



# Inside Charter Schools

A SYSTEMATIC LOOK AT OUR NATION'S CHARTER SCHOOLS

Project Update

January 2007





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**T**he 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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# Introduction

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**D**o students learn more in charter schools than they would have learned in other schools? Although it is an important question, there is no easy answer. Charter schools are different by design, so making broad generalizations about their effectiveness is difficult. Some are entrepreneurial start-ups; others are converted from pre-existing public schools. Some opened their doors this year; others are already 15 years old. Many are authorized by school districts and state boards of education; others are authorized by universities, cities, or nonprofits. Some are independent organizations; some are managed by large educational management organizations. Depending on their location, charters can operate under more or less restrictive charter laws. And this just describes policy and governance—charter academic programs are equally as varied. We cannot draw a bottom line about charter school effectiveness, or say much about how they can improve, until we take into account these variations and how they shape the work of adults and children in the classroom.

With this challenge in mind, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has embarked on an ambitious research agenda to study the people and work of charter schools. The initiative—called “Inside Charter Schools”—is funded by a consortium of private foundations and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The first part of Inside Charter Schools, begun in the fall of 2006, focuses on the skills, background, roles, and turnover of the people who lead and teach in charter schools. The second part of the initiative, begun in early 2007, takes a close look at the academic programs and school environment of charter schools, with a special emphasis on how low-income students are taught. The Inside Charter Schools studies will be structured to make comparisons not only between charter schools and traditional public schools, but also within and across the charter sector. Key research questions for the studies include:

- ❑ Who is teaching and leading charter schools today, and how did they get there?
- ❑ What causes some charter schools to decline due to leadership change, while others remain stable or improve?
- ❑ Do charter schools use teacher time and skills differently?
- ❑ Do charter schools offer options that were not previously available to the students they serve?
- ❑ How do state and authorizer policies influence charter school educational structures and strategies?

The following sections provide some context for this work and a summary of what we hope to accomplish in the coming years.



# What Is Known About Charter School Leaders, Teachers, and Instructional Programs?

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## Part I: Studying Leaders and Teachers

### Who leads charter schools?

To date, most of what is known about charter school leaders and teachers comes from what we know about principals and teachers in general. School leaders are an important part of what makes an effective school. With greater accountability and high-stakes tests, scholars argue that all principals need to be instructional leaders, not just building managers. Charter school leaders face the additional challenges of ensuring sufficient student enrollment to fund operations, finding and managing school facilities, and negotiating relations with their boards, parents, and authorizers.

What is known specifically about charter school leaders is largely out of date (based mainly on data from 2000 or earlier). Nevertheless, it is intriguing: charter school leaders are less likely to have sought master's degrees in education administration—the most common route to education leadership in traditional public schools. Instead, charter school leaders are more likely than traditional school leaders to have either just a BA or to have earned a PhD. They have less experience teaching before becoming a school head, but they are also more likely to have been a school department head, specialist, or counselor. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that charter school leaders experience high rates of turnover, especially in the first two years of operation, though there is little data to back this up.

In order for the charter school movement to grow, a strong supply of good leaders is crucial. To ensure a solid pipeline in a growth-oriented charter movement, policymakers, assistance providers, and charter schools themselves need to know more about who leads charter schools, what kind of training best prepares them, what leads to turnover, and

what can help schools weather that change. Through an original survey and fieldwork in six states, the Inside Charter Schools leadership study will advance the policy discussion by looking across the charter sector at issues such as:

- ❑ How charter school leaders perceive the effectiveness of their training
- ❑ What charter leaders say matters most to their job satisfaction
- ❑ The degree to which charter schools are anticipating and planning for leadership transitions
- ❑ The rate and possible patterns of turnover among leaders

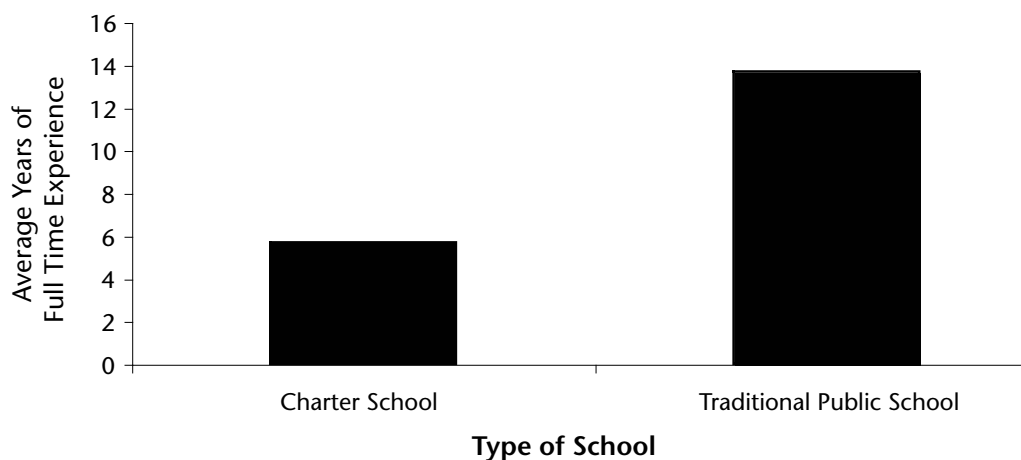
### **Who teaches in charter schools? How do charter schools manage human capital?**

Many researchers have looked closely at the role of teaching and student achievement and have concluded that, among all school-related factors, teacher quality appears to be the most important factor affecting student achievement. When students have effective teachers, the results are dramatic. However, by almost any measure, teacher quality is inequitably distributed across students and schools in the traditional public school system. Teacher quality and teacher turnover is a particularly acute problem for students in high-poverty schools and districts.

While it is reasonable to assume that charter schools are not immune from these trends, charter school teachers have received far less research attention than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Again, what little we do know suggests that, like charter school leaders, charter school teachers are a different breed.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), for example, charter school teachers appear less likely to be certified, and they appear to have less teaching experience than public school teachers (see figure 1); they appear more likely, however, to have attended selective colleges. Charter schools appear to have higher teacher turnover rates than traditional public schools. Anecdotal evidence echoes these findings, suggesting that charter schools, like other schools that serve disadvantaged students in urban areas, have high rates of teacher turnover.

**Figure 1.** Charter school teachers have less teaching experience



Charter schools not only appear to employ teachers with different characteristics, they also appear to use different personnel policies. We know, for example, that charter schools are more likely than other public schools to use financial incentives to attract teachers in shortage fields (i.e., math, special education) and to dismiss low-performing teachers.

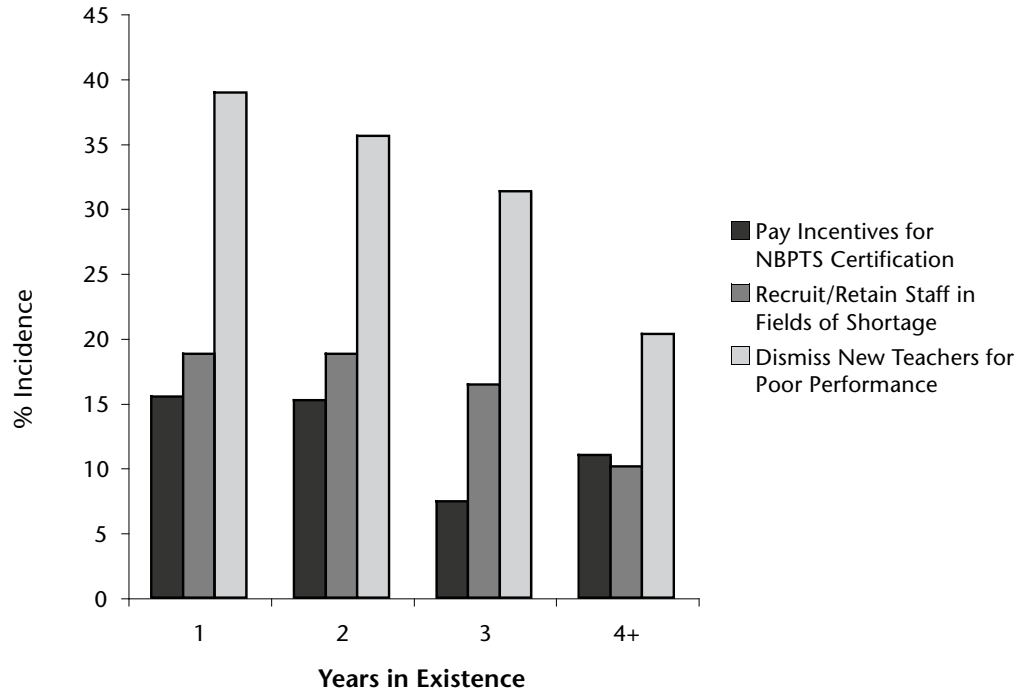
These findings are intriguing, but raise more questions than they answer. We cannot say, for instance, whether the average inexperience of charter school teachers is a problem or not. It is possible that some charter schools may choose to recruit many younger, more energetic teachers and pair them with a few more experienced mentors, a strategy akin to private school hiring strategies. We also do not know whether charter school turnover rates are high compared to schools serving similar populations or, for that matter, whether high turnover rates are actually a problem for charter schools.

To help charter schools improve and grow, we must learn more about how they can recruit and keep talented teachers. Who stays and who leaves? Do some schools, authorizers, or policies attract high-quality teachers? Do some drive them away? As with the leadership study, the teacher study will investigate these and other questions through an original survey and fieldwork, as well as through an analysis of state personnel files.

A preliminary look at charter school personnel policies suggests the importance of paying attention to the distinctions between charter schools that were raised earlier. The same SASS data that suggest charter schools employ less-experienced teachers, for example, suggest that the younger the charter school, the more likely it is to use pay incentives to attract teachers with National Board Certification, to recruit and retain teachers in

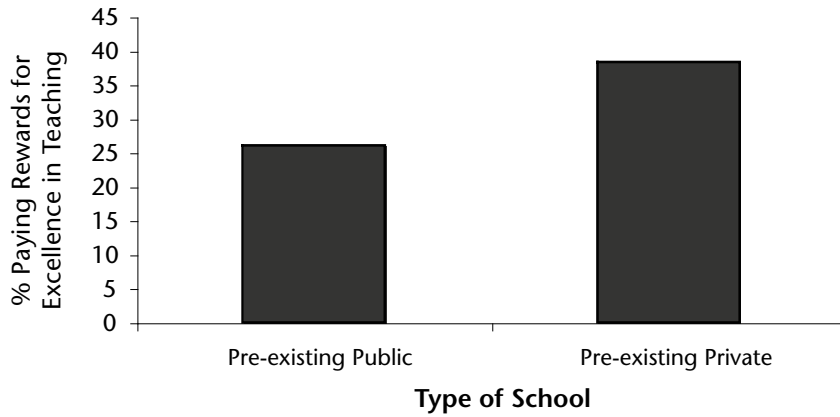
shortage fields, and to dismiss new teachers for poor performance (see figure 2). Why is it that newer schools use these personnel policies? As they age, do they begin to look more like traditional public schools? What other changes happen over time as charter schools mature?

**Figure 2.** Charter school lifecycle and personnel practices



How a charter was created also may affect the way it manages teachers. The SASS data suggest, for example, that charters converted from pre-existing public schools are significantly less likely to reward for excellence in teaching, while schools converted from pre-existing private schools are more likely to do so (see figure 3). Do these characteristics hold over time, or do charter conversion schools ever grow more independent as they mature? Do formerly private schools sometimes grow more like traditional public schools over time? Inside Charter Schools aims to shed some light on these and other intriguing questions about charter school human capital and how it is managed.

**Figure 3.** Charter school origin and payment of rewards for excellence in teaching



## Part II: Studying Charter School Instructional Programs

### What is being taught and how?

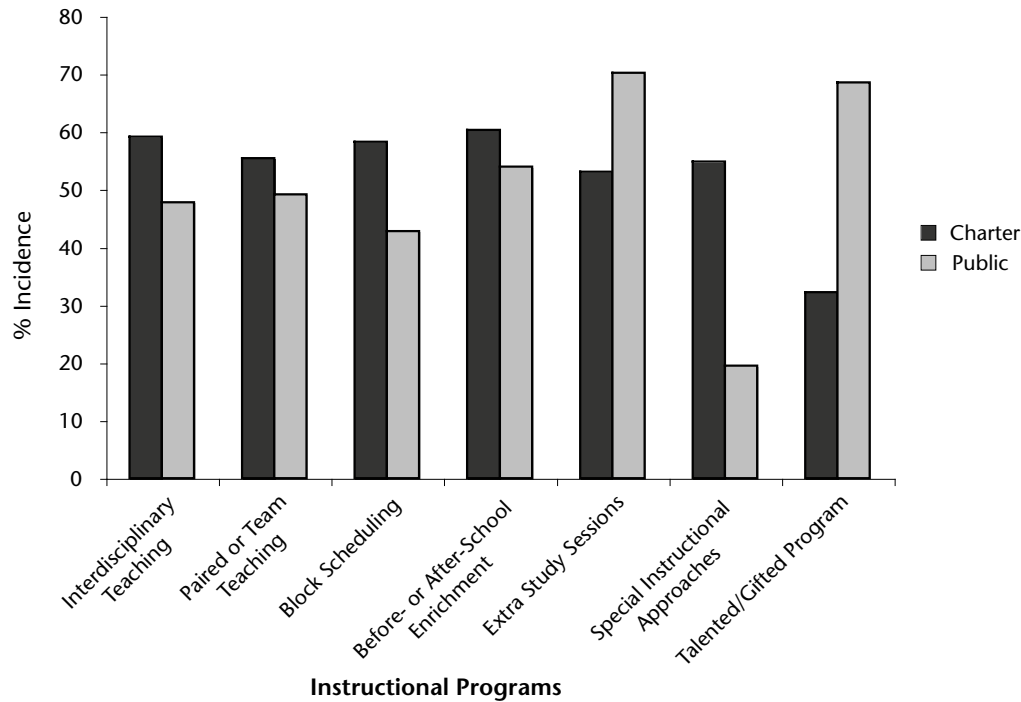
The interaction of teachers and students around an academic program is the most fundamental component of a student’s educational experience. Charter schools were founded on the premise that innovative educators, free from the mandates of traditional public schools, could continuously adapt to meet their students’ needs. To date, however, the vast majority of research on charter schools has tended to focus on more structural issues, such as governance and finances. Efforts to focus on academics have largely been explored through studies that compare outcomes—typically student test scores—across charter and public schools. To truly understand what services charter schools are bringing to students, we must have a deeper understanding of the academic programs of charter schools. Mapping how charter schools vary in their educational “theories of action” and their curricular and instructional strategies is the first step in understanding whether charter schools can create more coherent learning environments for their students and staff and, ultimately, whether they increase student learning. What do charter school academic programs look like, and are they

aligned? Do they appear to use their autonomy to offer true educational alternatives to families? These findings will be important for all schools—charter, traditional public, and private.

The Inside Charter Schools instructional programs study will explore academic programs and classroom instruction in three phases, the first of which is already underway. We begin with an analysis of national data from the SASS. These data have the potential to reveal broad patterns in the academic programs, scheduling, and organization of charter schools vis-à-vis public schools, and how these factors vary among different charter schools. We will follow this national analysis with an analysis of school charters from a sample of charter schools in six states. Through these documents we will better understand the underlying theories, approaches, and visions on which charter school founders built their schools. Finally, we plan to look deeper into classrooms with teacher surveys that probe on curriculum and instructional practice in both charter schools and neighboring public schools.

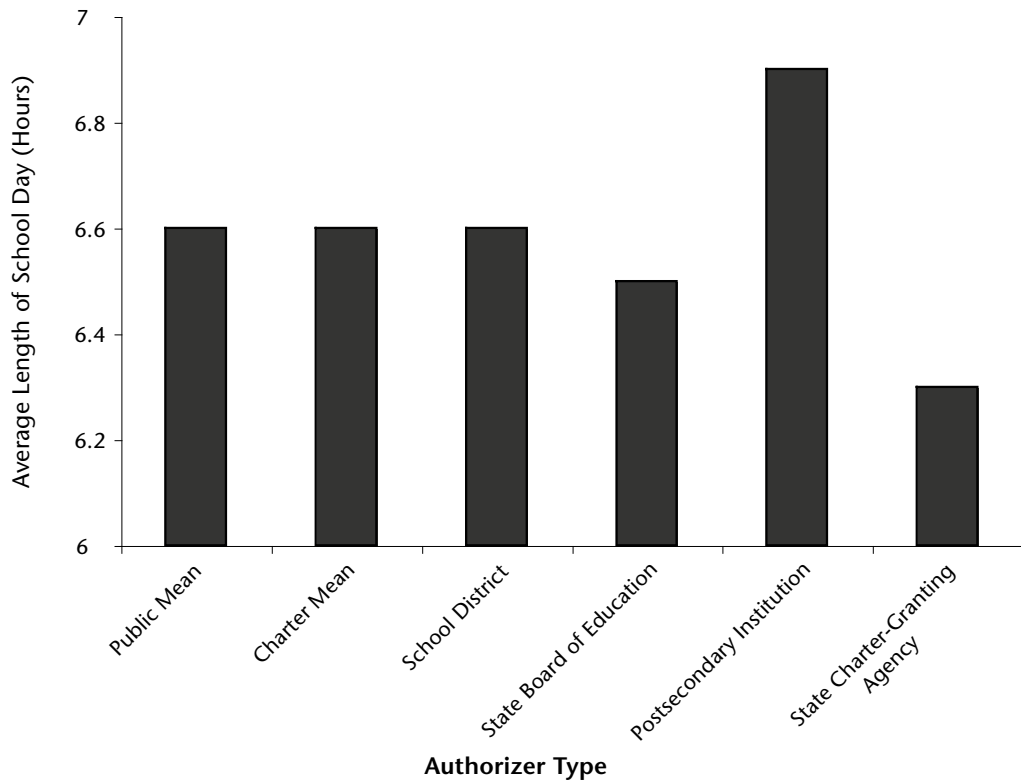
Again, the SASS provides some intriguing evidence about the differences between charters and traditional public schools and among charter schools themselves. As figure 4 shows, charter schools are more likely than traditional public schools to use interdisciplinary teaching, paired or team teaching, and block scheduling. Differences in program offerings exist between charter schools and public schools as well. Charter schools are more likely to offer before- and after-school enrichment programs, while traditional public schools are more likely to offer extra study sessions outside the normal school day or school year (i.e., summer school) for students needing extra assistance to meet academic expectations. Finally, charter schools are much more likely to use special instructional approaches, such as Montessori, and traditional public schools much more likely to employ the Talented and Gifted program. Despite the conclusion from some small-scale studies showing charter schools as not “innovative,” charter schools nationally actually do look different from traditional public schools when it comes to their classroom strategies and instructional programs, at least on these rough measures.

**Figure 4.** Variation of instructional programs between charter schools and traditional public schools



As with personnel policies, there also appear to be differences in approach within charter schools, depending on what type of authorizer they have (e.g., school district, state board of education) and whether the school started from scratch or converted from a traditional public school. For example, the length of school day seems the same between charter schools and traditional public schools on the aggregate level—both average 6.6 hours in a school day. However, when we break up charter schools into groups by authorizer and conversion type, we see that the average school-day length varies (see figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Length of school day and type of charter school authorizer



Charter schools authorized by a postsecondary institution have significantly longer school days, with an average of 6.9 hours, while those authorized by a state charter-granting agency have significantly shorter days, with an average of 6.3 hours.<sup>1</sup> While these differences may appear small on paper, over the course of an entire school year, 36 minutes a day can add up to over 100 hours of extra classroom time—over three weeks more than traditional schools.<sup>2</sup>

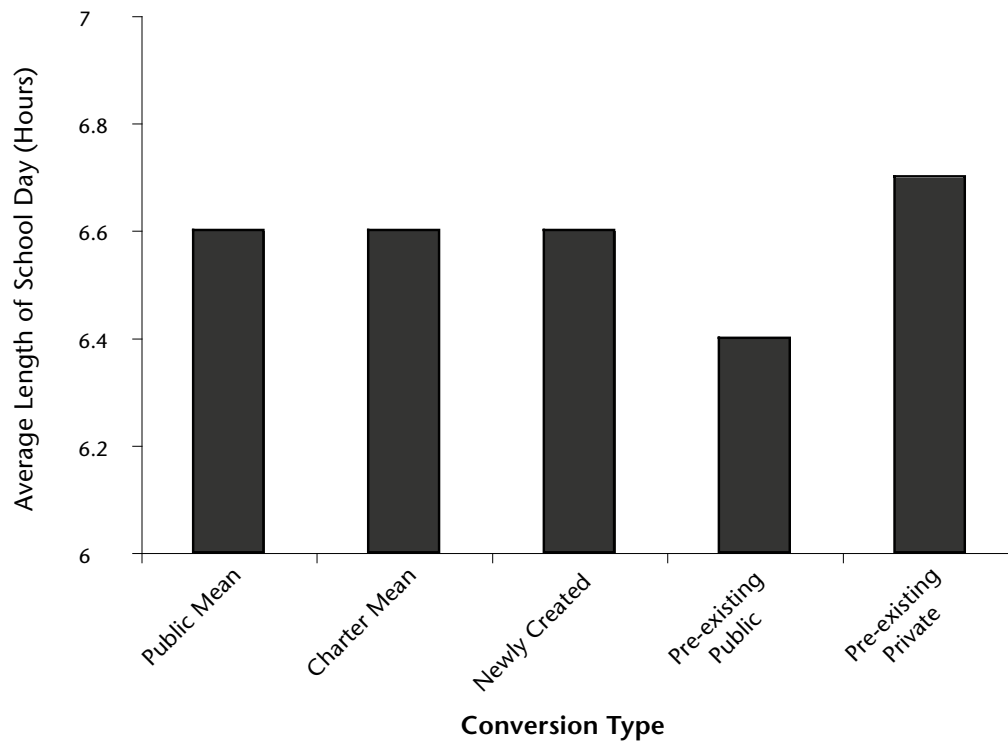
Length of school day appears to vary by school conversion type as well. Charter schools that converted from traditional public schools have shorter school days, with an average of 6.4 hours per day, while charter schools converted from private schools have longer days, with an average of 6.7 hours per day—adding up to a difference of 54 hours a year, or nearly two weeks more of instruction (see figure 6).

1. Although almost all charter schools authorized by a postsecondary institution are located in Michigan, that state's traditional public schools on average have shorter school days than the rest of the nation, suggesting that the longer school day seen by postsecondary-authorized schools does not result from their location in Michigan.

2. Numbers are based on a 180-day school year with a six-hour instructional day.



**Figure 6.** Length of school day and charter school conversion type



The Inside Charter Schools study of instructional programs aims to better understand this variation among charter schools and learn what causes it. Although the study does not attempt to tie any of these educational practices to results, it will examine the links between charter school instructional practice and the current evidence on successful strategies. Future studies will be able to build on this analysis to begin to link charter school educational practices to outcomes.

# Summary of the Initiative

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## **What states will we study?**

The Inside Charter Schools initiative will look closely at charter schools in Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas. Together, these states account for almost half of the nation's charter schools, and represent the spectrum of charter school laws and governance structures.

## **What is the study approach?**

The three-year initiative includes an original survey of charter schools in these six states, fieldwork and case studies, and a review of national and state data sets.

## **What do we hope to accomplish?**

The resulting analyses will provide policymakers and the charter school movement with a better picture of the charter school workforce, stability and turnover, and academic programs offered, suggesting how these areas vary by school, authorizer, and state context. The studies will help identify promising strategies and policies, and will produce reports that are relevant and accessible to charter schools, authorizers, and the broader research community. Our next products will include a more thorough report from the schools and staffing survey data, and a report on teacher turnover in Wisconsin, Ohio, and North Carolina charter schools.

For progress updates and more information about the initiative's scope and methods, please visit [http://www.ncsrp.org/cs/csr/print/csr\\_docs/pubs/inside.htm](http://www.ncsrp.org/cs/csr/print/csr_docs/pubs/inside.htm).

**THE INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS INITIATIVE IS  
CO-DIRECTED BY ROBIN LAKE & DR. BETHENY GROSS.**

**Robin Lake** directs the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). She specializes in charter school research and policy development that focuses on effective accountability policies, scale and supply, and school district use of chartering as a reform strategy. Lake has authored numerous studies and technical assistance reports on charter schools, including *Charter Schools and Accountability in Education* (with Paul T. Hill, Brookings Institution Press, 2002). She is co-editor of NCSRP's annual report, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools*.

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**The Inside Charter Schools initiative** is part of the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the Evans School of Public Affairs. NCSRP was established in 2004 with support from a consortium of foundations to bring rigor, evidence, and balance to the charter school debate.

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The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) aims to bring 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](http://www.ncsrp.org). Original research, state-by-state charter school data, and links to charter school research from many sources can be found there.



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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.