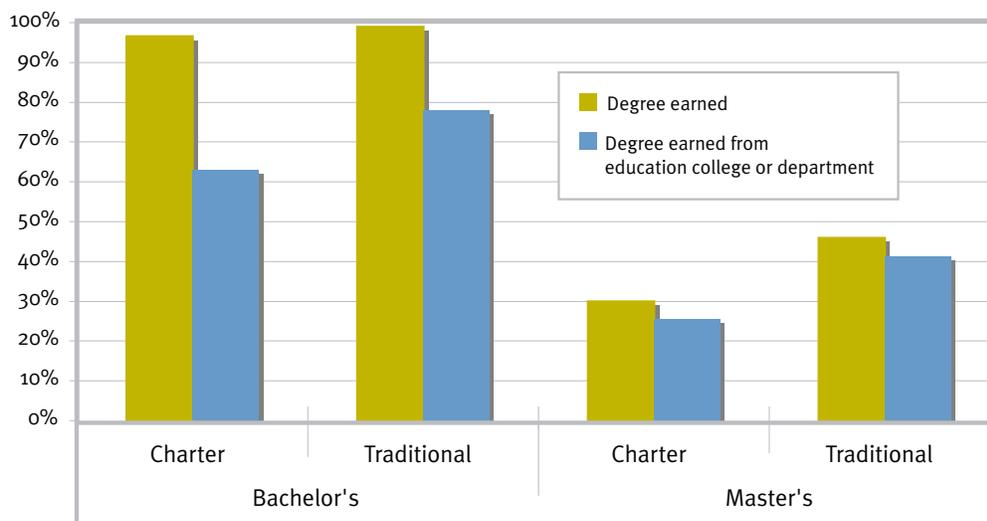


Compared to traditional public schools, charter schools are about twice as likely to have a school-wide focus on serving students with a history of difficulty in school, according to responding principals (8 percent versus 4 percent). Figure 5 refers to schools with a school-wide focus on students who have dropped out, have previously been suspended or expelled, or have had serious issues with behavior and acting out.

### CHARTER TEACHERS PRESENT DIFFERENT TEACHING CREDENTIALS

Most charter school laws provide at least some exemption from union hiring, pay, and work rules. Have charter schools taken advantage of that flexibility to draw from a different labor pool? It seems they have. Charter school teachers are less likely to have advanced degrees and less likely to have been trained in a college or school of education. Figure 6 provides the relevant data.

FIGURE 6. DEGREES EARNED BY TEACHERS



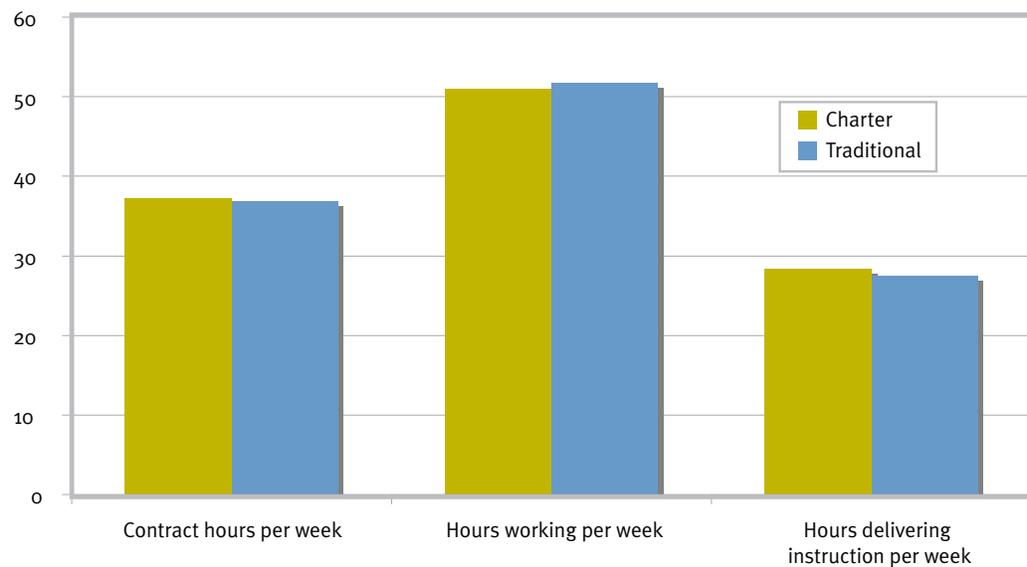
As figure 6 indicates, almost all teachers in charter schools (97 percent) and traditional public schools (99 percent) have earned a bachelor's degree. However, nearly half of traditional public school teachers (46 percent) hold a master's degree, compared to about a third of charter school teachers (30 percent). Teachers in traditional public schools are also considerably more likely to have earned their degrees in schools, colleges, or departments of education than charter school teachers: fully 78 percent of traditional public school teachers with a bachelor's degree earned their degree from an education program, compared to 63 percent of charter school teachers. Of those at the master's level, 41

percent of traditional public school teachers hold education degrees, compared to 26 percent of charter school teachers.

### WORKLOADS IN CHARTER AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS SIMILAR

Teachers in charter and other public schools report having similar workloads in terms of hours per week and the amount of time devoted to instruction (see figure 7).

**FIGURE 7. TEACHER WORKLOAD**



Both groups report that they are responsible for 37 total work hours per week. On average, charter school teachers report themselves responsible for delivering 28 hours of instruction each week, compared to 27 hours for traditional public school teachers. In terms of hours worked per week (including preparation, reviewing assignments, and homework), charter school teachers report 51 hours a week compared to 52 for traditional public school teachers.

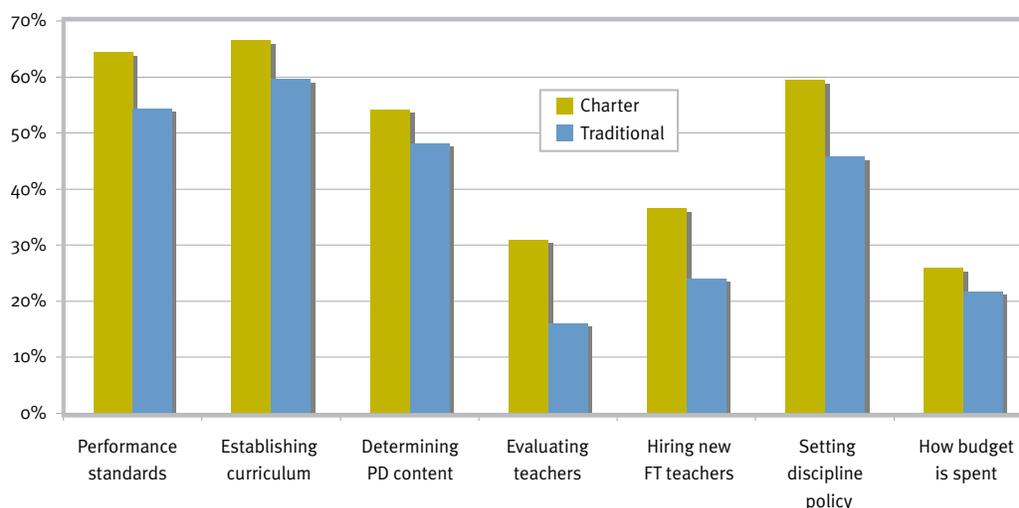
While the workload may be nearly identical, the staffing patterns differ somewhat. A separate analysis of the SASS responses indicates that charter school teachers have to contend with slightly higher student-teacher ratios (15.3:1 in charter schools and 14.7:1 in other public schools). Beyond that, they are somewhat more likely to be

part-time teachers: 91 percent of traditional public school teachers report that they are employed full-time as teachers, compared to 87 percent of charter school teachers.

### INFLUENCE ON SCHOOL POLICY AND PRACTICE HIGHER IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

What about the issue of teacher influence on curriculum, school practice, and policy? Here, charter schools clearly seem to be delivering on their promise, judging by SASS teacher responses. It is not that teachers in traditional public schools have no influence on policy and practice; it is that, across the board, from setting standards and curriculum to establishing discipline and budget policy, more charter school teachers report having an influence than do traditional public school teachers (see figure 8).

FIGURE 8. TEACHER INFLUENCE



In general, the patterns of influence by topic for school-wide issues are similar. Teachers at both kinds of schools tend to report influencing the same within-school topics in about the same order. They have, for example, a much greater voice in establishing curriculum than in setting budgets.

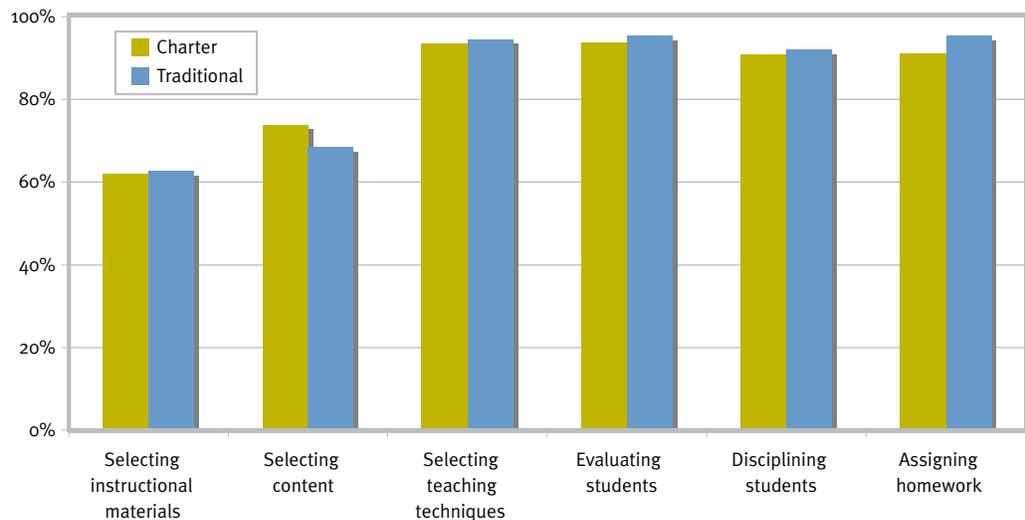
In some areas, teacher influence seems to be profound. At least 40 percent of both kinds of teachers report “moderate” or “great” influence over the same issues—setting performance standards, establishing curriculum, determining the content of professional development, and setting discipline policy. Typically, they report much less influence in areas such as hiring new full-time teachers and evaluating teachers.

Still, no matter the topic, charter school teachers consistently report having a great deal more influence over how their school is run than do teachers in other public schools. The greatest differences were in setting performance standards, establishing curriculum, hiring new teachers, and setting discipline policy. In a special analysis of rural charter school teachers, it is clear that they report having even greater levels of influence.

### SIMILAR INFLUENCE OVER CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Charter school teachers have about the same degree of influence over classroom practices as do teachers in traditional public schools (see figure 9). If 62 percent of charter school teachers report “moderate” or a “great deal” of influence over the selection of instructional materials, they are matched by 65 percent of traditional teachers. For charter school teachers, the proportion reporting influence over selecting teaching techniques (93 percent), evaluating students (94 percent), and disciplining students (91 percent) are practically mirrored in the traditional teacher responses. The largest differences concern selecting classroom content (74 percent of charter school teachers report influence, versus 68 percent of traditional public school teachers).

FIGURE 9. TEACHER INFLUENCE ON CLASSROOM PRACTICE



## CONCLUSIONS

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What seems to be clear from this review is that, as a national phenomenon, charter schools continue to grow, albeit at somewhat slower rates. The charter school model seems to be fairly well established as part of the public school landscape. Caps and funding restrictions hinder growth, but many states are loosening these constraints. Political and legislative strife is focused on issues of growth and effectiveness, not whether or not charter schools should exist.

What is also clear, however, is that the momentum for charter schooling is slow to moderate in most states where charter schooling is still considered a “sideline” reform, and very strong in a handful of states where charter schools are becoming a prominent feature of public education and a mainstream schooling option for urban families.

For the growing number of families who do have the option to attend charter schools, understanding what happens within the walls of the school is critical. This analysis shows that charter schools appear to be delivering on their promise of offering alternative approaches to instruction and targeting students who were falling through the cracks in the traditional system.

With regard to staffing, too, these new kinds of public schools are doing quite a few things differently. Based simply on the data available, it is hard to draw a distinction between how charter school teachers spend their time or how hard they work, compared to traditional public school teachers. However, on the basis of teacher responses, there seems to be little doubt that charter schools are hiring teachers with different credentials. Charter school teachers are more likely to lack traditional school of education backgrounds and less likely to hold master’s degrees. Charter schools are also more likely to experiment with unconventional school structures and to involve teachers more in school-based decisions. Charter schools, in short, appear to be fulfilling some of their early promise for innovation.

What accounts for these differences is hard to say. It may be that charter school principals and boards try to extend limited resources as far as possible and prefer to hire younger teachers, without graduate degrees, as a way to stretch payrolls. It may be that as the charter movement matures, and more young teachers complete graduate credits on a part-time basis, they will close the graduate degree gap. It could also be the case that, if charter leaders find themselves bound by the “highly qualified teacher” provisions

of *No Child Left Behind*, existing charter flexibility around teacher hiring and conditions of employment may be limited.

What is indisputable, however, is that charter schools have become a national policy fixture. Since first proposed in the 1980s by Albert Shanker, the late American Federation of Teachers president, and promoted by President Bill Clinton in 1994, charter schools have grown to approach 4,000 in number, enrolling more than a million students. Beyond establishing themselves, they have also demonstrated their ability to make good on at least some aspects of their promise of innovation.

The question now is whether charter schools can continue to grow and experiment or whether their growth has already peaked.

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#### NOTES

1. Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill, eds., *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2005*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2005).
2. Ibid.
3. Lisa Stulberg, *Beyond the Battle Lines: Lessons From New York's Charter Caps Fight*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).
4. Source: Figures on the number of charter schools, openings and closings, legislative activity, and student demographics come from NCSRP's annual survey of state charter school offices conducted between June and September 2007. Teacher and school characteristic comparisons of charter schools and other public schools are based on findings from the 2003-04 School and Staffing Survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics.
5. See for example Caroline Hoxby, "The Supply of Charter Schools," in *Charter Schools Against the Odds*, Paul T. Hill ed., (Stanford: Hoover Press, 2006) 15-44; National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, "School Choice: Doing It the Right Way Makes a Difference" (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); and James Harvey and Lydia Rainey, *High-Quality Charter Schools at Scale in Big Cities*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006).
6. Stulberg, *Beyond the Battle Lines*.
7. Fifty of the new slots are reserved for New York City, where the local teachers union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, is generally supportive of charters.
8. The comparison of charter and other public schools in the Schools and Staffing Survey is based on analysis including only states that had both traditional public schools and charter schools in the SASS sample. All results reflect data weighted by the final weight variable in the SASS dataset. Results are drawn from responses to the School Questionnaire (typically completed by school principals) and the Teacher Questionnaire. All indicators discussed in this paper are statistically significant at the 0.01 level or better, using Pearson's chi-square test.
9. *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*, 2005.

10. Conceivably, nomenclature creates a problem here. Although the survey provides brief descriptions of each type of school, a charter school principal faced with a question about whether the school is a “regular school” might reject that description on the grounds that charter schools are not “regular” schools. Similarly, the principal might take it at face value that the charter is an “alternative” school.
11. *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*, 2005, 9-14. In 2004-05, nearly a third of charter schools (30.5%) were located in big city districts, compared to 10.4% of public schools. About a quarter of charter schools (24%) were located in small towns or rural districts, compared to 45% of public schools. Overall, 58% of charter school students and 45% of traditional public school students in the same states belonged to a racial/ethnic minority group, but there was almost no difference in the minority composition of charter schools and the districts where they were geographically located.