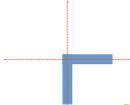


Hopes, Fears, & Reality

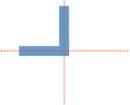


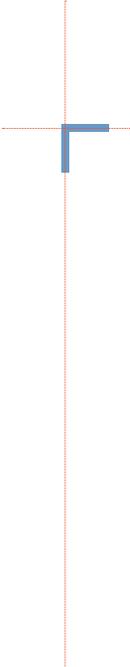
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN **2007**

Robin J. Lake, *Editor*

*National Charter School Research Project
Center on Reinventing Public Education
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington*

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.

We thank our current and past funders for their generous support:

- Achelis & Bodman Foundations
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Daniels Fund
- Doris & Donald Fisher Fund
- Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- The Heinz Endowments
- Jaquelin Hume Foundation
- Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
- Rodel Charitable Foundation
- U.S. Department of Education
- Walton Family Foundation

Our advisory board guides the selection and methodology of NCSRP research:

- Julian Betts, *University of California, San Diego*
- Susan Bodilly, *RAND Education*
- Anthony Bryk, *Stanford University*
- Lisa Coldwell O'Brien, *Coldwell Communications; New York Charter School Association*
- Abigail Cook, *Public Policy Institute of California*
- Jeffrey Henig, *Columbia University*
- Gisele Huff, *Jaquelin Hume Foundation*
- Christopher Nelson, *Doris & Donald Fisher Fund*
- Michael Nettles, *ETS*
- Greg Richmond, *National Association of Charter School Authorizers*
- Andrew Rotherham, *Education Sector; Progressive Policy Institute*
- Priscilla Wohlstetter, *University of Southern California*

CHAPTER 5

Safety and Order in Charter and Traditional Public Schools

Paul T. Hill and Jon Christensen

Many parents say they choose charter schools because of the climate they offer. Parents consider charters to be safer and more conducive to learning. What do we know about charter school climates?

The best evidence suggests that charter schools are indeed quieter and less disruptive than traditional public schools serving similar students, but it is hard to say why this is the case. Charter schools may simply provide safe havens for students and parents who care most intensely about their children's schooling experience. Or they may do something to change behavior. If so, what are they doing? And can other schools imitate them? This chapter suggests at least preliminary answers to these questions.

As an earlier report from the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) shows, charter schools, on average, experience fewer disruptions and incidents of violence.¹ A separate study of charter schools in one large urban district draws the same conclusions.² Figure 1 draws from NCSRP's analysis of teacher survey data on serious student misbehavior and the frequency of such behavior.

Charter schools, on average, experience fewer disruptions and incidents of violence.

FIGURE 1. TEACHER REPORTS OF THREATS TO PERSON OR PROPERTY

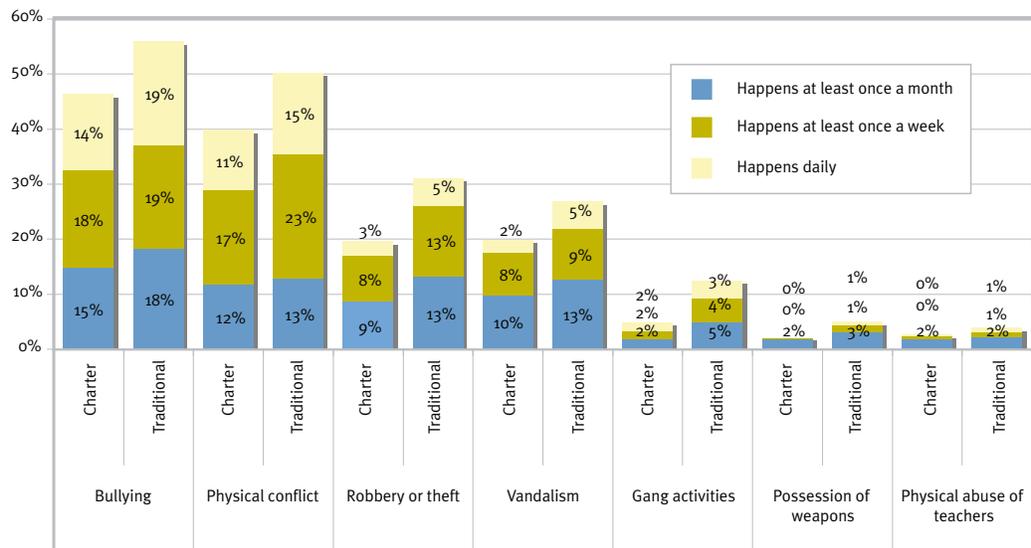
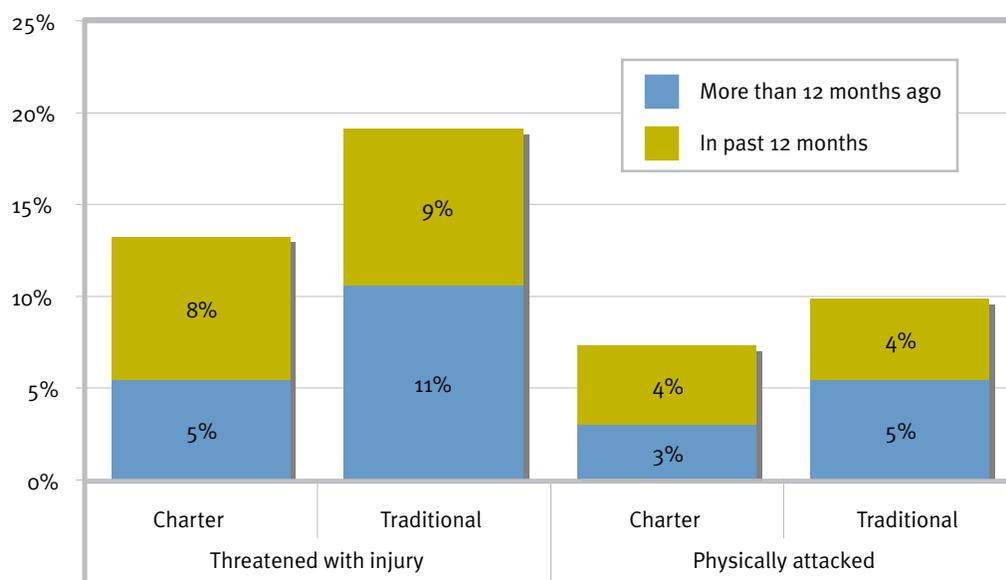


Figure 1 indicates that, according to teacher reports, serious threats to person and property are evident in both traditional public and charter schools. The figure also reveals that, across the board, teachers report these problems more frequently in traditional public schools than in charter schools. In both kinds of schools, vandalism, robbery or theft, physical conflict (fights), and bullying are the most frequently reported problems. Gang activities, possession of weapons, and physical abuse of teachers are reported less frequently in both kinds of schools. Still, it remains true that on every one of the behaviors listed in figure 1, teachers in traditional public schools report occurrences of these difficulties considerably more frequently than do charter teachers.

Surveys of principals produce similar results, although principals in general report fewer incidents than do teachers. Principals, whether in charters or traditional public schools, are not as close to the action as teachers, and they may have incentives to make the best case for their schools. As Ted Sizer suggested in his review of this chapter, principals sometimes discount student threats as posturing, not evidence of serious intention to harm students or other teachers.

The behaviors listed in figure 1 represent serious disciplinary issues. No one can take bullying, fighting, weapons possession or the like lightly. Beyond the issue of physical abuse of teachers listed in figure 1, teachers were asked whether a student from their current school had ever threatened them with injury or physically attacked them. These responses are presented in figure 2.

FIGURE 2. TEACHER REPORTS OF THREATS OR ATTACKS AT CURRENT SCHOOL

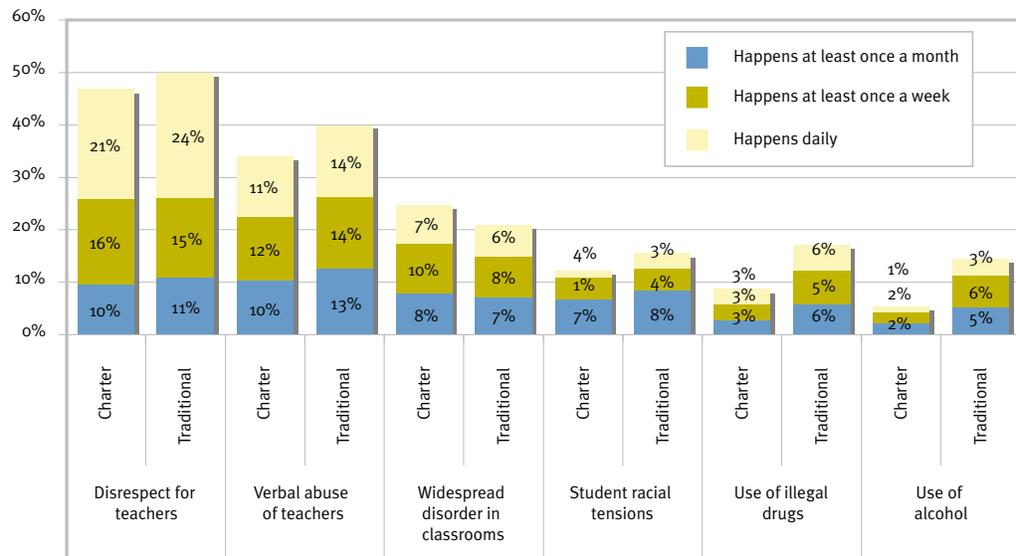


The results are sobering. As figure 2 reveals, one in seven charter school teachers and nearly one in five traditional public school teachers reported receiving threats from students (sometimes in the last 12 months, sometimes more than a year ago) in their current school. What about physical attack? About one in sixteen charter teachers and one in nine traditional public school teachers reported actually being attacked, with the results in this case about evenly divided between attacks in the last 12 months and attacks a year or more ago. The survey questions about attacks on teachers are broad enough to encompass everything from light physical contact to serious assault. Based on the survey data alone it is impossible to say how serious the reported attacks are, or whether more forceful attacks are more prevalent in one kind of school or the other. Yet any teacher reporting that they had been attacked is cause for concern.

Figures 1 and 2 relate to behaviors that everyone would agree are completely unacceptable in any school or classroom. In addition to incidents such as those, teachers clearly have to deal with a host of less violent behavioral challenges—ranging from disorder in the classroom to verbal abuse of teachers. The survey also explored those issues. Teacher responses are presented in figure 3.

One in seven charter school teachers and nearly one in five traditional public school teachers reported receiving threats from students (sometimes in the last 12 months, sometimes more than a year ago) in their current school.

FIGURE 3. TEACHER REPORTS OF BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS



In general, figure 3 reveals that, based on teacher reports, disrespect and verbal abuse of teachers along with widespread disorder in the classroom are the most frequently cited issues in both kinds of schools. At least 20 percent or more of teachers in both kinds of schools reported such problems at least once a month. By comparison, student racial tension and use of illegal drugs and alcohol are less common, according to teachers. Across the indicators displayed in figure 3, teachers in traditional public schools report more problems than charter school teachers in five of the six indicators. Only classroom disorder is reported to be more common in charter schools than in traditional public schools.³

ARE CHARTER SCHOOL CLIMATE RESULTS SOLELY DUE TO STUDENT SELECTION?

Teachers in traditional public schools report more problems than charter school teachers.

The question naturally arises: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Are teacher reports indicating that charter schools generally seem to be safer and more orderly a result of student selection? Or are these results something charter schools establish through their actions?⁴

It is hard to say, absent the sort of close scrutiny that the Center on Reinventing Public Education has sponsored around claims about charter schools' effects on student

achievement. Judging whether charter schools are safer or more orderly is a lot like determining whether they are more effective for students.

There are many ways to get the wrong answer. Just looking at school-wide data (the only kind now available on safety and climate nationwide) can hide important considerations. For example, if charter schools admit or attract a different group of students—say those who have always behaved better in school than others of similar age and background—then results on safety and climate could be caused by student selection, not by the schools themselves. If, on the other hand, the students in the two kinds of schools are roughly or nearly identical in terms of background and prior behavior, the attractiveness of charter schools in terms of safety and student behavior is likely to be a result of something the schools themselves are doing.

As in studies of student achievement, definitive research requires close attention to the backgrounds and performance of individual students. Ideally, researchers would be able to compare individual students' deportment before and after enrolling in a charter school. The results of such an analysis would be invaluable. Unfortunately, such an analysis is impossible at this time because districts do not report detailed student-based records on disruptive behavior (and may in fact be precluded from doing so by federal requirements governing student privacy).

It might be possible to assign students at random between charter and regular public schools, and track their subsequent behavior in school. To date, such a study has not been completed. The cost of such research would be high because it would require detailed observation of student behavior in many schools.

For reasons explained in the next section, such studies, even if done rigorously, might not be able to establish definitively whether the teacher reports discussed here are a consequence of student selection or of charter school actions. Indeed, it is highly likely that both factors are simultaneously at work.

CLIMATE: A JOINT RESULT OF PREFERENCES AND SCHOOL ACTIONS

Even if we knew that students' behavior changed after entering charter schools, it would be difficult to pull apart the results of student characteristics and preferences from

As in studies of student achievement, definitive research requires close attention to the backgrounds and performance of individual students.

school actions. Even if current charter school students were just as disruptive as other students in their former schools, they might have been disruptive largely to avoid being bullied. Given the chance to start over in a charter school with classmates disinclined to be disruptive, such students might tone down their behavior considerably, giving charter schools superior results on climate and safety. In this example, charter schools would have contributed to better student behavior, if only by giving students a chance to realize their own preferences.

In a similar vein, student behavior might change, not because of students' preferences but those of their parents. The switch to charter schools could strengthen parents' hands, allowing them to say, "This is a safer and quieter place and you are not going to be the one to disrupt it."

The late James Coleman, a sociologist, illustrated how student and family preferences can combine with school actions to produce an orderly climate.⁵ As he explained, most parents want their children to be in safe, quiet schools and most students want to avoid disruptions or threats from others.⁶ But even a child of such parents is likely to misbehave at some time or other. When a child misbehaves, his or her parents often want an exception made, to prevent a suspension, expulsion, or blemish on the child's record.⁷ In that case, which arises in every school, the school head's actions are crucial. School leaders who make the requested exceptions often find themselves forced to excuse other infractions as well, so that in the long run actual standards of safety and order fall below the standards all the parents want. On the other hand, school leaders who enforce the school's standards might annoy the parents who are pleading for an exception, but they keep faith with the other parents and do not encourage future appeals.

As Coleman explained, parents are unlikely to get as safe and orderly a school environment as they think appropriate, unless that school helps them attain their preferences. On the other hand, a school probably cannot forcibly maintain a quieter environment than parents want. Moreover, even if a school expels students who constantly violate standards of behavior, the school still needs to say "no" to the remaining parents when they seek exceptions.

The process Coleman describes has little to do with "creaming." If the vast majority of parents and students want safer schools than those now available to them, and seize the chance to cooperate with a school that promised such an environment, there is virtually

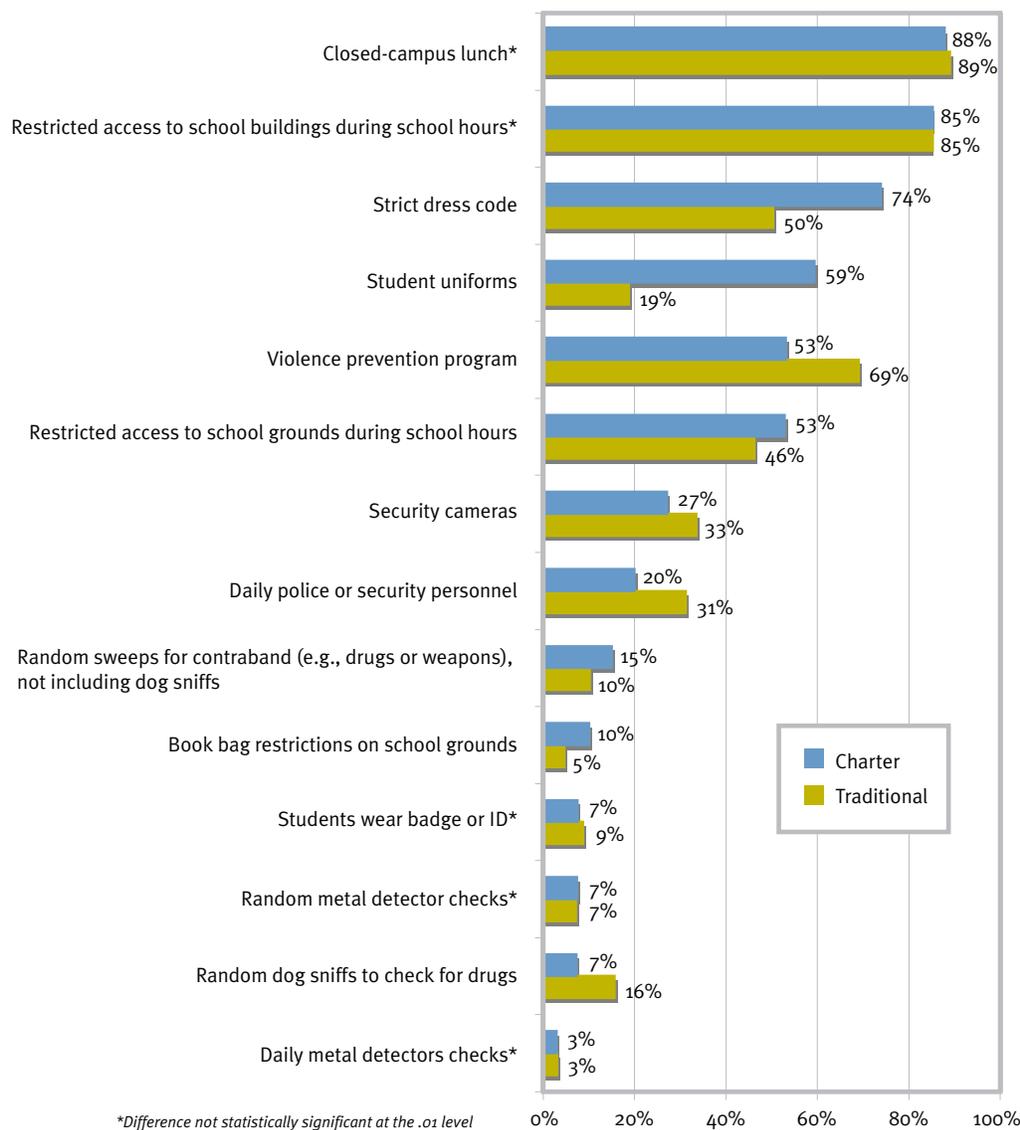
The switch to charter schools could strengthen parents' hands, allowing them to say, "This is a safer and quieter place and you are not going to be the one to disrupt it."

no limit to the number of students who would behave better under the right circumstances, or of parents who would support such schools.

WHAT CHARTER SCHOOLS ACTUALLY DO

Theory aside, do charter schools do anything noticeably different from traditional public schools with regard to promoting safety or emphasizing discipline and order? The 2003–2004 School and Staffing Survey provided useful data from school principals that can be used to illuminate this question. Figure 4 provides the results.

FIGURE 4. PRINCIPAL REPORTS OF SCHOOL SECURITY POLICIES



Theory aside, do charter schools do anything noticeably different from traditional public schools with regard to promoting safety or emphasizing discipline and order?

As figure 4 shows, charters and traditional public schools emphasize different school security policies. Traditional public schools are more likely than charters to offer violence prevention programs, provide for the daily presence of police and security on campus, and mount random dog sweeps to detect drugs. Charter schools, on the other hand, are considerably more likely to enforce strict dress codes and require uniforms.

If charter schools do anything special about safety and order it might well be, as Coleman suggested, based not on specific programs but on the basic rules of behavior set on admission and enforced in daily transactions among students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

The fact that charter schools are smaller than public schools on average is also probably an advantage.⁸ Small schools make it easier for adults to know individual students and make student actions more visible. Most adults in small schools work as generalists, not specialists, so they cannot defer handing disruptions to deans or discipline specialists.⁹ As table 1 shows, charter schools are safer and more orderly than regular public schools of the same size.

Charter schools are safer and more orderly than regular public schools of the same size.

TABLE 1. TEACHER REPORTS OF DAILY, WEEKLY, OR MONTHLY INCIDENTS BY SCHOOL SIZE

		Fewer than 200 students	200 - 749 students	750 - 1199 students	1200 or more students	
Threats to Property	Bullying	Charter	43%	48%	43%	52%
		Traditional	46%	53%	59%	60%
	Physical conflict	Charter	43%	37%	37%	57%
		Traditional	50%	44%	53%	59%
	Robbery or theft	Charter	15%	19%	18%	42%
		Traditional	20%	21%	33%	50%
	Vandalism	Charter	15%	19%	19%	36%
		Traditional	20%	18%	29%	44%
	Gang activities	Charter	8%	4%	2%	7%
		Traditional	18%	6%	12%	27%
Possession of weapons	Charter	2%	3%	1%	3%	
	Traditional	4%	2%	4%	12%	
Physical abuse of teachers	Charter	1%	4%	1%	3%	
	Traditional	11%	4%	3%	5%	
Behavioral Problems	Disrespect for teachers	Charter	56%	45%	42%	49%
		Traditional	46%	42%	51%	65%
	Verbal abuse of teachers	Charter	42%	32%	31%	35%
		Traditional	43%	30%	42%	57%
	Widespread disorder in classrooms	Charter	28%	25%	22%	18%
		Traditional	25%	15%	25%	29%
	Student racial tensions	Charter	11%	12%	9%	23%
		Traditional	18%	10%	16%	27%
	Use of illegal drugs	Charter	13%	7%	6%	16%
		Traditional	19%	5%	14%	45%
Use of alcohol	Charter	8%	4%	3%	16%	
	Traditional	15%	4%	12%	39%	

LEARNING MORE ABOUT SAFETY AND ORDER

Given the difficulty of making valid comparisons between charter and traditional public schools, there is little hope that a study can prove definitively whether charter schools are intrinsically safer and more orderly. There will always be questions about student selection, accuracy of reporting, and the special advantages of schools of choice. However, there is a lot more to be learned about how school leaders (in charter and traditional schools) can use their leverage in hiring, student counseling, parent relations,

and day-to-day school management to promote safety and order. This would require close observation of schools in action, not just national surveys.

Coleman argued that principals in highly bureaucratic school systems have incentives to accommodate individual parents' demands for exceptions, lest controversy cause trouble for the principal with the district central office or school board. On the other hand, he argued, heads of more independent schools have incentives not to accommodate such demands but to keep faith with the rest of the parents, who want to maintain the school's department standards.

Much depends on the incentives created for school leaders. Chartering creates good incentives, but so can school district leaders if they support school heads who refuse to make compromises about school climate. In Coleman's analysis, the key to safety and order is not careful selection of children or parents according to their preferences, but careful management of school culture. What matters is how schools enlist the natural support that exists for a positive climate and respond to threats when they occur.

Charter schools have opportunities and incentives to use this leverage, but they are not the only schools that do. Traditional public schools, particularly those competing against charter schools for students, have strong incentives to improve school climate. Moreover, as the data reported here reveal, charter schools can improve also, especially in avoiding classroom disruptions. All schools could learn from the example of the charter schools that have dealt well with these issues.

Safety and order do not cause student learning, but their absence can prevent it. Parents are right to seek safe, orderly schools, and school leaders have a responsibility to do all they can to manage school climates in children's interest.

IMPLICATIONS

Future research on safety and order in charter schools can provide ideas that all schools can use. School districts should also learn from charter experience and support, not abandon, principals who take risks to maintain school climate. Finally, state legislatures should think twice about granting demands to regulate charter schools or force them to follow onerous student discipline requirements. Charter schools demonstrate that public schools can provide the kinds of climates families want and need. The ability to offer

*Safety and order do not
cause student learning,
but their absence can
prevent it.*

parents that kind of climate might be compromised if officials force charter school leaders to avoid controversy at all costs.

NOTES

1. Jon Christensen, *School Safety in Urban Charter and Traditional Public Schools*, NCSRP working paper #2007-1 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, March 2007). That report, and this chapter, was developed around data from the National Center on Education Statistics' 2003-04 School and Staffing Survey (SASS). See Gregory A. Strizek et al., *Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals, and School Libraries in the United States: 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), <http://nces.ed.gov/Pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006313>.
2. Scott A. Imberman, *Achievement and Behavior in Charter Schools: Drawing a More Complete Picture*, Occasional Paper #142 (New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, 2007).
3. Principals' responses on this issue differed. Charter school principals reported widespread classroom disorder happening less frequently than principals in traditional public schools. This may be an area in which teachers are closer to the classroom reality than principals.
4. Imberman (2007) examines these same issues and concludes that both student characteristics and attributes of the schools themselves contribute to the lower incidence of disruptive behavior in charter schools.
5. James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
6. This argument is backed up by Public Agenda findings about parents' preferences for safety and order. African-American parents, whose children are more likely to attend more dangerous and turbulent schools, nonetheless have stronger preferences for safety and order than other parents. See Steve Farcas and Jean Johnson, *Time To Move On: African-American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools* (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 1990).
7. In effect, parents reveal one kind of preference—about the environment they want for their children—when they choose a school, and quite a different preference—about the conditions under which they want their child to be punished—when a disciplinary issue arises. This would not be news to the heads of parochial and elite private schools.
8. In Imberman's data (2007) the small size of start-up schools explains most of the charter school advantage with respect to student behavior.
9. As reviewer Ted Sizer notes, larger schools can gain a comparable advantage by creating smaller, more intimate sub-groupings for student advising and some coursework.

Charter schools demonstrate that public schools can provide the kinds of climates families want and need. The ability to offer parents that kind of climate might be compromised if officials force charter school leaders to avoid controversy at all costs.