

## CHAPTER 2

# How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction

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## INTRODUCTION

Charter schools promised to be different and most people assumed they would be. Since these new schools enjoyed a “blank slate” and a great deal of autonomy over school design, observers expected to see charters experimenting with everything from curriculum to organizational structures. There were good reasons to break the mold of traditional public schools, not the least of which was that traditional schools had failed many students, especially low-income minority students. However, there are also reasons why charter schools might resemble traditional public schools. The image of a “good school” is deeply entrenched in the minds of American families—especially for high schools, the launching pad into college or decent work opportunities. For schools competing for students, offering programs that met parents’ expectations could be just as critical as the schools’ ability to offer something different.

So, some 15 years into the charter movement we still need to ask, how different are charter schools? To explore this question NCSRP analyzed a national survey of public school programs and practices and a sample of charter school proposals approved by authorizers. The research shows that charter schools differ from traditional public schools in several ways. Specifically, charter schools are more likely to:

- Be focused around specific instructional designs;
- Offer different grade configurations and smaller classes, spend more time on instruction every day, and stay open more days per year;

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- Customize support for struggling students;
- Offer college-prep coursework instead of school-to-work programs for high-minority student populations.

## NATIONAL DATA ON SCHOOL PROGRAMS

The research for this chapter primarily used the 2003–2004 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to learn how charter schools and traditional public schools compare in such curricular and program offerings as after-school programs and English Language Learners (ELL) mainstreaming. The SASS is a nationally representative survey of public and private schools; the 2003–2004 survey is the most recent survey available. It is conducted every four years by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The SASS is an important and useful nationally representative data source because it allows researchers to compare charter schools and traditional public schools in the same data set. However, the programmatic questions are not as detailed or as deep as would be ideal for this type of study.<sup>1</sup>

To supplement the SASS survey analysis, we also reviewed a sample of 38 charter school applications from California, North Carolina, and Texas to gain a richer view of how charter schools may be addressing elements of their education programs.

### Accounting for the basic differences between charter and traditional public schools

It is known that charter schools differ from traditional public schools in their location and size. Charter schools tend to be located in urban areas and also tend to be smaller than their neighboring traditional public schools. Schools in urban contexts have not only different opportunities and resources but also serve different types of student populations than schools in rural towns and small cities. To account for these differences, this chapter presents results from a restricted sample limited to only schools that enroll fewer than 750 students located in urban centers and their surrounding fringe. However, since small school size may be a deliberate organizational strategy, we occasionally lift the size restriction and report any substantial differences between the small school sample and the sample that includes schools of all sizes.

Even when differences in location and size are accounted for, the fact remains that charter schools tend to serve different student populations than traditional public schools. For example, table 1 shows that, relative to traditional public schools, charter schools even in this restricted sample serve more minority students and students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch. When relevant, NCSR accounts for these differences across sectors by focusing on schools with the largest share of low-income and minority students.

**TABLE 1. BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHARTER AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS	
	Charter	Traditional public
Minority enrollment**	56.44%	43.01%
Free/reduced-price lunch**†	53.02%	44.86%

**NOTE:** Includes only schools in urban or urban fringe areas serving fewer than 750 students

\*\* Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

† Includes only schools participating in the free lunch program

## FINDINGS

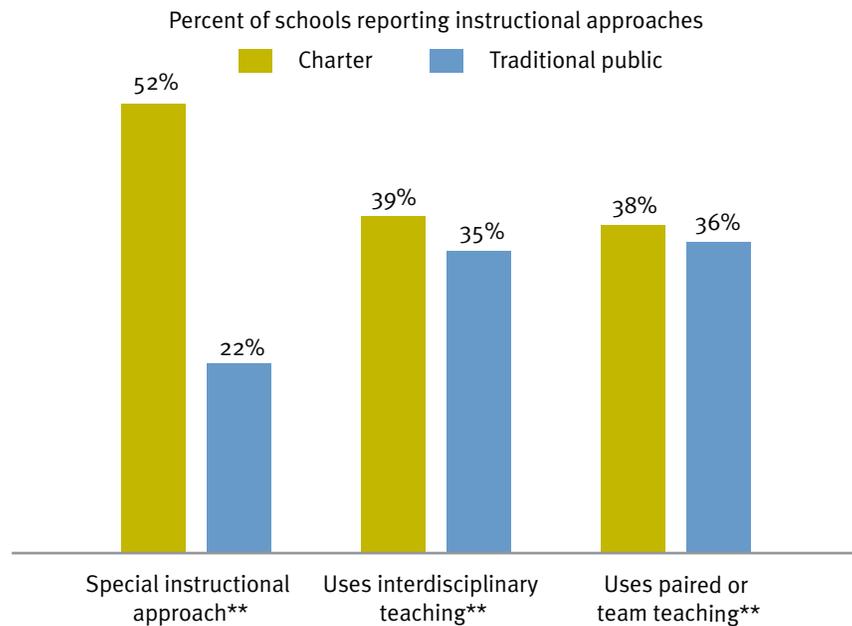
A student’s experience in school is largely driven by the school’s instructional approach, classroom and school structures, curriculum, and support services. Collectively, these aspects of the school account for the amount of time students spend in school, how they spend their time in school, the material they learn, and how they interact with teachers. The discussion below details the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools in four key aspects of school programs: instructional approaches, classroom and school structures, curriculum (specifically high school curriculum), and student support services.

### FINDING #1: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY THAN TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO EMPLOY A FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

**INSTRUCTION:** Charter school founders must define their instructional approach in their charter school applications, forcing them to think in relatively concrete terms about how they will approach teaching and learning in their school. It is not surprising, then, to see that almost half of charter schools report using a “special instructional approach” (for example, Montessori, self-paced instruction, open education, ungraded classrooms<sup>2</sup>). The prevalence of specialized instruction in charters is well above the 22 percent of urban traditional public schools reporting the use of such a model (see figure 1).

There is no evidence from the SASS, however, that charter schools break dramatically from the traditional discipline-based approach (for example, courses in traditional subjects such as history, mathematics, etc.) to instruction. Just slightly more charter schools than traditional public schools report using interdisciplinary teaching—a strategy that provides students with cross-disciplinary instruction and which is useful when a small staff must teach a full academic curriculum. Similarly, just a slightly higher proportion of charter schools employ team-teaching methods.

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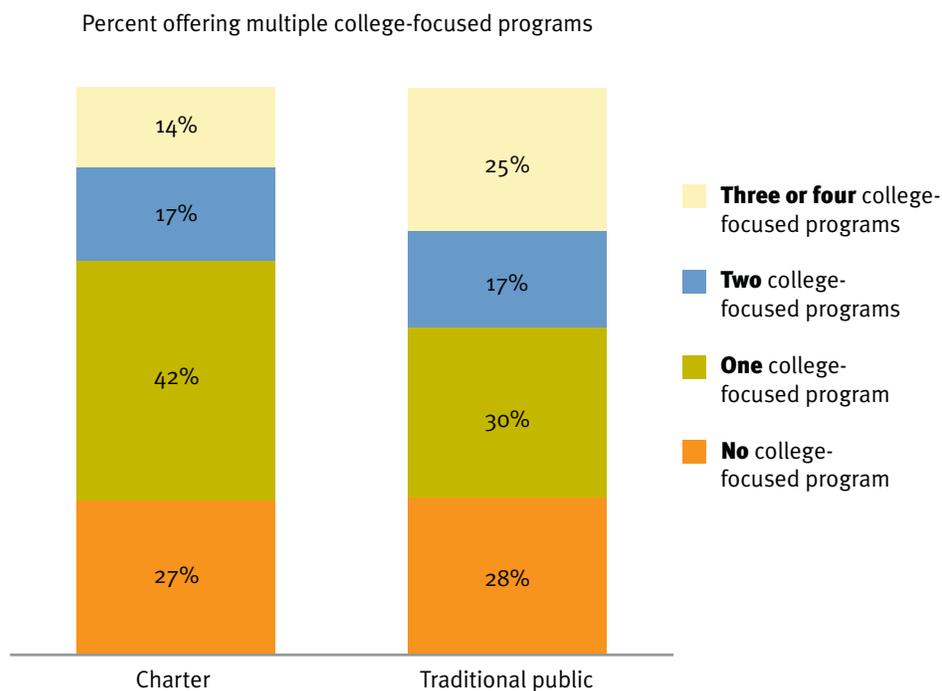
**FIGURE 1. CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MORE FOCUSED AND STEPPING OUTSIDE THE NORM**

\*\*Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

NOTE: Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

**CURRICULUM:** The SASS survey offers some insights into the presence of college-focused and school-to-work learning curricula in high schools.

Charter schools appear just as likely to offer some form of college-focused curriculum (73 percent in charter schools versus 73 percent in traditional public schools), but they are more likely to create their own college-prep programs (for example, partnerships with local community colleges or honors classes) than to use costlier national programs such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate curriculum. However, charter schools, perhaps in keeping with a more focused instructional program, tend to offer fewer college-focused curriculum options to students. While 31 percent of charter schools report offering more than one of these college-focused programs, 42 percent of traditional public schools report doing so (figure 2).

**FIGURE 2. CHARTER SCHOOLS OFFER FEWER OPTIONS IN EACH SCHOOL**

**NOTE:** Includes only schools serving high school aged students and those with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. All differences are significant at a 95% level of confidence.

The charter applications that NCSRP reviewed show that charters tailor their college-prep programs to student needs with a combination of individualized instruction, college-prep and study-skills curriculum, extended school days or school years, and tutoring and counseling to get their students college ready.

### **FINDING #2: CHARTER SCHOOLS OFFER NON-TRADITIONAL GRADE AND DEPARTMENT CONFIGURATIONS, SMALLER CLASSES, GREATER TIME ON TASK**

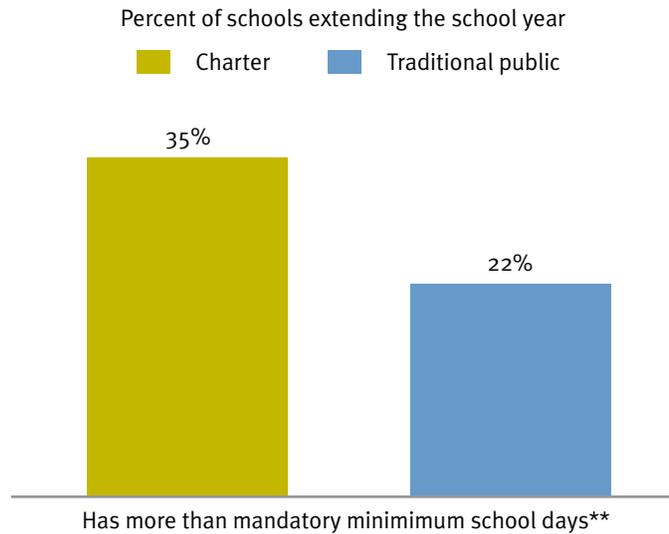
Building a school from scratch, as most charter schools do, offers school founders the opportunity to completely rethink the way they organize their schools and classrooms. Many charter schools take advantage of this blank slate to do several things differently—everything from extending the school day and calendar to moving away from traditional classroom organization.

**MORE TIME ON TASK:** First, the chances are significantly greater that a charter school will have a longer school year than a traditional public school (see figure 3). Almost 35

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percent of charter schools reported a longer school year than the mandated minimum; just 22 percent of traditional public schools report exceeding the minimum number of calendar days.

**FIGURE 3. CHARTER SCHOOLS STRETCH THE SCHOOL YEAR**



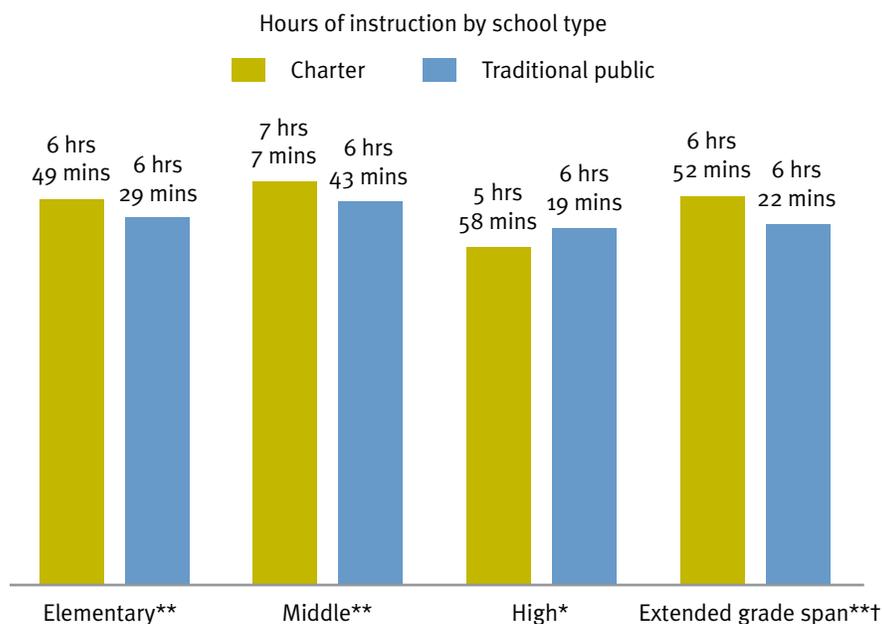
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Not only do charter schools extend the number of days, but at the elementary and middle school levels, they also extend the school day itself (see figure 4). At the elementary and middle school levels, the average charter school day was almost 20 minutes longer than the average day in traditional public schools. Over a typical 180-day school year, that alone would add up to an additional 60 hours of instruction. By adding five or ten days to the school year, elementary and middle school charters provide an additional 100–200 minutes of instruction.

What is true at the elementary and middle school levels is not true at the high school level. In fact, the relationship is reversed: the charter high school day is about 20 minutes *shorter* than the average traditional public high school day.

**FIGURE 4. CHARTER SCHOOLS CHANGE THE LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL DAY**



\*Indicates that difference is significant at a 90% level of confidence

\*\*Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

† Extended grade spans include schools that serve grade spans that extend beyond the traditional grade spans for elementary, middle, or high schools. Examples of extended grade spans include K-12 or 7-12.

**NOTE:** Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

**MODIFYING CLASS SIZE:** Charter schools not only change school organization and time on task, they also modify class size (see figure 5). At the elementary and high school levels, charter schools tend to offer students smaller classes. Charter elementary school classes, on average, have two fewer students per class than do elementary classes in traditional schools; at the high school level, they have three fewer students on average. On the other hand, at the middle school level (the least common grade span among charter schools), traditional schools tend to have one less student in the average-sized class than charter schools.

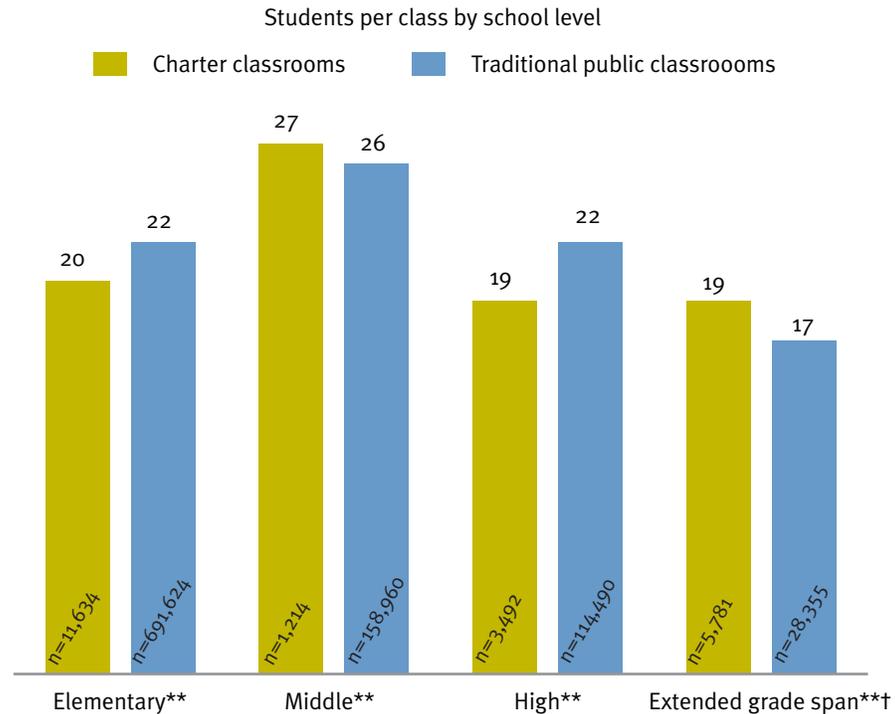
In less common grade configurations (“extended grade spans”), traditional public schools tend to have two fewer students per class than charter schools. These are schools serving grade spans that do not correspond with traditional grade structures for elementary, middle, and high schools—for example, K-12 or 7-12 schools.

It is important to note that this analysis, to ensure a fair comparison, included only schools with fewer than 750 students and excluded classrooms where one might expect

*Charter schools not only change school organization and time on task, they also modify class size.*

to see exceptionally small class sizes. Without the size restriction, charter and traditional public schools appear to have approximately the same average class size.

**FIGURE 5. CHARTER SCHOOLS LOWER CLASS SIZE FOR ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**



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† Extended grade spans include schools that serve grade spans that extend beyond the traditional grade spans for elementary, middle, or high schools. Examples of extended grade spans include K-12 or 7-12.

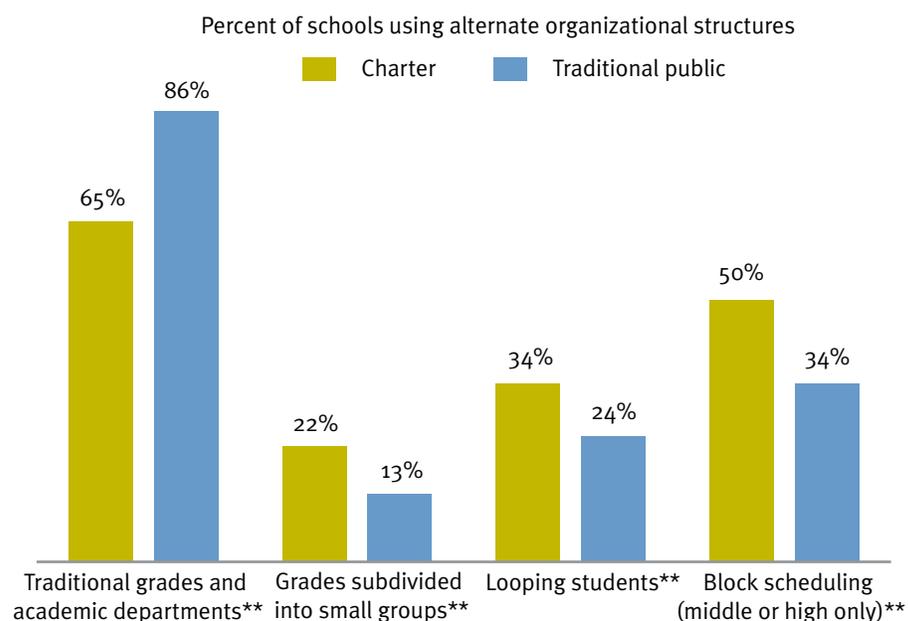
**NOTE:** Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. Average class sizes were calculated using teacher-reported data from the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey Teacher Questionnaire. The analysis included teachers from schools in central cities, or the urban fringe of a central city, and excluded special education teachers and teachers in unconventional classroom structures (e.g. pull-out classes, team teaching, or elementary school enrichment such as physical education). All results have been weighted to be nationally representative of teachers in charter schools and traditional public schools.

*Many charter schools move further outside the norm in the ways they organize time and grade levels, as well as their students and teachers.*

**NON-TRADITIONAL GRADE AND DEPARTMENT CONFIGURATIONS:** Many charter schools, as shown in figure 6, move further outside the norm in the ways they organize time and grade levels, as well as their students and teachers. Charter schools are less likely to report using the traditional grade and department structures. As many as one-third of small urban and urban fringe charter schools say they do not organize their students into traditional grades and departments. By contrast, only 13 percent of similar traditional public schools say the same.

Relative to traditional public schools, charter schools are also more likely to subdivide their grades into teams or houses, while students in charter elementary programs are considerably more likely to spend multiple years with the same teachers—a practice known as “looping.” In addition, charter high school students, relative to their traditional public school peers, are more likely to take classes on a block schedule, which allows for extended instructional periods for classes (typically about 90 minutes). When the sample is no longer restricted to small schools, there is very little difference in the relative shares of schools using these alternative structures, suggesting that schools of 750 students or fewer are making these choices for programmatic reasons and not because they suit the school’s size.

**FIGURE 6. CHARTER SCHOOLS ORGANIZE TIME AND GRADE LEVELS DIFFERENTLY**



\*\*Indicates that difference is significant at a 95% level of confidence

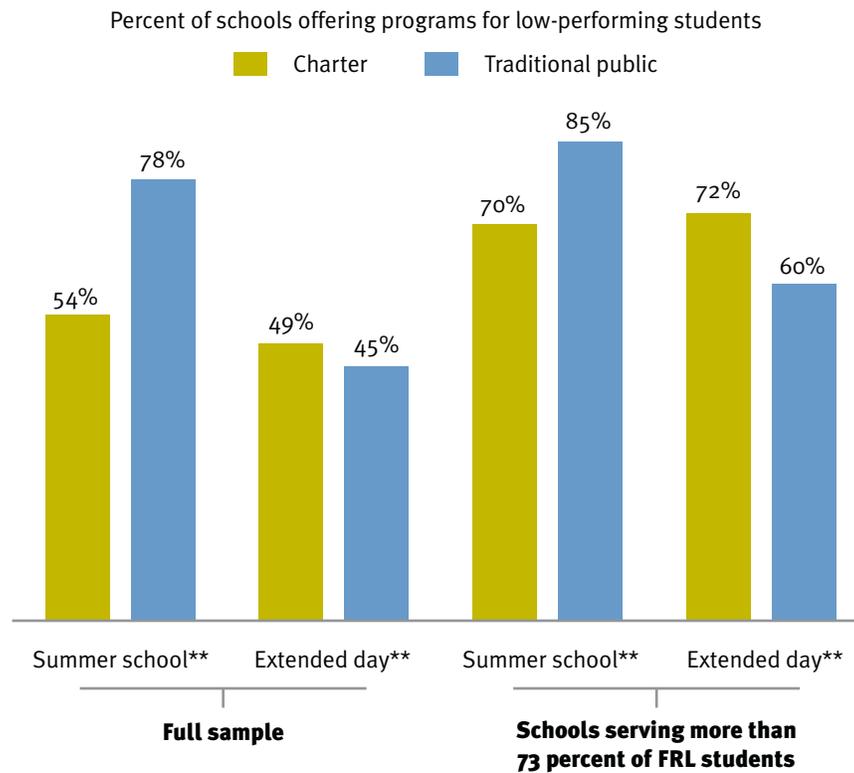
**NOTE:** Includes only schools with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas

It is interesting to note here that charter schools, which face significant resource constraints, are implementing—either deliberately or by circumstance—two high-cost strategies: longer school days in elementary and middle schools, and smaller class sizes in high schools.<sup>3</sup> This is an important observation because, as noted above, charter schools seem to shy away from other potentially valuable but nationally recognized high school curriculum programs, suggesting that these schools most likely value the benefits of more time on task and smaller class sizes or cannot avoid the higher staffing costs involved.

### FINDING #3: CHARTER SCHOOLS CUSTOMIZE SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

The SASS asks about summer school and extended-day programs—two well-known ways in which schools attempt to remediate and accelerate low-performing students. Public schools are more likely than charters to offer students at least one of these options: about 71 percent of charter schools and 85 percent of traditional public schools offer low-performing students at least one. However, charter schools are slightly more likely to offer extended-day programs, and substantially more likely to offer extended-day interventions in schools serving large proportions of low-income students. Across all charters, 49 percent offer extended-day programs, compared to 45 percent of traditional public schools. When it comes to schools with 73 percent or more of their enrollments made up of low-income students, nearly 75 percent of charter schools offer extended day, compared to just 59 percent of traditional schools.<sup>4</sup>

**FIGURE 7. CHARTER SCHOOLS LIKELY TO OFFER EXTRA ACADEMIC SUPPORT, ESPECIALLY FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS**



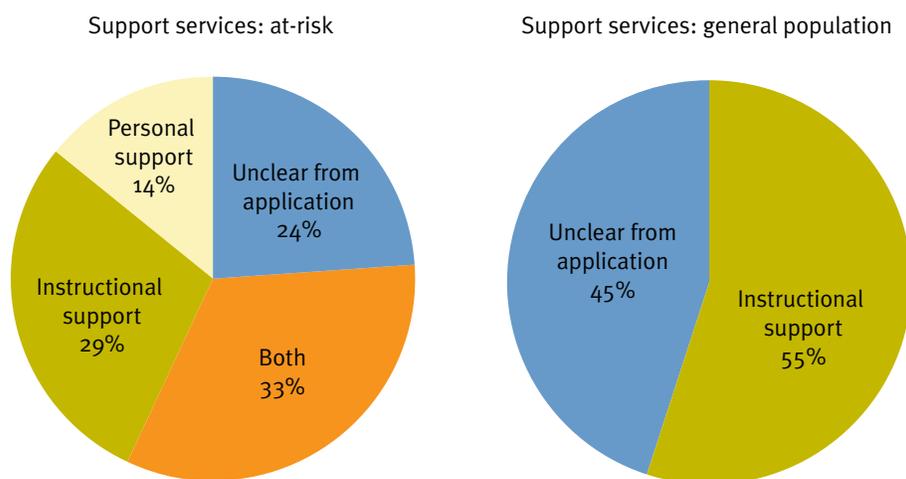
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NCSRP's review of charter applications shows that summer school and extended day are just a sliver of the support services that are common in charter schools. Typical charter school instructional services include mandatory after-school tutoring, optional tutoring, college or other academic counseling, and post-graduate support. Many charter middle and high schools also offer personal support services including child care, counseling services, mentoring, health services, and job placement assistance.

**TAILORED SUPPORT:** As with the SASS results, this review of charter applications shows that schools targeting at-risk students employ different strategies than those serving a general population. In their applications, charter schools serving at-risk populations are more likely to describe an explicit intervention strategy and are more likely to describe strategies that employ both personal support services and instructional supports (see figure 8).

**FIGURE 8. CHARTER SCHOOLS TAILOR SUPPORT FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS**

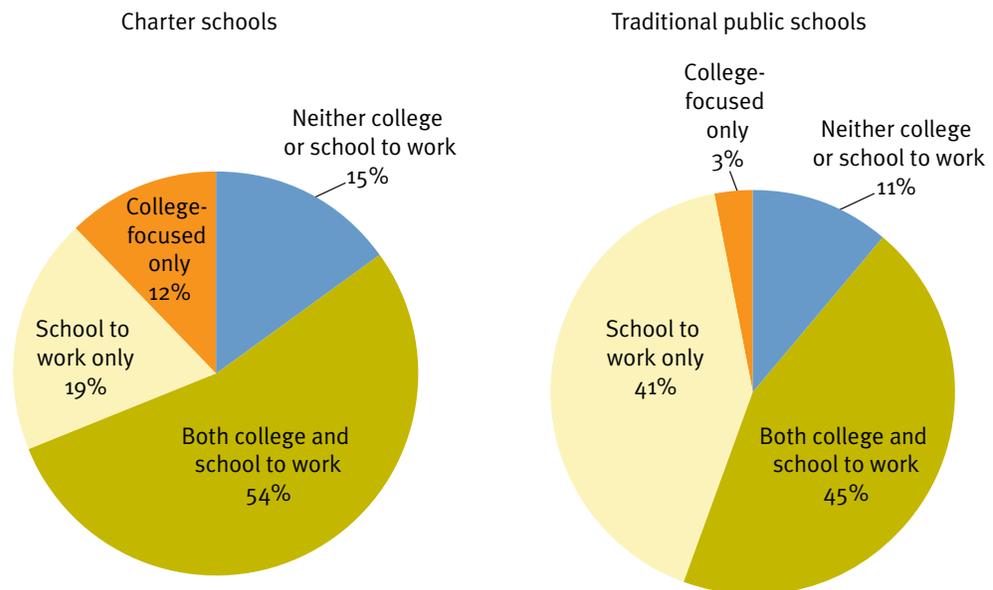


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#### FINDING #4: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO OFFER COLLEGE- PREP COURSEWORK INSTEAD OF SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAMS TO HIGH- MINORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

Charter schools with high-minority<sup>5</sup> populations are more likely to have an explicitly college-focused curriculum than are similar traditional public schools. Two-thirds (66 percent) of charters versus 48 percent of traditional public schools reported offering at least one college-focused program. By contrast, 73 percent of charter schools offered a school-to-work curriculum while 86 percent of traditional public schools did so. Even more striking is the fact that 41 percent of traditional public schools offered only school-to-work learning while only 19 percent of charter schools reported offering school to work without a college-focused option, suggesting that charter schools are much more likely to press minority students to be college-focused.

**FIGURE 9. CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVING MINORITY STUDENTS OFFER A COLLEGE-FOCUSED CURRICULUM WHILE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS EMPHASIZE SCHOOL TO WORK**



**NOTE:** Includes only schools serving high school-aged students and those with fewer than 750 students in urban or urban fringe areas. All differences are significant at a 95% level of confidence.

*Charter schools with high-minority populations are more likely to have an explicitly college-focused curriculum than are similar traditional public schools.*

## CONCLUSION: SUBTLE BUT POTENTIALLY IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM DESIGN

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Innovation in education means different things to different people. To some it means doing something that has never been tried; to others it means putting strategies together in new ways. Those in the first camp may be dismayed that the instructional programs in charter schools in some ways look very much like those in traditional public schools. However, those in the second camp may look at these results and argue that many charter schools are innovating by stepping outside the norm to:

- create focused instructional designs;
- rearrange time to better suit learning goals via longer blocks of learning time and extending the school day and year;
- personalize attention by keeping students with the same teacher for multiple years and lowering class size;
- commit to extra support for struggling at-risk students while offering minority students access to a college-focused curriculum; and
- combine well-known supports and programs flexibly so as to tailor curriculum and instruction to student needs.

For now, it is clear that charter schools are focusing, choosing among, and subtly adapting many established educational strategies in hopes of meeting the needs of the students they serve. Whether or not these differences lead to better results is arguably the only aspect of innovation that matters.

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**NOTES**

1. While the SASS has many strengths, including its breadth of questions and wide sample size, it also has weaknesses in relation to charter school-specific issues and school program offerings. The SASS was originally developed with the traditional public school in mind. However, there are five questions at the end of the SASS that pertain specifically to charter school authorizers and school founding. The questions surrounding the issues of curriculum and target population are not very detailed and many of the questions could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Because charter schools are only a small part of the SASS population, the survey developers chose not to include many questions that would have been relevant to only a minority of the respondents.
2. These are exactly the examples offered to survey respondents in the SASS.
3. Some charter school observers might argue that charter schools, which typically operate outside local collective bargaining agreements, often do not pay their teachers more money or even pay them less despite the longer school day and thus do not feel the cost of a longer school day. While these schools may not feel a direct cost from the longer school day, their teachers would bear the cost of the longer school day and the school would likely feel the effects as they compete for teachers in the local labor market.
4. For 25 percent of schools in NCSRP's sample, more than 73 percent of their students are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch.
5. Schools with 69 percent or more minority students represent schools in the highest quartile of minority concentration in NCSRP's sample of schools.