THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CHARTER SCHOOL OPERATIONS

SURVEY OF AMERICA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS 2014

the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1996, the Center for Education Reform has surveyed the nation's charter schools in what has become the most reliable and detailed view of the environment and conditions in which these independent public schools operate. Back then, we surveyed the roughly 500 schools that were in operation in the 16 states and the District of Columbia that had charter school laws. In 2012, we surveyed 5,300 operational charter schools now hailing from 42 states and the District that allow for the creation of charters. What is clear over the course of the 17 years of this particular analysis is that while charter school growth has been steady, averaging 340 new schools per year, it has not kept pace to meet the demand of students and families desperate for quality educational choices.

The *Survey of America's Charter Schools* provides an in-depth analysis of charter school students, operations, and teachers. If discusses trends over time in the *Size and Scope*, *Demographics*, *Finance and Operations,* and *Academic Program* of charter schools and insights into why these independent schools are in such high demand.

The story of charter schools is in the data, and it is still unfolding 21 years after the first charter school opened its doors in Minnesota. Against the odds, and far too often in hostile policy environments, charters survive and succeed grounded in the principles of choice, accountability, and autonomy. They innovate and adjust to deliver results by introducing new curriculum or creating blended learning environments to meet student needs. Even when they are part of a larger network, no two charter schools are alike, providing diverse educational options from which parents and students may choose.

KEY FINDINGS

Charter school **growth continues at a steady, nearly linear pace**. While this continued growth – reaching 6,004 charter entities in 2012 – is a positive for the charter movement, an even more accelerated pace would allow charter schools to play a more central role in education reform over the next few years.

The **highest charter school and enrollment growth is in jurisdictions with strong charter laws.** Strong charter laws feature independent, multiple authorizers, few limits on expansion, and high levels of school autonomy. In 2012-2013, 335 additional charter campuses were established in states with charter laws and policies graded an "A" or "B" on CER's *2013 Charter School Law Ranking and Scorecard*, while only 13 additional campuses were created in states rated "D" or "F." These numbers echo the growth differential observed in previous years. If we measure charter growth by the number of students enrolled, there currently are 1,335,408 in states that CER gave an "A" or "B" rating. Only 56,046 students attend charters in jurisdictions rated "D" or "F".

Demand for charter schools remains strong, with the length of the average waiting list increasing from 233 in 2009 to 277 in 2012. The fact that demand continues to outstrip supply suggests that charter schools could grow significantly faster if the policy environment were more supportive.

Independent charter authorizers play an essential role in the health of the charter school movement. Independent authorizers hold charter schools accountable, and these schools generally are more academically and operationally sound. An authorizer other than a local school board has granted over 60 percent of charters across the country.

Charter schools' **use of innovative performance-based and skill-based compensation for teachers is increasing**, even as the small proportion of schools with unionized staff decreases. For example, between 2009 and 2012, the percent of charter schools implementing performance-based compensation increased from 19 percent to 37 percent. The proportion that is unionized decreased from 12 percent to 7 percent.

Charter schools **emphasize a strong, challenging academic program**. The most popular educational approach is college preparatory (30 percent), and a substantial number (8 percent) focus on the demanding Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) area. Another popular approach is Core Knowledge (16 percent), which emphasizes a broad and deep understanding of important academic content in literature, history, science, math, and other subjects. Newer, technology-dependent approaches also are noteworthy, including Blended Learning (6 percent) and Virtual/Online learning (2 percent).

When compared to traditional public schools, **charters serve a more disadvantaged student population, including more low-income and minority students**. Sixty-one percent of charter schools serve a student population where over 60 percent qualify for the federal Free or Reduced Lunch Program due to their family's low income.

Charter schools continue to receive significantly less in revenue per student than traditional public schools, on average 36 percent less, and, unlike other public schools, most do not receive facilities funds. They therefore are forced to spend a significant portion of their funds to rent suitable space.

Despite charter schools' limited resources, **an increasingly large number of charters provide students with extended instructional time, such as a longer school day or a longer school year**. The percentage offering an extended school day increased from 23 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2012.

Charters provide **smaller, more personalized learning environments for students**. In 2012, the typical (median) charter school enrollment was 286 students, compared to 475 students in traditional public elementary schools and 684 in traditional public high schools.

ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY DATA

METHODOLOGY

The *Survey of America's Charter Schools* is broken out into four key sections, each designed to provide insights into the overall management and environment of charter schools across the country. The four sections are: *Size and Scope, Demographics, Finance and Operations,* and *Academic Program*. Each section contains data and graphs based directly on the responses of the charter schools.

Except where otherwise cited, the source for data presented in this report is the CER *National Charter School Survey*. In 2012, CER distributed survey instruments to 5,294 operating charter schools. The survey posed a range of questions about educational programs and operations, standardized testing, and demographics. A total of 743 charter schools returned their surveys, for a 14 percent return rate. The data have been reviewed, compiled, analyzed and summarized in this report.

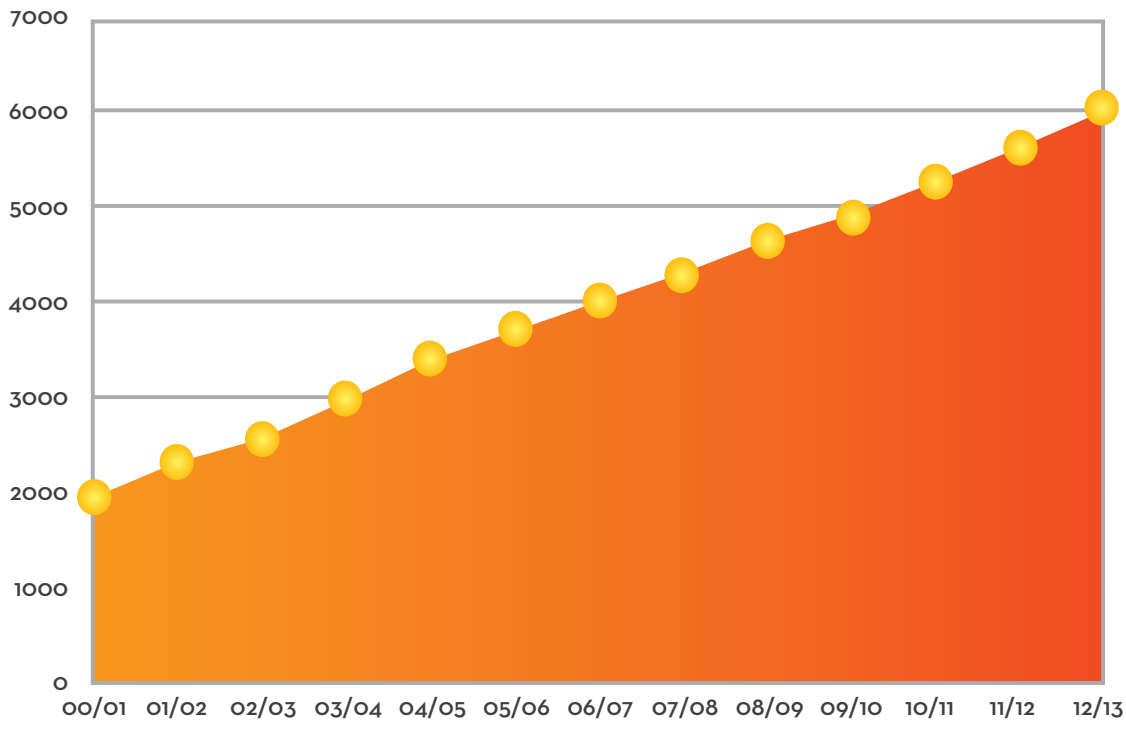

Figure 1: Growth in Operational Charters from 2000/2001 to 2012/2013

Data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2012-13 (see endnote 1).

SIZE AND SCOPE

Charter Growth

Since 1992, charter schools have empowered parents with new educational choices for their children as they offered educators the freedom to create innovative educational environments in exchange for increased academic and financial accountability. What began as a small experiment had grown to one that serves over 2.2 million students in 6,004 charter entities in the 2012-13 school year.[1] By early 2013, 42 states and Washington, D.C., had enacted statutes authorizing charter schools.[2]

The total number of charters has increased over the last decade at an average rate of 340 schools per year. While this represents a solid achievement, growth will need to accelerate if charter schools are to play a central role in improving the educational system over the next few years, and also to meet the public demand for these schools.

Jurisdictions with strong charter school laws[3], particularly those that feature independent, multiple authorizers, tend to experience the highest new school growth each year, and this held true in 2012-13. The charter laws in these states include fewer limits on expansion, higher levels of school autonomy, and strong, independent charter authorizers, such as universities or independent charter boards. In 2012-13, there were 335 new charter school campuses in jurisdictions whose charter law was graded "A" or "B," while there were only 13 new school campuses in jurisdictions with a charter law earning a grade of "D" or "F."[4]

This growth only magnified the difference in charter school enrollment between states with laws graded "A" or "B" and those earning a rating of "D" or "F." As shown in Figure 3, there were 1,335,408 students enrolled in the former in 2012-13, while only 56,046 students enrolled in the latter.[5]

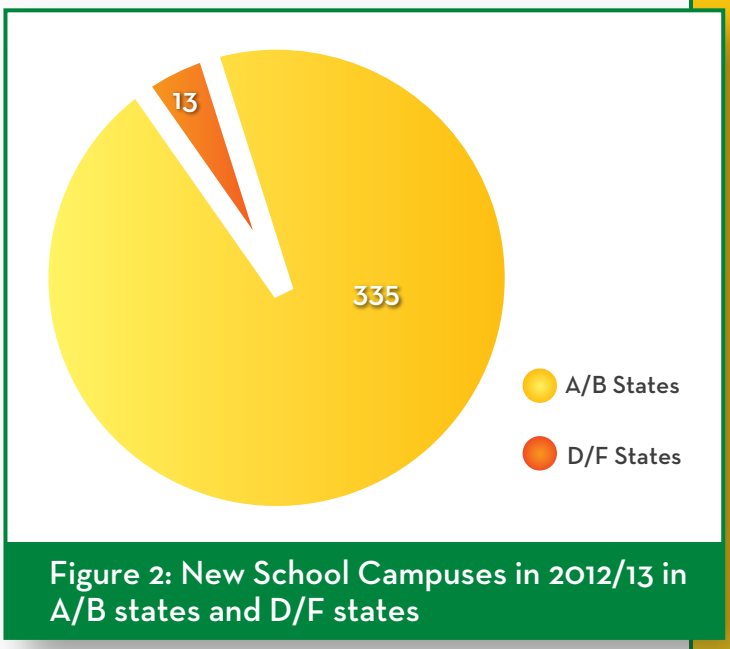

Figure 2: New School Campuses in 2012/13 in A/B states and D/F states

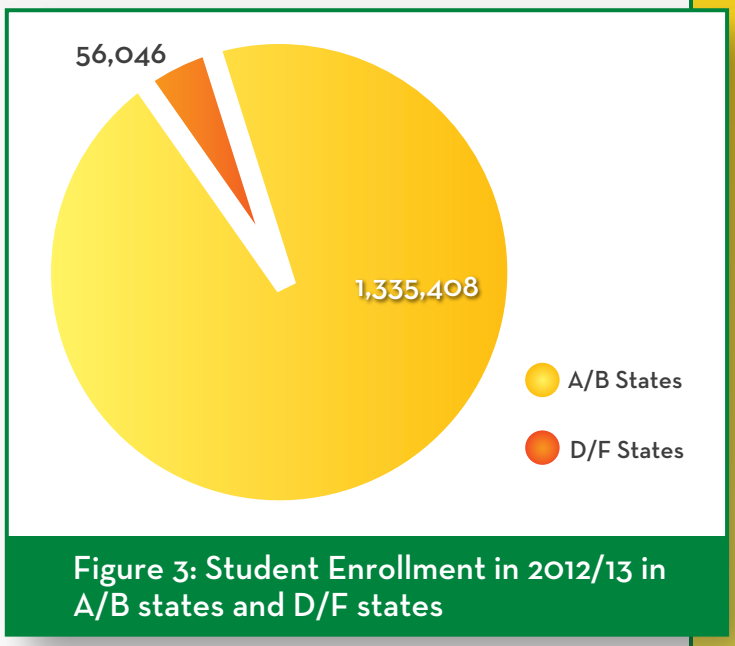

Figure 3: Student Enrollment in 2012/13 in A/B states and D/F states

Charter School Size

Charter schools historically have been smaller than traditional public schools. Many aim intentionally for such a setting in order to provide a tighter-knit and more attentive environment to their students, while for others it is the result of a tighter facilities budget than traditional public schools. Regardless of the cause, the smaller size enables charters to provide more personalized attention to students and builds smaller learning communities.

Figure 4 illustrates the difference in size between charter schools and traditional public schools. The average size of all charter schools (425) – high schools as well as elementary schools – is smaller than the average size of traditional public elementary schools (475)[6] and much smaller than the size of traditional public high schools (684)[7]. But the few relatively large charter schools (many of them virtual) mask the fact that the typical (median) charter school is substantially smaller, enrolling only 286 students.

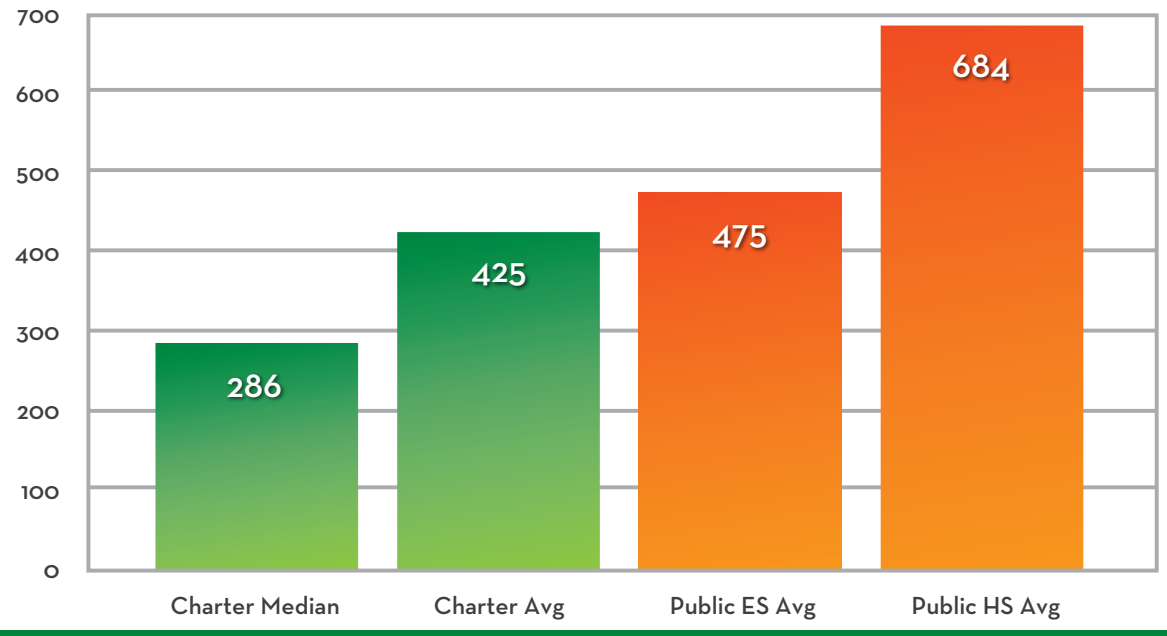

Figure 4: Charter and Public School Sizes

Unfortunately, in addition to school and enrollment growth, there has also been an increase in the number of students on charter school waiting lists. From 2009 to 2012, the average charter school waiting list increased from 233 students to 277 students. Weak state charter laws continue to impose artificial caps on the number of schools that can open regardless of demand. To enable charter schools to keep up with parental demand and grow at a faster rate, such arbitrary obstacles must be removed and mildly supportive state policy environments must become more amenable to rapid, scalable growth.

Charter Authorizers

Figure 5 illustrates that charter authorizers are a diverse group and may include state boards of education, local boards, two- or four- year colleges or universities, independent state charter boards, local cities, or something else entirely. Since charter schools are often (though not always) viewed through a hostile lens by local districts, effective charter laws permit entities other than the local district to authorize charter schools or approve appeals. Over 60 percent of charter schools are authorized by an entity other than the local school district. As mentioned on page 5, states with strong charter laws tend to have multiple authorizers, and therefore more charter schools.

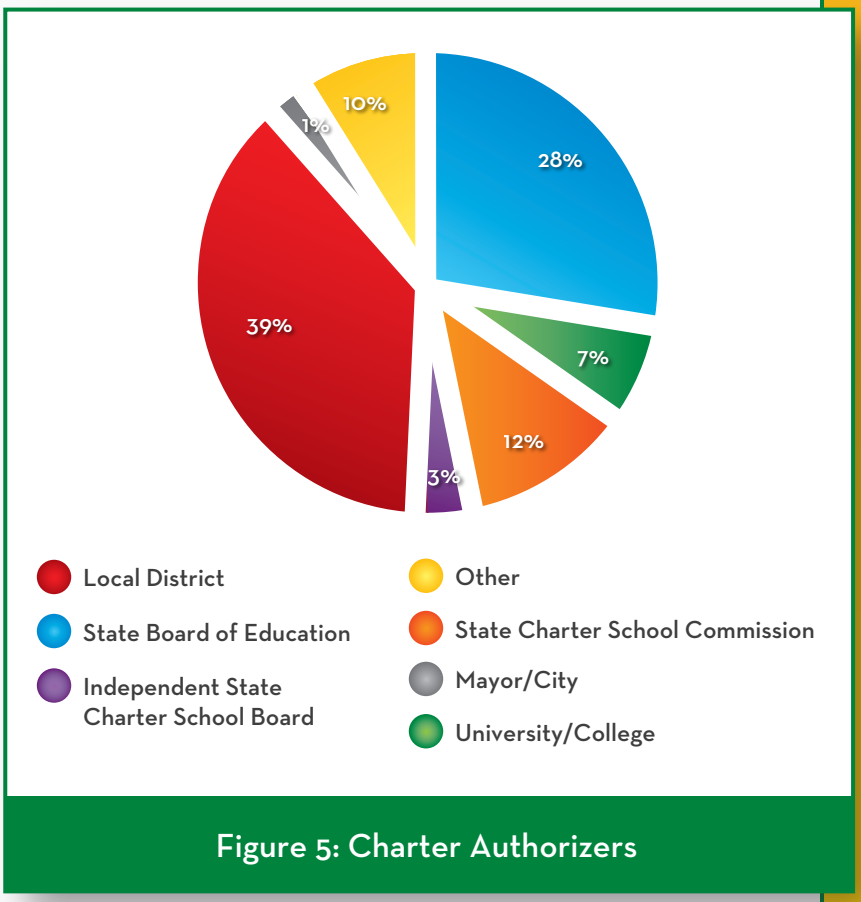

Figure 5: Charter Authorizers

DEMOGRAPHICS

The federal Free and Reduced Lunch program is by far the most commonly cited proxy for student low-income status at the elementary and secondary level. It is not an ideal measure for this purpose, but it is often the only available measure. For this reason it is included in this study as well. School districts spend enormous amounts of energy and resources ensuring that they count every applicable student, as each additional student draws an added increment of federal money from programs such as Title I and the subsidized federal lunch program. But because most charter schools do not belong to school districts, they must collect and distribute their own data. Charter schools have found this to be an onerous process and some prefer not to participate in the federal lunch program because of the regulations imposed, as you will see on page 15. This therefore is not a completely reliable data point. However, it is the best one available at the moment to compare demographics.

Other demographic variables that analysts commonly associate with disadvantage include students enrolled in special education, English Language Learners (ELL), and Black and Hispanic pupils. Gifted and talented status typically is associated with advantage.

Contrary to the impression some have that charters "cream" more advantaged students from traditional public schools, a majority of charter school students are non-white, or minority students. Only 45 percent of charter students are white, while 52.5 percent of public school students are white. Figure 6 provides key demographic comparisons between charter students and public school students based on the charter survey results and the most recently available data for public school students from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education[8]. The populations of charter students and public school students appear to be comparable with respect to special education status, the proportion of English language learners, and gifted and talented students. Charter students are somewhat more likely to qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch due to being low-income (63 percent of charter students versus 48 percent of public school students), to being African-American (28 percent of charter students versus 16 percent of public school students) or to being Hispanic (28 percent of charter students versus 23 percent of public school students).

In addition, 2.9 percent of charter school students are Native American, while the comparable figure is 1.1 percent of students in the public schools. Asian students comprise 3.6 percent of charter students and 4.6 percent of public school students. Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students are 0.6 percent of charter students and 0.3 percent of public school students.

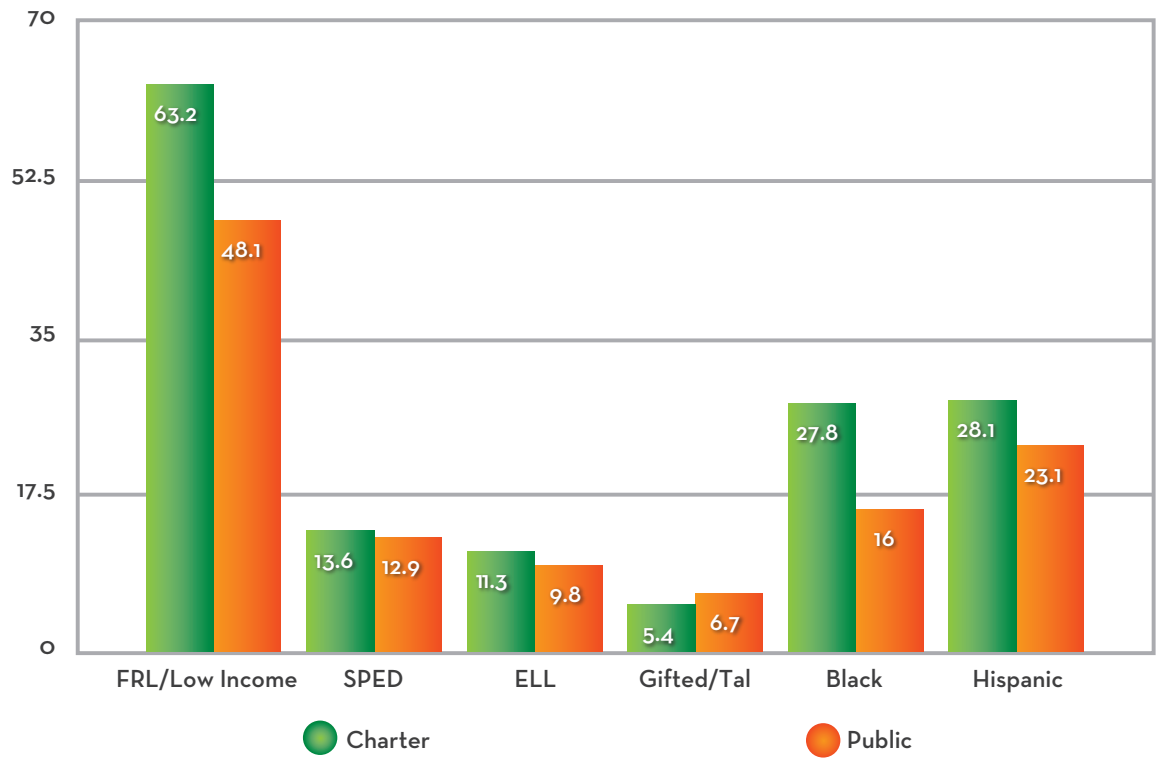

Figure 6: Charter and Public Student Demographics

Many charter schools, especially those in urban environments, serve concentrated low-income and at-risk student populations. As shown in Figure 7, 61 percent of charter schools serve student populations where more than 60 percent of students qualify for the Free and Reduced lunch program for low-income families.

Similarly, 27 percent of charter schools serve populations with at least 60 percent of students categorized as at-risk.

This evidence from our survey should put to rest the myth that charter students are cherry-picked and less disadvantaged than students in traditional public schools.

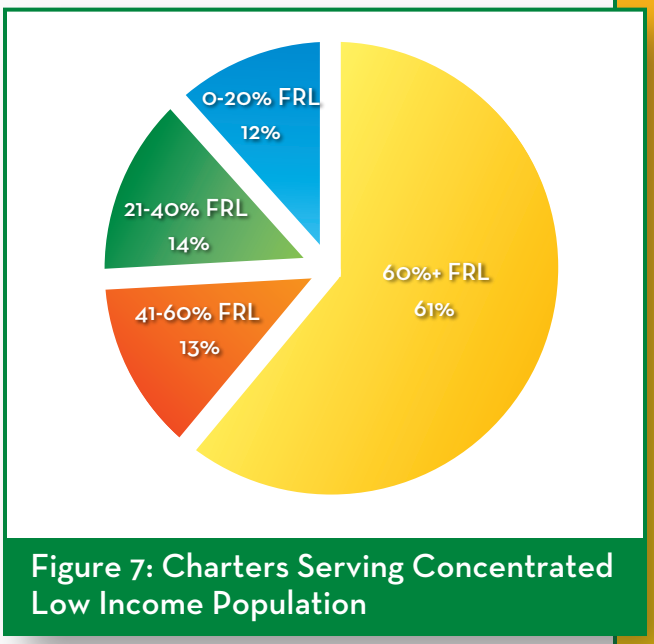

Figure 7: Charters Serving Concentrated Low Income Population

FINANCE & OPERATIONS

Revenue

Since charter schools are public schools, students attending them should be entitled to the same funding as students in traditional public schools. However, only a handful of states fund charters in a manner that approaches equity with other public schools. Even many states with otherwise strong charter laws typically fail in this regard. Based on our survey respondents, charters are funded at approximately 64 percent of their district counterparts, averaging $7,131 per pupil compared to the average per pupil expenditure of $11,184 in the traditional public schools in 2009/10.[9]

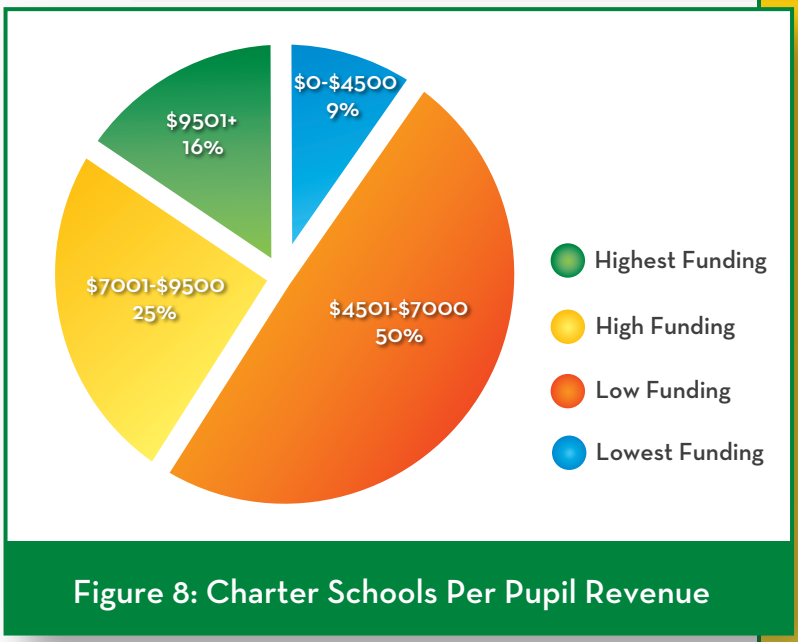

Figure 8: Charter Schools Per Pupil Revenue

Figure 8 shows four ranges of charter school per pupil revenue, ranging from the lowest proportion of public school funding to the highest. Nine percent of all charters receive less than $4,500 per student in revenue, a far cry from the average per student expenditure in the public schools of $12,136 (i.e., the entire pie). Fifty percent receive between $4,501 and $7,000. Twenty-five percent receive between $7,001 and $9,500. Only 16 percent of charter schools receive at least $9,501 per student, in the ballpark of the *average* per pupil expenditure in the public schools.

Cost

Charter schools spend, on average, $7,658 per pupil — $527 more than they receive in revenue! This is accomplished primarily through fundraising, increasing the amount they have available to spend per student from approximately 64 percent of the amount public schools spend to about 68 percent. While the increase is a relatively small amount in percentage terms, charter schools believe several hundred additional dollars per student are worth the substantial time and effort involved in raising the money and realize they have few options available to increase their bottom line.

Figure 9 shows four ranges of charter school per pupil cost, ranging from the lowest proportion of public school funding to the highest. Twelve percent of all charters spend less than $4,500 per student. Thirty-eight percent spend between $4,501 and $7,000. Thirty percent spend between $7,001 and $9,500. Only 20 percent of charter schools spend at least $9,501 per student, in the ballpark of the *average* per pupil expenditure in the public schools.

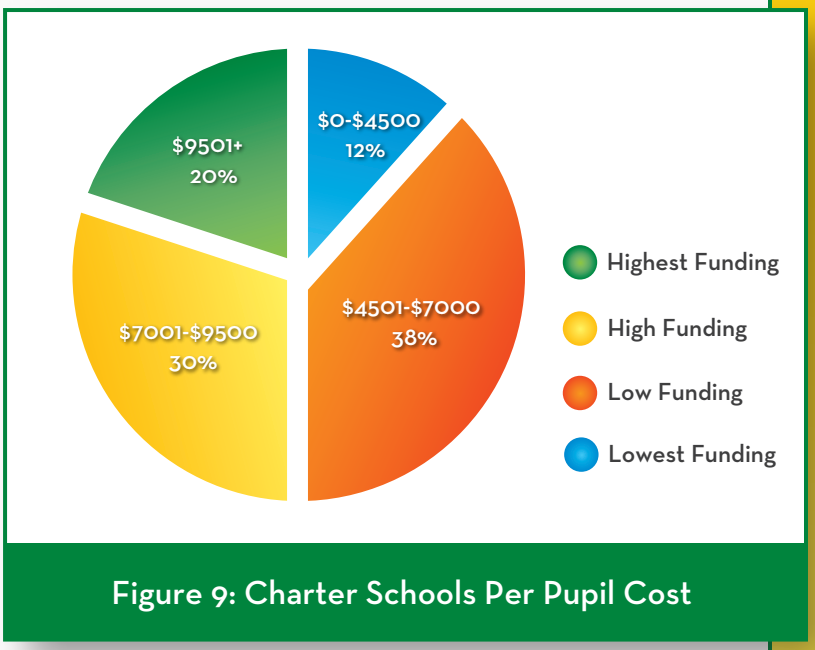

Figure 9: Charter Schools Per Pupil Cost

School Facility

Charter schools typically do not receive funding to cover the cost of securing and maintaining a facility, although traditional public schools receive both funds and buildings. For the small proportion of charters that receive facilities funding, it averages only 11.7 percent of their total budget. The charters that responded to the survey stating that they receive facilities funding tend to be in a cluster of states where some facilities aid is provided. The amount of funding these schools receive, while certainly useful, is usually not enough to cover the full cost of renting, purchasing, or maintaining proper school facilities.

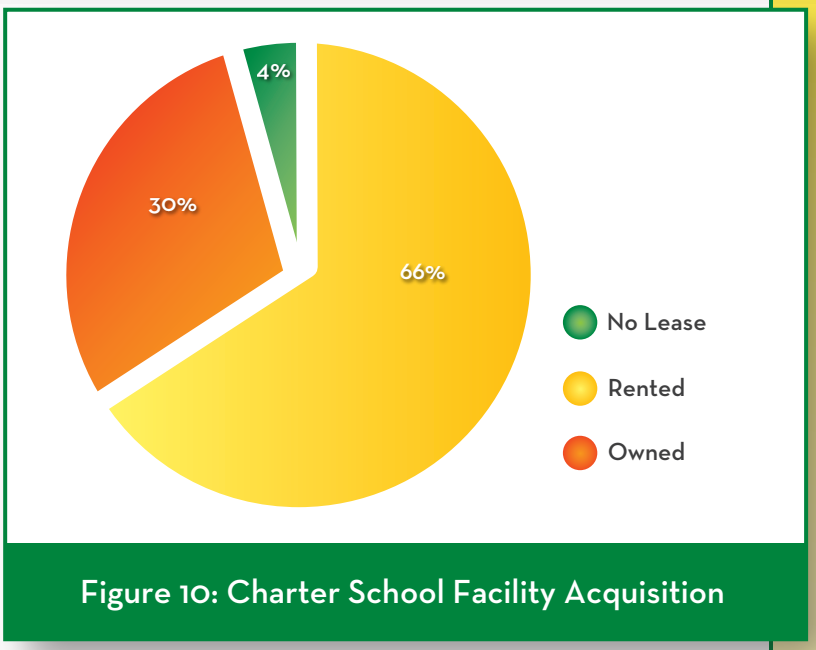

Figure 10: Charter School Facility Acquisition

It is sometimes remarked that charter schools operate in less than ideal locations, including former stores, office buildings or older public school buildings in need of renovation. This is the predictable result of weak charter policies on facilities funding. Charter school operators are forced to improvise and be creative when it comes to finding an inexpensive location for their school. As indicated in Figure 10, 66 percent of survey respondents rent their school building and only 30 percent own. Charters rent their buildings from a variety of people and businesses – wherever they can find adequate space. Twenty-seven percent rent space from private commercial businesses, often spending more money than desired because of the location and the facility owner.

Eighteen percent of charters that rent space sign leases on an annual or short-term basis (less than four years). These charters have the additional burden of instability when they have to revisit their lease every few years. Such issues rarely are present for traditional public schools, and operational and financial challenges relating to facilities are a significant factor driving some charter schools to close their doors.

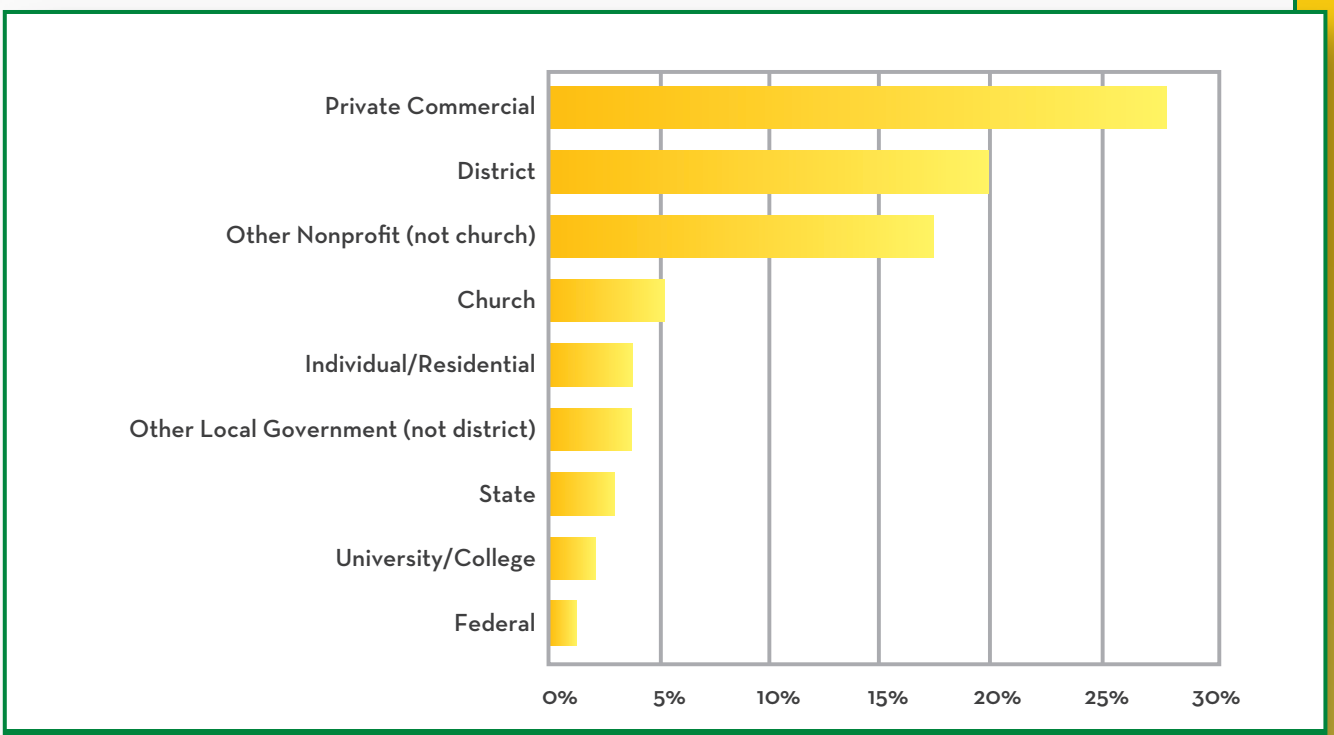

Figure 11. Property Owners of Rented Charter School Facilities

As described in Figure 11, charter facilities are most commonly rented from commercial sources, followed by the school district, other nonprofit organizations, and churches. Less common sources include residential properties, local government, the state, universities, and the federal government.

Teaching and Administrative Staff

Charter schools aim to maintain a low proportion of administrative staff to teachers. The overall result, 27.1 teacher positions to 7.5 administrative staff, is close to a 4:1 ratio of professional to administrative staff. Additional details, including a breakout of full-time and part-time staff are in Figure 12.

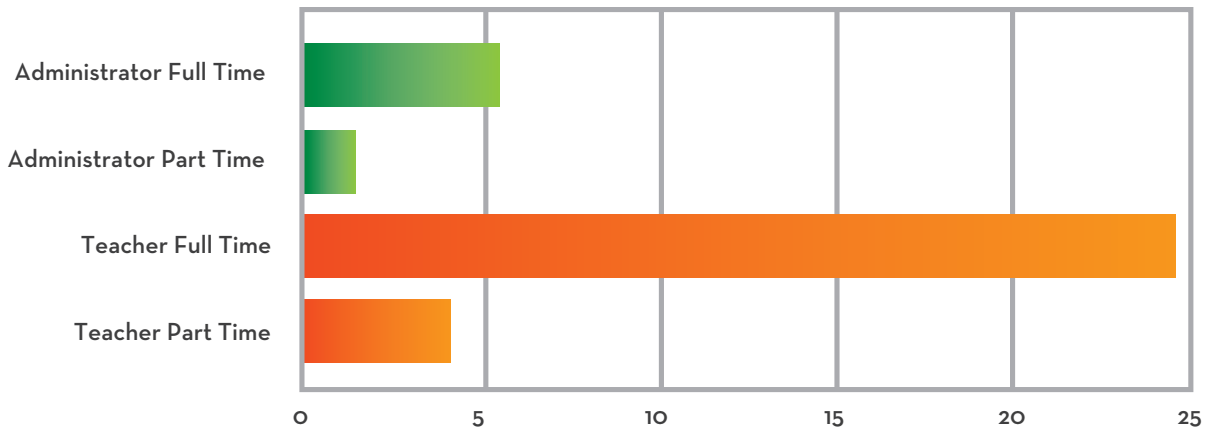

Figure 12. Teaching and Administrative Staff

Teacher Freedom

Charter schools are based on the idea that freedom from constraining work rules and contracts, as well as district regulations provides an opportunity for higher performance and school success. Most charter laws do not require schools and employees to participate in unionization and collective bargaining, although the weaker laws do treat charter school teachers virtually the same as traditional public school teachers. While the overwhelming majority of charter schools have been non-union since the early days of the charter movement, the small percentage that were unionized appear to be declining as a share of all charter schools. As indicated in Figures 13 and 14, this number has dropped by five percentage points from 2009 to 2012, and many of these schools are in states where union membership is required by law. At the same time, the percentage of charter schools implementing skill-based and performance-based staff contracts has increased by eight percentage points for the former and 18 percentage points for the latter. This is a positive trend that shows that when given the freedom, charter schools take hold of their own staffing authority and create a salary system based on skills and performance, and reject the fixed salary levels that have been comfortably adhered to and influenced by teachers unions to ensure uniformity across all public schools.

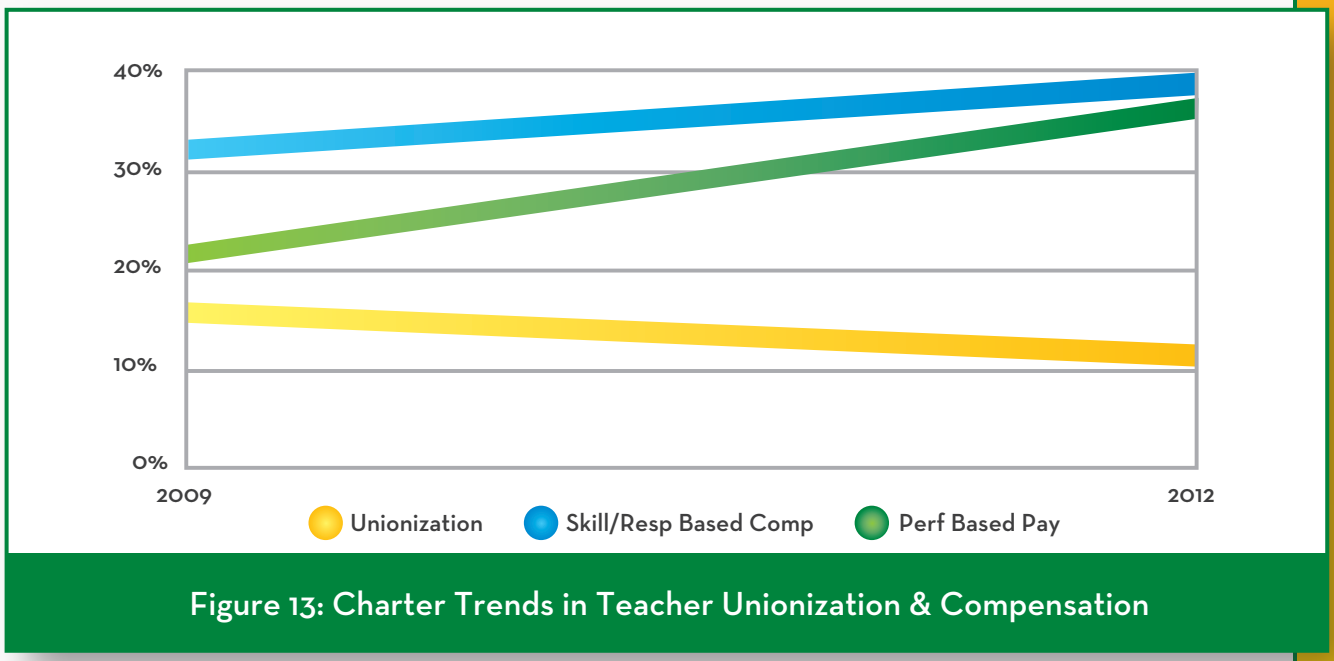

Figure 13: Charter Trends in Teacher Unionization & Compensation

The proportion of charter schools employing teachers with alternative certification was 20 percent; this has not changed substantially in recent years. Alternative certification allows professionals who choose teaching after having a career in another area and do not have a traditional teaching certificate to earn one without a prohibitive price tag or timeframe.

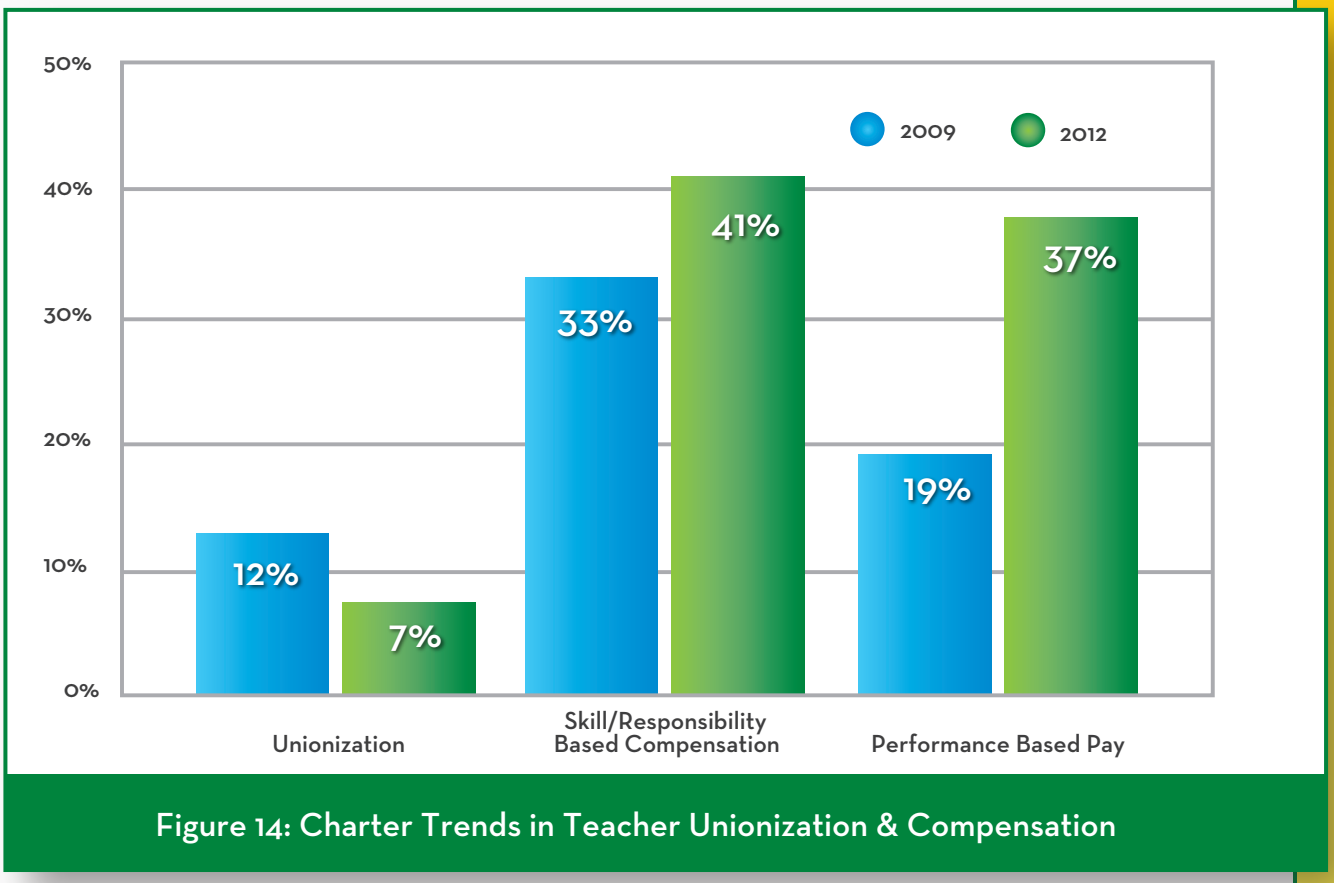

Figure 14: Charter Trends in Teacher Unionization & Compensation

Charter Management

Charter schools are predominantly start-ups of brand new schools. However, a significant minority are conversions of public schools or other types of pre-existing schools. Many conversions have opened in states with weak laws where those are the only types of charter schools allowed, or in states where there was a financial incentive to convert, such as in certain California districts. Figure 15 identifies the proportion of different types of charter schools.

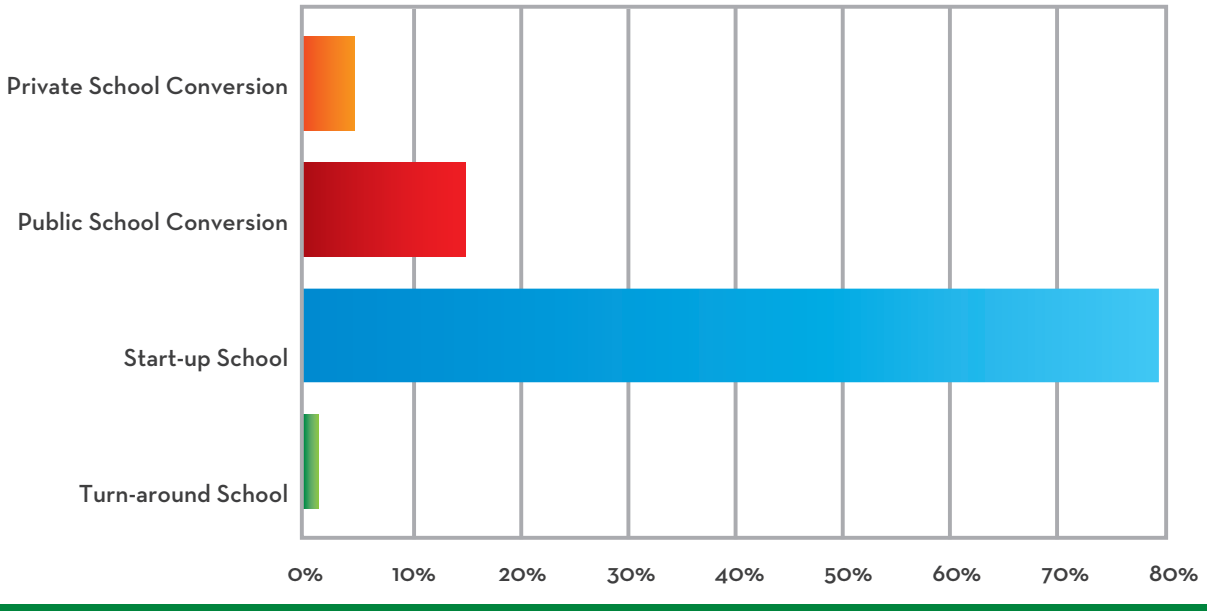

Figure 15: Types of Charter Schools

While 74 percent of charter schools operate in a completely independent manner, 26 percent are part of a charter school network or operated by a separate Education Service Provider, such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, or Charter Schools USA. Further, 20 percent of charter schools operate on multiple campuses.

Lunch Program

An increasing proportion of charter schools are part of the federal school lunch program according to our survey, which means these schools apply for and receive subsidies to feed low-income students. In 2012, 72 percent of respondents indicated that they participated in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), up from 54 percent in 2009. Those that responded they do not participate in the program were then asked why not and given a variety of options from which to select. The 28 percent who do not participate in the program are described in Figure 16 below. Twenty-one percent that do not participate in the federal program indicated that they still feed their children using their own resources. Some of these schools are half-day or blending learning or online learning programs. A majority of those who do not participate (54 percent) are unable to do so because of inadequate facilities, or facilities that do not meet the federal regulations, which are onerous. Thirty-three percent do not participate due to excessive paperwork required by the USDA to receive funds. Many charter schools, both large and small, feel that the additional burden caused by paperwork, red tape, and the hiring of staff to serve lunches, would not be worth the funding. Only ten percent of those charters who do not participate in the program report that they do not have eligible students.

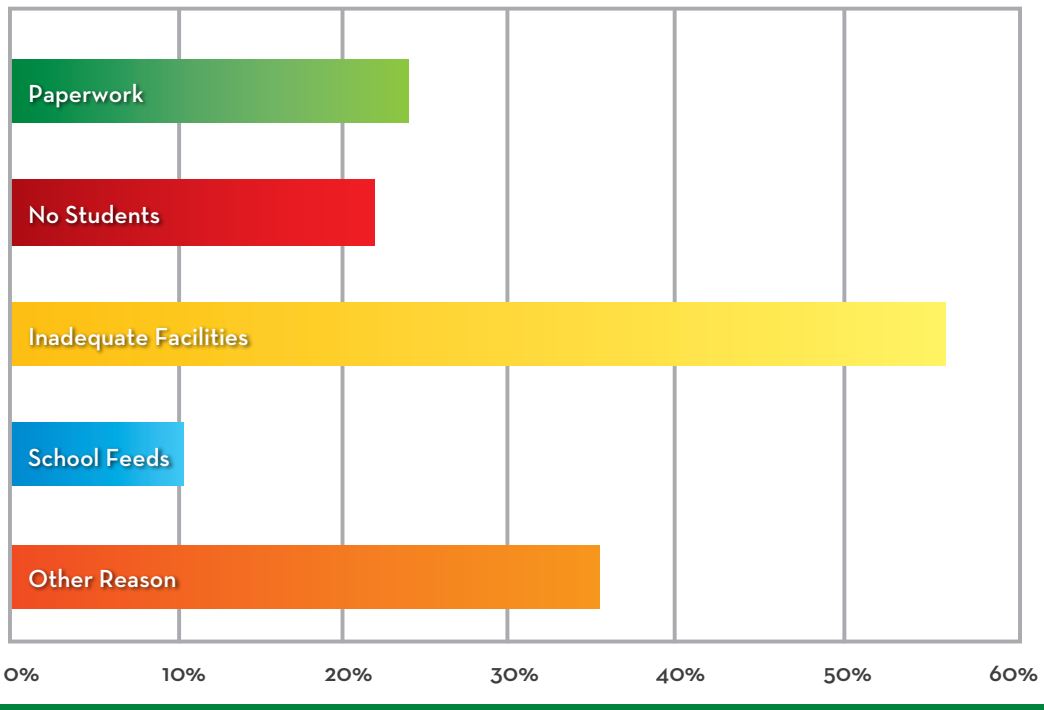

Figure 16: Reasons for Non-Participation in National School Lunch Program

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Educational Approach

Charter schools are nearly always created by individuals whose primary goal is to implement an educational approach that they believe will provide great benefits to students. Often, a waiver in the state's charter law further empowers them to pursue their innovative academic and programmatic vision rather than use books and courses typically seen in the regular public schools. Traditional public schools are less likely to specialize because their programs and materials are dictated largely by the centralized school district. A student body that has been assigned to a traditional school based purely on geography, rather then choosing to be there, also makes it much more difficult to implement a particular approach.

It is common for charter schools to emphasize a particular educational theme or focus. Figure 17 provides a listing of the most common approaches cited by our survey respondents. College preparatory programs were ranked first with 30 percent. STEM, with 8 percent, could be considered a more focused type of college preparation as well. The only other response selected by more than 10 percent of respondents was Core Knowledge, which continues to maintain its popularity. Also notable are some relatively newer approaches such as online and blended learning.

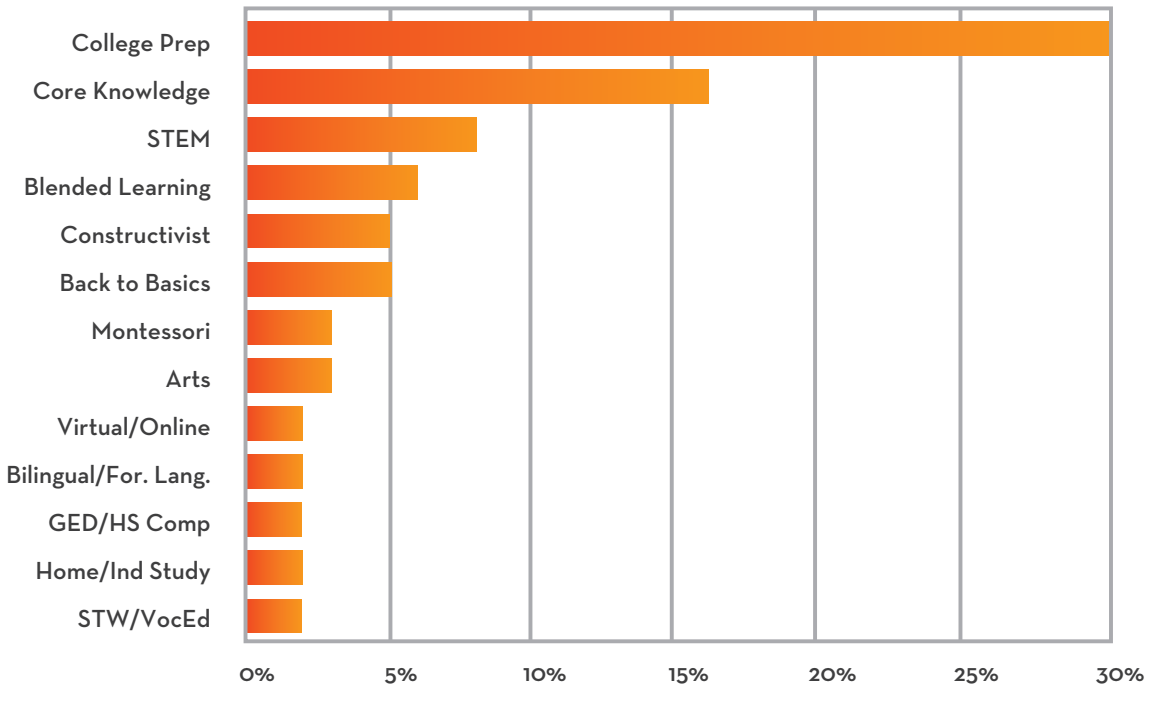

Figure 17: Charter School Educational Approach Rank Order

Instructional Time

Many charter schools have historically used their freedom in budgeting and staffing to increase student instructional time beyond the traditional public school six-and-a-half-hour day and 180-day school year. Charter schools are able to accomplish this because they typically are not bound by collective bargaining agreements limiting work hours and permissible activities. These reforms are consistent with the wealth of educational research that indicates an association between increased student learning time, time on task and opportunity to learn with higher academic achievement.[10]

From 2009 to 2012, there has been a further increase in the proportion of charter schools that expand instructional time, especially the school day. The percent of charter schools with an extended school year increased from 14 percent to 27 percent, while the percent with an extended school day increased 25 percentage points from 23 percent to 48 percent.

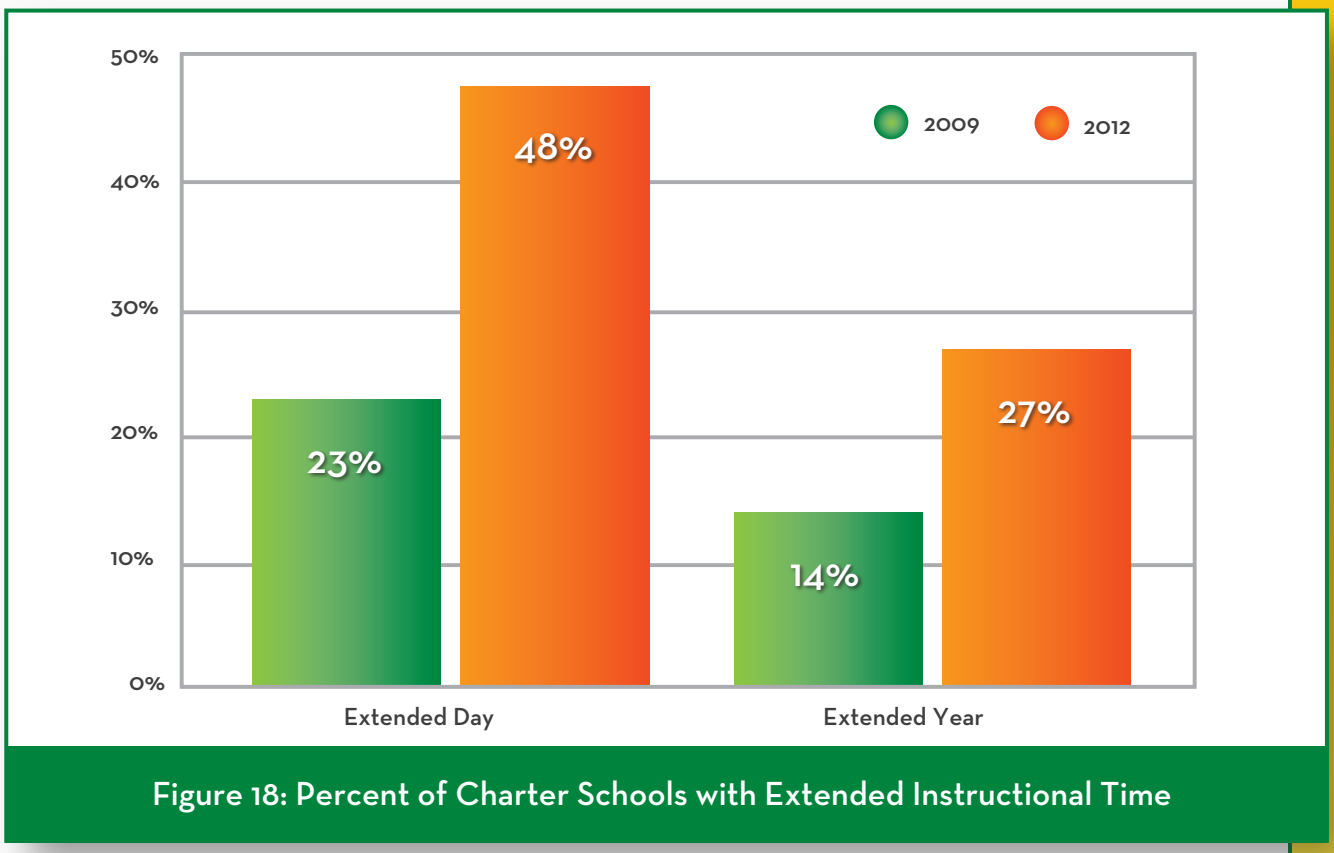

Figure 18: Percent of Charter Schools with Extended Instructional Time

Additional Assessment to Improve Instruction

In addition to participating in state testing as required under their charters, many charter schools choose to administer additional assessments and measurements to ensure that students are effectively learning. Survey participants could select from a range of test options or add another test if they didn't see it. The top responses are in Figure 19.

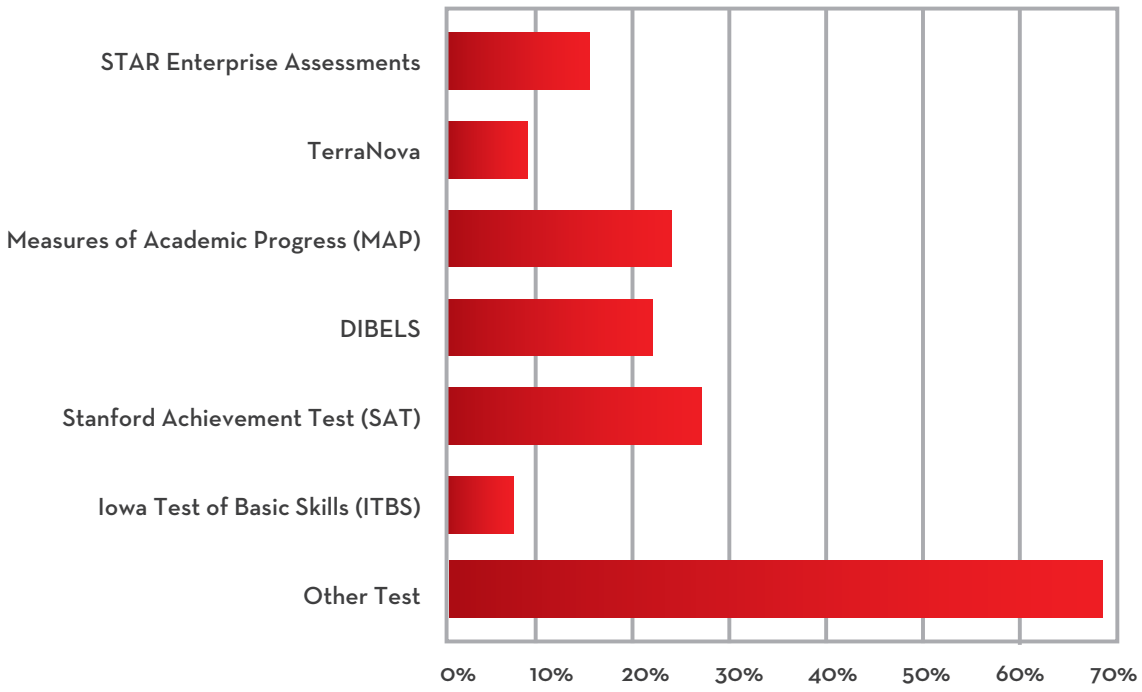

Figure 19: Additional Assessments Administered by Charter Schools

CONCLUSION

The charter school movement continues to grow at a measured pace. As it does so, it routinely implements many reforms that states and school districts struggle over and battle to scale up and extend across traditional public schools. These include rigorous academic curricula, skill- and performance-based compensation for educators, extended instructional time, close-knit learning environments, and many others. Charters implement and continually refine these reforms, focusing on the task at hand, required for their survival to do so in a way that addresses the needs of their parents and students.

Some of these same reforms, such as performance-based compensation, have created large-scale political strife and struggled to gain acceptance in the public schools when designed as statewide, one-size-fits-all initiatives. Meanwhile, the charter approach of creating bottom-up, organically built institutions has quietly forged ahead employing the motto *just get it done*. As parent- and educator-driven reform, charter schools stand as a stark alternative to the common bureaucratically driven model found in most traditional public schools.

Like other new entities, brand new charter schools typically take a couple of years to establish smooth operations and hit their academic groove. The fact that they are inequitably funded relative to other public schools doesn't help matters. But research that tracks the academic growth of students that remain at charter schools for several years has found substantial academic benefits.[11] At-risk students in charter schools and other schools of choice are more likely to graduate and continue on with post-secondary education.

While there is much that is positive about the charter movement today, the fact is that it could be playing a larger, more central role in addressing the national education crisis. It's time for state policymakers to take a fresh look at the charter policy environment and to identify the critical factors that are hindering the growth and scalability of high-quality charter schools and systems. As we investigate the public's increased frustration with top-down reforms and never-ending political struggles, we find that real reform happens when student-centered institutions are created by educators responding to, and working closely with, parents and families. Charter schools, as well as other school choice reforms, are powerful mechanisms for accomplishing exactly that.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

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ENDNOTES

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