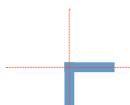


Hopes, Fears, & Reality

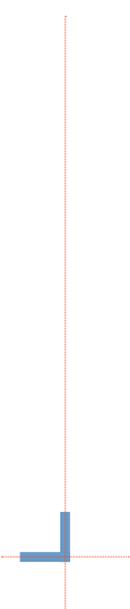


A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN **2009**

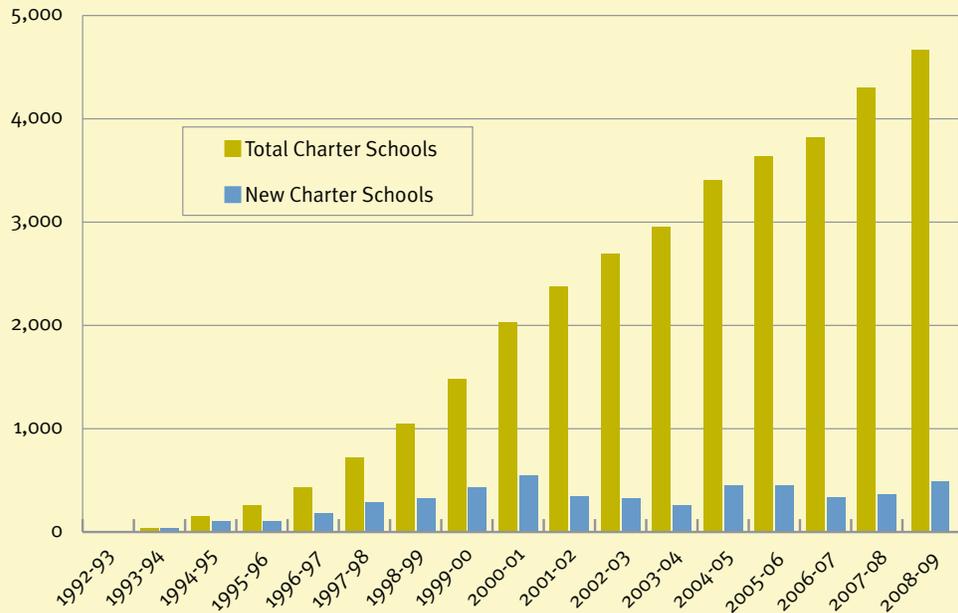
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FAST FACTS: Charter Schools in 2008–2009



- Number of charter schools in 2004-05: **3,293**
 Number of charter schools in 2008-09: **4,662**
- Percentage of all public schools that are charters in 2004-05: **3.6%**
 Percentage of all public schools that are charters in 2008-09: **4.8%**
- Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2004-05: **1.9%**
 Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2008-09: **2.9%**
- Number of states that *expanded* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2004-05: **7**
 Number of states that *restricted* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2004-05: **2***
- Number of charter schools that opened in 2004-05: **445**
 Number of charter schools that opened in 2008-09: **487**
- Number of charter schools that closed in 2004-05: **65**
 Number of charter schools that closed in 2008-09: **143**

* Oregon and Indiana placed restrictions on virtual charter school enrollments only.

SOURCE: Charter school figures come from NCSRP's annual survey of state charter school offices, conducted between July and September 2008, as well as data published on state Department of Education websites. Public school figures were compiled from state Department of Education websites and the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.

OVERVIEW

Can Charter Schools Become a Crossover Hit?

Robin J. Lake

The charter movement has evolved dramatically over the past 18 years. Once considered mainly an escape valve for a set of unhappy parents and fringe community groups, the charter sector has increasingly responded to the call for more consistent quality, has shown it can replicate high-performing schools faster than school districts ever have, and has introduced us all to fundamentally new models of gap-closing public schools.

Still, charter schooling has by no means hit the mainstream. If charters were a band, they might be under an independent label, played by college radio stations. According to a recent Gallup Poll, most Americans still have little or no knowledge of what charter schools are.¹ As discussed in chapter 1, National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) data show that 89 percent of American school districts have no charter schools within their boundaries, perhaps in large measure because so many school districts are so very small. In public education reform circles, charter schools are still generally viewed as idiosyncratic—nice idea, but not likely to fundamentally improve American schools. Earlier this year, many of the foundations that used to support charter schools signaled that they were turning to other popular reforms, such as efforts to improve teacher quality or investing in state data systems.

Remarkably, however, chartering is suddenly back in vogue thanks to unprecedented attention from President Barack Obama and his Department of Education. From

WHAT ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Charter schools are public schools of choice. Charter schools receive public funds based on the number of children who attend, and schools that do not attract enough students to pay their bills must close. Schools obtain charters only with the approval and oversight of their local school district or other state agency. The approving agency can also close a charter school if it does not perform. The adults who run charter schools and teach in them enjoy significant freedom of action, but they can lose their jobs if the school proves ineffective or families do not choose it.

Charter schools are another way—in addition to schools directly operated by a school district—that communities can create new public education options and partnerships for their children. While some of public education's traditional constituents may be uncomfortable with charter schools, these new institutions are intended to be part of the fabric of public life in their communities.

well-publicized charter school visits to central placement of charters in key economic stimulus programs, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President Obama have repeatedly sent the message that they view charter schools as an essential component of K–12 education reform strategies. As a result, states are now scrambling to lift charter school caps and to figure out how they can incorporate charters in efforts to turn around low-performing schools. Even foundation boards are turning back to charter investments.

Will all of this move charters from the margins to the mainstream? Can charter schools cross over to the pop charts and play in major state accountability efforts, major urban school reforms, and, finally, in the public consciousness? That is not yet clear. There are a number of critical tests ahead for the charter school sector. This volume of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* explores these issues.

In chapter 1, Jon Christensen, Jacqueline Meijer-Irons, and myself lay out the basic data on charter school growth in the last several years. We examine the growth and character of the charter movement over the last five years to examine how quickly the charter sector continues to grow and whether it serves the country's neediest children. Rumors of the demise of charter schools were premature, we conclude: charter growth has been robust and consistent, and charters are serving some of the most disadvantaged populations in their communities.

Beyond the data, what about the other critical tests facing charters? Can chartering be employed as a useful school turnaround strategy? How do charter schools coexist with unions? Are the best charter schools a reliable model for urban education? Successive chapters take up questions such as these.

In chapter 2, Terry Ryan of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation looks into charters as a school turnaround strategy. It's a cautionary tale, based on Fordham's experience with sponsoring a charter school in Ohio. One of Ryan's messages: no one really knows how to do this, at the scale required. When Fordham mounted a turnaround effort after its Omega Academy ran into trouble, it hired the wrong new leader and the mistake proved catastrophic: "The damage caused to the school's reputation by its inheritance of troubled academics and turnaround setbacks at the outset could not be overcome." A clear take-away from the experience is that the right leadership in turnaround efforts is not simply important, it is essential.

What about charter schools as an important new model for urban schooling? Katherine Merseth of Harvard University takes up this issue in chapter 3. She outlines the essential components found in a number of high-performing Boston charter schools and discusses their potential contributions to our knowledge base about effective strategies for closing the achievement gap. Merseth also asks an important question about whether these high-achieving schools, which focus intensively on helping students meet state standards, put too low a priority on other types of learning that might be essential for college success.

Can charter schools coexist with teachers unions and perhaps even provide innovative models for shaping productive new union contracts? In chapter 4, Mitch Price from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) considers such questions. Drawing on early lessons from a new study underway at CRPE, Price assesses whether charter unionization is a growing trend, outlines the reasons that charter schools unionize, and describes the potential ways that individual charters can balance unionization and mission. He concludes that: “Charter unionization is not one concept; rather, there are different things going on in different schools motivated by different reasons and yielding different results.” In 2009, union activity in a few high-profile charter schools received a lot of media attention, stimulating much discussion about whether charters and unions are antithetical, or whether the few examples this year constitute a trend. Price cautions against such broad-brush speculation, and he brings new facts and thoughtful analysis to this highly divisive topic.

In chapter 5, I take up the questions of whether and how charter schools can prompt school districts to become more innovative and performance-oriented. Do charters create a within-district ripple effect prompting districts to improve all of their public schools? In some cases yes; in others, no. Districts with expanding enrollment may be happy to have charter schools take some of the growth pressure off their hands. Other districts consider their hands to be tied by state regulation or are protected from the competitive effects of charters by state support. A small but apparently growing number of districts are coming to see charter schools as a source of innovation and school improvement, as well as offering new options for children in low-performing schools. But those examples are far too rare. I argue that policymakers and philanthropists could do much more to encourage districts to compete or cooperate with the charter sector, and thereby expand the impact of the nation’s high-performing charter schools.

Finally, in chapter 6, CRPE's Christine Campbell explores an underutilized opportunity for strengthening charter schools: addressing the quality of charter school governing boards. Too often, charter boards suffer from the same challenges as their public school brethren, reports Campbell. They tend to be either too disengaged or too meddlesome. What is required is neither a meddlesome nor a rubber-stamp board, but rather a steward of the school's values. She concludes by urging expanded recruitment and training for charter board members, along with authorizers who pay more attention to board functioning. In the search to scale-up high-performing schools, improving the quality of governing boards may be a high-leverage investment opportunity for funders and policymakers.

WHITHER CHARTERS?

By featuring charters so prominently in Race to the Top and School Improvement grants, President Obama and Secretary Duncan have given the charter sector an unprecedented opportunity for growth and impact. A number of major urban school districts have also opened their doors to charter schools as a way to replace low-performing schools.

So, the charter outlook looks promising, certainly more promising than it did twelve or eighteen months ago. Still, there are many scenarios under which charters could fail to live up to their promise and fail to take advantage of this opportunity.

- What if few charter providers respond to invitations to take over the lowest-performing schools? There are just a handful of charter management organizations willing to do school takeovers today. And there is also little obvious investment in building the supply of providers willing to play this role.
- What if many more charter school providers and their authorizers decide to do takeovers, but are unable to do so successfully?
- What if, as charter schools grow and mature, they begin to take on the very characteristics of the schools and school systems they hoped to abandon?
- What if charter authorizers fail in their duty to close the lowest-performing charter schools? As NCSRP's data in chapter 1 reveal, only a few states regularly close any charter schools. If that trend continues, the charter movement will fail on Secretary Duncan's expectation for accountable and continually improving public schools.

- What if school districts that come under heavy competition from charters are protected from financial harm by well-meaning state officials, and therefore never feel compelled to change?

All of the above scenarios are possible. Based on the essays in this volume, they may even be likely, absent focused policy and investment attention. On the other hand, what if charter schools can rise to the occasion? In that case, chartering would live up to its promise. The practice could change the face of public education by taking away excuses for chronic low performance and by providing an effective supply of innovative and effective new schools.

In this, the fifth year of NCSRP's existence and its publication of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*, our commitment is to continue to provide research that gives a frank assessment of progress and failure in the charter sector, a forward look at the most compelling opportunities and risks for charter schools, and—always—a look at how charter schooling can be not just a movement or a sector, but a powerful tool for deep and lasting improvement in the full offering of America's public schools.

NOTES

1. Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 2009, <http://www.pdkpoll.org>.