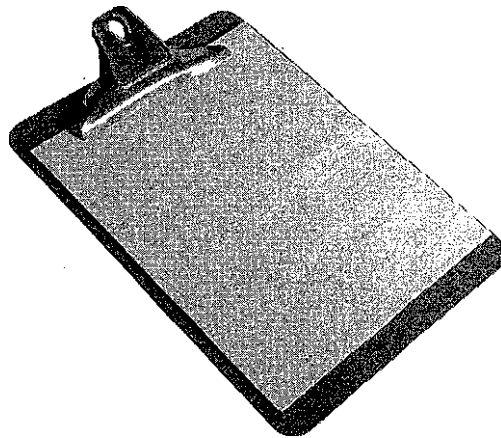

THE Center for Education Reform



SURVEY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS
(1998-1999)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



CHARTER SCHOOLS: *Today*
CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
Washington, DC

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SURVEY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS 1998-1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Education Reform (CER) is pleased to present the results of its nationwide survey of charter schools, which includes data compiled from charter schools operating in the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years. The responses — representing 305 of the 1,208 charters operating as of June 1999 in 23 states and the District of Columbia — paint a picture of a diverse and vibrant system of schools.

CER asked these charter schools general questions about their educational programs and operations, including, for the first time, questions about their budgets. In addition to asking for quantifiable data about demographics, operations and curriculum, CER asked open-ended questions about charter schools' struggles and successes, current programs, and plans for the future. *A copy of the full survey sent to charter schools can be found in the End Notes.*

CER's survey is the largest sample to date of activities in and around charter schools nationwide. The schools' responses illustrate some of the quantifiable, positive effects charter laws are having on education. For example, charter schools' curriculum programs vary widely, but the top five in use are known for their academic rigor and integrity. In addition, demand for charter schools is rising, and parental demand, student satisfaction and entrepreneurial spirit are driving charter school growth. Half of charter school respondents said they plan to expand, and many indicated that their growth plans focus on academic programs and achievement.

The range of responses reveals that every charter school is different. Charter schools, moreover, reflect both their own approaches to meeting student needs and the provisions of their states' authorizing charter laws. Finally, these schools clearly are satisfying consumers and creating demand: 67 percent of respondents report waiting lists.

THE SURVEY'S KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL.

Charter schools deliver the smaller size that parents want and that is conducive to educational achievement. Average enrollment is about 250, and two-thirds of charter schools have significant waiting lists.

CHARTERS OFFER CHOICES.

Charter schools have responded to students' and parents' well-documented demand for higher standards and more specific, comprehensive school curricula.

MOST CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE START-UPS.

More than three-quarters of responding charter schools are start-up schools, a figure that continues to grow.

MULTIPLE CHARTERING AUTHORITIES LEAD TO MORE CHARTERS.

A majority of charter schools are approved by an agency other than the local school board. Local school boards, however, chartered 43 percent of respondents, and they are more likely to grant charters when state laws allow for multiple charter-granting bodies.

FUNDING AND FACILITIES ARE MAJOR CHALLENGES.

Nearly 40 percent of responding charter schools cite funding as a major challenge. Nearly one-quarter cite facilities as a significant challenge.

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE WORKING OVERTIME TO DELIVER QUALITY EDUCATION.

Charter schools set their own schedules, and about one-fifth report having either extended-day or extended-year schedules.

EDUCATING UNDERSERVED STUDENTS.

Charter schools serve large percentages of children who are typically underserved in America's schools.

SUCCESSSES TELL THE STORY.

Individual schools' responses are an important way to illustrate the success of and enthusiasm for charter schools. As **Bluffview Montessori School** of Winona, MN, said: "We were the first school in U.S. to obtain a charter (November 1991), and we have sure had an interesting time. We have gone far beyond our wildest expectations of success and owe it to those families who decided the district schools just don't cut it."



KEY FINDINGS

SMALLER SCHOOLS WITH LONGER WAITING LISTS

Research shows that smaller schools aid student achievement. Charter schools deliver the smaller size that parents want. As *Figure 1* indicates, most charter schools are relatively small, with average enrollment about 250 students, compared to the average of 710 in traditional public schools. While a few charter schools serve larger populations, fewer than 20 percent of charter schools have more than 500 students.

Two-thirds of charter schools have long waiting lists, illustrating strong parental demand. The average waiting list

is 141 students, or nearly 60 percent of the average charter school's enrollment. From 1997-1998 to 1998-1999, the average number of students on charter school waiting lists increased by 22 percent.

In the future, two factors may lead to shorter waiting lists for charter schools: first, the number of charter schools is rising so more schools will be available to meet demand; and second, as charter schools open, they often inspire competition — and improved performance — from other public schools.

Figure 1: Size and Waiting Lists of Charter Schools

	1997-1998	1998-1999
Average enrollment	221	253
Range of enrollments	10 to 1986	15 to 2026
Percentage of schools with waiting lists	63%	67%
Average number of students on waiting lists	116	141

Average Charter Enrollment, Nationwide (from CER's *National Charter School Directory*) 1998-1999: 250; 1997-1998: 241.

SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTION PROVIDES CHOICE

Charter schools provide multiple curriculum options, responding to the demand for better and more focussed curricula. Most charter schools adopt a specialized teaching strategy - one the school's operators believe will best meet students' needs (Figure 2).

The curriculum programs offered by charter schools vary considerably. Some, for example, focus on specific disciplines (such as math and science or the arts) while others are built around stu-

dents' future plans (college preparation or school-to-work). The top five curriculum programs shown in Figure 2 are known for their academic rigor and integrity. While comparable data for all public schools is unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests that charter schools specialize more than public schools overall. District public schools are less likely to specialize because the instructional methods and curricula for the entire district usually are centralized.

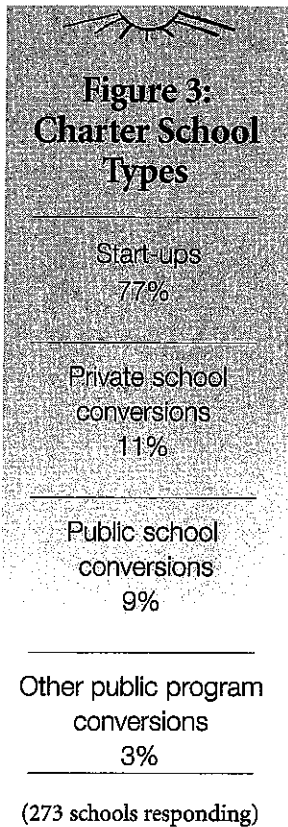
Figure 2: Curriculum/Instructional Focus

Science/Math/Tech	26%
Core knowledge (E.D. Hirsch)	24%
Thematic instruction	24%
Back to basics	20%
College prep	16%
Direct instruction	14%
School-to-work	13%
Arts	11%
Outcome-based education	11%
Home/independent study	8%
Bilingual/foreign language	5%
GED/HS completion	5%
Montessori	4%
Waldorf	2%
International Baccalaureate	0.3%
Other *	27%

291 schools responding.

Note: Please refer to the glossary in the End Notes for definitions of these instructional approaches.

Note: Write-in responses for "Other" include various state curriculums; subject-based curricula, including agriculture, arts and science, business, economics and health care; the Bank St. Model; character education; leadership and community education; computer-assisted learning; Edison Schools Project; experiential and hands-on learning; Marva Collins; project-based learning; neuro learning; Paideian philosophy; process learning; technology literacy; and life skills.



MOST CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE START-UPS

More than three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that their charter schools are start-up schools (*Figure 3*), likely reflecting the reality that it often is easier to start from scratch than to transform an existing culture. This conclusion is supported by trend data, which show that the number of charter school start-ups is growing, while the number of charter school conversions — existing public or private schools that become

charter schools — is declining (*Figure 4*).

Our survey found that a higher percentage of private schools than public schools converted to charter schools. This finding, however, may be an anomaly. Only nine states allow private schools to convert to charters so either these states had a surge of conversions or a disproportionate number of private school conversions responded.

Figure 4: Trend Data on Charter School Types

	U.S. Department of Education, May 1997	U.S. Department of Education, May 1998	CER 1999
Start-ups	56%	70%	77%
Private school conversions	11%	11%	11%
Public school conversions	32%	19%	9%
Other program conversions			3%

MULTIPLE AUTHORITIES LEAD TO MORE CHARTERS

A review of who grants charters (*Figure 5*) illustrates the impact of different state charter laws. Overall, agencies other than local school boards authorize more charters than any other chartering authority; 57 percent of charters are granted by alternative sponsoring authorities.

Local school boards, however, grant 43 percent of charters in this survey. A state-by-state analysis of charter-authorizing bodies, moreover, indicates that local school boards are more likely to grant charters when the state law allows alternative bodies, such as state school

boards and universities, to authorize charters. Only 4.5 percent of charter schools are in the 11 states that allow only local school boards to grant charters, and on average, states with multiple chartering authorities or appeals process have 91 percent more charter schools than states where local school boards are the only charter-granting body. California and Michigan, for example, allow for multiple chartering bodies or appeals, and these two states are home to more than 25 percent of all charter schools in the United States. Further data on chartering authorities can be found in *Figure 5a* in the Appendices.

CHARTER SCHOOLS' GREATEST CHALLENGE: FUNDING

Nearly all charter schools report funding among their top challenges, and 39 percent cite funding as a significant challenge. Specific funding challenges include operating with inadequate funding and not receiving their fair allocation of dollars from the district.

While all public schools are funded in similar ways, funding systems vary from state to state. For example, Arizona and California have highly centralized school funding systems, whereas Michigan has a reliance on both state and property taxes.

In addition, funding for charter schools usually takes a different path from funding for traditional public schools (Figure 6). While only 48 percent of traditional public school operational funding comes from the state, charter schools report that 73 percent of their operational funds come directly from the state.

The implications of these data may not be immediately apparent. Some por-

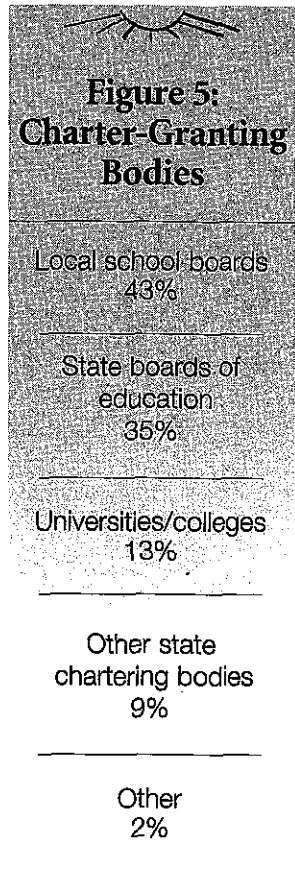
tion of district funding for traditional public schools' actually comes from the state; if it flows through the district, it is considered district funding. Thus, even though charter schools report a higher percentage of state funds, one can't conclude that charter schools are getting more state money than traditional public schools. Funding for charter schools simply follows a different path: money flows directly from the state to the charter school without first going through the district. (More info about the path money takes is explained in CER's *Charter School Laws Across the States*).

In fact, at both the state and district levels, charter schools often have to seek out their fair funding allocation. Funding for traditional public schools usually is automatic. (See *The Obstacles and Opposition to Charter Schools*, Chapter 2 for examples of charter schools that had to fight for funding because of the newness of their schools and various operational hurdles.)

Figure 6: The Path of Charter School Funding

Operational funding	Charter schools	Traditional public schools
District funding	19%	45%
State funding	73%	48%
Federal funding	6%	6%
Private funding	3%	N/A

For further details of funding see Figures 6a-6c in the Appendices.



(294 schools responding)

Note: Write-in responses for "Other" included various county agencies and some overlap is suggested by the survey data. CER's National Charter School Directory 1998-1999 found that nationally, 42 percent of charters were sponsored by a local agency (generally a local school board), and 57 percent were sponsored by an alternative public agency, such as the state board of education, a specifically created charter sponsoring body, or a college or university.

MOST CHARTER SCHOOLS STRUGGLE TO FIND FACILITIES

When a school is financially secure in its building, it can focus on instruction and learning instead of an ongoing struggle to keep its doors open. Most charter schools struggle to find facilities, and the most successful charter schools are housed in buildings they can sustain financially. Nearly a quarter (21 percent) of charter schools, however, cited their facility as a major challenge. Facilities challenges include finding, outfitting and paying for school locations.

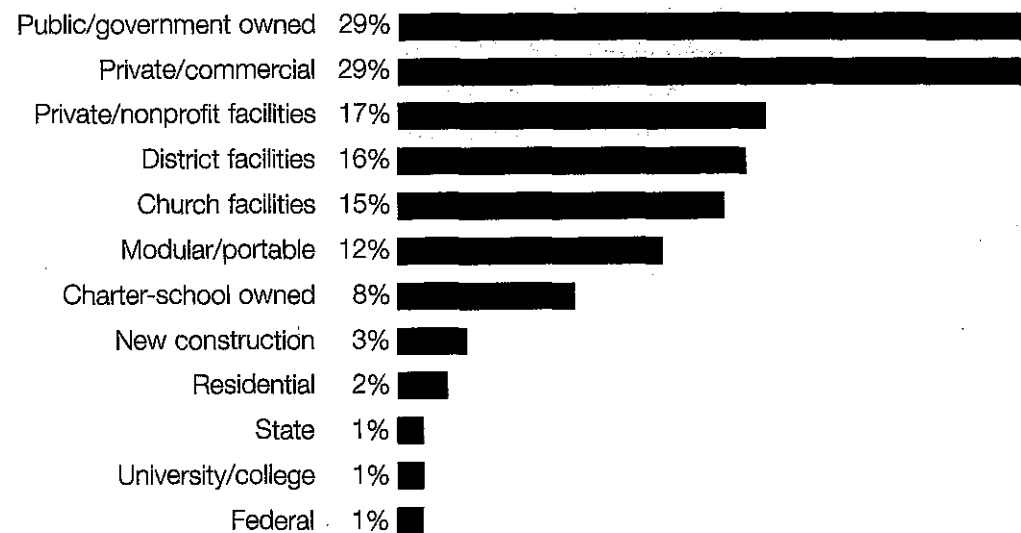
Charter schools often demonstrate creative use of space, showing that quality learning can occur almost anywhere. Locations for charter schools include parent-renovated buildings, churches, converted banks and factories, and military bases (*Figure 7*).

Many respondents checked more than one box, noting that more than one definition of their space applied. One charter school, for example, noted that

the school is housed in a public university, and thus marked both “public” and “university.” Others operate in privately owned, newly constructed buildings. Finally, some charter schools operating in church facilities also noted that these were private, nonprofit offices. Thus, while *Figure 7* shows the kinds of spaces charters occupy, it does not illustrate the exhaustive array of sites that exist.

Specific location descriptions covered urban, suburban and rural settings, including portable and modular buildings; a parent-purchased and -renovated 18,000-square-foot building; former schools and office buildings, churches, a former club which was converted to a 6,000-square-foot school; converted bank buildings, factories and government buildings; museums; the middle of Prescott National Forest; shopping malls; military bases; and a riverboat landing. For more extensive location listings, see the *Appendices*.

Figure 7: Location



(272 schools responding)

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING PROMOTES LEARNING

Charter schools set their own schedules, and many work overtime to deliver quality education, with about one-fifth reporting either extended-day

or extended-year schedules. Twenty-one percent of responding schools reported having a longer school day, and 19 percent reported having a longer school year.

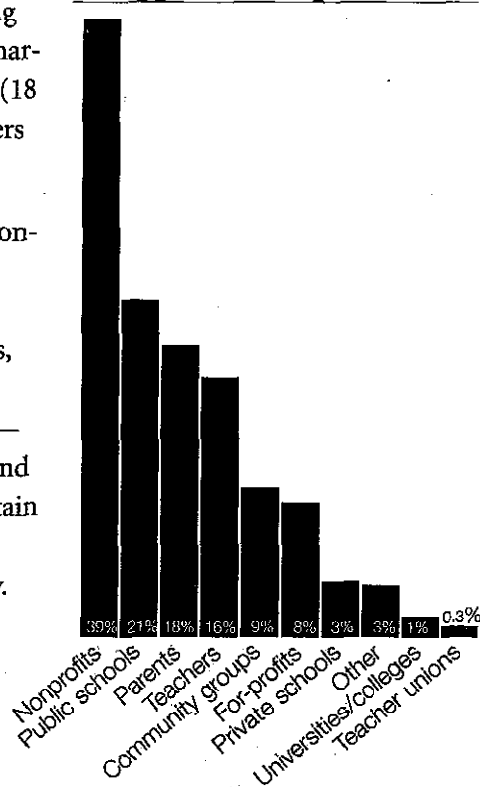
DIVERSE GROUPS OPERATE CHARTER SCHOOLS

A wide range of individuals and organizations apply for and manage charter schools (*Figure 8*). Not surprisingly, those who stand to gain the most from introducing new ideas to public schools are the ones applying for and operating charter schools: parents (18 percent), and teachers (16 percent).

Note: While nonprofits made up 39 percent of charter applicants/operators, that is most likely because applicants — including teachers and parents — often obtain nonprofit status for their applying entity.

That category also includes a growing group of civic and community-based groups that have worked with children, such as the Urban League and Boys & Girls Clubs.

**Figure 8:
Applicants/Operators**



(287 schools responding)

Note: Write-in responses for “Other” included a retired public school administrator, a university professor and other individuals.

Finally, one interesting note on public schools: the 21 percent of respondents who marked “public school” were responding to how they viewed themselves, not who started them. Normally, teachers and parents who started a school also marked “public school” to signify how they now view their charter as the operator.

SERVING SPECIAL POPULATIONS

As *Figure 9* illustrates, charter schools specialize in serving special populations of students, particularly those typically underserved by the district school system, such as at-risk (27 percent), special education (20 percent), minority (20 percent) and low-income (19 percent) students.

Because the survey provided little definition in this area, charter schools often checked more than one box, such

as “at-risk” and “minority.” Interestingly, almost all respondents (80 percent) marked general population at the same time they marked a specific sub-population, demonstrating that most charter schools believe that their special populations reflect the general population they serve. That may be because a relatively large number of charter schools are in areas where children are most disadvantaged.

Figure 9: Populations Served/Targeted

General	80%
At-risk/dropouts	27%
Special education	20%
Minority	20%
Low-income	19%
Gifted and talented	14%
Adjudicated youth	9%
Teen parents	9%
Expelled youth	8%
Disabled	6%
ESL/bilingual	5%
Other	0%

(298 schools responding)

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PLANS

Perhaps even more valuable than the quantifiable data are the personal responses charter schools offered to CER's more open-ended questions. These answers tell the full story of charter schools' challenges, assessments, successes, unique aspects and plans, and many of this report's conclusions were drawn from these responses. An overview of respondents' observations follows. Detailed individual responses are provided in the appendices.

ACCOUNTABILITY, ASSESSMENT AND SUCCESS

Despite charter schools' fledgling status — two-thirds of the charter schools that responded to questions about accountability were less than 3 years old — 39 percent reported early evidence of academic improvements and successes. Because charter schools are required by their performance contracts to demonstrate gains on specific, objective measures, most charters we spoke to upon further investigation said they were likely to wait until they have measurably met a contract performance goal before reporting a success.

Charter schools reported a range of achievements, including gains in reading and math performance, test scores that are higher than district and state averages, increased parental involvement, higher attendance and fewer discipline problems. Examples of specific successes include:

* Ten percent of students go on to advanced top-of-the-line [high] schools, 40 percent are enrolled in Advanced Placement in math and 30 percent are enrolled in Advanced Placement in literature/English. We have successfully applied our approach to students from the full

spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds. (**Bennett Academy, Phoenix, Arizona**)

- * Above local, state and national norms on the Stanford 9 Achievement Test. (**Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy, Flagstaff, Arizona**)
- * Eighty percent of students are prior dropouts. We maintain a 68 percent graduation rate, and more than 60 percent go on to a junior college or university. (**Intelli-School-Metro Center, Phoenix, Arizona**)
- * Highest elementary and middle school standardized test scores in the district. (**The Heritage School, Phelan, California**)
- * Third in North Carolina's end-of-grade tests. (**Magellan Charter School, Raleigh, North Carolina**)

Respondents used a number of methods — including state-mandated assessment measures, which are required by most charter school laws — to assess, monitor and report on their students' development. These methods included teacher evaluations, competency-based curriculum, student portfolios, letters to

parents, site-developed assessments, independent outside evaluations, and standardized tests, such as Stanford 9, CTBS and Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

For more in-depth, individual responses, see Charter Schools' Successes: Selected Responses, which are available by visiting www.edreform.com.

CHALLENGES

As noted earlier, charter schools' biggest challenges are funding, cited by 38 percent of respondents, and facilities, cited by 21 percent (239 schools responded). Other challenging areas include: academic and program considerations, relations with the district and local boards, enrollment and attendance, communications and public relations, state regulations and paperwork, bureaucracy

and political issues, special education, staff and governance issues, transportation, start-up, and parent and student challenges.

For more in-depth, individual responses, see Charter Schools' Successes: Selected Responses, which are available by visiting www.edreform.com.

GROWTH AND FUTURE PLANS

Of the 240 schools that responded to CER's question about plans for growth and change, half said they plan to expand: 28 percent plan to increase the grades they serve, 21 percent plan to increase enrollment, and 20 percent plan to build or expand their facilities.³ Many also indicated that their plans for growth will focus, additionally or exclusively, on

academic programs and achievement. As **Eagle's Crest Charter Academy of Holland, Michigan**, noted, "Parent satisfaction drives our enrollment growth."

For more in-depth responses, see Charter Schools' Plans for Expansion and Development: Selected Responses, which are available by visiting www.edreform.com.

³ The growth figures overlap because schools could check multiple growth categories. For example, a school may plan to grow its facilities and student body.

THE LAST WORD

Charter schools overwhelmingly took time to provide additional insights into how they work. For example, several respondents were proud of their parent and community involvement, emphasis on technology and peer counseling. Others discussed strict academic criteria, such as “no retakes on tests or late homework for credit” (**Union Colony Charter School, Greeley, Colorado**), independent study programs with one-on-one teacher

contact (**Options for Youth - Long Beach, Inc., Pasadena, California**), and other programs.

These detailed responses describing unique aspects of individual charter schools and their contributions to education can be found in Charter Schools' Academic and Other Program Offerings: Selected Responses, and The Last Word: Additional Comments are available by visiting www.edreform.com.

NOTES ON THE SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Not all schools responded to all questions. For each question, percentages are based on total responses to that particular question, not on the 305 schools overall who responded to the survey.

For some questions, total responses add to more than 100 percent because many schools gave more than one answer to each question.

