How are school districts responding to charter laws and charter schools?

A Study of Eight States and the District of Columbia

Policy Analysis for California Education

Eric Rofes, Investigator; April 1998

This is the first published empirical research documenting the effects of charter schools on public school districts.

Preface

This report provides findings from a study titled "How Are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools?" This research aimed to identify: (1) the impact of charter schools on school districts; (2) the ways school districts had responded; and (3) whether districts had experienced systemic change as a result of charter laws and the opening of charter schools.

The study was conducted in 1997, six years into the nation's experiment with charter schools. It focused on eight states and the District of Columbia and included case studies of 25 school districts affected by charter schools. This research was funded by The Saint Paul Foundation and was hosted by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), an independent research unit of the University of California at Berkeley. The study's investigator was Eric Rofes.

Highlights

Overview

- This study is the first published empirical research aimed at documenting the effects of charter school laws and the opening of charter schools on public school districts. The **overall effects** are a result of complex interactions between the **impact** of charter laws and charter schools on a district and the **responses** by that district. The study's goal was to examine the impact, analyze ways in which school districts were responding or not responding, and assess the overall effects of this new reform initiative.

Charter Impact

- This study revealed the following primary impacts: (1) the loss of students and often an accompanying loss of financing; (2) the loss of a particular kind of student to niche-focused charter schools; (3) the departure of significant numbers of disgruntled parents; (4) shifts in staff morale; (5) the redistribution of some central office administrators' time and increased challenges predicting student enrollment and planning grade-level placement.

- Of the 25 case-study districts in this research study, almost half (12 or 48%) had experienced either strong (five or 20%) or moderate (seven or 28%) impact from charter schools and slightly more than half (13 or 52%) had experienced either no impact (nine or 36%) or mild impact (four or 16%). Large urban districts had experienced significantly less impact from charters than rural, suburban, and small urban districts.

Typically, school districts had not responded with swift, dramatic improvements at the time of this study.

District Response

- Typically, school districts had not responded with swift, dramatic improvements at the time of this study. The majority of districts had gone about business-as-usual and responded to charters slowly and in small ways. Almost one quarter of the districts studied (24%) had responded energetically to the advent of charters and significantly altered their educational programs.

- Charter laws and charter schools stimulated certain kinds of changes and bring about certain kinds of effects and not others in traditional public schools and school districts. Several moderate- and high-response districts had made changes in their educational offerings as a result of charters.

- Certain innovations hypothesized by the study's investigator had rarely occurred: few superintendents, principals, and teachers in district schools were thinking of charter schools as educational laboratories or were attempting to transfer pedagogical innovations from charters to the district schools; districts were still building large school facilities and were rarely creating smaller schools; the large urban districts studied rarely had responded in meaningful ways to charter laws and charter schools.

Analysis

- The districts in this study which had experienced high levels of impact usually exhibited responses to charters, though not necessarily at a high level; districts which had experienced low levels of impact generally exhibited low levels of response or no response at all.

- Districts which exhibited the greatest response to charters had not necessarily experienced high levels of impact; other factors appeared to account for the response. Districts which exhibited the lowest response to charters generally had experienced no, low, or moderate impact.

- A variety of factors other than the nature and degree of impact seemed to contribute to school district response to charters, including the overall ecology of school choice in the district, student performance, a critical mass of charters in the area, community awareness of charters, and district leadership.

- Charter laws and charter schools may have contributed to statewide reform efforts that had no formal connection to charters, such as new systems of school accountability, drives for site-based management, and changes in school financing practices.

Background

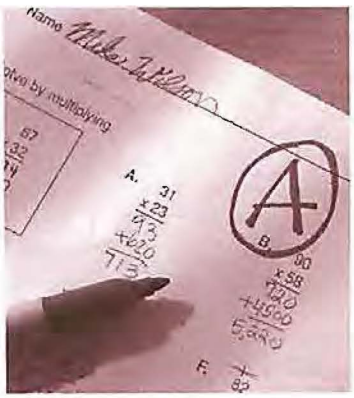
From 1991 through 1997, 29 states and the District of Columbia approved legislation that allows for the formation of charter schools. Charter laws vary from state to state and charter schools vary widely even within states. Essentially charters are schools formed by parents, teachers, and/or community members who collaboratively determine the school's structure, mission, and curricular focus. Depending on the state law, they are granted a charter by local school districts, state or county boards of education, public universities, or other official bodies deemed appropriate as charter sponsors. Charter laws essentially allow entities other than the school district to start and operate a public school. This usually occurs with approval of the local school board but half the states with charter laws also allow some other public body to sponsor charters.

Charter schools are provided with public financing, are usually freed from many state and district laws and regulations, and are governed by the terms and conditions set forth in their charter. In exchange for freedom from many formal regulations, the charter generally commits the school to specific student outcomes and various other objectives. The school is

granted a charter for a specific term—often five years—and may apply for renewal, at which point the chartering body assesses the school's success in meeting its objectives.

Advocates have argued that charter schools will improve public education in the United States in a variety of ways: (1) by providing quality educational programs and improved academic achievement for the students in the charter school; (2) by offering families the opportunity to exercise educational choice within public education; (3) by generating innovative pedagogical methods which district schools may then adopt; (4) by providing district school boards with an opportunity to create new and different schools; (5) by creating incentives for district boards to improve their schools and school districts.

Since 1993, a variety of research efforts have been directed towards charter laws and charter schools. Almost all of these studies have focused on the charter school: investigating school characteristics, student populations, student achievement, and organizational dynamics.[1] Perhaps because the initiative has been in a start-up phase, only a few researchers have examined emerging relationships between charter schools and other public schools or the dynamics created within school districts once charters have been proposed or developed in the area.[2]



If the effect of charter laws is to cause innovation, through what mechanisms does this occur?

Research Questions and Approach

This study focused entirely on ways charter schools and the development of charter legislation may have affected neighboring school districts and addressed the following questions:

- Are charter schools having an impact on public school districts? If so, what kinds of impacts are occurring in school districts and at what level of intensity are these impacts being experienced? How are these impacts affecting the climates and cultures of nearby schools and school districts? How are they affecting the communities in which charters are situated?

- What have districts done differently from what they would have had charter schools not entered the picture? What has changed in their delivery of educational services?

- What factors spur traditional public schools and school districts to respond to charter laws and charter schools in ways that bring about improved educational opportunities for students who are not attending charter schools? If the effect of charter laws is to cause innovation, through what mechanisms does this occur?

To answer these questions, this study examined the ways school districts have experienced and responded to the development of charter laws and charter schools. The study focused on 25 school districts in eight states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia. States were selected that had at least two years experience with charter schools. An attempt was made to include states with restrictive laws which generally allow only school districts to serve as the charter's sponsor (California, Georgia, Wisconsin) as well as non-restrictive laws which provide for more than one chartering authority (Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and the District of Columbia). The study deliberately included a random mix of urban, rural, and suburban districts in which charter schools were situated.

Over 200 interviews were conducted for this study, primarily with district superintendents and central office administrators, principals and teachers in traditional public schools, and charter school administrators, founders, and advocates. People with national and statewide perspectives, including representatives of unions and school employee associations, public officials, directors of charter school resource centers, journalists, and public policy analysts, were also interviewed. Face-to-face interviews were held with over 75% of the informants in this study; the remaining interviews occurred during telephone conversations and through correspondence by letter and e-mail. A range of documents from school districts, individual charter and traditional public schools, local communities, and state departments of education were collected and analyzed as well as an extensive collection of newspaper articles focused on charter schools.

This study focused on the interaction between school districts and charter schools and examined the *impact* of charters on school districts, the *responses* of school districts to charter laws and charter schools, and the *overall effects* or *repercussions* of charter school laws on school districts. The primary unit of analysis was the school district because it is the district that almost always has the power to determine whether or not changes occur in its schools. The purpose of the study was to advance understanding of how districts have been affected by and responded to this initiative. This study did *not* choose the charter school as the unit of analysis and did not examine the impact of school districts on charters and the responses of charters to school district action. These topics, however worthy of examination, were outside the purview of this narrowly focused research effort.

A number of issues emerged during this project that bear on the study's findings. First, it was not unusual for different informants to provide different explanations for how specific changes or educational innovations came to be. Educational change is multi-factorial and emerges out of a rich social, cultural, and political context. No attempt was made to prove causation in this study; thus, specific innovations are linked to charters in this report only when district officials or school personnel from traditional public schools explicitly acknowledged the linkage. Furthermore, the various impacts of charter schools on school districts during these early years of this reform initiative often elicited strong reactions and polarized debates. Throughout this report, quotations from interviews serve to exemplify key perspectives raised by several informants. The quotations were selected because they articulate an important and common viewpoint in a succinct and powerful manner.

Second, this research observed policy effects at a fairly early stage in the dynamics which charter laws and charter schools may generate. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during 1997 and the first few months of 1998 and the findings reflect the status of district responses *at this particular time*. While the eight states studied and the District of Columbia have distinct charter school laws, during the time period of this study changes occurred regularly which affected the research findings. Since the period studied, additional states have been considering and approving charter legislation. States with laws have been changing them in various ways. Charter impacts and district responses vary not only geographically but also over time. This study examined one particular cross-section of time in a frequently shifting and evolving process.

Third, the states and school districts in this study frequently offered a variety of programs involving public school choice (intra-district and inter-district enrollment, post-secondary options, magnet schools, vouchers, and others). In districts with a rich menu of public school-choice options, informants were asked to distinguish which shifts or innovations were triggered or influenced primarily by charters. Nevertheless, it was often difficult to untangle the differing options and attribute specific changes in public education solely to charter schools, the focus of this study.

Fourth, this study focused on only 25 school districts. While the investigator hoped a random selection of 25 school districts would prove representative of the range of effects emerging out of this initiative, the size of the sample meant that, in any single state, only a few districts affected by charters were studied. Hence this report is limited in its scope. Interviews with individuals with statewide perspectives were included in an attempt to broaden the study's frame of reference and distinguish between dynamics that were typical and those that were highly unusual. While media and policy-oriented discourses about charter schools frequently seize on extreme examples or exceptional cases of individual charter schools "destroying" or "single-handedly reviving" public education, such a focus was not the intent of this study. The aim of this research project was to determine what typically had been experienced by districts following the appearance of charter laws and the opening of charter schools.

What impact are charters having on school districts?

Finding #1: The impact of charters on school districts was manifested in five primary ways: (a) the loss of students and often an accompanying loss of financing; (b) the loss of a particular kind of student to niche-focused charter schools; (c) the departure of significant numbers of disgruntled parents; (d) shifts in staff morale; (e) the redistribution of some central office administrators' time and increased challenges predicting student enrollment and planning grade-level placement.

(a) Loss of Students and Financing

A significant number of school districts had lost financing as students opted to attend charter schools. Many of the superintendents, principals and teachers interviewed in this study were confused, misinformed, or uninformed about whether their schools had lost financing or how much financing had been lost to charters.

Shifts in financing are at the core of many of the most contentious debates about charter schools and, in every state studied, viewpoints differed—often dramatically—about fiscal changes occurring due to charters. The limited nature of this research project did not allow for the kinds of analysis that would have determined actual dollars redistributed due to charters or resolve opposing viewpoints about the shift of financing from traditional public schools to charters. The disparate formulas utilized state by state in financing public schools make studying the finances surrounding charter school initiatives extremely challenging. Other researchers are studying the complicated paths of financing charter schools and their findings will greatly inform our understandings of the effects charters are having on school districts.

This study examined *perceptions* of financing shifts experienced by individual public schools and school districts. Transcripts of the interviews and an examination of district documents revealed that fourteen of the districts in this study

showed no significant signs of having lost financing to charter schools. These districts experienced no "felt-loss" in financing. In 11 districts, some financing was lost and in five of these districts, administrative personnel asserted their district had experienced significant losses in financing. This suggests that, at the point in the development of this reform initiative during which the study took place, such examples may be the exception rather than the rule.

One of the most interesting findings, however, was that school financing is so complicated that often high-level public school officials, including principals and superintendents, did not have a grasp on how charters had been affecting their fiscal resources. One Minnesota district's superintendent insisted they had experienced a financial loss but was unable to cite program, personnel, or other cuts caused by the loss. In one Colorado district, the superintendent asserted that financing had been lost at the middle school level, but neither the middle school principal nor a middle school teacher interviewed believed the school had lost financing.

In one Massachusetts district, the principal and teacher interviewed insisted financing had been lost to charters and identified programs that had suffered or been cut. The charter school director cited a figure for how much money had been lost by the local public school district. Yet the superintendent insisted no financing had been lost and that the state had fully reimbursed his district for the allocations that had been directed to the charter school. When asked to explain why, if financing had not been lost, staff in the district thought it had, the superintendent replied:

> *I'd suggest that perhaps typically the Legislature's found a way to leave the extreme rhetoric hanging out there and create a reality that's almost 180 degrees the other way. Because, in fact, we haven't lost a nickel. The Legislature has found ways to supplement our state aid.... I get paid to understand the nuances of not only public policy but institutional culture. Whenever I've met with the school's faculty, I've certainly been straightforward in any comments about the charter school, but I have also been willing to emphasize those aspects that help create a culture of pride that was lacking five years ago...If that means that we do some tub thumping without exaggerating or distorting, but simply exploit the competitive intention of the legislature in creating charter schools, well so be it.*

Fourteen of the districts in this study showed no significant signs of having lost financing to charter schools.

Some districts lost students and financing to charter schools but did not experience a "felt-loss" because departing students were replaced by incoming students who were part of a rapidly growing school-age population. For instance, Denver lost some financing to charters but this was more than compensated for by a rising student population in the area. Queen Creek, Arizona, a rural district east of Phoenix which was rapidly being converted to suburban status, lost students and financing as students left for a local charter, but this loss was balanced by an influx of an equal number of students whose families had recently settled in the area.

Districts that had experienced a "felt-loss" in financing due to charters had coped in a variety of ways. Holland, Michigan, lost over $1 million and put off capital purchases and improvements but did not fire any staff members or eliminate positions. The loss here was felt most acutely in terms of tidiness and the condition of the buildings and grounds. Grand Rapids, Michigan, lost about $12 million of their $190 million budget and the district subsequently considered a bond issue to improve that district's infrastructure. Mesa, Arizona, the largest district in that state, lost approximately 2,000 students to charters from the 70,000 in their school district, that resulted in a loss of between $5 and $6 million out of a noncapital budget of about $240 million. The district's finance director explained,

> *Our district is one where we staff our schools based upon a formula which is determined by the number of students. So, in essence, we're also staffing for 2,000 fewer students, so it's not like we lost $5 to $6 million in revenue and we haven't lost any expense along with it. We have lost some [expense].*

The "felt-loss" was often greatest in small and rural districts that may have had difficulty maintaining the basic infrastructure of the district if a significant portion of students entered local charter schools. One comment which typified several informants' concerns was offered by a leader of a statewide association of school administrators. He explained the financing impact this way:

The differential impact of a charter school on a budget of a small district is far greater than it is in some of the larger districts. And it has the net effect where the charter school kids and parents take away more than their fair share and leave the rest of the kids with less resources to spend...There's a basic infrastructure that you have to maintain to serve the balance of the kids. Just because 30 kids leave doesn't necessarily mean that you've lost a teacher, doesn't necessarily mean that the cost of the building is any less or the cost of the utilities is any less.

Some principals and teachers expressed concerns that after the "count day," the day in the school year when heads are counted and money is allocated per pupil, disaffected students re-enrolled in the district from charter schools. Hence several charters received financing for students who were being served in the district schools. Likewise, some charter school administrators felt that they were required to educate without financing students flowing into charters after "count day." While these matters appeared to be of critical importance in a few circumstances where significant numbers of students were involved, such concerns were not widespread and rarely were expressed when only a few students were transferred after count day.

(b) *Loss of Particular Kinds of Students*

Staff members in more than one-third (36%) of the public school districts studied expressed concerns about losing particular kinds of students to charter schools. Because charter schools are diverse and aim to serve various kinds of students, there was little uniformity in responses on this topic. Concerns clustered in several different areas:

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Do niche schools lead to segregation? Several participants in this study expressed concern that charters focused on a particular kind of student (for example, African-Americans, deaf students, or schools for "at-risk" children) would increase segregation and leave the district schools with a less diverse student population.

Are charter schools attracting the smarter students and more academically-engaged parents? While studies have shown that most charters do not "cream" and that charters draw students with a wide range of academic abilities,[3] several people interviewed from traditional public schools expressed anxiety about charters becoming elite institutions. One superintendent said, "We are losing the parents who are really interested in teaching and learning."

Are charter schools becoming "dumping grounds" for students the traditional public schools do not want to serve? It is difficult to understand how this fear arose in some of the same districts where concerns were expressed about charters attracting smarter students. If charter schools in the area served "at-risk" students or students with a history of disciplinary problems, a few informants expressed concerns that personnel in traditional public schools might have counseled this population into the charter schools.

While many subjects interviewed were aware of studies that show charters serving large numbers of students of color and poor/low-income students, several expressed concern that charters may be increasing the segregation of particular kinds of students.[4]

(c) *The Departure of Disgruntled Parents*

One unexpected finding of this research was that both school district employees and charter school leaders were aware that charters often attract families with a long history of complaints against the local school district and students who have had disciplinary problems in the traditional public schools. A superintendent from Massachusetts put it this way:

Let me overgeneralize grossly...there's probably a quarter of your parents who are actively pleased with a school system, a quarter who gripe, and 50% in the middle who are just complacent, they'll take whatever you give them. There's no question that the creation of the charter school skimmed off the loudest of our gripers, and gave us a relative breathing space to begin

to turn one of our schools around. I mean I've joked on occasion that it's like turning an oil tanker around in a small harbor-there's not a lot of space to do it and the ship's not terribly maneuverable. If they'd been part of the mix at the same time, it would have been more difficult.

Disgruntled parents may shuttle back and forth between the charter and the district school.

A former school board member in Arizona described one district's response to the formation of the charter:

The district was glad—or the bureaucracy of the district was glad, I should say—to see these guys were shuffling off to Buffalo and leaving them alone. And I've heard that echoed by a number of school board members. It gets rid of our malcontents. Let them go get charters. Who cares? They're out of our face, and we can work at building our community schools and educating the 98% of the kids that still want to be there.

An advocate for charter schools in Colorado believed some districts support charters because disgruntled families leave:

This is taking care of those pain-in-the-ass parents or that pain-in-the-ass part of our district, or those artsy parents that we've been hearing from for fifteen years now. Now they're happy because they've got their school.

It should surprise no one that many of the disgruntled families quickly became disillusioned with the charter school and returned to the traditional public school district. One Massachusetts superintendent reported that, by the charter's third year, most of its founders, who had previously been quite critical of the district middle school, had returned their children to the district schools. While one Colorado principal experienced the "return gripers" as less vocal and agitated than previously, other principals and teachers saw them as just as vocal in their complaints as they had been before they left for the charter school. One charter school founder observed, "You get five or six charter schools where these disgruntled parents are happy and then the overall school district isn't under attack. District personnel see it as a way to get some steam out of the system." He believed an exodus of gripers into charter schools ultimately might prove detrimental to traditional public schools because they will have lost a key constituency agitating for school improvement.

Thus both charter schools and traditional public schools may become trapped in a dynamic whereby disgruntled parents, a diverse and influential group, may shuttle back and forth between the charter and the district school. Districts may find themselves losing articulate voices which kept school personnel alert and responsive and charters may become overwhelmed by the agitation stirred up by these families. While this dynamic rarely finds its way into discussions of charter/district relations, it has emerged from this study as a significant area of impact.

(d) Staff Morale

The formation of charter schools often had a significant impact on the morale of teachers and other personnel in local school districts. Some teachers in traditional public schools who were interviewed for this study acknowledged feeling significant added pressure to produce strong educational results. Accompanying this pressure in many cases were pronounced changes in morale among school district personnel. Informants from more than a quarter of the districts studied mentioned that the opening of charter schools in a local area was perceived by teachers and other school personnel as "a slap in the face" or a commentary on their failings. Charters had an impact on the pride people felt in their work.

One Minnesota teacher explained that the formation of a charter near her school, was one of the many factors that has added pressure to the job: "Teaching has become increasingly stressful. Part of it is because I think there are many educators in this building that feel like we want to do a good job, we've tried to do a good job, and we interpret the charter school as 'You weren't doing a good job, therefore we had to found a new school.' There are increasing pressures."

An educator and union leader in Colorado spoke of the "affective impact" of the charter debates:

Public school teachers have been attacked so much in the past ten years, and so when there's this element out there of "We might take over your school..." there's that affective impact... Teachers sit back and say, "I haven't had the money. I've got too many special ed. kids. I have too many severe needs kids. I don't have textbooks. I don't have time. And you're telling me I don't do a good job and you're gonna take my tax dollars and put them someplace else and do a better job?"

A central administrator in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, public schools noticed shifts in educators' morale during the process of approving and opening a nearby charter school:

There's definitely a psychological effect. It's a morale issue in terms of the staff. At first they have some initial fear: Is the government out to destroy public schools? Then there's an urgency, people recognizing we're in a competitive market. When you visit a staff room in a building located near a charter school, you sense an immediate change in psychology: now we're in competition with the charter. We have to market our schools.

Sometimes educators experienced the arrival of charters as a powerful statement, not about their own performance, but about the performance of a district with which they have long felt frustrated. One principal in Arizona commented,

The perception on the part of many teachers—it would be hard to speak for all of them—is that it's not a slap against them, it's a slap against the system, and the system doesn't work for them either.

Many charter school advocates seemed unaware of ways the administrative energies of district personnel had been consumed by charters.

A few of the traditional school personnel interviewed spoke of improved levels of morale within their schools once staff members realized that their offerings equaled or exceeded the offerings of the charter school. One Massachusetts principal spoke of initially feeling that the charter was a comment on her ability to create a safe and educationally-challenging organization. Once students began returning to her school from the charter, she felt "affirmed," as if the entire chartering process had proven the value of her school in the public arena and enhanced her district's collective pride.

Staff morale is a key area which districts might monitor closely during the period following the opening of nearby charter schools. Whether personnel working within traditional public schools understand the charter as a harsh statement judging their work or as an affirming sign from the many families who continue to enroll their children in the district school, district administrators and school principals should anticipate and plan for shifts in morale as charters gain momentum.

(e) Redistribution of Administrative Time

Charters have presented challenges to administrative planning in local school districts and placed additional demands on central office personnel, resulting in a redistribution of time for some central office administrators, particularly in states where charter school financing and administrative record-keeping have been funneled through the district.

Many charter school advocates seemed unaware of ways the administrative energies of district personnel had been consumed by charters. Charter school staff members frequently believed that the introduction of public school choice through charters did little to impact the administrative management of a district. While this tended to be true for states where charters were constituted as separate legal entities and were fiscally and administratively independent of the district, in other circumstances planning and time allocation had been affected by charters.

Educators from public school districts generally agreed on the range of planning issues that had been complicated by public school choice and charters. Many informants discussed difficulties dealing with returnees to the district. Here the issues ranged from the match between the knowledge-level expected by the traditional public school and that of the charter school, which made grade-placement difficult; to teacher allocation processes that were expected to proceed without specific information on how many students at each grade level would

Often districts within a single state exhibited dramatically different types and levels of impact.

be attending charters; to planning for the appropriate number of books or musical instruments without knowing how many students would be in the district school.

District personnel were not always clear what grade placements they should assign charter school students returning to the district schools. Lansing, Michigan, administrators had experienced difficulty predicting student enrollment. Financial managers in the Mesa, Arizona, schools discussed difficulty planning a budget and estimating numbers:

> *Charters make planning harder. Historically, we always had problems, because you never know how many people moved in exactly during the summer, how many moved out, how many went to private schools, how many decided to go to home schooling. So you always were estimating and sometimes guessing exactly what it was going to be. Charter schools just make that estimating and guessing a little harder because you have another variable you have to plan on.*

Similar sentiments were echoed by district personnel in Groton-Dunstable, Massachusetts. A traditional public school in Madison, Wisconsin, was inundated with students leaving the charter school well after the school year had started and had to struggle with issues of teacher allocation, equipment needs, and different disciplinary standards between the charter and the traditional public school. A Massachusetts charter school principal discussed problems trying to place children in the traditional high schools in their area without knowing the match between the schools' curricula. Traditional public school personnel in almost all of the states studied indicated that they found themselves dealing with placement problems related to students returning to the district after a year or two in a charter school.

School district central office personnel gave varying answers when asked how much time charter schools took up in their work week. Generally, districts that had approved charters and served as the administrative and financing conduit for charter schools spent more time on charter business than districts located in states where most of the chartering went on through non-district bodies. Most personnel agreed that the bulk of time spent on charters occurred during the start-up phase and, once a district had created new systems for the charters, much less energy needed to be directed towards them. Districts seemed to spend time mostly on the application and approval process for chartering, participating in legislative lobbying related to charters, and in helping charters meet their obligation to serving special education students.

Several administrators in public school districts complained of the time lost to charters, particularly when charters were located in their districts but were chartered by an outside body. Two administrators expressed concern that when a charter school experiences organizational crisis, local district personnel often have to deal with the fall-out: students exiting the charters and returning to the district schools, public relations management, and crisis intervention. One district superintendent's staff consistently fielded phone calls complaining about the behavior of charter school students and the appearance of the building and grounds of the charter school even though the charter operated independently of her district's authority.

Finding #2: Of the 25 case-study districts in this research study, almost half (12 or 48%) experienced either strong (five or 20%) or moderate (seven or 28%) impact from charter schools and slightly more than half (13 or 52%) experienced either no impact (nine or 36%) or mild impact (four or 16%). Within a single state, the type and level of impact varied widely from school district to school district and often districts studied within a single state exhibited dramatically different types and levels of impact.

A key finding that emerged from this research is that most of the districts did *not* show signs of strong material impact from the arrival of charter schools in their area. Of the 25 districts studied, nine exhibited no impact, four showed mild impact, seven showed moderate impact and five districts exhibited strong impact. When superintendents, principals, and teachers were asked if their schools and school districts would be different were the charter school not in the picture, most indicated there would be no difference or there would be only minor differences. Less than half the informants cited significant impact from charter schools.

The impacts on districts were analyzed in this study and placed in four categories: no impact, mild impact, moderate impact, and strong impact. Districts which were categorized as exhibiting strong levels of impact had experienced significant "felt-loss" of students to char-

ter schools along with the "felt-loss" of significant financing. These districts also had experienced at least two of the following four impacts: loss of particular kinds of students, departure of disgruntled parents, staff morale shifts, and the redistribution of administrative time. Districts which were categorized as experiencing moderate impact were characterized as having experienced a moderate loss of students and funding to charters and at least two of the four impacts. Districts which were categorized as experiencing no impact or a mild impact were characterized as having experienced either no loss of students and funding to charters or very little loss, and may have experienced up to two of the four impacts.

A variety of factors contributed to the limited impact of charters in some areas: some charters in their early years were not able to develop effective programs and experienced a protracted period of internal turmoil; some of the districts studied were high-performing districts and the charters which formed in their areas were small, alternative programs, attracting primarily special education students; in at least one state, Georgia, charters were seen as a way to improve an existing school but not as a way to influence the workings of the non-charter public schools in the area.

The impact of charters on local school districts was determined in large part by the local context in which public education was being offered and the quantity, quality, and size of local charter schools. Thus attempts to generalize about an entire state are of limited value. Such efforts are complicated further by differences between the impact of charters on rural, suburban, and urban schools, driven in large part by their different social, cultural, and economic characteristics.

If advocates intend charter schools to spur significant reforms in school districts that need to improve student achievement, they might develop strategies for targeting large urban school districts.

Finding #3: The impact of charter laws and charter schools on large urban districts was less than on rural, suburban, and small urban districts.

Small cities, suburbs, and rural areas such as Grand Rapids, Michigan; San Carlos, California; Queen Creek, Arizona; Adams County, Colorado; Holland, Michigan; LeSueur, Minnesota; and Lansing, Michigan had experienced significant impact from charter schools at the time of this study. Cities such as Minneapolis, San Diego, Atlanta, Tucson, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C. and Denver had not appear greatly affected by charter schools.

The passage of charter legislation clearly spurred the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union to create that city's "pilot school" program. Despite the contentious discourse about charter schools in Massachusetts, charters seemed to have had little impact on public schools in Boston that were not pilot schools. Tucson's first charter schools had primarily served as alternative programs for drop-outs and, while the district looked on them favorably, no major impact on the district had been felt. While an assistant to the superintendent in Minneapolis acknowledged the potential of the district to use charters strategically in reform efforts, he asserted that there "isn't anything different about any of the charters" that would offer new knowledge to the district. The major contribution that he believed charters were making to his district involved assisting the district in dealing with enrollment that was rising 1,000 students each year:

> *In a sense, for us, the charter school has helped in a system-wide view of being able to meet the educational needs of families...We would've had to build another school...It funnels off students...200 kids here. 200 kids there—great. Because that's two more buildings that we don't build at this point or have to find the land to do it on. We're building three more buildings in the next two years.*

Several factors contributed to the limited impact felt in large urban centers: (1) most of the urban districts studied were experiencing increasing school-age populations; (2) most of these large urban districts contained only a few charter schools; (3) charter schools had existed in these districts for periods ranging from two to five years and more time might be needed for urban districts to feel an impact from charters; (4) research suggests that reforming large urban districts is a great challenge compared with reforming smaller districts with less weighty bureaucratic structures;[5] (5) several of these urban districts already had in place plans for school restructuring and educational reform and viewed charters as a distraction from their efforts.

If advocates intend charter schools to spur significant reforms in school districts that need to improve student achievement, they might develop specific strategies for targeting large urban

school districts. State policymakers in Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Missouri have crafted charter laws which strategically target low-performing urban centers. By targeting their reform efforts on the districts which are most in need of improvement, these states may see diminished opposition to charter proposals.

Many acknowledged that public school choice policies had made districts beef up public relations efforts.

How are school districts responding to charter laws and charter schools?

Finding #4: Typically, school districts had not responded with swift, dramatic improvements, as of the time of this study. The majority of districts had gone about business-as-usual and responded to charters slowly and in small ways. Almost one quarter of the districts studied (24%) had responded energetically to the advent of charters and significantly altered their educational programs.

School district responses analyzed in this study were placed into three general categories. Districts which exhibited high levels of response were categorized by significant changes in district educational programs, emulation of aspects of the charter school model, and chartering of schools on the district's initiative. Districts which exhibited moderate levels of response were categorized by moderate, circumscribed changes in the district's educational programs, emulation of superficial aspects of the charter school model, and neutrality towards the chartering of district schools. Districts which exhibited low levels of response were categorized by little or no program changes in response to charters, resistance to using any models piloted in charter schools, refusal to support charter applications, and efforts to eliminate the charter law.

While categories of high, moderate, and low responsiveness have been utilized here, it is important to note that there may have been important reasons why some districts had made few program changes due to charters: some districts in this study had already offered excellent educational options before the arrival of charter schools; some charters had not been successful in creating models worthy of emulation and other charters replicated programs already offered by district schools; some districts opposed charters, not because they resisted reform, but because they believed the state's financing arrangements for charters were not fair; in some districts the impacts from charters had been negligible or at such a low level that they had not appeared likely to trigger significant response.

Placing districts in these categories required extensive analysis of the district's context and activities in response to charters. For example, where does one place the Denver Public Schools, a district which, at the time of this study, only recently had initiated its own charter but for several years had opposed chartering schools and remained a large, urban district offering no other evidence of responding to charters strategically? Denver was classified as exhibiting "low" responsiveness. Where does one place Boston, a district which initiated a pilot school program (its own in-district charters) now comprising almost a dozen schools, yet had not shown any other responses to charters? Boston was classified as exhibiting "moderate" responsiveness. The Adams County School District #12 in Colorado had chartered numerous schools as part of its broader reform strategy, responded to parent requests for more back-to-basics programs, and created stronger thematic programs in its traditional schools. Adams County #12 was classified as exhibiting "high" responsiveness. In this study, six of the districts (24%) were classified as "high" response districts, another six (24%) were classified as "moderate" response districts, and 13 districts (52%) were classified as "low" response districts.

The majority of districts in this study (13 out of 25 or 52%) fell into the low responsiveness category. Low responsiveness status does not imply failure. The Stillwater Independent School District in Minnesota had not responded aggressively to charters because they already had strong, successful reform programs in place in district schools and the charter school situated in their district had evolved into an alternative program for students who were not finding success in the traditional schools. Other districts in this category, particularly large urban districts such as San Diego, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., might have benefited from the strategic use of chartering but had not done so at the time of this study.

Six of the 25 districts (24%) studied were categorized as districts of moderate response. This category includes Mesa, Arizona, a high-performing district which had experienced significant numbers of students opting out of district schools for charters. Mesa's moderate response

had included the opening of additional back-to-basic district schools and an aggressive public relations effort promoting their schools. Likewise, Grand Rapids, Michigan, has been placed in this category as it had stepped up its public relations work, opened an environmental education-focused school, and was planning additional thematic schools, partly in response to charters.

Six of the 25 districts (24%) had been classified as districts with high responsiveness to charters. These districts were sites where the charter school initiative had played a major role in driving stepped-up reform efforts. This category includes the Cartersville and Bartow County Schools in Georgia, San Carlos, California, and Adams County #12, Colorado, districts where reform-minded superintendents have seized on the state's charter law and used it as a key strategic part of reform efforts. It also includes the Nauset Regional School District in Massachusetts where the formation of a local charter served as a catalyst for improving the district's middle school and Phoenix, Arizona, the only major city which offered evidence of strong response to charter schools (see page 20).

Finding #5: Several districts classified as having low or moderate responsiveness had made a significant effort to improve public relations and had begun to aggressively market their schools to the public.

Informants in 19 of the 25 (76%) districts studied felt that the local media had given excessive attention and/or uncritical coverage to charter schools. A number of charter school leaders corroborated this perspective. One state official in Massachusetts succinctly articulated the feelings of many public school personnel:

> *I understand the frustration. You're working hard as a teacher, principal, or superintendent, feeling like you're finally getting some things done and doing interesting things and, for the life of you, you can't get a good story out of the newspaper because they're always writing about the charter school... doing some of the same things you're doing, but just getting all the publicity for it. I think that's the way people in Boston sometimes feel, like "If I see one more story about City on a Hill I'll scream."*

Some school districts had devoted additional resources to marketing and advertising. Others had become more aggressive in public relations and outreach. Superintendents, other central office personnel, and principals spoke frequently of stepping up efforts to accommodate parents and being receptive to their concerns. Many acknowledged that public school choice policies had made districts beef up their public relations efforts. Principals in traditional public schools in several districts spoke about marketing becoming an increasing part of their jobs and occupying a greater percentage of their time.

Five of the 25 districts studied had made efforts to go beyond an increased receptivity to input from the community and the parents of children in the schools. These districts had begun active public relations campaigns to recruit and retain families in response to charters and other choice mechanisms. In Arizona, the Mesa Public Schools had begun a highly visible advertising campaign in local newspapers and the Queen Creek Unified School District began to market their schools at the local movie theater. In Michigan, the Grand Rapids schools were the focus of an advertising campaign on television and the district had begun to train administrators in public relations and marketing.

The Holland, Michigan, public school district had increased its public relations function, hired a full-time communications director, and sent letters to families at the local charter school explaining how they could re-enroll in the public school district. The superintendent of the Hartland Consolidated Schools in Michigan also had sent a letter to families departing for charter schools, asking for "constructive suggestions" that would be turned into "a plan of action to improve the Hartland Consolidated Schools."

These examples suggest that school district responses to charters may be motivated by a broad range of intentions. Some districts clearly were attempting to counter the departure of students from their schools into nearby charters; others seemed to be responding to the new rules created by the emerging marketplace of public school choice. If public school choice continues to expand, this is one area which merits ongoing review and analysis.

Finding #6: Several moderate- and high-response districts had made changes in their educational offerings as a result of charters. These changes included opening schools organized around a specific philosophy or theme, creating "add-on" programs such as an after-school program or all-day kindergarten, and offering more diverse activities or curricular resources.

Journalistic accounts of charter schools frequently included anecdotes about new educational programs that have been offered through school districts as a result of the competition introduced by charter schools. This study investigated such anecdotes to determine the precise relationship such innovations have had to charter schools.

To date, charters have served to encourage some districts to create additional thematic schools focused on a particular educational philosophy. Most prevalent have been the expansion of back-to-basics and core knowledge schools within public school districts as a result of similarly themed charters drawing families away from the district. Adams County #12 in Colorado had opened additional in-district fundamental programs after two fundamental charters attracted hundreds of students from the district. New core- knowledge schools were opened by several Colorado districts after the Jefferson Academy charter school had opened and drew hundreds of students from nearby districts. Mesa, Arizona, which had pioneered fundamental schools for over a dozen years, increased its number of these schools, in part due to the expansion of similar programs in their district through chartering.

In other areas, charters spurred school districts to create additional schools focused on particular themes. The Grand Rapids Public Schools in Michigan developed an environmental

Few superintendents, principals, and teachers in district schools were thinking of charter schools as educational laboratories.

sciences middle school program after similarly-focused charter schools had opened in the area. The Boston Public Schools took their pilot school proposal off the back burner and put it on a fast track only after charter legislation had been approved in Massachusetts. They opened almost a dozen schools with concentrations ranging from the arts, allied health sciences, drop-out prevention, science and math to multiculturalism. Boston's superintendent referred to these pilots as "in-district charter schools."

In Madison, Wisconsin, school department leadership used the state's charter law to create a middle school focused on technology and individualized programming to serve that city's African-American population that had lost its neighborhood middle school in the 1970s. The Rochester, Minnesota, public schools approved an in-district Montessori program only after interested families had begun considering forming a charter school. Charter laws throughout the nation have spurred a revival of the alternative educational programs popular in the 1960s and 70s, and expanded open classroom, Montessori, Waldorf-type programs, and developmental- focused pedagogies within public schooling.

All-day kindergarten is now offered in school districts such as Lansing, Michigan, and Mesa, Arizona, as a result of local charters attracting families seeking such programs. An after-school program was created in the public schools in Williamsberg, Massachusetts, after local charters had attracted families seeking such programs. The superintendent of the LeSueur-Henderson, Minnesota, public schools discussed ways the process of debating and approving a charter school in his rural district had served as an impetus to efforts to reform the district schools and increase project-based activities, block scheduling, and computer-focused learning experiences. He said,

> *I think the charter school's been helpful to us in a number of intriguing ways—subtle, more subtle than anything. It has been helpful in that the very existence of the charter has challenged our larger system to take a look at more innovative approaches to learning and teaching. And in the second year of the charter school, we implemented a four-period day at the high school, that really changed how we utilize time...I think the fact that the Board voted to sponsor the charter helped create more of a sense of urgency, that—yes, we must change.*

After a charter school in Orleans, Massachusetts, had purchased vans to transport students to a wide range of community-based activities, the local high school decided to also purchase vans and expand their community-based programming. The district's middle school was considering acquiring vans at the time of this study.

Finding #7: Certain innovations and changes in school districts and traditional public schools hypothesized by the study's investigator had rarely occurred: Few superintendents, principals, and teachers in district schools were thinking of charter schools as educational laboratories or attempting to transfer pedagogical innovations from charters to the district schools; districts were still building large school facilities and were rarely creating smaller schools; the large urban districts studied rarely had responded in meaningful ways to charter laws and charter schools.

One of the unexpected findings of this research was that school districts at the time of the study had rarely taken innovations in teaching or learning produced by charter schools and put them to use in district schools. The majority of subjects interviewed from traditional public schools and school districts—as well as many of the informants from charter schools—acknowledged that charters rarely had been utilized by school districts as laboratories for pedagogical innovation. Some believed charters may offer innovations in governance, accountability, and assessment rather than pedagogical innovations. One teacher questioned whether any schools have adequate systems which encourage the transfer of knowledge and pedagogical innovation.

In a speech at the first national charter school conference sponsored by the Department of Education, Secretary of Education Richard Riley applauded a charter school in Minneapolis for functioning as a laboratory and producing new knowledges for the local schools. Yet the director of this same school, interviewed for this study several weeks before the secretary's speech, expressed frustration that there had been "no investment from the larger district" in transferring knowledge gained from the school. He insisted:

I've learned that there's no pay-back for trying to convince someone they should do something I think is better...They know where we are. If they want to learn, they can learn. We had three of the superintendents visit and they're all very positive and impressed. But when I did say, "Well, if you want the partnership with us, I'm willing to do that..."

This charter founder felt that the district administrators were simply inattentive to educational innovations and hence unable to benefit from the methods or programs developed in his school. Yet a central administrator in the same district seemed to question the work of the charter and insisted,

We're not going to create another school like that. Kids are getting special education and we have some questions about what it is that they actually are doing. They have a well-done program. Well, we already have similar curriculum in other schools. So we have not responded in that sense.

For charters to function as educational laboratories for traditional public schools and experiments with new methods of teaching and learning, two things are needed: the charter must be able to produce new knowledges and the district must be open to transferring the innovations produced by the charter to the district schools. At the time of this study, several factors served as barriers to districts making use of charters as educational laboratories: (1) many charters were in their first few years of operation and had not had the time to fully develop their pedagogical offerings; (2) during the early years of operation, most charter school personnel did not have time to share lessons learned with people from outside their school; likewise many teachers and principals in traditional public schools had little time to visit the classrooms in their own school, let alone in a nearby charter school; (3) in many areas, charter schools and the traditional public schools either had no relationship with one another or maintained a hostile relationship that precluded sharing pedagogical learnings between the two; (4) some charter schools conceptualized their mission as fulfilling the educational needs of their students and did not feel drawn toward transforming other schools' classroom practices; (5) many charter schools were located in school districts that already offered excellent and highly-rated programs and district personnel believed they would have little to learn from a charter school; (6) some district leaders insisted the charters were only replicating programs already in place in the district schools and a "we already do that" mentality precluded districts from learning from charters.

One rural district in this study exemplified the problem of transfer of knowledge among and between charter and traditional schools. The administrator for the charter believed no local teachers had visited the school because

they have not seen it as being meaningful and relevant...As recently as a year ago the new principal took it to his faculty leadership team and discussed getting involved with us and they said, 'We don't consider that education.'

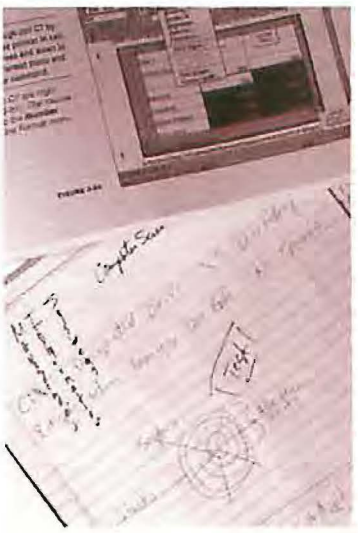
Yet when a teacher in the local traditional school was asked why she had never visited, she insisted at first, "There was a lot of animosity..." and then explained, "I wouldn't just have a day where I would say I can go down there...but I could certainly go down there in a prep period." In a subsequent communication she attempted to understand the barriers that had kept her from considering the school as a laboratory for educational innovations:

One of the things I remembered was the feeling on the part of the faculty that those supporting the charter were not saying it was 'an experiment for innovative educational practices'—instead they said it was necessary because the high school was, in part, failing. It was not perceived by us as a lab school and I did not get the impression from our school board that they saw it that way.

This informant felt that the charter school had formed its identity in opposition to the district high school and had criticized the work of that school's faculty. This led her to assume a defensive posture that served as a barrier to visiting the charter. Charter schools in the study that had recruited families and increased their own stature by criticizing, demeaning,

Many charter schools were located in school districts that already offered excellent and highly-rated programs.

Informants from districts that had coexisted with charters for three to five years displayed an attitude characterized by considerably less hostility and suspicion than those with charter experience of a shorter duration.



or outright trashing the local traditional public schools, frequently found themselves unable to create comfortable working relationships to share pedagogical insights or oversee student transitions in and out of the charter school.

Districts may be more willing to transfer innovations produced by charter schools to traditional public schools when the charters have been initiated or approved by district leadership. Ironically, this tended to occur less frequently in states where so-called 'strong' or non-restrictive laws, providing for sponsors other than the district board, were in place. In such states many of these charter schools may have a contentious relationship with the district, at least during their first years of operation; this does not promote mutual exchange. Yet the presence of the alternative sponsor may lead to the development of particularly unique educational programs which should be considered as a model for traditional public schools.

Denver Public Schools had recently opened its own charter school that some believed was intended to serve a laboratory function, but no significant exchange had occurred between the district and the other charter school located within its boundaries. Likewise several districts in California, including the San Carlos Public Schools, had initiated charter schools precisely for this experimental and laboratory function. Boston's City on a Hill charter school recently had been awarded a federal grant which was expected to bring about a formal collaboration between charter and district teachers.

Finding #8: An analysis of the 25 case studies in this report suggests district response to charters evolves over time and that there may be distinct stages in the development of charter schools, which offer specific opportunities for district response.

Responses from districts to charter schools were rarely quick, discrete, or isolated from the rich mix of changes regularly experienced by school districts. The majority of districts in this study could be understood as having gone through three stages of response to charter schools, which can be characterized in the following ways:

(1) **The period stretching from the initial proposal of charter legislation through passage and the founding stages of the first charters:** This was often a time when intense internal debate occurred among school personnel, parents, and political leadership; it was frequently a time of exaggerated claims on the part of charter advocates and opponents alike. Impacts on the school district during this period were primarily focused on attitudes and the climate of the district and its schools. If the charter school in formation was founded in opposition to the traditional public schools, it was common for districts to take on a defensive posture at this time.

(2) **The period from when charters open their doors through their early years of operation.** This was a period when some school districts began to make specific changes in response to charters: they may have begun or stepped up marketing efforts, considered add-on programs, curricular expansion, and expanded hours in an attempt to minimize the loss of students to the charter. This was likely to have been a time of heightened conflict within local communities as districts responded in various ways to shifts in financing. These shifts were usually felt most intensely during the first year a charter school was open, when a specific student cohort departed en masse from the traditional public schools for the charter. This was also a time when charter founders were busy creating their school and initiating educational programs; they had little time for involvements outside of their school.

(3) **The period when charters attain some stable institutional presence in relation to the local districts.** Conflicts abated at this time and the district and charter moved toward a point of equilibrium and mutual respect. Districts experienced students re-entering the traditional public schools from the charter by this time. Claims predicting the 'devastation' of the school system had been proven to be exaggerations; and charters had passed the honeymoon period when they were idealistically characterized and their weaknesses and failings had been acknowledged. An acceptance settled in regarding changes that had occurred in the way public education was organized, and the hostility that some districts and charters had directed towards each other began to lessen.

Informants from school districts that had coexisted with charters for three to five years displayed an attitude towards charters characterized by considerably less hostility and suspicion than those with charter experience of a shorter duration. Several superintendents and central office administrators spoke of reaching an accommodation with charters and working more cooperatively with them after having had survived "the big hit" of the first year's exodus of students.

Finding #9: The climates and cultures of nearby traditional public schools, school districts, and communities almost always had changed following the appearance of charter schools in their midst, but not in a single, predictable manner.

Advocates for charter schools often assert that the introduction of public school choice and new educational options will infuse school districts and personnel with a fresh spirit of energetic competition. Once the district's monopoly on public education is ended, this argument goes, the weighty bureaucracies that constitute large school districts in the United States begin to flex and become consumer-friendly. By transforming public schooling into an educational marketplace, districts and schools are forced to continually reform themselves in order to maintain steady participation by local families.

This study affirmed that attitudinal, climatic and cultural shifts occur within school districts due to the introduction of charter laws, charter schools and other types of public school choice. However, the data suggest a complicated pattern of responses in public schools and school districts where the impact of charters and the response of districts are tightly braided together. While increased responsiveness and attention to student outcomes were part of many schools' responses, several other impacts and responses emerged from the data including increased pressure and stress on teachers and principals; cycles of hostility, vilification, and conflict occurring within school districts and local communities; and a loss of or increase in morale of traditional school teachers. Within the school districts affected by charter schools that were studied, a number of different changes had been occurring that frequently appear contradictory or paradoxical.

Varying levels of conflict occurred within and between various constituencies when charter schools were formed. Charters formed in cooperation with districts schools or initiated by school district leadership experienced less hostility than those formed as a critical reaction to the district schools. Charters were not always the focus of contentious debate within local communities. In several districts studied, charters were proposed, accepted, and created without significant conflict arising. This tended to occur when the charter offered a program for at-risk students or other students with special needs, when it was situated in a well-funded, heavily-resourced district, or when it was formed in cooperation with the school district.

Charters were not always the focus of contentious debate within local communities.

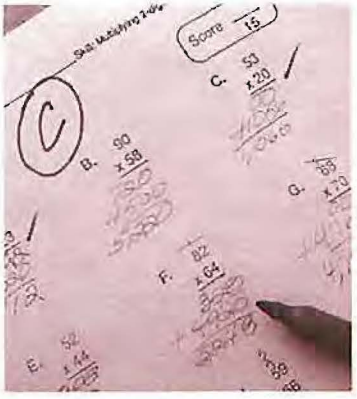
In Tucson, Arizona, where the earliest charters were designed to "attract students who are disillusioned with the regular public schools," teachers freely had referred appropriate students to the charter school. The principal of a local high school insisted,

> *We don't feel competitive. We think it's having a positive effect on our population because of the type of students that are attracted to the charter schools in Tucson.*

In Stillwater, Minnesota, a charter school served at-risk students who had not succeeded in the traditional high schools, and teachers seemed to feel little conflict about the school. In Dillon, Colorado, one seventh grade teacher commented on "a huge difference" in her school once the charter opened:

> *There was a segment of our population that was gone. They were kids that took a lot of teacher time. They were kids—not to say all the kids there were like this—but there was a good portion of kids who I would say had emotional and behavioral problems...It made the school calmer, easier to teach. We didn't have nearly as many behavioral problems, when those kinds of kids weren't here.*

A teacher in Adams County #12, Colorado, expressed his satisfaction at having a charter school for gifted and talented students share a school building with a district middle school:



This research suggests the existence of a relationship between level of impact and district response to charter schools.

> *I feel it is a big kudo for the gifted and talented charter school to be here, because we get an influx of different things going on in the building. So I'm kind of happy they're here.*

Yet in other places the proposal, debate, acceptance, and appearance of charters had sparked great conflict within schools and local communities. This appeared common in rural areas where a single charter school could enroll a significant portion of students from the small local district. One Colorado teacher noticed powerful hostility suffusing the community during the formative stages of a charter forming in her rural district:

> *At the very beginning there was a lot of animosity and resentment about the charter's beginning... people took it personally because it felt like the school board was saying to us, "You're not good enough, so we're gonna allow this charter school to start." Since then, there's been virtually no communication between the charter and our school.*

The formation of a charter school in Queen Creek, Arizona, a rural district in the East Valley of Phoenix resulted in great divisiveness in the local community. One staff member insisted, "The community just totally split in half. Neighbors quit talking to neighbors. Friends quit talking to each other." Another observed,

> *I've found great division in the community. I've found that teachers who have been here any length of time are very resentful of the type of advertising the charter is doing and the type of comments that are made about the traditional public schools. Teachers resent the fact that we are being discussed as a below-average school, a school that doesn't teach anything. We even had a person who said that all Spanish-speaking children were sent home at noon. Complete falsehoods were brought out about the school. And we were resentful of that.*

A fourth grade teacher in the district added, "The community has been divided, badly divided, to the point of being nasty to each other, not speaking to each other."

In one Massachusetts district, teachers who had accepted jobs in the new charter school before they finished their work for the year in a district school experienced hostility from their former colleagues. One principal in this district described children no longer talking to other children and parents not permitting their children to play with friends whose families had taken the other side in the charter school debates. A sixth grade teacher who was an activist in the union opposing charter schools found that her long-time teaching partner had accepted a position in a local charter school:

> *I was kind of devastated last year when my own teaching partner left me. She is now at the charter school. She never told me. I heard about it from the principal...I just couldn't imagine somebody that I'd taught with every day for seven or eight years submitting her letter of resignation.*

One charter school principal in Michigan shared stories he had heard from the parents who send their children to his school. He believed animosity became strongest when parents' friends "were teachers in a traditional public school and in the teacher union's ranks. That's where I'd say sentiment is strongest against charter schools by far. In Michigan it's particularly strong because we're such a union state." He saw much divisiveness among parents' peer groups.

Charter school founders and school district personnel all have choices to make about the kinds of relationship they would like to see established between the charter school and the district. Some charter school founders interviewed for this study felt as if they had sacrificed the integrity and autonomy of their school in order to "buy" the support of the district or the union and avoid ill-feelings. While most of the charter schools that had begun with contentious relationships to local school districts found the relationship improving after two or three years of operation, a few of the districts in this study had maintained tense and uncooperative relationships with charter schools for over three years.

Under what circumstances do school districts respond to charter laws and charter schools by accelerating school improvement efforts?

Finding #10: The districts in this study which had experienced high levels of impact usually exhibited responses to charters, though not necessarily at a high level; districts which had experienced low levels of impact generally exhibited low levels of response or no response at all.

Personnel in several school districts that were studied had not felt particular pressure to improve their schools due to the development of charter schools. Most of these cases were highly-acclaimed school districts that were well-resourced and well-respected in local communities. Hence in seeking to determine factors that allow charters to function strategically to spark improvement in district schools, it is important to acknowledge that some public school districts in which charters were located had already succeeded in developing strong, successful educational offerings while others were well on the road to successful school improvement before charters were initiated.

This research suggests the existence of a relationship between level of impact and district response to charter schools. There was a correlation between some of the levels or kinds of impact experienced by school districts and the levels or kinds of response by the district. Additional research is needed to fully understand this complex relationship. While it was clear that districts which had experienced heavy impact from charters showed some response, this was often a moderate response, rather than a strong one. Occasionally the response focused on improved public relations rather than substantive changes in educational programs. The districts which had not experienced significant impact from charters tended to offer little or no response.

There were also some observable relationships between the nature of impact and the nature of response. This was most pronounced when thematic charters formed and offered educational programs which district schools had not offered or offered to a limited extent, resulting in turning away families seeking such options. District schools often responded by offering a similar type of program, although sometimes in a somewhat muted form compared to that of the charter school. Districts which had experienced strong impacts from charters generally responded in ways which included improved public relations and stronger communication with parents.

Finding #11: A variety of factors other than the nature and degree of impact seemed to contribute to school district response to charters, including the overall ecology of school choice in the district, student performance, a critical mass of charters in the area, community awareness of charters, and district leadership. Districts which exhibited a high level of responsiveness to charters usually had reform-minded leaders who seized on charters as a strategic tool to step up reforms in their districts.

This study considered factors which resulted in traditional public schools and school districts responding to charters in ways that resulted in improved educational opportunities for the students who were not attending charter schools. While some theorists have suggested that an economic loss (the loss of financing) is the incentive needed for school districts to engage earnestly in reform efforts, this study uncovered a range of additional factors driving public school reform within school districts:

(a) The Overall Ecology of School Choice

Charters were not the only public school-choice option available in most of the states studied. Sometimes a combination of choice options had served to motivate district personnel into more expeditious reform efforts. In states such as Minnesota, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Colorado, it was difficult for informants to distinguish between the effects of varying choice options. The cumulative effect of several distinct, interrelated choice options seemed to drive several district-wide reform efforts.

(b) Student Performance

Student performance on standardized tests had contributed to district response to charters in several ways. Superintendents, principals, and teachers from high-performing districts tended to discount the impact of charters and often appeared committed to preventing controversies surrounding charters from distracting them from their already well-proven efforts. Charters in these districts often had been motivated by families seeking smaller school settings or specific educational alternatives. During the time of this study, two districts located in different states had received disappointing test results and personnel in these districts worried that the combined effect of the test results and the charter schools would result in drastic changes to the workings of the district. Clearly overall student achievement in a district played an important role in spurring or stifling response to charters.

(c) Enrollment Levels

The departure of significant numbers of students to charter schools was clearly a factor motivating intensified reform efforts for several of the school districts in this study. Ranging from dozens, to hundreds, to thousands of students, the "felt-loss" of students was usually tied to a loss of financing. Few subjects interviewed for this study disagreed that financial losses might spur a district to reform, yet some felt personal pride was as great a motivating factor. The loss of students was understood to result in a loss of pride for the superintendent or principal, who would then respond in a spirit of competition to win back the students and the financing.

A major factor mitigating the responsiveness of the districts studied involved rising school-age populations. Even though districts may have lost several hundred students to charters, if they were seeing an influx of new students to their area, this served to off-set the charter-related loss and minimize the "felt-loss" of financing. Several superintendents interviewed spoke supportively of charters. One Arizona superintendent described frantically trying to build new

schools to meet the rising demand and argued that charters "siphoned off" students in a helpful way.

(d) A Critical Mass of Charter Schools

One or two small charter schools in large urban districts did not seem to significantly spur reform throughout the district. Yet the same number of schools in small, rural districts might have had a major effect on the district's operations. Clearly the "critical mass" necessary to have a felt-impact on a district is related to district size. Several subjects thought that a specific level of market density was necessary to jolt school districts into action. Additional research in varying locations and contexts might aim to understand what constitutes a critical mass of charters that would prove capable of igniting reform energies within districts.

(e) Media Attention and Community Awareness of the Charter Effort

It became clear throughout this study that media coverage surrounding the development of charter schools often had had a crucial impact on the ways in which school district personnel responded to the charter. There did not seem to be a simple, predictable pattern of response, but several superintendents and principals indicated that they had felt compelled to respond aggressively when the level of discourse concerning charters became significant in their communities. If a charter school had been formed in a district, yet had received little media attention and the local community had been uninformed of its presence, it was less likely to have inspired response from the local district than if its formation had been accompanied by significant public debate.

(f) Charter Policies Which Allow For Multiple Sponsors of Charter Schools

States which had policies that provided for the chartering of new schools only through the local district showed significantly less evidence of reform effects from the development of charter schools than did states which allowed for multiple sponsors. While district officials frequently saw laws which allowed for multiple sponsors as undermining their authority and ability to oversee educational improvement in their district, the sites in this study where greatest effects were occurring were almost entirely in states with policies which allow for multiple sponsors. District personnel on at least five occasions in this study acknowledged —sometimes begrudgingly—that charters had served to "jump-start" their efforts at reform. While they initially had opposed charters and the chartering had been accomplished outside their authority, they felt that district schools ultimately had benefited from the dynamics introduced by the charter school.

(g) District and School Leadership

When informants were asked "What brings about positive reforms within public education?" the leadership of the district and of individual schools was frequently cited. Several superintendents, central office administrators, and principals saw charter legislation as an opportunity to aggressively move forward efforts to improve district schools. Most did not. In one district, the leadership of the state superintendent of schools was cited as well. This study uncovered several districts where the superintendent and/ or school committee had taken aggressive leadership to reform schools in order to head off efforts to open charter schools. In addition to the economic losses resulting from students enrolling in charters, reform-minded leadership was cited most frequently as key to the improvement of public schools.

During the design phase of this study, several researchers argued that leaders and employees of public school districts interviewed would not credit charter schools for increasing efforts at reform and would attribute improvements and innovations to other sources. The data indicated otherwise. School superintendents, central office administrators, principals and teachers frequently credited charter schools, or the debates surrounding charter schools, with motivating more earnest efforts at school reform.

Several school districts in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, were the sites of significant reform initiatives linked to charters. A principal of a middle school in Adams County #12 said,

Several superintendents saw charter legislation as an opportunity to aggressively improve district schools. Most did not.

I'm a person who believes that a little competition for the public school system wouldn't be a bad thing, as long as it's fair and not destructive in nature...I think having charter schools that are within the umbrella of the public school system—that sort of screens out the ideological aspects to a large degree—is a good way to go. It's a nice compromise...So I think the more choices and options we have for people, the better, as long as we keep the playing field even... The charter school has given teachers the idea that there is another system. We need to make sure that our product, if you will, our service, is as sterling and as polished as possible because people could turn to another way of doing this.

One urban district in this study illustrated that the opening of charter schools can serve as a catalyst for significant response on the part of a large urban district. In the Phoenix Union High School District in Arizona, district leadership had initiated aggressive reform efforts in response to charter schools. A deputy superintendent in the district said,

I think if charter legislation didn't come about—I've been here seven years, and we pretty much look today as we did seven years ago, as we did several years before that. But I can guarantee that next fall schools will look different. There will be different sized schools, there will be different configurations. We will have a year-round school. We do have a block scheduled school this year and that may not be a result of competition, but it's a result of delivering a better product. And I think that whole product, results-driven effort to redesign schools was heightened and then moved more quickly because of the competition from charter schools.

The superintendent of the Nauset Regional School District in Massachusetts spoke at length about using the new charter school that had been initiated in his district as part of a strategy to reform the district's middle school. He argued that the charter initiative could benefit his district if it spurred administrators and teachers to greater responsiveness and if it motivated school personnel to regularly rethink and re-envision their work. In Georgia, where the charter school initiative is part of the state's School Improvement Program, educational leaders in the Bartow County School District used the charter process "as a means that would allow them to improve education for children and get parents more involved." The superintendent of the district who facilitated the move towards chartering said,

My job and the system level staff's jobs will turn more and more into being a support base. We will function in a way that will support more of what the schools are doing, instead of generating stuff at the system level. It will be developed at the school level. We at the system level will serve to support the school. I see it changing more from a dictatorial role to a facilitator role. We help facilitate what they want to make happen.

Seven of the district's 10 elementary schools had become charters and the other three were in process, as were the district's middle schools and high school.

Finding #12: Informants disagreed about whether creating a competitive environment for districts leads to school improvement. Some believed it does. Others saw competition as harmful and believed educators prefer collaboration and are motivated by the needs of students or personal pride in their work rather than competition over enrollment, awards, or reputation.

When superintendents, teachers and principals were asked to list factors that motivate school personnel to create quality learning environments for students, two contrasting perspectives emerged. One viewpoint saw competition as a powerful and helpful force that keeps people on their toes and inspires a striving towards excellence. A superintendent from Georgia succinctly captured this perspective:

Competition is good for the public school system just like it's good for business...It's good for the kids and keeps everyone on their toes. It works against being lethargic and unresponsive.

A Massachusetts superintendent exemplified the view that competition is necessary for the healthy functioning of schools when he argued:

Informants disagreed about whether creating a competitive environment for districts leads to school improvement.

I think we're beginning to see some healthy benefit from the competition. The day after the charter school was announced, I walked into an administrators' meeting, tossed on the table a copy of David Halberstam's The Reckoning, *and said, "Who do you want to be—Honda or General Motors?" That metaphor has played itself out. Our middle school, which is the school at which the charter school is aimed, was by any rational standard the least successful school in the district...Its test scores were mediocre...It had a faculty that was defensive and complacent...*

The charter school was a wake-up call, like it or not. The fact is that the parents of more than 100 kids said, "We want our kids out..." Charter schools served notice to everybody that complacency wasn't an option...With no competition, people show up to work, do what they consider to be their jobs, go home feeling tired, satisfied, fulfilled—you pick it. The unfortunate reality perhaps is that the competition forced us to look in a mirror and ask who we were, who we wanted to be, why these people had chosen to leave us, and what we were gonna do about it.

Some charter schools were founded out of an adversarial relationship with the district schools; this adversarial relationship was often felt acutely by educators working in the district. In describing various relationships charter schools have had with district schools in Colorado, one superintendent said,

I think sometimes it feels contentious and I think sometimes they have been bred of adversity. Ours was bred of adversity. People who were very unhappy with the middle school founded the charter. So their earlier public relations was "We're gonna set this up because the middle school stinks!" This was very broad-based, harmful. Oh, it did not feel good. It did not feel good.

Another superintendent interviewed believed competition is destructive and felt that educators are motivated by factors such as pride and a commitment to educating the child. A social studies teacher in a traditional school in Tucson insisted,

I don't think we need the pressure at this school. We have extremely dedicated teachers. And I resent the attitude that change has to come from without, by competition, and that people who aren't certified—and I think in charter schools you don't have to have certification—that they're going to be able to make more of a difference than public school teachers. I think it's a fallacy. What drives us as teachers is love of our students. Concern for their future, the future of our city or our nation.

Another fifth grade teacher in Denver echoed these sentiments:

I don't do my job based on thinking I have a competitor. I do it based on knowing that the child needs to grow up and have a good education to get somewhere. That's what motivates me.

While it was unclear whether creating a competitive environment for a school district always promoted positive changes or encouraged an array of changes where the good outweighed the bad, the informants in this study, including traditional public school superintendents, district personnel, and principals, spoke thoughtfully and occasionally passionately about this topic. Many saw public school choice as one catalyst for school improvement in their districts.

Finding #13: This research suggests charter schools may have contributed to statewide reform efforts that have no formal connection to charters.

One charter school founder wondered whether Minnesota's site-based management initiative hadn't been spurred by the success locally which charter schools have had as site-based managed organizations. When asked why she thought the initiative had been related to charters, she responded,

Well it seems to follow on the heels and it's always a negotiating chip: rather than push for more for charters, why don't we do more within the system? And if charters can do that, then why can't we do it within the system? So it's there to pose questions to people. I think that's one of the intangible things that you'd have to track through legislative testimony to see how many times that's the gambit.

The deputy superintendent of an Arizona school district credited charter schools with improving that state's financing process for all public schools and loosening regulations surrounding teacher certification:

> *Same-year funding's been talked about for years, but if it wasn't for charter schools—the state superintendent, she's the one who decides how we're going to do the funding, pointed this out to the legislature as unfair...So they changed the law which closed the loophole...State licensing for teaching is also changing. Since the charter school law was put in, it's easier to become certified because the charter schools, they don't have to certify in our state.*

Other informants wondered whether the current expanded use of reconstitution of failing schools and the creation of stronger systems of school accountability in their areas could be attributed in part to charter schools' trailblazing in these areas.

Finding #14: Advocates and opponents of charter legislation and many of the state policymakers interviewed for this study often inaccurately characterized the overall effects which charter schools have had on school districts.

People involved in the contentious political debates surrounding charter schools frequently misrepresented the impact which charter schools have had on public school districts. Charter school movement activists, union leaders, representatives of education groups, administrators in state departments of education, and elected officials often made claims about how school districts had been affected by charters and presented compelling examples which fit their ideological beliefs. Yet when evidence was sought to substantiate these claims, a different picture often emerged.

This misrepresentation took several forms: the use of anecdotal information focused on outstanding charters or charter school failures to encourage people to mistake statistical outliers for typical cases; the denial or exaggeration of the number of students opting out of district schools or financing lost by some districts; a tendency to attribute all changes occurring in districts to charters when other, independent dynamics may have served as the primary impetus.

Few informants appeared to engage in willful misrepresentation or deliberately altered facts to fit their arguments. More commonly, the pressures of the political debate seemed to motivate people to reduce complexity, exaggerate impact, or simplistically characterize dynamic and multi-faceted processes.

The pressures of the political debate seemed to motivate people to reduce complexity, exaggerate impact, or simplistically characterize dynamic and multi-faceted processes.

Endnotes

1 Some of the more interesting studies in this category include, Corwin, R. and Flaherty, J. (Eds.). (1995 November). *Freedom and Innovation in California's Charter Schools.* Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory; Wohlstetter, P., Wenning, R. and Briggs, K. (1995 December). "Charter Schools in the United States: The Question of Autonomy," *Educational Policy,* 9(4), 331-358; Vergari, S. and Mintrom, M. (1996 September). *Charter School Laws Across the United States—1996 Edition.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research; American Federation of Teachers. (1996). *Charter School Laws: Do They Measure Up?* Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers; Wohlstetter, P. and Griffin, N. (1997, September). *First Lessons: Charter Schools as Learning Communities.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

2 The federally-funded multi-year charter school study will be investigating effects on districts during its second and third year. See *A Study of Charter Schools: First Year Report.* (May 1997). Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. See also Nathan,, J. (1996). *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; also Vanourek, G., Manno, B., Finn, C., and Bierlein, L. (1997 July). *The Educational Impact of Charter Schools.* Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute. Amy Stuart Wells and colleagues at UCLA have been studying California charter schools in the context of local school districts and will be releasing their findings later in 1998. See also *Charters in Our Midst: The Impact of Charter Schools on School Districts.* (1997). Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

3 *A Study of Charter Schools: First Year Report.* (May 1997). Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. See also Vanourek, G., Manno, B., Finn, C., and Bierlein, L. (June 1997) *Charter Schools in Action.* Washington, D.C.: The Hudson Institute.

4 Ibid.

5 Cuban, L. (1993). *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1880-1990.* New York: Teachers College Press; Tyack, D. (1974). *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Tyack, D. and Cuban, L. (1993). *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Sarason, S. (1996). *Revisiting "The Culture of the School and The Problem of Change."* New York: Teachers College Press

Policy Recommendations

One aim of this research study was to develop recommendations for policymakers to consider as they confront legislative proposals regarding charter laws and charter schools. Several recommendations emerge from an analysis of the data:

Recommendation #1: Policymakers crafting charter school laws should clarify the legislation's aims regarding the overall effect on school districts. If spurring overall district reform is the intent behind charter laws, policymakers should consider both these laws' impact on school districts and the districts' response. Policies aimed at achieving a critical mass of charters in a particular area and efforts which garner significant media attention for charters may result in heightened impact on districts; policies created to allow more than one entity to sponsor charters may result in increased response from districts.

Recommendation #2: The leadership of professional associations of superintendents and school board members should step up efforts to educate their members about charters, respond to their concerns, and allow them to discuss charters with peers who are successfully utilizing charter laws as part of an overall reform strategy. Because this study suggests that superintendents and school board members play pivotal roles in determining the district's response to charters, these interest groups must receive considerable education and opportunity to debate charter laws.

Recommendation #3: Policymakers should seriously consider ways to ensure that urban educators, charter school advocates, union activists, and other leaders of reform efforts engage in collaborative efforts to develop an urban strategy for charter schools which encourages charters to contribute energetically to overall systemic improvement and spurs district responsiveness to charters.

Recommendation #4: Policymakers should ensure that evaluations of the state's charter policy include a detailed assessment of impact, response, and overall effects on districts. While statewide evaluations of charter policies should assess student achievement and evaluate overall school performance in the state's charter schools, resources should be devoted periodically to an assessment of how school districts may be changing in the aftermath of this reform initiative.

Recommendation #5: Researchers assessing the effects of charters on school districts should recognize that systemic change rarely occurs swiftly and dramatically and avoid imposing inappropriate expectations and unrealistic time frames on the charter/district dynamic. Long-term ethnographic studies of the effects of charter schools on school districts should be initiated. Special attention should be devoted to locations where charter policies are inspiring reform and resulting in improved student achievement in the district schools. Such studies might ask: What kinds of charter laws and what kinds of charter schools spur systemic change? What specific conditions, factors, and dynamics are necessary to allow charters to trigger district-wide improvements?

Recommendation #6: District superintendents, central administration personnel, principals, and school board members should redesign their planning processes for an era of increased public school choice. New systems, schedules, and processes might improve budgeting and planning for capital improvements, enrollment levels, and personnel shifts and allow districts to anticipate changes brought about by school choice options.

Recommendation #7: If policymakers create charter laws with the intention of districts transferring pedagogical innovations from the charters to traditional public schools, they should examine carefully ways in which charter laws may polarize constituencies which are intended to work collaboratively. They should analyze the impact charter laws are having on school districts—particularly in the areas of financing, redistribution of administrative time, student placement concerns, and the loss of particular kinds of students to niche-focused charters—and work with districts to plan for these and other changes. Policymakers should be aware of a possible dilemma here: Creating policies which allow for sponsors besides the local district may produce more innovative schools yet may encourage a polarization among educators which precludes mutual exchange.

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